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978-0-521-27787-7 - The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism

Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah

Excerpt

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Introduction and manifesto

Although it stands by itself and is an autonomous whole, this book should also be regarded as complementary to my previous effort, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*.¹ At various points it intersects with themes and issues developed in the earlier one: These intersections are indicated in footnotes. Together this book and its predecessor should fuse into a larger cumulative whole.

World Conqueror and World Renouncer was essentially a discussion of the dialectical relations between the Buddhist *saṅgha* (order of monks) and the Thai polity, whose apex was kingship, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Thai polity was a member of the larger family of Theravāda Buddhist polities of South and Southeast Asia. These polities shared certain presuppositions and values regarding their constitution, of which the most prominent was a symbiosis and mutuality between the *saṅgha* as an order of monks dedicated to the vocation of liberation and the king as a righteous ruler whose obligation was to protect and secure the religion of the Buddha as the special treasure of his people. The importance of this overarching principle that characterized these Buddhist polities prompted me to outline in the first part of *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, so as to serve as a doctrinal and historical backdrop, the normative ideas developed and/or embedded in early Buddhism concerning kingship, society, and polity, the relations between the *bhikkhu* (monk) and laity, and the constitution of monastic communities and their relations to the larger socio-political context. By “early Buddhism” I did not mean Buddhism at its very beginning or during the life of Buddha – even the experts know too little about this time of origins – but Buddhism as it had crystallized by the time the Pali canon – or at least most of it – had been composed.

Early Buddhism as demarcated by Max Weber was roughly the time immediately anterior to the reign of Emperor Aśoka, and I am happy to accept this periodization. My reading of the canonical texts of early Buddhism convinced me that, although most of them have to do with the monk’s vocation (as one

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would expect of a literature composed by monks primarily for monks), yet they contained seminal and fateful value statements and characterizations of ideal Buddhist kingship, and of the relation between kingship and *Dhamma* (morality/duty) and the social order, in *contradistinction* to the Brahmanical theory of society and kingship; the relation between *Dhamma* and *artha* (instrumental politico-economic action); and the relation between *brāhman* and *ṣatriya* ruler. These embryonic but germinal ideas were realized in the Aśokan era and came to fruition at that time. Aśoka was by no means a historical accident or the agent who for the first time gave a political dimension to Buddhism, as was postulated by Weber. Moreover, in the eyes of Buddhists over the centuries, ever since the Aśokan era, a certain ideological mold regarding kingship and *saṅgha*, religion and polity, had set and acted as a persisting and perduring influence on the Buddhist polities of South and Southeast Asia. The theme of continuities and transformations, investigated from a classical point of reference and departure in early Buddhism, as stated above, seemed to be a meaningful way to study the trajectory of Southeast Asian Buddhist kingdoms, their tensions, and their dynamics.

The patterns I established in *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* with regard to the relations between *saṅgha* and polity were incomplete in one respect. There, I mostly dealt with the collaborations and ruptures between the king and that part of the *saṅgha* which we may in shorthand call the official monastic establishment; that is, the town-and-village-dwelling monastic communities insofar as they became a part of a looser or tighter ecclesiastical hierarchy, whose leaders were concentrated in the political capitals and who by and large buttressed and legitimated kingship. Phases of “purification” and “revival” of religion, as well as of “decline” of the ordination “lineages” of monks, were treated as part of the dialectical relations between king and political authority, on the one side, and the *saṅgha*, internally subdivided on sectarian lines, on the other.

The incompleteness of this story consists in not highlighting or focusing on a number of polarities: between town-and-village-dwelling monks and forest-dwelling monks; between the vocation of scholarship and books and that of meditation; and between a (more) ascetic and reclusive mode of life and a (more) active laity-oriented life, which tended in various combinations to divide, if not bifurcate, the *saṅgha*. Throughout the history of the Buddhist polities of Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand, one grand division of the *saṅgha* – that between monastic fraternities and/or communities labeled as forest dwellers on the one hand and as town/village dwellers on the other hand – has persisted and has affected the pattern and the course of the relations between polity and *saṅgha*. In fact, the relation between polity and *saṅgha* could be construed as having been *triadic* – one side being the dynamic relation between king and the “establishment” *saṅgha*, the second side being the relation between the king and the “forest-dwelling” monastic communities, and the third side being the internal

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dialogue between the town-dwelling and forest-dwelling emphases within the *saṅgha* itself, with their attendant consequences such as disputes about the correct disciplinary rules, the espousal of ascetic practices, the degree of dedication to meditation as opposed to scholarship, and so on. The relation between political authority and the internally segmented *saṅgha* could thus be profitably regarded as a center–periphery dialectic exhibiting a variety of pulsations and oscillations.

As a social anthropologist whose main fieldwork in Thailand was focused on contemporary Thai society, what caught my attention in the early and late seventies, and became the starting point for the investigation that developed into this book, was the great veneration that many Thai in Bangkok – of different social status and educational levels, both high and low, male and female, affluent and poor, powerful and weak – had for a certain number of famous forest monks, recently dead or living, who were acclaimed as saints (*arahants*). They were meditation masters credited with extraordinary wisdom, love, and charismatic powers. These saints, who had lived and worked in humble circumstances on the periphery of Thai society and territory, received the adulation and prostrations of the urbanites of the country's capital, which was the hub of the Thai polity and society and the central arena where power and wealth were won and lost. Concurrently with the acclamation of the saints, I noted two other enthusiasms that were at first sight difficult to reconcile: an increased participation by the laity in Buddhist meditation, a pursuit traditionally relegated to monks, and an intensification of the cult of amulets, a traditional preoccupation now reaching the pitch of fetishistic obsession among those same fevered urbanites. The amulets held in the highest esteem and to which were attributed the greatest efficacy were – apart from certain famous antique and vintage rarities – those blessed by the famous forest saints of modern times. Both the saints and the amulets were common subjects in the popular Thai literature of magazines, books, and newspapers.

In the course of tracing the connections between the charisma and the hagiography of present-day saints, the increasing lay interest in meditation, and the classification and efficacy of amulets, I have branched out in many directions. As in my previous book, one of the paths, or rather a grand highway, on which I travel is both doctrinal and historical. The path of the *arahant*, his vocation and his discipline, his efforts and the fruits of his achievements, are the subject of course of much canonical and commentarial literature. Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (the path of purification), composed around the fifth century A.D., serves as a landmark and a beacon of illumination. Furthermore, since Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand have had a long tradition of forest-monk communities, I situate my description of present-day Thai forest monks in a broader historical landscape. The historical portions are not so much concerned with telling a chronological story as with discovering certain structural patterns and tendencies that crystallize in various circumstances and social contexts.

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The book is divided into four parts. Part I sketches the classical Buddhist doctrinal concepts of the *arahant*, his path of purification, and his position in a Buddhist hierarchy of beings. It also provides some idea of the known historical accounts of the forest-monk traditions in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand, and extracts from them some ideas to guide the subsequent treatment of Thai phenomena.

Part II, the central portion of the book, deals with the line of famous Thai forest monks in recent times: their biographies; the hermitages they have founded; and the pattern of relations between the meditation master and his ordained disciples, and between the master, as saint or holy man, and the laity. These substantive issues are approached by probing Buddhist hagiography.

One of the most famous forest saints of Thailand, Acharn Mun, is the subject of a well-known biography by one of his disciples, Acharn Maha Boowa. I present a summary of this biography and discuss it as a masterly exercise in Buddhist hagiography. My exegesis of the multiple implications and facets of this piece of hagiography is guided by the view that to do justice to the task a simultaneous study had to be undertaken of the saint and his life as the *subject* of the biography and of the biographer himself as disciple and as the *author* of a work, whose shape was influenced by the larger sectarian circumstances in which he found himself and by the propagandist objective which impelled his writing. The analysis of the dialectic between biography and biographer is at the same time a grappling with the relation between text and context and the weaving of a single totality of meaning.

I have employed the notion of *indexical symbol* to tackle the study of text and context, semantics and pragmatics, meaning that refers back to classical constructs and forward to uses in the present. The concept of *indexical symbol* was first proposed by Burks, who derived it by combining two of the terms in Charles Peirce's threefold classification of signs (symbol, icon, and index). Jakobson labeled the same concept *shifter*, following Jespersen.² The main point about *indexical symbols* or *shifters* is that they have a duplex structure, because they combine two roles – they are symbols that are associated with the represented object by a conventional semantic rule, and they are simultaneously also indexes in existential, pragmatic relation to the objects they represent. The dual meanings point in two directions at once – in the semantic direction of cultural presuppositions and conventional understandings and in the pragmatic direction of the social and interpersonal context of action, the line-up of the participants and the processes by which they establish or infer meanings.

Let me illustrate the way in which I have used the notion of *indexical symbol* with regard to the biography of a modern saint, Acharn Mun, as a text. The traditional accounts of the lives of Buddha himself, and of other famous Buddhist saints, have as models to some degree influenced the actual life of our Thai saint as well as the retrospective account of his disciple. At this level of exegesis, a

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passing glance at the conventions of the Christian hagiography of medieval saints is also informative.

The scrutiny of present-day pragmatics and indexical uses to which hagiographies are put takes me into the sectarian affiliations of the biographer (and his teacher, the saint) and into the sectarian rivalries and differences between Thailand's two major monastic sects, the Thammayut and Mahānikāi, the distinct styles of meditation they sponsored, and their patrons and political connections in the capital. In other words, this pathway of interpretation takes us into the interplay of religion and politics within which the biography has a place. Moreover, the scrutiny of sectarianism in its manifold aspects allows us to see how the seemingly antithetical interests of the laity in practicing meditation and in possessing amulets become reconcilable, if not actually congruent, activities.

In sum, I have employed the notion of *indexical symbol* to comprehend symbolic and semantic meanings, on the one hand, and indexical, existential, and pragmatic meanings on the other hand, as riding on the same form and melding into an amalgam.

Part III of the book is concerned with the cult of amulets and the objectification and transmission of charisma. Sacralized amulets in the form of small images of the Buddha or famous saints, or of medallions struck with the faces and busts of the same, and amulets of other shapes and representations, are an old phenomenon in Thailand. There are classical and medieval classifications and systems of names for this fecund variety of sacred objects – relics, statues, images, *stupa* monuments, etc. – and complex explanations of their roles and uses. These explanations range from their pious consideration as “reminders” to their awed treatment as sacra radiating fiery energy and protective or fertilizing powers. In fact, one finds on pursuing this question that the beliefs and attitudes surrounding amulets are virtually of the same kind as those surrounding famous Buddha statues. I have therefore been tempted to devote one chapter to the myths of origin and the travels of two famous Buddha images – the Sīnhala Buddha and the Emerald Buddha Jewel – which are credited with supranormal powers and which have acted as the palladia of several kingdoms and principalities in Thailand and Laos. In the course of such forays, I hope I have contributed something to answering the puzzling question: What is the orientation of Buddhists to Buddha images, relics, and other sacra? In any case, the answer has to be more complex than the simpleminded proposition that the Buddhists “cognitively” know that the Buddha does not exist but “affectively” feel his presence. And, once again, treating these objects as *indexical symbols* and *indexical icons*³ enables us to appreciate their semantic and pragmatic meanings and values as an amalgam.

I present a certain amount of ethnography on the manufacture of amulets, the rituals of sacralization they undergo, and the methods by which their powers are

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activated. These preliminaries bring us to the role of modern Thai saints, forest monks, and meditation masters in the sacralization of amulets and to the uses to which the lay sponsors and possessors of these amulets put them in the life-affirming activities of this world – in the manipulations of politics, commerce, and love, and in the pursuit of both altruistic and selfish goals.

