



July 26, 2010 – Thai Sculpture and Buddhist Reference Books

Our guest speaker at the July 25, 2010 meeting was Madison Morrison. Madison is from the USA and is a graduate of two prominent universities – Yale (Bachelor) and Harvard (Master and PhD). Formerly a university professor, who has lectured widely in Asia, Europe and America on English and American literature, he is now retired and living in Pattaya. He has prepared and given recent lectures on comparative geo-politics and religion, Chinese painting, the western epic, the global financial crisis, Buddhism in Southeast Asian art and his own collection of mostly western paintings. He is also at work completing a 26 volume cosmological or universal epic called *Sentence of the Gods*. In the past two years, he has under-taken a study of Buddhist art, inspired by his living in Thailand and travels in Southeast Asia.

The following lecture notes and pictures were provided by Madison Morrison.

[Lecture notes I](#): Exotic elements in popular Thai sculptures

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[Lecture notes III](#): Buddhist murals in Thailand

Lecture notes I: Exotic elements in popular Thai sculptures

(1)

The Search for Inner Peace: Buddha in the Posture of Samadhi

In the spiritual realm the Buddha reigns over Southeast Asia. Of Indian origin, he has been assimilated to Thai tradition, with here the addition of a Khmer niche, which may allude to Sakyamuni's historical visit to Cambodia. The Buddha sits in the posture of enlightenment through meditation. The opulent details qualify his asceticism with an expression of material prosperity, aesthetic elegance and social respectability.



(2)

An Allegory of Good and Evil: Rama Disarms Ravana

Against repose is balanced heroic action. The scene set among clouds unfolds beneath the moon, signifying perhaps the distant presence of the god Vishnu, of whom Rama no less than the Buddha is an avatar. Ramakian (the Thai version of the Indian epic Ramayana) calls him son of Narayana, sent to earth by Shiva as a moral scourge. Exotically dressed, Rama grasps Ravana's lance to disarm him, in an allegorical victory of Good over Evil.



(3)

The "Wai" as Welcome: A Balinese Princess

The serenity of Thai civilization owes much to its practice of respect, conveyed through the gesture of the *wai*, with which Thais greet one another and take their leave. The modern artist has represented this charming young noblewoman in the guise of a Balinese princess, probably a fashionable nod to Indonesian civilization. Her present refinement may signal that her goodness in a past life has been rewarded by a beautiful reincarnation.



(4)

The Sensual and the Sacred: A Divine Apsara

From India the Khmers and Thais also inherit a tradition of divine sensuality (an index of high culture), exemplified by this exotic *apsara*, here shown magically traveling through the air. Her lavish accouterments include the *chada* (a headdress typically Thai). She may bear an elixir of immortality extracted from deep within the sea. As in contemporary Indian dance the continuation of ancient sensuous traditions signals a cultural vitality.



(5)

A Rest Stop in the Jungle: The Traveler and her Gentle Vehicle

A noble woman, neither divine nor explicitly heroic, but like Sita (also conveyed by a fabulous bird), pauses in a flowery arbor, a jungle retreat, to allow her fantastic, gentle vehicle, known as the *hongsa*, to drink from a fountain and be comforted. Man and nature are in harmony according to the artist's vision, whose iconography alludes to the Indic Garuda, his aesthetics, to the clouds, cliffs and lakes of Chinese landscape painting.



(6)

Conjugal Bliss: God and Consort or King and Queen

Although their Indian dress and posture tell us that the amorous couple is not Thai, their faces say otherwise. Have we here a nobleman and his spouse, a king and his queen, or Shiva, the creator/destroyer of the Universe, and his consort, Uma? The shape of the couple's ears suggests divine intelligence, the relative size of man and wife, an Asian view of hierarchy in marriage, one that persists despite our contemporary dispensation.



(7)

An Avatar of Rama: Narai's Vision

This small relief is modeled on a much larger piece in Lopburi that represents King Narai as an avatar of Rama, asleep on a Khmer dragon with elephant's trunk. His wife comforts him. Lotuses, which emanate from the king, fill the central scene; atop one sits *paprom* the four-faced Hindu divinity. The bird grasping an elephant by the leg (in the upper left) is larger than the largest beast, as accords with Narai's vision of a world transformed.



(8)

Between the Other World and This: A Water Goddess

She is divine, and her regal headdress tells us that she is also Khmer. Her posture — seated on her haunches — indicates respect, perhaps attendance upon a king. For someone at least she bears an amphora of water (the vine in her hand is the means whereby she had lowered it and filled it in a pond). She is a maiden, as expensively garbed and bejeweled as a Cambodian princess. Nonetheless she is natively Thai.



(9)

Military Victory: Siam Defeats Myanma

The battle of elephants (for Thais, symbols of royalty) represents an actual scene of conflict between Thailand and Burma (both modern names). The Thai King Naresuan (on the right) cuts off the head of the Burmese king, Upparacha (on the left). The Thais were not always so fortunate, for in 1767 this traditional enemy razed Ayuttya, the ancient capital, which then gave rise to its rebuilding at Thonburi, near modern Bangkok.



(10)

Another Path to Quietude: Rama in Disguise

This diminutive monarch or little nobleman may be deceiving us as to his true identity. He could be Rama in disguise, a figure from the spiritualized Ramayana. At any rate, he is making the gesture known in Thai as *phanom mue* (raising the hands in the shape of a lotus to chest level), which, unlike the *wai*, expresses solitary prayer to divinity. Despite his Indian ornament and high stylization, the original is probably of Thai provenance.



11)

Religious Exuberance: A Chorus of Dancing Girls

Cultures in which semi-naked dancing is prohibited are not religious in the fullest sense. These amply breasted Khmer *apsaras* may be celebrating a merely political event, say the victory of a king, but their evident mirth is also full-bodied. Such a kinetic performance would not have been regarded by traditional Thais as religious. Monotheists, strict Buddhists and other puritans, will agree. Adepts at Angkor would have begged to differ.



(12)

A Pleasurable Harmony: Drum, Gong and Flute

The sensuous cultures of the world — in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere — are routinely maligned, but we originate with naked breasts suckled more than once.

The theatrical gong is not being struck, but the drum is being spanked, and behind a curtain the flute, here a luminous wand, is deliciously contemplated. The ancient impulse of life is revived not with prudery or a vow of chastity but with a sublimated sensuality.



Note: These popular works, copies of well-worn templates, are included both for their common charm and as an index of the persistence of various motifs that combine, in the traditions of Thai and Khmer art, with Buddhist themes. **(1)** represents a purely Buddhist image, Thai but with an amalgam of Khmer decorative elements; **(2)** represents the Indianization of Thai art with yet another exotic element, here Burmese (see the handling of Rama's costume); **(3)** reflects the importation of motifs from Indonesian Srivijaya, a dynasty that ruled Thailand; **(4)** represents a motif drawn from India but Siamized; **(5)** combines a pre-Indic figure, the mythical *hongsa* with Chinese landscape motifs; **(6)** is ambiguous: the attire is Indian but the faces Thai; the subject is secular but also divine; **(7)** represents a historical figure within a mythic setting which combines originally Indic figures (the lotus, the four-faced Brahma) with a Khmer dragon; **(8)** like the earlier "Bali Princess," which represents a Thai girl dressed in Indonesian costume, here we have a Thai goddess in a Khmer headdress; **(9)** represents an historical figure, as earlier had the image of Narai but copies a famous Thai painting; **(10)** represents a prefiguration of the Buddha in the spiritualized Rama, as earlier Rama in battle with the evil Ravana had a Buddhist struggle; **(11)** These Khmer girls are both secular and religious, like the many representations of Shakti in the guise of an apsara to be found at Angkor Wat; **(12)** This final image is more purely popular but embodies traditional postures of music-

[Return to first page](#)

Lecture notes II: Buddhist art books and their cover illustrations

(1)

Betty Gosling, *Origins of Thai Art*

Cover: Terracotta figures from Khu Bua, the southernmost settlement of the Dvaravati heartland. Though this style arrived, it seems, from Theravada Sri Lanka, it is notable for its representation of Mahayana Bodhisattvas. Here musicians are shown. The figures, which bear Sri Lankan features, are unlike work that had arrived in Thailand by way of the Ganges region of northern India. 7th or 8th century.

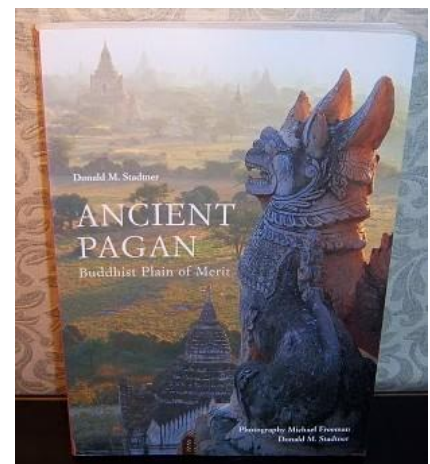


Text: “Neolithic, Bronze and Iron age art”; “The Introduction of Buddhist art into the central plains”; “The Art of the Dvaravati Heartland”; “The Peninsula, the Pasak and Nontraditional Art of the Central Plains — 5th to 9th Century A.D.”; “Khmer and Dvaravati-related Art on the Khorat Plateau”; “Art in the Central Plains in the Northern Highlands — 12th and 13th Centuries A.D.”; “The pre-Tai Legacy.”

(2)

Donald M. Stadtner, *Ancient Pagan: Buddhist Plain of Merit*

Cover: View from the roof terrace of the Ananda Temple, looking east, on the plain at Bagan, where 2,000 Buddhist temples and other monuments were erected between the 11th and 13th centuries. An extraordinary book based upon in situ research into an art and architecture very different from what one encounters elsewhere in the region.

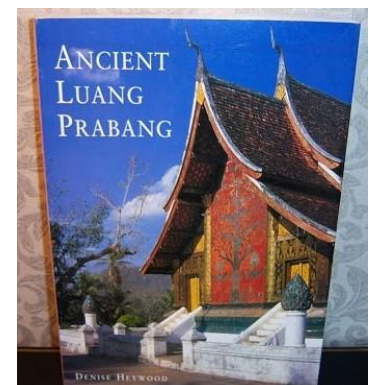


Text: A study of 33 of the principle temples with introductory sections on “Religion,” “Materials,” “Architecture,” “Painting” and “Sculpture.” One of several truly distinguished texts published by River Books of Bangkok, Stadtner’s has on average four color reproductions to the page. May be read before or after one’s visit to Bagan.

(3)

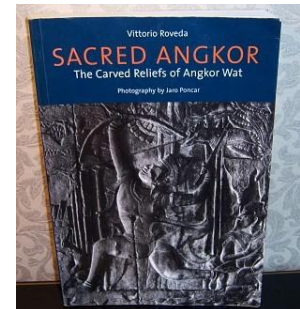
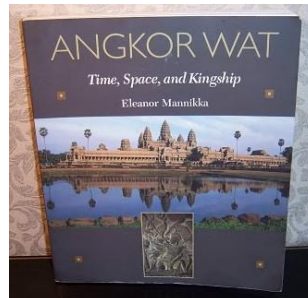
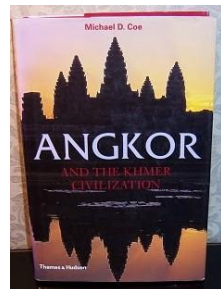
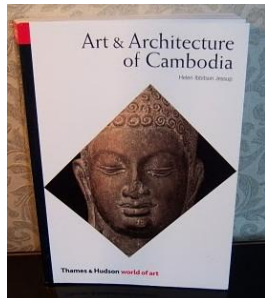
Denise Heywood, *Ancient Luang Prabang*

Cover: The assembly hall of Wat Xieng Thong, on the back (western) end of which is “a shimmering mosaic of the tree of life, with a red background”; contains details “in silver, turquoise, blue, purple and green”; created by local restorers in 1960. “The tree of life is a cosmological symbol of the *axis mundi*, the link between the heavens, the earth and the underworld. Trees are also resonant with notions of cosmic unity, as their roots reach down into the ground and their branches stretch upwards to heaven.”



Text: Focuses on three dozen examples of “Sacred Architecture: Buddhist Temples”; “The Royal Palace”; “Secular Architecture: Lao Vernacular and French Colonial Buildings”; plus a section on the living arts of Laos. Exquisite, exotic illustrations.

(4)-(7) Four very useful books about Khmer art, Khmer civilization and Angkor Wat. I will not comment on the familiar views of Angkor Wat. Of the two dozen books that I have acquired, mostly on my seven trips to Cambodia, the following are highly recommended to the beginner. I have not included a more recently acquired study by the Italian Marilia Albanese, the most lavish visual survey of Khmer Civilization.



(4) Text: Helen Ibbotson Jessup offers the best summary treatment of her subject, *Art and Architecture of Cambodia*, one which draws upon the findings of many scholars.

Cover: Head of Buddha, Vat Romlok, Angkor Borei, Ta Keo, ?6th-7th centuries.

(5) Text: Michael D. Coe, a Yale anthropologist who has also written on the Mayan civilization, offers the best introduction to the history of the Khmer civilization.

(6) Text: Eleanor Mannikka has conducted a much more specialized study of the numerology of *Angkor Wat: Time, Space, and Kingship*, considering the monument not as a static form but as an experience through time and space. Her essential thesis, at first rejected, has now been acknowledged by most scholars.

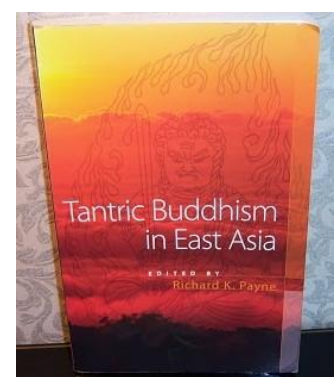
(7) Text: Vittorio Roveda has written two books extraordinarily useful to the more advanced scholar, *Khmer Mythology: Secrets of Angkor* and *Sacred Angkor: The Carved Reliefs of Angkor Wat*, the latter shown here, with a scene from Ramayana.

Cover: Sita's svayamvara, detail, Angkor Wat, N.W. corner pavilion

The history of Buddhism in Cambodia is a contested subject. Some argue that Brahmanism and Buddhism arrived simultaneously to mingle with an earlier culture. Certain is that Mahayana doctrine was dominant at Angkor during the period of Jayavarman VII, who probably had himself realistically represented at Bayon and elsewhere as a Bodhisattva. After his death, there followed a period of drastic iconoclasm, before Buddhism eventually returned to Angkor, where it has persisted till the present. Having glanced at Burma, Laos and Cambodia, we now put Thailand and Vietnam aside for the moment to glance at China, Korea and Japan.

(8)
Richard K. Payne, Ed., *Tantric Buddhism in East Asia*

Quotations from the Introduction: "Although not widely used in contemporary scholarly discourse, 'Mantranaya' is important as a term to distinguish an early development in Buddhist practice. The word is a compound of *mantra(s)*, the evocative verbal formulae, which play a central role in this practice, and *naya*, a principle, system or method in the sense of both organizing and motivating it."



Mantrayana is regarded, after Theravada and Mahayana, as another higher, vehicle for conveying one to *nirvana*. “While the division into three *yanas* — Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana — has become commonplace,” says Payne, “there are other ways of construing the history of Buddhist tradition. The great Tibetan exegete Tsong kha pa considers there to be only two major forms, Hinayana and Mahayana.

“The latter he divides into the Perfection Vehicle (*paramitayana*) and the Secret Mantra Vehicle (*guyamantrayana*). While at first this might appear to be a distinction that makes no difference, it serves to place Tantric Buddhism firmly within the philosophy and practice of Mahayana.” A different distinction is drawn by Luis O. Gomez, who identifies the three strands of tantric Buddhism as follows.

The earliest of these he calls “Vajrayana.” Though this school originates as early as the 4th century, Gomez uses the term “to describe early documented manifestations of Tantric practice, especially in the high tradition of the Ganges River valley after the 7th century.” Vesna A. Wallace places the Kalachakra in the early 11th century and notes that “its sphere of influence was in Bengal, Magadha and Kasmir.”

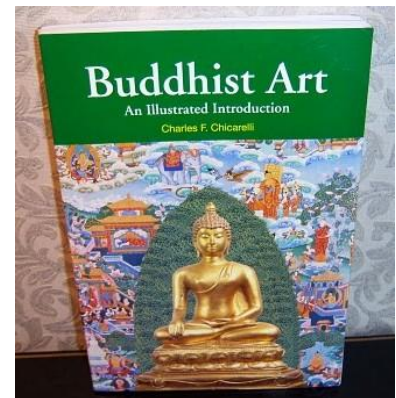
“From here Vajrayana was transmitted to Nepal, Tibet and later Mongolia. The categories of *mantranaya* and *mantrayana* form the background for the Chinese term *zhenyan*, pronounced “*shingon*” in Japanese. The term, meaning “true word,” refers to the mantra. This rendering points to the Indian philosophy of language in which mantras are effective because they manifest the primal creative energies.”

(9)

Charles F. Chicarelli, *Buddhist Art: An Illustrated Introduction*

Cover: A gilt bronze seated Buddha in the style of Lan Na (Northern Thailand, 11th-18th centuries) superimposed on a background of leaves composed by the designer of the book’s cover from a motif in the mural reproduced behind it.

Text: Chicarelli surveys Buddhist art in India, Central Asia, China, Korea, Japan, Nepal, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam in a very informative text, adorned with illustrations that focus on the representation of the Buddha himself. If one were to read only one book on the subject, this would be it..



We will now look briefly at seven of Chicarelli’s illustrations:¹

(10) A Gupta sculpture in sandstone of the Buddha preaching his first sermon in the Deer Park (Sarnath, India, 5th century). Dharmachakra mudra (or “Turning the Wheel of the Law,” or “Setting the Wheel of the Law in Motion”).

(11) Of unusual elegance for Chinese Buddhist art, this figure represents the Bodhisattva called “Guanyin” (painted wood, Northern Sung or Liao dynasty, 11th-12th centuries), seated in the rajalasana (royal ease posture).

(12) The Birushana-butso (the Great Buddha of Nara) in the Todaiji Temple (Nara is of course the ancient capital of Japan). This Buddha, who manifests magical powers, is the cosmic Vairocana Buddha. Abhaya and varada mudras. This is the world’s largest Buddha in the world’s largest wooden edifice.

¹Illustrations not reproduced since they are protected by copyright.

(13) The Vajrasattava (here from Nepal, 19th or 20th century) “is shown wearing a crown and royal robes, with a *vajra* scepter in his right, a *ghanta* bell in his left hand.” He is one of five transcendent Buddhas (Immovable, Jewel Born, Resplendent, Infinite Light, Infallible).

(14) The Bodhisattva Tara (Sri Lanka, late Anuradhapura period, 8th century), an image in the Mahayana tradition (reached Sri Lanka, 3rd century B.C., in this otherwise Theravada country). The image had been understandably mistaken for a Hindu deity.

(15) Buddha in the posture of Nirvana (Ananda Temple, Bagan, Myanmar, ca. 12th century. This enormous image represents either Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha, or his predecessor Kanakamuni.

(16) Jayavarman VII, one of 64 such images on The Bayon, Angkor Thom, Cambodia (constructed ca. 1190), which portray (1) an actual person, (2) the Bodhisattva, (3) royal authority and thus (4) a warning to enemies.

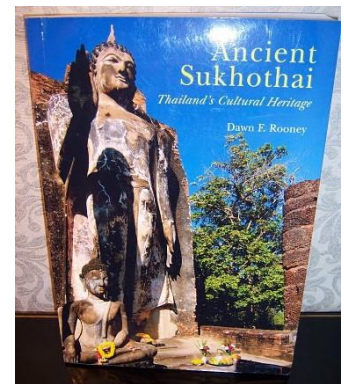
(17)

Dawn F. Rooney, *Ancient Sukhothai: Thailand's Cultural Heritage*

Cover: Standing Buddha of Wat Saphan Hin, “Temple of the Stone Bridge” (ca. late 13th to early 14th century), called “Phra Attharot, a Thai name meaning 18 cubits (or 9 meters), which is believed to be the Buddha’s height. “His right hand is raised with the palm facing outwards in the gesture of dispelling fear or giving protection; his left hand is by his side.” Considered one of the most beautiful Sukhothai Buddhas.

Text: Another of the distinguished volumes published by River Books of Bangkok, this book is by an independent scholar, Dawn F. Rooney (author of *Thai Buddhas* and of an account of early travelers to Angkor). She has lived in Asia for decades and is affiliated with the most prestigious research institutions. Her study of Sukhothai, a truly splendid guide to the ruins of the ancient capital, ironically makes its monuments more accessible than does an actual visit to the site. During her research she was flown free of charge from Bangkok to Sukhothai by Bangkok Airways.

“Sukhothai’s political and territorial power escalated,” says Rooney, “and the art flourished in the late 13th century during the reign of Ramkhamhaeng (reg. ca. 1279-1298 [exactly contemporary with the earliest years of the Sung dynasty in China]). He was a powerful monarch and very influential in Sukhothai’s history.”

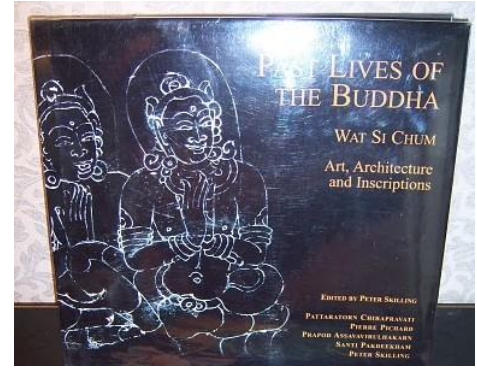


(18)

Past Lives of the Buddha: Wat Si Chum, Art, Architecture and Inscriptions, Ed. Peter Skilling, with contributions by Pattaratorn Chiraprivati, Pierre Pichard, Prapod Assavavirulhakarn, Santi Pakdeekham and Peter Skilling

Cover: A detail from Slab 34. Maghadeva Jataka (Jakata tale number 9, “The Power of a single grey hair”) at Wat Si Chum, Sukhothai’s most charismatic monument.

Text: This massive scholarly study documents the slabs of phyllite (a metamorphic rock intermediate between slate and schist) that line the ceiling of an obscure passageway of an extraordinary Buddhist structure and illustrate the first hundred of the 547 Jataka tales (the other 447 may have been part of the original program).



One of the most interesting features of the book is a systematic comparison of the Sukhothai illustrations with those of the same Jataka tales as illustrated at Wat Khrua Wan in Thailand and the Ananda Temple in Burma. This is a difficult art rendered deliberately inaccessible by the designers of temples, who wished to make merit by including such detailed representations of the Buddha’s past lives. (At Bagan there is often no access at all to the Jakata illustrations; at Wat Si Chum, the images, to this day, would not be fully visible without the production of the present scholarly work.)

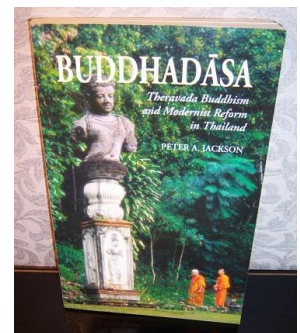
We turn next to three books useful in the study of Buddhism as practiced in Thailand. All too often Buddhism is discussed merely in terms of its texts and the “doctrines” associated with them, especially in the voluminous body of commentary. Buddhism, however, in Buddhist countries, is primarily a praxis. Especially in the West, much is written about Thai Buddhism by people who have never, or infrequently, visited the country. Likewise much is written about historical Buddhism without sufficient attention to its current practice. The following studies may serve as correctives.

(19)

Peter A. Jackson, *Buddhadasa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand*

Cover: On the high pedestal is a modern reproduction, on a monumental scale, of the famous bronze Srivijaya Bodhisattva in the National Museum in Bangkok

Text: Peter Jackson, a Fellow in Thai History at the Australian National University’s Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, has done us all a favor by bringing Buddhism up to date through his study of a famous contemporary monk named Buddhadasa (pronounced in Thai, “Phutthathat”). In consecutive chapters he takes up (Chapter 2) “The Sources of Buddhadasa’s Innovative Views”; (Chapter. 3) “Buddhadasa’s Method of Scriptural Interpretation; (Chapter 4) Buddhadasa on Rebirth [the famous monk rejects the doctrine] and Patticasamuppada [the Buddhist theory of causation]; (Chapter 5) *Chit Wang* and the Abolition of the Monk-Lay Distinction; later chapters treat modernization and the relationship between contemporary Buddhism and various socio-economic conditions in Thailand.



There follow quotations from Peter Jackson's book:

- “In contrast to the historical conservatism of Thai Buddhism, Buddhadasa’s work represents a distinctly analytical and philosophical development.”
- “Underpinning these reinterpretations is a novel method of approaching the Theravada scriptures so as to demythologize Buddhist doctrine.”
- “The demythologization of Buddhist doctrine is paralleled by Buddhadasa’s pervasive concern to give religious value to action in the material world.”

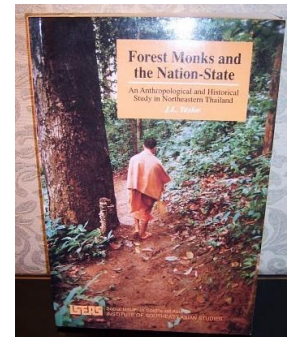
Jackson takes up the questions of “Western Influences on the study of Buddhism”; “The Influence of politics and social change in Thailand on Buddhadasa’s thought”; and “Buddhadasa’s qualified support for socio-economic development”; he concludes with a chapter that dubs Buddhadasa “Theravada Buddhism’s conservative radical.”

Two related books that I have found helpful in considering contemporary Buddhism as practiced in Thailand:

(20)

J. L. Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State: An Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand*

Taylor studies contemporary Buddhism as practiced, on the ground, in the Isaan.

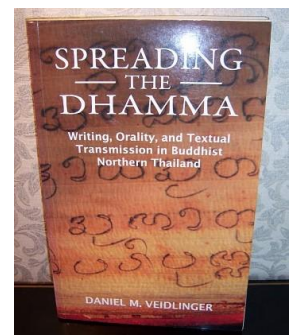


(21)

Daniel M. Veidlinger, *Spreading the Dhamma: Writing, Orality and Textual Transmission in Buddhist Northern Thailand*

By contrast, this book is an historical study, which reports a very interesting finding:

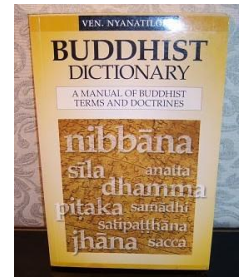
Though the Kingdom of La Na, from the 15th century on, had been thought to have received Theravada doctrine through Pali manuscripts (lodged in the libraries of virtually every *wat* in Northern Thailand), Veidlinger’s research reveals that very few such manuscripts were ever read. The transmission of Theravada doctrine, in short occurred orally, not by written means. This helps us better understand modern Thai culture, which, outside of major urban centers, is still predominantly oral.



(22)

Ven. Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary: A Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines*

A re-edited version of the 1946 classic, this 2006 edition is essential for the student who wishes to get serious and familiarize herself with Pali terminology.

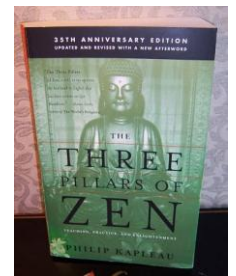


There follow two books about Zen Buddhism and Zen philosophy:

(23)

Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice and Enlightenment*

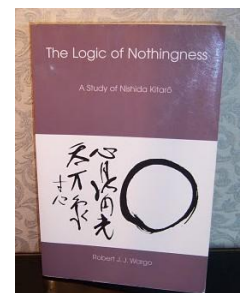
The “35th anniversary edition” of his classic study, by a renowned American practitioner and teacher of Zen, provides the best introduction in English to Japanese Buddhism. The subject of Japanese Buddhist art is too large for us to take up here.



(24)

Robert J.J. Wargo, *The Logic of Nothingness: A Study of Nishido Kitaro*

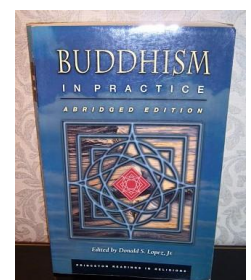
One of several books from Hawai'i about the Kyoto school, this study comments on its founder's non-religious exposition of the doctrine of the three major *bashos*, those of objective existence, of relative nothingness and of absolute nothingness, giving us a key to the most important philosophical developments of Zen thought with regard to the natural world, the world of consciousness and the intelligible world.



(25)

Buddhism in Practice, Ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr.

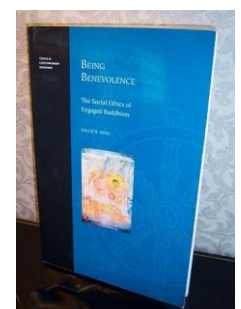
An abridged version of a larger anthology first published in 1995, this collection from Princeton includes 35 essays by various hands on the ways in which Buddhist doctrine has been put into practice over the centuries, in local contexts. The anthology thus provides a background for studying Buddhism in the art of various cultures.



(26)

Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism*

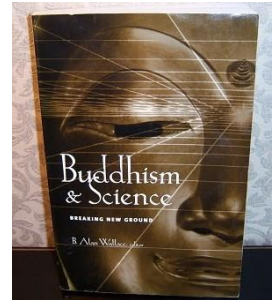
Engaged Buddhism is a movement that counts among its leaders the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, one of the principal strategists of the Buddhist anti-war movement, and Aung San Suu Ky, leader of Myanmar's democracy movement. This book from Hawai'i argues for a new social and political Enlightenment. It is not impossible that Buddhism could in time prove the basis for the abolition of war and poverty.



(27)

Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground, Ed. B. Allan Wallace

Truly ground-breaking essays by professionals, most of whom have academic degrees both in science and in Buddhist studies. Anyone examining the subject "Buddhism in Art" from a contemporary perspective should be aware of Buddhism in relation to science as well as in relation to modern social, economic and political thought.



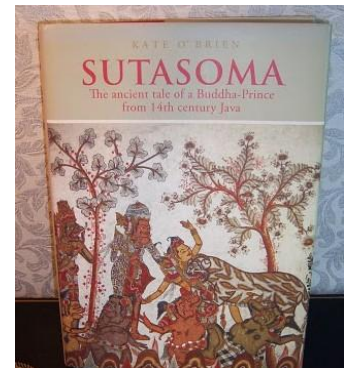
Now we return to Buddhist Art in Southeast Asia. We have looked at many figurative sculptures. Early Buddhist art is predominantly non-figurative. Most early texts are didactic: sutras, sermons, Jataka tales. Here is an example of a Buddhist epic:

(28)

Kate O'Brien, *Sutasoma: The ancient tale of a Buddha-Prince from 14th century Java*

Text: O'Brien focuses upon the mandala, a complex figure that organizes *Sutasoma*.

Cover: Much of Southeast Asian expression, as here, belongs to the art of puppetry.

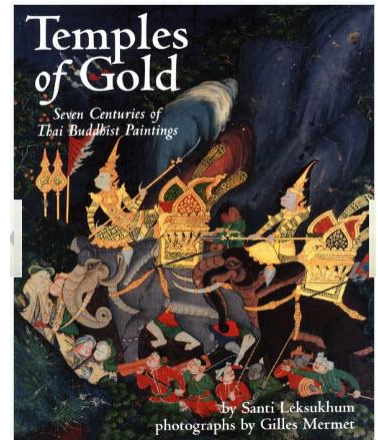


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Lecture notes III: Buddhist murals in Thailand

Source: Santi Leksukhum (author) and Gilles Mermet (photographer), *Temples of Gold: Seven Centuries of Thai Buddhist Paintings*

“The canonical collection of *jatakas*—stories of the earlier lives of the Buddha—contains 547 such stories, from Sri Lanka. A Burmese outline contains 550. However, the *Pannasa Jatakas*, or fifty *jatakas* originating in Lanna or Lan Chang (the ancient kingdom of Laos), including the Ten Great Jatakas and a number of extracanonical ones, enjoyed great popularity in the northern and northwestern parts of Thailand. The Ten Great Jatakas (Dasa Jatakas; in Thai, *Tosachat*) correspond to the last ten earlier existences of the Buddha that are found in the canonical ‘Great Collection’ (*Mahanipata*). These stories illustrate the ten Buddhist ‘Summits of Virtue’ (Parami):



- Abnegation (Temiya)
- Perseverance (Mahajanaka)
- Benevolence (Sama)
- Resolution (Nemi)
- Wisdom (Mahosodh)
- Practice of Moral Precepts (Bhuridatta)
- Patience (Candakumara)
- Equanimity (Naradakassapa)
- Truth (Vidhurapandita)
- Giving (Vessantara)

Examples of Thai Buddhist mural painting:²

(1)

The Buddhas of the Past (ubosot of Wat Chong Nansi, Bangkok), School of Ayutthaya, 3rd quarter of the 17th century)

(2)

The Narada Jataka (detail ubosot of Wat Chong Nonsi, Bangkok, School of Ayutthaya, 3rd quarter of the 17th century)

“At the request of Ruja, the god Brahma Narada comes down from heaven to bring King Angati back into a more correct observance of royal precepts. A saw tooth band separates the scene from the register above. This band is enhanced by the groups of trees bordering it. The upper register depicts the procession of King Angati into the forest to hear the preaching of the heretical ascetic.”

(3)

The Teniya Jataka (detail, ubosot of Wat Chong Nonsi, Bangkok, School of Ayutthaya, 3rd quarter of the 17th century)

“King Varanasi sends an executioner to frighten his son Temiya, but Temiya remains unmoved.”

² Illustrations not reproduced since they are protected by copyright.

(4)

The Narada Jataka (detail, *ubosot* of Wat Chong Nonsi, Bangkok, School of Ayutthaya, 3rd quarter of the 17th century)

“King Angati is entering the forest to hear the preaching of the heretical ascetic. Certain members of the king’s party are shown with bare torsos and wearing a loin cloth that reaches down to the knees (*chong kraben*). Others are wearing long-sleeved jackets with short *chong kraben* and have tall pointed headdresses.”

(5)

Celestial adorers (*ubosot* of Wat Yai Suwannaram, Petchaburi, School of Ayutthaya, beginning of the 18th century)

“The quality of the draftsmanship distinguishes the character of the diverse divinities: the Brahmas are seated in ranks side by side, each in a slightly different position, expressing grace and generosity. The advanced age of the Gandharva is remarkably well captured by a few brushstrokes. Floral motifs of various colors decorate the spaces between the saw tooth bands.”

(6)

a. *The Life of the Buddha* (detail, *ubosot* of Wat Koh Kaeo Suttharam, Petchaburi, School of Ayutthaya, 1734)

“The body of the Buddha is surrounded with an aureole symbolizing the light that emanates from his body, the form of which evokes in stylized fashion the *ruan kaeo*. The upper part of the aureole is enmeshed in a mass of foliage from the Tree of Enlightenment.”

b. *The Life of the Buddha* (detail, Suan Pakkad Palace, Bangkok, School of Rattanakosin, beginning of the 19th century)

“The Buddha is raised into the air above the waters in an attitude of meditation.”

c. *The Life of the Buddha* (detail, *ubosot* of Wat Koh Kaeo Suttharam, Petchaburi, School of Ayutthaya, 1734)

“With arms stretched outward, palms up, the Buddha accepts the offerings of the king of the elephants and the king of the monkeys in the Parileyaka Forest.”

(7)

The Life of the Buddha (The Voyage to Kapilavatthu), *ubosot* of Wat Rajasittharam, Thonburi, School of Rattanakosin, end of the 18th century)

“King Suddhodana sends envoys to his son to invite him to return to Kapilavatthu (*left*). Having returned to the kingdom of his father, the Buddha performs the miracle of rising into the air in front of the members of his family (*right*). The two scenes, which succeed one another chronologically, are separated by a saw tooth band that divides the panel diagonally. In the first scene, the Buddha is seated, surrounded by a nimbus whose form evokes “a pavilion of precious stones” (*ruan kaeo*); this nimbus is itself crowned with a flaming aureole. In the second half of the picture, the Buddha is represented standing with his left hand raised to his chest, palm outward — the traditional gesture indicating preaching. The body of the Buddha is framed with a flaming aureole enclosing a black background. Aesthetically, this method serves to set off the figure of the Master; it expresses the Enlightenment.”

(8)

The Life of the Buddha (detail, from Wat Rajasittharam, Thonburi, School of Rattanakosin, end of the 18th century)

“Having reached the Anoma River, Prince Siddhartha cuts his hair with his sword. The light brown color of the ground dominates the background. The foliage is carefully drawn, as are the wavelets on the whitish background representing the river. One finds the characteristic mixture of realism and idealization inherited from the Ayutthaya period. The groom Channa is shown near the prince, overcome with sadness, his head resting on the back of the horse. All these elements belong to an iconographic tradition dating back at least as far as the stuccos of the Sukhothai era (14th century).

“Professor Madeleine Giteau has established relations between certain elements found in a bas-relief from the Khmer temple Prah Pithu X (post-Angkor period) and the iconography of the paintings of this era.”

(9)

The Mahajanaka Jataka (detail, *ubosot* of Wat Yai Intharam, Chonburi, School of Rattanakosin, 1st half of the 19th century)

“The ship of Mahajanaka sinks in the storm; the goddess Manimekkhala, floating in the air, comes to the aid of Mahajanaka. The lightness of the palette here is a heritage from the school of Ayutthaya.”

(10)

The Mahajanaka Jataka (detail, from the *ubosot* of Wat Bang Yikhan, Thonburi, School of Rattanakosin, 2nd quarter of the 19th century)

“The fatal result of this combat on elephant-back between the king of Mithila, Ariththajanaka, and his younger brother, would cause the exile of the queen to Kalacampa, where she brought into the world the Bodhisattva Mahajanaka. This episode is rarely treated in Thai painting.”

(11)

The Khatthana Kuman Jataka (detail, *viharn* of Wat Phumin, Nan, School of Lanna, ca. 1867)

“Khattana Kuman helps Kham Sing emerge from the pillar in which she had been enclosed.”

(12)

Sang Thong (detail, *viharn* Lai Kham of Wat Phra Singh, Chiang Mai, School of Lanna, ca. mid-19th century)

“A prince accepts a cigarette from a courtier.”

(13)

Sang Thong (detail, from the *viharn* Lai Kham of Wat Phra Sing, Chiang Mai, School of Lanna, ca. mid-19th century)

“Princess Rochana accompanied by her servant girls. They are all dressed according to the fashion of the Bangkok court. The princess is carrying in her hands a garland of flowers destined for the one she will choose as a husband.”

(14)

The Chandagadha Jataka (detail, from Wat Nong Bua, Nan, School of Lanna, 3rd quarter of the 19th century)

“Princess Prohmachari, in order to avenge herself on her husband who abandoned her on a raft, has learned the art of war. Escorted by her army, she is paying a visit to her father, King Thamakhanati, who will arrange her coming marriage with Chanthakhat.”

Historical note to Thai mural paintings:

“During the period when the Angkor Khmer kingdom was beginning to weaken and the Burmese kingdom of Bagan was also undergoing a period of decline, the Thais founded two new kingdoms on their borders. One of them was the kingdom of Siam, which had for its capital the city of Sukhothai, about 310 miles (500 kilometers) north of Bangkok. Its great sovereign was Ramkhamhaeng (reg. ca. 1279- ca. 1316). In the north, King Mengrai (reg. 1261-1317), who reigned over Lanna, established a new capital at Chiang Mai in 1296, about 435 miles (700 kilometers) north of Bangkok. In the following century, in 1350, in the lower part of the Chao Phraya River basin, in central Thailand, Phra (“Lord”) Ramathibodi I (reg. 1350-1369) founded the kingdom of Ayutthaya and its capital city of the same name.”

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