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Symposium: New Roads in Theravada Studies

Introduction: New Roads in Theravada Studies

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This special section celebrates the twenty-fifth anniversary of Charles Hallisey's groundbreaking 1995 essay, "Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism," which offered both an incisive assessment of the history of Theravada studies and a generative blueprint for its future. Hallisey's introduction of the term "intercultural mimesis" and his emphasis on the local production of meaning resonated across Buddhist studies and beyond, shaping an entire generation of scholarship on South and Southeast Asia. This introductory essay first surveys "Roads Taken and Not Taken" and its impact on Theravada studies over the past quarter-century. We then explore how the three junior scholars whose essays are featured in this section take Hallisey's prescriptions in new directions. In closing, we reflect on emerging themes and voices in Theravada studies not represented here and where the field may be headed over the next quarter century.

Keywords: Theravada Buddhism; Charles Hallisey; intercultural mimesis; postcolonial studies; Orientalism; South Asia; Southeast Asia

A quarter century ago, Charles Hallisey's groundbreaking essay, "Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism," first appeared in the edited volume *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Lopez 1995). Prescient and perceptive, this essay proved to be one of the most influential and widely cited in the history of Theravada studies. Expanding on conversations begun by Edward Said and his interpreters, including James Clifford and Sheldon Pollock, "Roads Taken and Not Taken" demonstrated how Buddhist studies could contribute with greater sophistication to post-Orientalist critiques. Through a close reexamination of early studies of Theravada ritual and biographies of the Buddha by T.W. Rhys Davids, R. Spence Hardy, Paul Bigandet, and Adhémard Leclère, Hallisey persuasively called for a reconsideration of early European studies of Theravada Buddhism in order to uncover what approaches had been downplayed or

excluded over the past century and a half. In the process, he gave the field a new way of understanding itself as well as fresh encouragement to explore previously neglected dimensions of the tradition.

Hallisey's essay moved scholarship on Theravada Buddhism in several productive new directions. He warned that if we failed to recognize that nineteenth-century Western-language scholarship on Buddhism was shaped by the encounter between South and Southeast Asian experts and European writers, we would be in danger of perpetuating a form of "latent Orientalism" (Hallisey 1995: 31, citing Said 1978: 206). To avoid an unconscious continuation of ideas about the Orient as separate, Hallisey advised scholars to pay attention to "intercultural mimesis." Hallisey borrowed this term from the anthropologist Richard Burghart to describe a dynamic process of exchange and influence between local and colonial scholars. His novel application of Burghart's term is without a doubt the most frequently cited aspect of "Roads Taken and Not Taken." Defining intercultural mimesis as "occasions where it seems the aspects of a culture of a subjectified people influenced the investigator to represent that culture in a certain manner," Hallisey went on to describe this process as a kind of Weberian "elective affinity" (*Wahlverwandtschaft*) that shaped the early years of European Buddhist studies (Hallisey 1995: 33, 43). Intercultural mimesis has proven to be an extraordinarily revealing and flexible analytical lens well beyond Buddhist studies, one through which a wide range of historians and anthropologists have also gazed to their benefit.

Intercultural mimesis was not the only contribution from "Roads Taken and Not Taken" to have influenced studies of Theravada Buddhism over the past quarter century. Equally noteworthy was Hallisey's emphasis on the "local production of meaning" (1995: 49). This primarily meant attending to local texts that had long been neglected in Buddhist studies, documents which could prod scholars "to expect meaning to be produced in local circumstances rather than in the origins of the tradition" (1995: 50). Hallisey went further, however, insisting that attention to locally circulated Theravada literature could help us extend "the history of Orientalism beyond Said" and break down conceptual boundaries between "'the West' and 'the Orient'" (1995: 49–50). Though less broadly influential than his notion of intercultural mimesis, Hallisey's emphasis on interpreting Buddhism on the basis of local representations has been credited in subsequent work by many scholars of Asian religion, including those working within and beyond the Theravada tradition.

Hallisey's essay opens with a provocative epigraph from the 1933 lectures of the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset: "It does not matter whether one generation applauds the previous generation or hisses it—in either event, it carries the previous generation within itself" (Ortega y Gasset 1958: 53). In the context of "Roads Taken and Not Taken," Ortega y Gasset's words help frame Hallisey's approach to rereading European scholars of Buddhism from the mid- to late nineteenth century as a *genealogical* inquiry, in the Foucauldian sense of tracing a discipline's complex origins and contradictory relationships to power. By examining these scholars in a new light, Hallisey's essay signals how we might move beyond the binary of blame and praise for earlier generations by recovering forgotten models for present-day research.

Such genealogical projects are rare in Theravada studies, but nearly all recent endeavors to head this call place Hallisey's intervention at the center. This is certainly true of two of the most

perceptive "state of the field" pieces to appear in the decades after "Roads Taken and Not Taken," namely Kate Crosby's "Changing the Landscape of Theravada Studies" (2008) and Erik Braun's "Local and Translocal in the Study of Theravada Buddhism and Modernity" (2009). Crosby identifies Hallisey's essay as a turn toward "the social life of texts" in order to bridge the persistent gap between textual and anthropological studies of Theravada Buddhism (2008: 2). Braun shows how "Roads Taken and Not Taken" outlined a research program focused on the relationship between the translocal and the local adopted by many subsequent works on Theravada history (2009: 939), including Anne M. Blackburn's exploration of Lankan textual communities (2001), Anne Hansen's study of ethical tracts in colonial Cambodia (2007), and Justin McDaniel's foregrounding of monastic curricula across Laos and Northern Thailand (2008). Both Crosby's and Braun's articles extend the genealogical concerns of Hallisey's essay to imagine a future for the field by means of a careful examination of its past.

The present collection of essays celebrates the quarter-century anniversary of "Roads Taken and Not Taken" by similarly envisioning a meaningful next generation of scholarship that is informed by the work of its predecessors. The three contributors are all junior scholars of religion in South and Southeast Asia who are invested in the long-term vitality of Theravada studies. In keeping with Ortega y Gasset's dictum, these authors are cognizant of the endurance of Hallisey's applauds and hisses in their own work. Each contributor finds ways to examine and reformulate the legacy of the 1995 essay. We have asked them to wrestle with the following questions in particular: How has the field benefited from Hallisey's emphasis on specific local contexts of interpretation and interaction? What challenges do we continue to face? What new directions are we taking and why? The pieces are designed to begin conversations on these questions, rather than provide definitive answers. As such, they are open-ended but intentionally short.

This collection highlights two key features of the current state of the study of Theravada Buddhism, namely that it has continued to refine the work of reading and analyzing key texts, sites, rituals, and communities, and that it has cautiously considered larger questions about power, oppression, and representation. Scholars trained in classical and vernacular languages have sought out little-studied, multilingual textual traditions to reassess scholastic exegesis and institutional history. These painstaking research projects in languages such as Pali, Sanskrit, Sinhala, Burmese, Thai, Lao, and Khmer have opened up new understandings of Indic Buddhist traditions and the diverse paths they forged in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. As Trent Walker's essay in this collection shows, Indic-vernacular bitexts reveal the ways that Theravada practices and doctrines were transmitted across time and space. Moreover, highly localized studies of vernacular traditions have brought much of the range, depth, and expressive power of Theravada literature to life. Just as scholars have been contributing details to this larger panorama, they have also been thinking about how we can redraw the boundaries of the Theravada landscape.

One particularly welcome boundary change is the expansion to include maritime Southeast Asia. The Western study of Theravada Buddhism began with a focus on the oldest Buddhist texts of ancient India and Sri Lanka and the glimpses they might give of the historical Buddha. Increased interaction in the nineteenth century with Buddhist-majority communities in Myanmar and Thailand brought academic attention eastward. Twentieth-century anthropological work grounded

studies of Theravada Buddhism in their living and local expressions throughout mainland Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. As Jack Chia points out in his essay for this collection, even with these acts of greater inclusion, we have still neglected neighboring maritime regions that have historically been key sites of trade and cultural exchange. Furthermore, as Chia demonstrates, by attending to developments in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, we begin to understand how minority Theravada Buddhists forged communities and identities through rituals, non-canonical texts, and a shared sense of diaspora.

Both this extension to maritime Southeast Asia and to a more multilingual and granular understanding of literary traditions points to long-developed strengths in the study of Theravada that Hallisey drew on in his essay. With "Roads Taken and Not Taken," Hallisey was able to tap into the enthusiasm of many scholars in the mid-1990s to study a wider range of texts and consider the agency of local Buddhists in shaping global perceptions. Hallisey's work seemed to strike just when the field needed forceful encouragement to hone philological and historical methods so as to apply them in innovative ways.

This was also a crucial time in which the field was eager for sage advice on how to navigate the postcolonial turn accelerated by Said's *Orientalism* (1978) that forced scholars to reckon with the ways their fields had contributed to Western violence in Asia. Hallisey not only skillfully introduced salient aspects of Said's thought to Theravada studies, but also helped guide fellow students of Buddhism to move beyond a concern that they would reproduce Orientalism. He knew that what the field had spent over a century examining was something more than a self-serving fantasy of the Other. His well-supported claim that Buddhists subjectified by Western imperialism still influenced Western representations of Buddhism was so welcome because his fellow scholars were keen to celebrate the people who maintained the religion that they admired so deeply. Moreover, the conclusion of "Roads Taken and Not Taken" sounded a stern warning: scholars should not claim to speak for Buddhists but instead seek to develop a distanced, objective standpoint that "will keep us at a distance from what he hope to understand" (1995: 52). Hallisey's note of caution here calls to mind the postcolonial emphasis on how asymmetrical power-structures have shaped the field of Theravada studies.

This postcolonial attention to power dynamics is particularly germane to the essay by Alexandra Kaloyanides. This piece revisits Hallisey's notion of intercultural mimesis to consider how Theravada studies can deepen its understanding of how empires produce and curate knowledge about religion. Drawing on recent scholarship on imperialism and comparative religion, Kaloyanides calls on the field to move beyond dualistic depictions of colonizer/colonized, Western/Asian, and Christian/Buddhist in order to understand the multiple ways that knowledge about Theravada Buddhism has been and continues to be mediated. This essay also asks about the limitations of approaches to religious phenomena that see them solely in terms of social construction and human power struggles. It recommends joining scholars across religious studies who are expanding notions of agency to non-humans. How might we tell stories of South and Southeast Asian religious worlds that do not reduce local spirits and translocal gods to reflections of human power dynamics?

While these three essays sketch out a promising future for the study of Theravada Buddhism, working within and beyond the framework sketched out by Hallisey's "Roads Taken and Not Taken,"

there are also important issues that fall outside their purview, including issues of technology, material culture, and medicine, among others. We can only gesture toward some of the possible emerging areas of inquiry here: theoretical approaches attuned to gender and sexuality; emerging critical perspectives on race; attention to economic structures, and the diversity of the field's scholars themselves.

Several of the themes passed over in this section will be particularly important in the next generation of scholarship, such as attention to gender and sexuality. The academic study of Buddhism's relationship gender and sexuality has developed considerably in recent decades, yet many of the benefits of these converging critical lenses have yet to be realized in the study of Theravada societies. While there has been a growing attention to the religious experiences of lay and monastic women in contemporary South and Southeast Asia, the manifold contributions of feminist and poststructuralist critique have rarely been applied to the study of premodern Buddhist cultures. A notable exception is Ashley Thompson's *Engendering the Buddhist State: Territory, Sovereignty and Sexual Difference in the Inventions of Angkor* (2016), which we hope will inspire future studies.

Another theme neglected in this collection is race. The study of Theravada should follow in the footsteps of adjacent fields in religious studies and area studies to attend more carefully to the relationships between the ways that racial and religious identities are constructed. For example, Adeana McNicholl's research into Black American Buddhists challenges the assumption that the default Buddhist subject in North America is white, male, and heteronormative. McNicholl's analysis shows how Black semiautobiographical writing recasts Orientalist discourse to counter hegemonic white authority (2018). Such approaches to the process of religio-racial formation would build on Hallisey's attention to both local developments and complex power dynamics and advance the study of Theravada to engage with critical questions of race.

Economic systems and inequalities are another related set of areas we hope to see more attention to in the study of Theravada, though they are not directly addressed in this collection. The extant scholarship on the economic dimensions to Theravada societies has largely focused on contemporary societies, with very little work done to date that reveals the ways in which Theravada Buddhist institutions in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia have long been entwined with the economic structures of trade, agriculture, and resource extraction. A recent special section of this journal on "Buddhism and Economics" (Williams-Oerberg 2019) demonstrates the range of insights that can be gleaned from considering how contemporary Buddhists frame their relationship to economic processes.

Finally, the three authors in this collection do not address the imbalances and inequities in the field of Theravada studies across the many academic departments where it has taken root, including institutions in South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, Oceania, North America, and Europe, with limited representation in African and South American universities. Communication across the many languages in which Theravada studies scholarship is produced is often challenging. It seems that English-language work may have become even more dominant, both in quantity and influence, in the quarter century since "Roads Taken and Not Taken." At the same time, North America-based scholars rarely engage recent secondary sources written in German, Japanese, or Thai, to name only a few of

the more active languages in present-day Theravada studies. The constellation of scholars whose essays appear in this section is hardly representative of the broad array of geographic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds among scholars who are shaping the field today.

There are signs of hope on this front. While it is too soon to know how the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 military coup in Myanmar will further exacerbate inequalities in the study of Theravada, we are looking to digital humanities initiatives and financial aid resources for possible solutions. Mature and emerging digitization initiatives are providing free access to an increasingly large body of Theravada literature. A growing cohort of open-access journals and online repositories aid in the global circulation of knowledge on Theravada Buddhism. A variety of grants and scholarships that fund graduate students in Buddhist studies, South and Southeast Asian language training programs, and research travel stipends are helping students from a range of backgrounds join the field. We urge our academic communities and institutions to continue to find ways to distribute resources to scholars in marginalized communities.

A final caveat: one key aspect of Theravada studies that has notably changed since "Roads Taken and Not Taken" is a greater sensitivity to the history of the term "Theravada" itself. Hallisey's 1995 essay was released long before the field underwent a critical realignment centered on this dominant term. That reexamination began in a perceptive 2009 essay by Peter Skilling, "Theravāda in History." A later collection edited by Skilling, Jason Carbine, Claudio Cicuzza, and Santi Pakdeekham, *How Theravāda is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities* (2012), opens Theravada history and the term "Theravada" itself to a range of critical inquiries. Skilling's contribution to this collection emphasizes that while terms such as *theravāda*, *theriya*, or *theravaṃsa* are not wrong to apply in most contexts we would label "Theravada" today, these terms were rarely foregrounded by historical Buddhists themselves (2012, 329–331). Todd Perreira's closing essay in the same collection makes plain that the widespread use of the term "Theravada Buddhism" is a specific twentieth-century development heralded by the writings of the English monk Ananda Metteyya (2012: 560–561). While the essays in this special issue do not further advance this exploration of the history and usage of the term "Theravada," their attention to the ways the term has been constructed to include and exclude particular texts and communities is informed by this body of scholarship.

The three essays gathered here offer a collective account of where Theravada studies has been over the last quarter century and where it might be headed in the next. We work to honor the legacy of Hallisey's "Roads Taken and Not Taken" as a landmark from which to measure and reflect on the field's progress and prospects. Inspired by both the detailed analysis and sweeping ambition of his essay, the authors imagine an exciting future of Theravada Buddhist studies that is illuminated by attention to local communities, regional networks, and diverse textual traditions and that is engaged with timely conversations about power, privilege, and the imagination. As Professor Hallisey sagely advises in the response essay he wrote for this collection, let's not stop thinking about tomorrow together.

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