

An Entangled Relationship: A Lived Religion Approach to Theravāda Buddhism and Economics

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From the perspectives of lived practices of Buddhists, Theravāda Buddhism and economics have a deeply intertwined relationship. My proposed theoretical method for the study of Buddhism and economics delineates two approaches: the doctrinal approach of Max Weber and a modified lived religion approach. The doctrinal approach, which focuses on Buddhist texts and the early monastic life, treats anything outside of a posited “pure Buddhism,” as a transformation of the “original” teachings into something new and different. The remnants of this idea of transformation can be seen in studies of Theravāda Buddhism, causing economic practices involving Buddhist monks to be analyzed as a deviation from the Buddha’s teachings. I propose moving beyond early Buddhism and text-based studies as a baseline for comparison by offering as an alternative a modified version of the lived religion method of Meredith McGuire. My theoretical modifications to this approach allow us to think about lived religion in the Theravāda Buddhist context. I recommend that the cultural logic of Theravāda Buddhism, in particular the economy of merit and contingent conjunctures of engagements with the market, need to be considered in order to avoid understanding Buddhist connections with the economy as a transformation of Buddhist doctrine.

Keywords: Thailand, Buddhist Economics, Lived Religion, Theravāda Buddhism, Max Weber

Introduction

Buddhism’s relationship with economics appears contradictory. The Buddha renounced his luxurious lifestyle and attained liberation. His renunciation and the ascetic monastic order he established seems to preclude any sort of economic practice. As Schopen (2000) has shown, however, the monk and monastery have had long-term economic entanglements. While there are common perceptions of Buddhism as an anti-materialistic and austere religion, at the same time there is enormous wealth displayed at Buddhist monasteries and luxury items used by Buddhist

masters across Asia.¹ Internationally known Buddhist monks often contest any connection between Buddhism and capitalism, while many other members of Buddhist communities take part in the commodification of Buddhism and its tangible and intangible products.² How can this seemingly contradictory relationship between Buddhism and economics be understood? I argue that it is possible to reconcile these varying perspectives through the lived practices of Buddhists, which acknowledges Buddhism's deeply intertwined and ambiguous relationship with the economic sphere.³

An important field of research is developing further within Buddhist studies and its aim is to explore how Buddhism is employed within and shaped by economic contexts.⁴ Within this field of Buddhism and economics, there are three main scales of analysis: 1) Buddhism as a religion in the marketplace, 2) Buddhist tangible and intangible items in the market place, and 3) Buddhists themselves engaged in the marketplace.⁵ This paper focuses on the last scale as I analyze the ways scholars have interpreted Theravāda Buddhists' engagement with economic activity and offer an example from my own research, involving the ways Thai Buddhist monks enter into the economic sphere of tourism.⁶ Despite this recent interest in Buddhism and economics, Buddhist studies has a long history of text-based studies. This value placed on Buddhist texts has obscured the complexity of Buddhist engagements with the economy by characterizing the religion as primarily focused on its soteriological goal. Ian Harris agrees that "Buddhism has often been characterized as an entirely other-worldly religion with a gnostic distaste for the worldly order" which has led many, scholars and Buddhists themselves, to believe that "Buddhism presents a passive and detached face to worldly affairs . . ." (Harris 1999: 1). This trajectory of scholarship can be traced back to Max Weber, whose influence I will discuss in detail. Although this text-based, doctrinal approach has been challenged in

¹ See Schedneck (2015: 105–108).

² Googling the most internationally known monks, the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, reveals many quotes and sayings regarding Buddhist teachings about people's unnecessary attachment to money.

³ In this paper, I am not considering the idea of a Buddhist Economics proposed originally by E.F. Schumacher (1973) and subsequently expanded upon by Buddhist monks, such as P.A. Payutto (1992) in Thailand. Economics I am defining broadly as any exchange of money and transfer of wealth.

⁴ In addition to the research group on "Buddhism, Business, and Believers" from the University of Copenhagen, that has contributed to this special issue of the *Journal of Global Buddhism*, two other recent conferences and workshops have focused on the theme of Buddhism and economics. The first is the University of British Columbia's "Buddhism and Business, Market and Merit" conference that took place in May 2017 and the second is the Max Planck Institute's workshop on "Sangha Economies: Temple Organisations and Exchanges in Contemporary Buddhism" held in September 2017.

⁵ This special issue contains case studies of all three of these scales of analysis.

⁶ In this article I distinguish between Buddhists engaged in economic activity and the commodification of Buddhism. There has been much good work done on issues and cases of Buddhist commodification, including Pattana Kitiarsa (2007) and Schedneck (2014). These studies concern the ways that Buddhist practices and objects enter into capitalism. Within commodification, aspects related to Buddhism such as Buddha statues and meditation practice, are marketed, exchanged, and sold. In this article, instead of commodification, I am focusing on the ways Buddhists, as representatives of Buddhism, interpret their own engagement with the market economy. Therefore, I am not discussing marketing parts of Buddhism or supply and demand, but the Buddhist temple and Buddhist monastics entrance into the economic sphere.

recent decades with literature concerning Buddhism and this-worldly pursuits including economics and politics, the contrast I delineate below, between the doctrinal and the lived religion approach, provides new insights. Focusing specifically on Theravāda Buddhism, scholars have accepted that the religion and the economy are closely intertwined, but moving beyond Weber with an alternative method that does not posit early Buddhism as a baseline has not yet been achieved. Buddhist studies scholars, especially within the study of Theravāda Buddhism, are still working to abandon the remaining vestiges of the image of Buddhist practitioners as recluses seeking *nirvana* at a remove from the “ordinary” world. This paper aims to contribute to understanding Theravāda Buddhism’s pervasive and continuing importance in the economic sphere.

Because of this, I propose an opposite point of departure from the doctrinal approach: the lived religion approach, which allows for an understanding of Buddhist temple and monastic practices as intimately tied to capitalism and economics. A number of scholars have noted the limitations of Weber, especially in regard to Buddhism and politics.⁷ The inaccuracy of portraying Buddhism as an “otherworldly” religion and authentic practice as nonpolitical and noneconomic is an important and established critique of Weber. Building on scholarship on Buddhism and economics, this article not only critiques the doctrinal, “authentic” Buddhism approach and advocates for not considering texts or early Buddhism as a standard of comparison, but also offers an alternative. Instead of taking ideas and concepts as the primary motivators of action, the lived religion perspective analyzes how religious practices are framed by religious practitioners. Through this approach, Theravāda Buddhist voices are given the space to offer a more nuanced and grounded picture of the relationship between contemporary Buddhism and economics. My modification of the lived religion approach is two-fold: 1) I advocate for focusing on Buddhist emic understandings of economics, most importantly, the economy of merit, and 2) paying attention to the various factors and contingent conjunctures in which Buddhism and economics interrelate.

Buddhism has been intertwined within economic, political, and social spheres in the numerous locations to which Buddhism has spread (Brox and Williams-Oerberg 2017: 504). I agree with Lionel Obadia that “Buddhism” and “economics” are both employed contextually and contingently so that particular mainstream ideas about this relationship is always in flux (Obadia 2011). My argument builds on Obadia and others’ insights into the contingently framed connections between Buddhism and economics. In this way, I am recommending an ethnographic or emic-based approach to studying Theravāda Buddhism and economics. Internal debates determine what is inside and outside of Theravāda Buddhism and which Buddhist encounters with the marketplace are accepted or not accepted—not recourse to a textual ideal of the apolitical monk who never touches money. I am interested in paying attention to these contingent conjunctures that arise within economic contexts among Buddhists. I pursue these connections through exploring the history of Theravāda Buddhist studies scholarship focused on economic activity. At the end of the article, I offer a brief ethnographic example of tourist activities in Thai Buddhist temples in order to further characterize the lived

⁷ Schober (2011) also critiques Weber’s essentializing of Buddhism as other-worldly in the context of politics. Swearer (2010) notes that Weber’s description of Buddhist otherworldliness does not actually have a basis in Pāli texts, which depict a close relationship between the Buddha and monarchs of the time (Swearer 2010: 71).

practices and discourses within the particular context of Thai Buddhism. I begin by first contrasting two methods of analyzing the relationship between economics and Buddhism, the doctrinal and the lived religion approach.

Max Weber and the Transformation of Buddhism

In *The Religions of India*, Max Weber famously posited that Buddhist monks held an otherworldly, ascetic orientation (Weber [1958]: 207). According to this model, economic interactions of Buddhist monks are seen to be an inauthentic expression of Buddhist practice. This analysis, which focuses on Buddhist texts and the monastic life, treats anything outside of a posited “pure Buddhism,” as a transformation of the “original” teachings into something new and different. Weber describes ancient Buddhism as essentially a technology of wandering for intellectual mendicant monks (Weber [1958]: 206). He conceived of a radical separation between Buddhist monks and the laity whereby Buddhist monks would compromise their charisma in the eyes of the laity if they used money and settled in one location. He writes, “A rational economic ethic could hardly develop in this sort of religious order” (Weber [1958]: 216). Weber continues to frame Buddhism’s relationship with economics as an adaptation or accommodation from the conditions of ancient Buddhism (Weber [1958]: 250). Because of this formulation, which places Buddhist texts as a basis and standard for all Buddhist actions, Weber can only label any relationship of Buddhism to economics as a transformation or an alteration to the doctrinal ideals. Pyi Phyo Kyaw labels this kind of work normative text-based ethics and argues that using this model forces scholars to judge Buddhists’ behavior against textual standards (Kyaw 2017: 331). Economic activity by monks then comes to represent an inevitable decline from the tradition’s textual origins and purity.

Thomas Borchert and Ian Harris argue that “there were good reasons for Weber having made this judgment, as it maps onto the ways that some Buddhists at some points in history have viewed proper Buddhist action” (Borchert and Harris 2016: 107). Borchert and Harris continue that although scholars have shattered Weber’s ideal characterizations of Buddhism and society, “many Westerners have since taken to viewing the sole norm for monks or nuns as oriented toward the attainment of wisdom culminating in nirvana, or realizations of emptiness.” In the case of Buddhism and economics, some Theravāda Buddhist studies have also continued to take Weber’s characterization of other-worldliness and Buddhist texts as their starting point. We can see this in discussions of a Buddhist transformation or accommodation to using money, instead of the acknowledgment that appropriate economic activity for Buddhist monks and laity depends on the time period and location.⁸ I cannot provide a comprehensive bibliography of all the scholarship discussing this normative perspective of Buddhism, but offer some examples of the scholarship that addresses and problematizes the doctrinal approach.

⁸ For the purposes of this article, I am critiquing only the idea of analyzing Buddhism as being transformed or adapting to modern conditions in comparison with a Buddhist textual or early Buddhist ideal. Studies that deal with transformations from a specific time period or from one particular location to another are not part of this critique.

Weber was very influential in the mid- to late-20th century when many theories about Theravāda Buddhist cultural practices, institutions, and societies referenced his work.⁹ Donald Swearer's textbook *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* begins by referring to the seeming contradictions between Buddhist texts and practices. He traces this to Weber and his sharp distinction between otherworldly Buddhism and the institutional Buddhism that later developed. He writes, "Even recent scholars of Theravada Buddhism have been influenced by Weber's distinction in their studies of Buddhism as a cultural institution and an ethical system" (Swearer 2010: 1). In another textbook on Theravāda Buddhism, Kate Crosby has also found a bias towards Buddhism as a world-renouncing tradition within Buddhist studies so "that there is a blind spot when it comes to recognizing monks as full members of their society with the usual range of human aspirations and emotions and often a long list of duties and obligations that keep them closely involved with the local community" (Crosby 2013: 200). She finds that this impression has one of its major origins in the work of Max Weber, whose "view of Buddhism as other-worldly has had a long-term impact on the sociology/social anthropology of Theravada Buddhism" (Crosby 2013: 200).

Weber continues to be invoked in the study of Theravāda societies by scholars such as Phibul Choompolphaisal, Charles Keyes, and Pattana Kitiarsa. These authors have all written articles about the impact of Weber on the study of Theravāda Buddhism, but also see the need for scholars to go beyond Weber. However, an alternative approach is needed to remove the specter of Weber's interpretations that Buddhists acting within the economic sphere represents an adaptation of Buddhism's original ideals.

Charles Keyes, in an article in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*, focuses on the ways that studies of Theravāda Buddhism and society since the 1960s have been "strongly influenced by Weber" (Keyes 2002: 246). He describes scholarly projects located in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand, which argue that the relationship between Buddhism and society marks some kind of transformation from the religion's original ideals. These scholars seek to understand how non-Western societies confront Western influences such as modernization, industrialization, capitalism, and globalization. An example of this is Gombrich and Obeyesekere's aptly titled *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (1988), which posits a change in Buddhism they label as "Protestant" in nature. For these authors, Sri Lankan society and its Buddhism had to become more "Protestant" in order for them to analyze the religion during a period with an expanding economy and the development of an urban middle class. An alternative would be to understand Buddhism in emic terms, or how Buddhists use their tradition to explain their choices with more focus on the conjunctures of Buddhism, politics, and modernization that made these "changes" appear like a "transformation." This alternative would be more useful because, as Choompolphaisal points out, analyses like *Buddhism Transformed*, set up a dialectic where Buddhism and modernity, worldly and other-worldly are always in conflict (Choompolphaisal 2008: 23). Another important example is Stanley Tambiah's (1976) work *World Renouncer, World Conqueror*, which attempts to connect Buddhist doctrines with Thai Buddhist society. Tambiah describes his thinking on this project in this way:

⁹ For a discussion of Weber's influence on Buddhist studies outside of Theravāda Buddhism, see Borup in this issue.

The major fact I had to come to terms with was that the best possible account of twentieth-century relations between Thai Buddhism and Thai polity and society must at one end moor itself to a central conception between Buddhism and polity predicated in early Buddhism. A second realization was that I had uncovered, in following the trajectory from contemporary Thailand to early Buddhism, a recurrence of structures and their transformations in systematic terms (Tambiah 1976: 5).

Later in his career, focusing on Buddhism and politics in Sri Lanka in his *Buddhism Betrayed?* (1992), Tambiah sought to

probe the extent to which and the manner in which, Buddhism, as a “religion” espoused by Sri Lankans of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, has contributed to the current ethnic conflict and collective violence in Sri Lanka. If it has contributed, were there changes in the nature of that contribution over time? And if there have been changes, how are we to describe the changing or changed shape of Buddhism itself as a lived reality? (Tambiah 1992: 2).

Here Tambiah is interested in projects that posit an early Buddhism as part of the way to understand contemporary Buddhist influences and actors within the nation-state. Although he critiques scholarship that “essentializes” Buddhism by locating its “pristine” teachings and then finding deviations, Tambiah, in the above quote, also reifies a “pure” form of Buddhism that has not been influenced by politics and violence to compare how it relates to modern-day conflict in Sri Lanka. However, when considering Buddhism and economics, Tambiah challenged scholars to reconsider the connection between economics and Buddhist ethics because he believed that this relationship was more open to various economic and political activities than Weber had accounted for (Tambiah 1973: 1). He hoped scholars could go beyond Weber with the new evidence available.

Pattana Kitiarsa provides an overview of anthropological studies of Theravāda Buddhism, which use Weberian thought in order to explain the variety of Buddhist practices in Southeast Asia (Kitiarsa 2009: 200). Kitiarsa finds that Southeast Asian Buddhist anthropologists have located new issues to grapple with, such as the transnational nature of contemporary Buddhism, but are also still working with important Weberian insights such as charisma, rationalization, and the distinction between religious elite and ordinary practitioners (Kitiarsa 2009: 215). In more recent decades, Theravāda Buddhist studies have moved away from these dominant Weberian themes, but the relationship between Buddhism and economics in Southeast Asian studies has not yet been directly addressed with a new paradigm or methodology to understand Theravāda Buddhist economic realities.

There is a body of literature within Theravāda Buddhist scholarship, especially within Thailand, which has shown the entanglement of Buddhism and the economic sphere without relying on Buddhist texts as a basis for any economic activity. Peter Jackson, (1999a and 1999b) in two important articles, analyzes the ways that magic monks such as Luang Phor Khun, has been the impetus for prosperity cults in modern Thailand. Chapters within Pattana Kitiarsa’s (2012) book on Thai popular Buddhism also contain extensive case studies of the relationship between magic monks

and money as well as prosperity cults involving amulets. Lastly, Rachele Scott's (2009) monograph on the Dhammakaya Temple extensively analyzes considerations of wealth within Thai society and how this relates to perceived discretions by the temple's abbot. However, although these works do not espouse a doctrinal approach and align more with the lived religion approach, they do not offer a specific methodology to move past the analysis of Buddhism and economic activity as a transformation.

To illustrate this point, I will give two brief examples from the lived religion of contemporary Thailand. There are two well-known contemporary Buddhist movements, Wat Phra Dhammakaya outside of Bangkok, and the Asoke communities with their center in Santi Asoke, Bangkok. These two groups could not be more different in their understanding of economics and capitalism. Dhammakaya aligns itself with capitalism as the largest temple in the country, which places much value on wealth and large-scale merit making. Asoke is the opposite, giving its practitioners opportunities to live alternative lifestyles outside of modern-day capitalism in Thailand.¹⁰ Following the doctrinal transformational model, does this mean that Asoke is part of "pure Buddhism" and has the correct interpretation of doctrine and Dhammakaya can be labeled as a transformation from the Buddha's original ideals? When there are such varying responses and interpretations of how Buddhism should relate to the world, the temptation to use words such as transformation and adaptation must be resisted as they imply an evaluation of a pure normative form of Buddhism, using Buddhist texts as the basis of comparison.

The second example is the 18th rule of the Vinaya category *nissaggiya-paccittiya*, which states "Whatsoever Bhikkhu shall receive gold or silver, or get someone to receive it for him, or allow it to be kept in deposit for him—that is a Pacittiya offence involving forfeiture" (Strong [citing Terwiel 1975] 2008: 24). Therefore, if a monk handles money his punishment would be to forfeit it. However, few monks in Thailand follow this rule as it is much more convenient to handle money themselves. In addition, laypeople often give money directly to monks. In this case, practice is more important for understanding Buddhism in Thai society than the Vinaya text. Instead of understanding this as an adaptation, I aim to understand Theravāda Buddhism in its own religious contexts without placing it in opposition to doctrine.

An Alternative Approach: Lived Religion

"Lived Religion," "Vernacular Religion," "Everyday Religion," "Popular Religion," "Material Religion"—these are all recently coined terms meant to describe a similar trend in religious studies scholarship that places importance on local perspectives rather than a discussion of religion as promulgated by elite leaders, religious representatives, official doctrines, and texts.¹¹ I have chosen

¹⁰ For a comparison of the Asoke communities with the Dhammakaya Temple, see Mackenzie (2007).

¹¹ David Hall (1997) and Meredith McGuire (2008) utilized the term lived religion within the fields of American religion and the sociology of religion, respectively. Similar iterations of this term are everyday religion, which Nancy Ammerman (2007) used in an edited volume focusing on exploring modern religious lives. Popular religion is a term with a long history. More recently this term has been applied to Southeast Asia and Thailand. Pattana Kitiarsa (2012) discusses popular religion in the context of defining contemporary Thai Buddhism and Robert Winzeler (2016) within

to specifically focus on lived religion because this term is broad enough to understand the ways religious practitioners understand and evaluate their own relationships with money. Lived religion began with David Hall's edited collection *Lived Religion in America* (1997) as a term within the field of American religion in order to describe how American people chose more individual religious paths, rather than exclusively following the "official" version of their religions. However, Meredith McGuire has used and expanded on this term more recently in 2008 to discuss hybridity and multiple religious belonging, again mostly focusing on varieties of Christian practice in America. Rather than centering on eclecticism and practice, I seek to understand the ways Buddhist leaders, especially Buddhist monks, justify and perceive their own connections to the market economy. Because its previous applications have focused on religion in America, I delineate below some modifications to the lived religion approach necessary to understand the role of money in Theravāda Buddhist communities. My modifications for fitting this approach into this context are 1) a focus on the particular conjunctures in which Buddhism and economics are relating, and 2) an understanding of the cultural logic of Buddhism, in particular the economy of merit.

Contingent conjunctures, which has been termed by Ananda Abeysekara (2002) and subsequently taken up by Juliane Schober (2011) and Nirmala Salgado (2013), is an important alternative to the idea of transformation within the doctrinal approach. Abeysekara uses this term to analyze debates about the nature and identity of Buddhism (Abeysekara 2002: 3). He demonstrates, along with Schober in Burma and Salgado in Sri Lanka, how Buddhism is constructed within varying conjunctures (Abeysekara 2002: 4). He defines contingent conjunctures as "a period of few years, if not months or days, in which competing narratives and debates conjoin to make centrally visible particular authoritative knowledges about what can and cannot count as Buddhism" (Abeysekara 2002: 4). Abeysekara is not interested in recovering Buddhist agency but in showing how certain arguments become labeled as Buddhist while others fall outside of Buddhist identity (Abeysekara 2002: 15). Because of this, he critiques scholarship that understands Buddhism's "worldliness" as constituting a later transformation or adaptation from the original Buddhist texts (Abeysekara 2002: 74).¹² Buddhism, measured against this other-worldly standard, exists a priori, apart from, and outside of the framework of social spheres (Abeysekara 2002: 75).

Schober and Salgado agree that the idea of conjunctures helps to illuminate the constructed nature of Theravāda Buddhism. Schober argues that

Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam in Southeast Asia. Leonard Norman Primiano (1995) coined the term vernacular religion in an essay arguing that vernacular is a less marginalizing term than religious folklife or folklore. Marion Bowman and Ulo Valk (2012) developed this term further with an edited volume expanding on local practices and personal narratives. Material religion, through its insights into how objects and art are related to religion, investigates people's beliefs and practices. David Morgan's (2010) edited volume and the journal *Material Culture* are good examples of this large body of literature. Although these terms are distinct, they all are interested in the non-elite, non-textual view, and understanding how the majority of religious practitioners construct religion for themselves.

¹² Abeysekara specifically mentions the work of Donald Smith (1966), Heinz Bechert (1970, 1973, 1978), Donald Swearer (1970, 1991), Michael Carrithers (1979, 1983, 1984), and Stanley Tambiah (1976, 1992).

modern Buddhist conjunctures make evident that a Weberian description of Buddhism as otherworldly obscures our understanding of social engagement among modern Buddhist institutions and communities. Similarly, we must recognize that understanding authentic practice as inherently nonpolitical forces a collusion with a colonial hegemonic discourse that aims to maintain the status quo (Schober 2011: 10).

Here Schober asks us to disregard analysis that claims an authentic, doctrinal, or original Buddhism, especially in the context of Buddhism and politics in Burma. Salgado, writing about the acceptance of and choice to be a precept nun (*dasa sil mata*) or female monk (*bhikkhuni*), finds that “conjunctures producing those debates render the *determination* of what constitutes Buddhism questionable” (Salgado 2013: 151). Focusing on how Theravāda Buddhists debate for and against *bhikkhuni* ordination during its Sri Lankan revival in 1996–1998, Salgado concludes, “in order to better understand the questions surrounding the ordination debates in Sri Lanka, one must go beyond the assumption that the category of Theravāda is self-evident” (Salgado 2013: 181). Abeysekera uses the example of who is a good monk to demonstrate debates about who and what falls inside and outside of the category of “Buddhism.” He investigates Sri Lankan villages where one monk who has committed an offense is still supported by his lay community while another monk who commits the same offense loses support. These analyses destabilize scholarly categories of what constitutes Buddhism and monasticism. In this way the focus is on the emic perspectives of practitioners themselves and how they determine what is and is not proper Buddhist behavior. It is the practitioners, received practices, and religious leaders, rather than texts, which have more authority over proper Theravāda Buddhist behaviors in these contexts.

Instead of transformation from a textual ideal, we can think about Buddhists responding to contingent, complex, and specific interconnections of history, and economic situations. The Buddhist tradition is not infinitely plastic and malleable, of course; however, contingent moments allow Buddhists to draw on arguments they deem significant as they respond to each situation. To this end, writing about interpretations of Buddhism and economic activity, Keyes concludes that:

The basic dogmas of Theravada Buddhism—*kamma*, *dukkha*, *nibbana*—do not determine an invariant economic ethic for those who accept them as religious truths. Variant interpretations of these fundamental premises of Theravada Buddhism by practicing Buddhists in different societies and, especially since the late nineteenth century, within the same society [Thailand], have led to quite different stances toward economic life, all of which are in some sense Buddhist (Keyes 1993: 371).

The ways that religious institutions and texts relate to Theravāda Buddhist practice depend on context and situation. These contingent conjunctures are not merely situational though, as they relate to the specific tradition, teachings, and morality of Theravāda Buddhism.

Theravāda Buddhist ideals are located within a particular cultural logic, namely, the economy of merit, where the Buddhist idea of merit is given and received (see Wilson, this issue). Understandings of the relationship between Buddhism and economics must be situated within this

practice and its negotiations in everyday life.¹³ In his review of scholarship on merit in Asian societies, Walsh discusses the ways merit can be given, received, and transferred. In this economy of exchange, proper actions that support Buddhism earn merit.¹⁴ In turn monastic members award merit, which can be transferred to deceased kin or others (Walsh 2007: 360). Monks and monasteries within Theravāda Buddhism take care of the spiritual needs of their lay donors, while the laity cares for the physical needs of the monks, as offerings to the temple or monks are given in exchange for merit. In this way, merit links lay people and monks together in Theravāda Buddhist belief and practice. Merit is so desirable as an exchange commodity because it is believed to guard against a bad rebirth for oneself or others as well as leading to this-worldly benefits (Crosby 2013: 115). Merit, as the commodity of exchange, represents the Theravāda Buddhist economy related to both the market economy, in the form of donations and offerings, and to a desirable rebirth.

The Theravāda Buddhist economy necessarily interacts with the market economy because lay Buddhists must use money to offer food to monks along with other necessities such as paying for health care, building new shelter, and buying monastic robes. For their part, when monks enter into the market economy, they must justify how this involvement allows them to remain a pure field of merit. Buddhist monks are not thought to exist outside of an economic sphere but are necessarily deeply engaged with economic life. Unlike Weber and the doctrinal approach that situates monks and economic activity in opposition, the modified lived religion approach does not assume that monastic engagement in the economic sphere is a transformation of their ideals. But they are still subject to contingent conjunctures of their particular location and temple community, and they must validate their actions following the cultural logic of Buddhism.

In order to give an example that points towards a lived religion approach and highlights the contingent conjunctures of Buddhist-economic relations, I offer two brief case studies from contemporary northern Thailand. Using interviews with two monks who have engaged their temple in tourist practices, I discuss the ways they perceived their economic practices within Buddhist temples. I look at one important type of economic decision that temples face—namely, how to gain access to some of the resources tourists bring to the city. Through analyzing the ways monks frame their involvement with tourism, contingent conjunctures and the economy of merit become important elements to understand the entanglements of Theravāda Buddhism with the economy.

Tourist Economic Realities

Tourist conjunctures with Buddhist temples have been increasing in northern Thailand through volunteer tourism companies, which offer opportunities to teach English in temple schools. I have conducted fieldwork and been collecting data on this topic of volunteer tourism in temple schools since 2013. Volunteer tourism, where foreign tourists take part in service activities along with travel, is motivated by a desire to “give back” to those in need while creating opportunities for personal

¹³ For a comprehensive overview of Buddhist scholarship on merit see Walsh (2007) and for ways of making merit specifically in Thailand see Schedneck (2015: 66).

¹⁴ One list that indicates some of the possible actions associated with merit-making is the Ten Wholesome Actions (*dasa kusala kamma*) that can be found in all strata of Buddhist literature (Lopez & Buswell 2014: 423).

development (Wearing 2001). Professional workers and young travelers see a need for volunteerism in order to stimulate a sense of purpose and facilitate meaningful encounters with locals (Butcher 2003). The ability to experience Buddhist temple life, with its ceremonies and robed monks, is attractive to English-speaking travelers from the Global North. Volunteer tourists choosing to teach novice monks in Buddhist temples not only hope to contribute something to their host country but also to receive new ideas and experiences (Schedneck 2017).

Through relationships with temple abbots and principals of Buddhist temple schools, volunteer tourism companies provide the connections necessary for tourists to experience teaching and living in a Buddhist temple. These volunteers either live at the temple or nearby accommodation, usually staying anywhere between two weeks to six months. Temple school principals affiliate with these outside companies that help promote and manage the volunteer programs to attract the foreign teachers. It is important to note that although the monk principals remain in charge of allowing volunteers to stay, they task these volunteer tourism companies to manage the volunteer program, by advertising to and screening potential volunteers, and helping to acclimate them (Schedneck 2016).

The costs for these programs vary depending on how long one stays and which volunteer tourism company one works with. Typically, there is an application fee of \$250USD and the initial two-week cost is around \$700USD. Each additional week is typically another \$100–200USD. These organizations offer English teaching support as well as airport transfer, accommodation, some food costs, trips and 24-hour support for any emergencies or concerns. This volunteer fee does not cover a donation to the temple (Schedneck 2017).

Volunteer tourism programs in temples reveal contingent conjunctures of tourism, globalization, and Buddhism. The monk principals who host volunteer tourists argue that this connection of monastic schools with for-profit volunteer tourism companies is an acceptable part of temple practice because 1) the monks are not making or handling any money and 2) they are benefitting their community of monks. When interviewing monks about their affiliation with volunteer tourism companies, they immediately framed their participation in opposition to a business venture. In fact, many monks I have spoken to concerning economic practices such as this rhetorically separated business (*turakit*) from Buddhism (*puthasatsanā*). They do this because of the wider context of Thai monastic financial scandals, which have dominated the news cycle in this country.

Most recently, Thai Buddhist financial scandals can be seen in the controversial Wat Phra Dhammakaya and the May 2018 crackdown on temple fund embezzlement in Bangkok. