

**Symposium: New Roads in Theravada Studies**

## **Theravada Literature After “Roads Taken and Not Taken”: Reflections on Recent Textual Studies**

Trent Walker

*Stanford University*

This article sketches the study of Theravada Buddhist literature over the past twenty-five years. Drawing on Charles Hallisey’s influential essay, “Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism,” I survey the ways in which scholars have heeded his calls to study texts beyond the canon, to attend to issues of translation, and to examine the local production of meaning. I show how these calls correspond to three recent trends: increased emphasis on non-canonical Pali and vernacular texts; a renewed interest in multilingual texts and the cultures of translation that shaped them; and new models for charting intellectual histories of Theravada Buddhist societies beyond local confines.

**Keywords:** Theravada Buddhism; Pali; vernacular literature; multilingualism; intellectual history

In the mid-1990s, the field of Theravada textual studies seemed relatively mature within the landscape of Buddhist studies. In contrast to the still-emerging map of the Chinese, Gandhari, Sanskrit, and Tibetan canons, the scholarly survey of Theravada literature appeared almost complete. Nearly all of the Pali Tipiṭaka (the three-part corpus of Pali canonical scriptures) had been critically edited and translated into modern languages. Oskar von Hinüber’s landmark handbook (1996) confirmed that the historical chronology of Pali literature had become increasingly clear. At the same time, some scholars were beginning to articulate a need for Theravada textual studies to move beyond earlier essentialized views of the Pali canon. Such concerns were crystallized in a powerful article by Steven Collins (1990), which called for critical attention to the historical processes that shaped the development and reception of Buddhist texts in particular contexts.

Theravada studies took longer, however, to fully move beyond the older, reified view of the Pali canon critiqued by Collins. Though studies of vernacular texts occasionally filled in key gaps, the primacy of Pali for understanding Theravada Buddhism remained the norm. Anthropologists and others studying Buddhist societies could largely rely on editions and translations of Pali texts to establish relationships between particular regional expressions of Theravada culture and a canonical



core. Abhidhamma treatises, exegetical commentaries, and local literary and doctrinal developments were largely ignored in European-language scholarship on the Theravada tradition.

Charles Hallisey's influential 1995 essay, "Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism," built on the concerns outlined by Collins and others to offer a bold reappraisal of the field and its nineteenth-century roots. By examining the divergent approaches of colonial-era European scholars of Buddhism in what is now Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia, Hallisey demonstrated how those that swam against the Orientalist current were pushed to the edges of academic discourse. He pointed out that almost all European researchers of the period were engaged with local interlocutors, unacknowledged South and Southeast Asian scholars whose views gave shape to Western perceptions of Buddhism. He turned our attention to pioneering studies by Adhémard Leclère and others that emphasized how religious meaning is produced in local linguistic and cultural contexts, as opposed to solely through a translocal Pali corpus. Like William Pruitt's work on Pali-Burmese texts (1994), Hallisey reminded us that early European scholars of Pali often relied on vernacular and bilingual Pali-vernacular sources, a heritage elided in later scholarship. These and other salutary correctives from his 1995 essay helped scholars realize how many trails remained to be traveled in the study of Theravada literature. Over the past twenty-five years, new approaches to textual studies have responded to Hallisey's perceptive reading of the past.

In the quarter century since the publication of "Roads Taken and Not Taken," three emerging trends in Theravada textual studies stand out. First, scholars are treating non-canonical Pali texts and vernacular compositions as seriously as the Pali Tipiṭaka, particularly by applying methods of textual criticism. This is making the layers, diversity, and intertextuality of Theravada literary production more legible. Second, philologists are redefining Theravada literature as a fundamentally multilingual phenomenon, centered on local modes of translation, what Hallisey called "the specifics of translation as a cultural practice" (1995: 38). Third, researchers are deepening the study of Theravada texts through inquiries into local and translocal intellectual histories in South and Southeast Asia. These emerging movements in Theravada studies open up new grounds for conversation with those engaged in the study of the broader Buddhist world.

### **Expanding Studies of Non-Canonical Texts**

Since the 1970s the study of Theravada Buddhism in North American and European academic contexts has grown primarily on the strength of ethnography and social history. While scarce before the mid-twentieth century, there are now dozens of book-length anthropological and sociological studies that detail the lived experience of Theravada Buddhism across the region. As Jack Chia shows us, such studies are steadily expanding their geographic frontiers, including in maritime Southeast Asia. In addition, there is a deepening field of historical studies on Theravada cultures, using sources such as newspapers, public records, and governmental archives to illuminate the social and political dimensions of Buddhism. Studies of the colonial period, many of which explicitly invoke Hallisey's framework of "intercultural mimesis" (1995: 33), have yielded especially rich results, transforming our understanding of how modernist forms of Theravada Buddhism emerged. Notable examples include monographs by Penny Edwards (2007) and Anne Hansen (2007) on Cambodia, and by Erik

Braun (2013) and Alicia Turner (2014) on Burma (for further examples, see the essay by Alexandra Kaloyanides in this collection).

Many recent anthropological and historical studies of Theravada civilizations rely on careful examinations of vernacular-language texts. Jason Carbine (2011) engages in detailed analysis of Burmese and bilingual Pali-Burmese textual sources in his exploration of an “ethics of continuity” in the contemporary Shwegyin Nikaya. Katherine Bowie (2017) skillfully combines a close reading of Thai sermon texts with their performative, political, and ethnographic contexts. Martin Seeger’s illumination of the histories of individual nuns in Thailand (2018) exemplifies the interpretive power of reading local-language sources against ethnographic observations and interviews. Such studies offer a remedy to what Hallisey’s essay pinpoints as a contemporary scholarly neglect of non-canonical Pali texts as well as vernacular translations (1995: 49).

Other recent works have followed up on Hallisey’s call to investigate these lesser-known sources. For example, many post-canonical Pali compositions, including sub-commentaries, grammars, narratives, poems, and ritual texts, have been brought to light through exacting studies in the past few decades by Banjob Bannaruji (2549 [2006]), Claudio Cicuzza (2011), Petra Kieffer-Pülz (2013), Aleix Ruiz-Falques (2015), Kazuko Tanabe and Shimuzu Yōhei (2016), Daniel Stuart (2017), and Javier Schnake (2018), among others. Similar studies have been supported by increased access to manuscript collections, whether due to digitization efforts such as the Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts (Hundius and Wharton, 2011) and the Digital Library of Northern Thai Manuscripts, or to the meticulous cataloging work by Jacqueline Filliozat (2000), Peter Skilling and Santi Pakdeekham (2004), Shimuzu Yōhei (2015), and Olivier de Bernon, Kun Sopheap, and Leng Kok-An (2018), among others.

Technological advances in database management, digital imaging, and online interfaces have supported a rapid proliferation of such projects in recent decades. It is too early to tell whether such digitization initiatives will facilitate more widespread participation in the study of Theravada literature. Will they spark interest in manuscripts for a new generation of local and international readers? Or, in the absence of the relevant codicological training in both North American and South/Southeast Asian universities, will they remain the preserve of a few experts? For scholars already engaged with these sources, they are now in the exceptionally privileged position of being able to access manuscripts in Pali and vernacular languages from a wide swath of Theravada cultures.

Moreover, numerous studies on the social life of manuscripts—how manuscripts and the texts they transmit function in particular communities—are beginning to emerge. Peera Panarut’s compelling dissertation (2019) on the manuscript transmission of Ayutthaya-era Thai literature—much of which is explicitly Buddhist—provides a rigorous standard for the study of paratexts in manuscripts. In another recent dissertation, Bounleuth Sengsoulin (2016) paints a vivid portrait of the manuscripts in an important Lao monk’s personal collection. Volker Grabowsky’s monograph on a Buddhist manuscript from Müang Sing in Laos (2019) affirms the depth of social history that may be quarried from a single document.

In response to Hallisey’s call and other influences over the past quarter century, studies on vernacular Buddhist literature have steadily accumulated. Scholars working on Central and Northern

Thai literature, including Bonnie Brereton (1995), Trisilpa Boonkhachorn (2547 [2004]), Arthid Sheravanichkul (2012), and Betty Nguyen (2014), have produced compelling studies of Buddhist genres. Olivier de Bernon (2000), Ashley Thompson (2005), and Kun Sopheap (2013) have profoundly enriched our understanding of Khmer Buddhist texts. Recent translations of Sinhala Buddhist literature include those by Stephen Berkwitz (2007) and Ranjini Obeyesekere (2009). Peter Koret's voluminous translation (2018) of a Lao millenarian autobiography offers a vivid account of this important genre from the colonial era. The pathbreaking dissertations of Jotika Khur-Yearn (2012) and David Wharton (2017) provide some of the first detailed studies of Shan and Tai Nuea Buddhist literature, respectively. Chia's piece in this issue draws our attention to recent translations of Pali texts into Indonesian. The vast landscape of vernacular Theravada literature is thus gradually coming into view.

As these detailed, highly localized studies of Theravada literature accumulate, one wonders if broad, comparative work is being neglected. With the exception of textbooks, monographs in Theravada studies as sweeping and ambitious as the pathbreaking books by Steven Collins on Buddhist utopias (1998) and Kate Crosby on traditional meditation (2013, 2020)—works that speak across national borders to address larger themes—remain exceptional. As Richard Payne (2016) points out, we severely curtail the possibilities of Buddhist studies when the nation-state becomes the default category of analysis. We might further inquire if a narrow focus on single texts, ideas, or languages limits our scope in the study of Theravada literature. What approaches might we need to cultivate in order to make room for comparative work?

### **Revisiting Multilingual Theravada Literature**

One possible route for escaping the trap of hyper-localized studies is to embrace the multilingual character of Theravada literature. The bulk of traditional Buddhist texts transmitted in manuscript form in Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia are composed in a mix of Pali and vernacular languages. In some cases, these texts follow a broadly shared set of technical conventions. Drawing on terminology from linguistics, I call such compositions “Indic-vernacular bitexts,” for they combine portions in one language (Pali or sometimes Sanskrit) with portions in another (Sinhala, Khmer, Siamese, Lao, Burmese, etc.), often in an interphrasal or interlinear format (Walker, 2020b). The bilingual texts analyzed in recent years by William Pruitt (1994), Patrick Pranke (2004), Assanee Poolrak (2555 [2012]), and Pyi Phyoo Kyaw (2014) fall under this same rubric. Works by Anne Blackburn (2001) and Justin McDaniel (2008) have been especially influential in reorienting Theravada studies toward such multilingual texts.

These studies open a window on Hallisey's “specifics of translation as a cultural practice.” Indic-vernacular bitexts offer a key site for understanding how particular Theravada texts and ideas were in fact transmitted and received across South and Southeast Asia. Hallisey, citing earlier work by Pruitt, remarks that the early years of European Buddhist studies were profoundly shaped by such Pali-vernacular compositions, and that Orientalist scholars such as Burnouf and Rhys Davids made extensive use of bitexts. Recent work on translation and the multilingual heritage of Theravada

Buddhism has begun to undermine what Hallisey critiqued as an ahistorical “dichotomy between classical and vernacular texts” (1995: 38).

Beyond Indic-vernacular bitexts, several recent studies demonstrate how Buddhist texts have been translated not only between Indic and Southeast Asian languages but also across various Southeast Asian vernaculars, including Khmer (Anant, 2003), Lao (Kourilsky, 2015), Lanna (Lagirade, 1994), and Vietnamese (Walker, 2020a). These studies ground Theravada Buddhism in the interactive, multilingual spaces that lie between regions and cultures rather than solely in the Pali of the scriptures. Moreover, they afford a comparative view of Theravada literature without losing sight of how particular texts function in local communities. This is one possible avenue for a broad, boundary-crossing approach in Theravada studies that still remains faithful to the field’s philological inheritance.

### **Globalizing Local Intellectual Histories**

The potential impact of fine-grained research on Theravada texts goes beyond a mere incremental contribution to our understanding of South and Southeast Asia. Attention to local Theravada meaning-making practices helps challenge Eurocentric approaches to supposedly universal categories such as race and religion. This speaks to a third trend emerging in the study of Theravada literature: the tracing of local intellectual histories against a wider Asian and global background. As Hallisey remarked in his 1995 essay, “It remains typical for Buddhism in South Asia to be studied as a thing apart from the rest of the intellectual and cultural history of India, although it is becoming increasingly apparent how artificial this separation is, especially with respect to the study of ritual” (1995: 46). With regards to non-Theravada traditions, most current studies place Buddhist thought in animated conversation with other Indian philosophical schools. However, the study of Theravada thought remains largely unmoored from the history of Asian thought writ large. While courses, conferences, and monographs that focus on Southeast Asian or Sri Lankan intellectual history remain rare, research and pedagogy on Indian and East Asian thought have flourished in the modern academy. We have come to expect that premodern philosophers writing in Sanskrit or literary Chinese make contributions of universal human value, beyond the particular local contexts whence they came. By contrast, we seldom treat thinkers from Theravada cultures as anything more than reflections of particular national or linguistic communities. Notable exceptions have been recent works on Buddhaghosa by Maria Heim (2014, 2018) and Jonardon Ganeri (2017), which center the eminent commentator and exegete as relevant to contemporary philosophical debates.

One of the boldest attempts to reframe Theravada intellectual history is Steven Collins’ magnum opus, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Buddhist Imaginaire*, which appeared three years after “Roads Taken and Not Taken.” Collins’ investigations of the civilizational history of Theravada Buddhism in this volume center around his notion of the Pali imaginaire, which he defines as “a mental universe created by and within Pali texts, which remained remarkably stable in content throughout the traditional period” (1998: 41). In an extended essay on Buddhist texts, art, and patronage at the beginning of the Bangkok period in Siam, Peter Skilling pushes back against Collins’ notion of Pali texts constituting a stable mental universe over time, and instead advocates for a more

historicized “Pali imaginaire” as a flexible, peripatetic “databank” that Buddhists have drawn from and contributed to across South and Southeast Asia (2012: 336–347). In their own ways, Collins and Skilling are each grappling with how to position Pali texts as a translocal corpus that shaped a variety of cultures across a vast stretch of time. Collins emphasizes the consistency of this corpus as a way to describe a complete mental universe, while Skilling points to the plurality of imaginaires present with Buddhist societies, of which the Pali imaginaire is only one member. Both contributions point to how we might connect the intellectual trajectory of Theravada Buddhism to wider questions in the humanities.

One particularly compelling model for how local Theravada intellectual histories can inform broader fields of inquiry is Christian Lammerts’ *Buddhist Law in Burma* (2018). His book offers a complete revision of Buddhist legal history in Burma on the basis of vernacular, Pali-vernacular, and Pali manuscript sources. In so doing, he demonstrates the possibilities that emerge from following Hallisey’s call to pay attention to the local production of meaning, and to trace the form and substance of specific translation practices. By tracking the transformation of legal materials across time, Lammerts builds the foundations of an intellectual history of Buddhist law in Burma and in the broader region. Though grounded in local sources, his rigorous approach makes it possible to appreciate the universal relevance of the legal questions tackled by Burmese intellectuals.

Although framed as a preliminary study for further research on Burmese jurisprudence, *Buddhist Law in Burma* provides a powerful template for how to approach the study of Theravada literature. First, it remains rooted in a critical, philological approach to Buddhist legal texts and the manuscripts that transmit them. Second, it heeds the dynamic interplay between Pali and vernacular languages, including bilingual genres and shifting vectors of translation, from Pali to Burmese and vice versa. Third, in an echo of Hallisey’s essay, it does not take the survival of particular Buddhist texts for granted, but rather examines “the manner in which texts were circulated” and “the processes by which certain texts were singled out as worth preserving” (1995: 51). This, in turn, provides the basis for a regional intellectual history, grounded in a patterned framework of circulated texts, translations, authors, and copyists.

Towards the conclusion of his essay, Hallisey noted that “we will inevitably end up having to rethink our conceptualizations of Buddhism as a translocal tradition with a long and self-consciously distinct history but which is at the same time a tradition dependent on local conditions for the production of meaning” (1995: 51). Though many of the authors cited in this essay do not engage Hallisey’s words directly, they are nonetheless party to the same project of examining Theravada texts, particularly in their local dimensions. As the dearth of studies that transcend national borders makes clear, however, there is still considerable space to explore the translocal lives of Theravada texts and their place in the world’s intellectual heritage.

There is much to celebrate in studies of Theravada literature from the past quarter century: a renewed emphasis on non-canonical and vernacular texts, emerging philological standards for the study of vernacular and multilingual texts, and innovative models for tracing the local development of thought and literature across increasingly broad horizons. Given the wealth of manuscripts that have become readily accessible in recent years, however, the ideal of developing a complete picture

of Theravada literature, even for a single community, remains a distant goal. Widespread digital access to primary materials is a much-welcome development, but the codicological and philological work necessary to appreciate the depth and richness of Theravada manuscripts will take decades to come to fruition. At the same time, localized studies of particular texts need to speak to universal human capacities and conundrums in order to make the case for the enduring relevance of Theravada cultural production on a global stage.

Justin McDaniel, in his introduction to Steven Collins’ posthumously published *Wisdom as Way of Life*, writes that Collins saw the need “to articulate why Theravāda mattered in much larger questions in the study of Buddhism and religion more broadly” (2020: xxv). Collins’ position feels especially urgent in these manifestly uncertain times. No matter how the political, material, and technological circumstances of Theravada studies change in the coming decades, this question of why our work matters will remain. In 1995, Hallisey’s essay revealed how much terrain remained to be explored. Many then-untrodden paths are now emerging as well-paved roads: non-canonical literatures, multilingual texts, and translocal intellectual histories. For the next twenty-five years, our question is not so much what paths we will or will not take, but rather which ones we will prioritize by linking them to wider humanistic concerns.

### Corresponding author

Trent Walker  
Department of Religious Studies  
Stanford University  
[ttwalker@stanford.edu](mailto:ttwalker@stanford.edu)

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