Part IV is devoted to conceptual and theoretical clarifications on the basis of preceding substantive accounts. The first issue is millennial Buddhism, to which we are led by considering the cosmographic and cultic features of the hermitages of some contemporary meditation masters that are spectacularly lodged on the slopes and crests of cosmic mountains and by charting the pilgrim's progress to such a hermitage. The esoteric, cultic, and mystical features of these hermitages composed of circles of disciples and lay devotees show unmistakable similarities to esoteric and "messianic" associations in Burma, and they all raise the question of the possible link between them and the militant and violent millennial insurrections that have been recorded as sporadically exploding in Burma and Thailand during the past couple of centuries.

The facts pertaining to the cult of the amulets, and to the role of Buddhist holy men in the conferment of potency on them, also lead along a second path, this time to general anthropological and sociological theory. The Weberian conception of "charisma" as a gift of grace, as a form of authority that was spontaneous and resistant toward discipline and regulation, does not square at all with the supranormal powers and "charisma" of the Buddhist saints achieved without divine intervention by the undergoing of an ascetic and contemplative regime. This confrontation leads me to propose a typology of charisma that takes into account the proposals of Shils and Eisenstadt.

Penetrating as was his treatment of charisma as an interpersonal phenomenon, Weber was blind to the transfer of charisma to objects, and the sedimentation of power in objects, which mediated social relationships. This was probably because he would have seen amulets, sacra, regalia, and relics as belonging to the "magical religion" of the masses, a fare for which he had no stomach. The question of objectification of charisma or the sedimentation of powers in amulets is more rewardingly treated within the scope of the Maussian theory of the gift and the Marxian conception of the fetishism of commodities. It is hoped that the attempts to place the cult of amulets within the general scope of the fetishism of objects, and the Buddhist conception of the saints' acquisition of special powers within the general scope of theory of charisma, are examples of a fruitful traffic between Indology and anthropology. The Indology consists in viewing these phenomena in their particularity, clothed in their distinctive linguistic and cultural dress, and situated in a long civilizational tradition; the anthropology consists in taking the next step of bringing these phenomena, discerned in their own cultural and historical terms, within the scope of a more general and comparative sociological apperception.

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The book aspires to illustrate several passages – from history to anthropology, from text to context, and from Indology to anthropology. And the author nails to his mast this statement on perspective: I have in my previous writings and in this book as well been influenced by the view that to confine the study of “religion” to the doctrinal beliefs and philosophical constructs is, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith⁴ has argued, an unfortunate rationalist Enlightenment legacy that both unduly narrows and pauperizes the phenomenon. For me, Buddhism is a shorthand expression for a total social phenomenon, civilizational in breadth and depth, which encompasses the lives of Buddhist monks and laymen, and which cannot be disaggregated in a facile way into its religious, political, and economic realms as these are currently understood in the West. I am mindful and influenced in this respect by the views of Louis Dumont on Indian society as a hierarchical totality.

I have found that those who espouse the narrow-minded view of religion, as stated above, also frequently have a linear view of the development of Buddhism, from a pure, pristine, philosophical, salvation-search-oriented beginning, unstained and unsullied by the character and concerns of the social milieu in which it arose, to the later states of ever-widening popularization and vulgarization and deviation from the initial purity, in which are at play all the human passions and this-worldly concerns of the masses. This posture can be baptized as “the Pali Text Society mentality” – although there are extraordinary individuals who belonged to this society who did not merit this opprobrium – which is not only portrayed by some Western scholars of a puritanical bent but also by some Sri Lankan scholars who have not emancipated themselves from the presuppositions of that “reformist Buddhism” inspired and propagandized by Theosophists with such vintage names as Olcott and Blavatsky and imbibed by the rising middle classes of the southwestern littoral of Sri Lanka.

The proponents of the elitist thesis of the vulgarization of high religious tenets by the masses in whom dark passions of the id surge in an anti-Buddhist rage come in various guises – but the worst are those who propose a historical thesis without practicing history. Unsullied Buddhist principles were formulated in early Buddhism in India; then, after an imaginary leap in time and space, we see distortions and deviations in popular religiosity in Burma or some such outlying region.

In my previous writings, and again in this book, I have tried to demonstrate that the philosophical abstractions of the canonical *suttas* and the elite scholar monks are often reiterated by the patterns of ideas embedded in myths and popular rites; that even the early Buddhism of the Pali canon and of classical commentary cannot be fully understood unless we see it as an interwoven tapestry of biographical, philosophical, mythological, and cosmological strands, so masterfully revealed by Paul Mus and his associates; and that if there was development in Buddhism over time it was informed by both continuities and transformations, the latter being not merely the gross handiwork of the masses but wrought

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by all parties, elite monks and ordinary monks, kings and court circles, urban merchants and traders, and peasant farmers and artisans, all responsive to their existential conditions and aspirations.

I am in sympathy with the indictment by Peter Brown (in his recent *The Cult of the Saints*)⁵ of what he calls the “two-tiered” model of modern scholarship on the religious and ecclesiastical history of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages:

The views of the potentially enlightened few are thought of as being subject to continuous upward pressure from habitual ways of thinking current among “the vulgar” . . . When applied to the nature of religious change in late antiquity the “two-tiered” model encourages the historian to assume that a change in the piety of late-antique men, of the kind associated with the rise of the cult of saints, must have been the result of the capitulation by the enlightened elites of the Christian church to modes of thought previously current only among the “vulgar.” The result has been a tendency to explain much of the cultural and religious history of the late antiquity in terms of drastic landslips in the relation between the elites and the masses . . . Applied in this manner, the “two-tiered” model appears to have invented more dramatic turning points in the history of the early church than it has ever explained.

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PART I



THE ARAHANT AND THE PATH OF MEDITATION

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The Buddhist conception of the *arahant*

The *arhat* (Skt) or *arahant* (Pali) has been glossed in several ways: literally “able, worthy,” a person who has reached the goal;¹ “worthy of worship”;² “one who is entirely free from all evil desire”;³ “the perfected saint”;⁴ “saint worthy of the respect of all”;⁵ and so on.

It is part of the received wisdom that pristine Buddhism, possibly a Kṣatriya-sponsored protest against Brahmanical claims of superiority on the basis of divinely ordained birth status and ritual functions, and against Brahmanical purity preoccupations in social intercourse, declared that one is a *brāhmaṇa* by birth, and allowed open recruitment to the order of *bhikkhus* from all ranks and *varṇa* status orders.

Though this pristine Buddhism repudiated the Brahmanical assignment of differently evaluated *Dhammas* (moralities) and vocations for the hierarchized status orders and proclaimed a single liberation quest for all human beings, it nevertheless accepted an inequality of spiritual achievement among human beings and their consequent ranking on the basis of *karmic* action in past lives and in the present.

On this ladder of achievement, the perfected saints are not only placed at the top but minutely differentiated from one another according to their merits. An apt example is “the jewel discourse” (*Ratanasuttam*) of the *Khuddakapāṭha*, a Theravāda canonical text.⁶ For the most part employing binary categories that are asymmetrically evaluated, it proceeds from the inferior to the higher mode of existence, at each level the superior category being the ground for the distinction at the next level. The discourse takes the seven jewels or treasures (*ratanam*) of the *cakkavatti* (universal ruler), as enumerated in the *Mahāsuddassana Sutta*, as a point of departure in order to generate its own hierarchical scheme in which lay persons and renouncers of different achievements and attributes are placed.⁷

The jewel, we are told, is twofold – that “with consciousness and without consciousness.” The wheel and gem jewels, gold and silver and so on, are of the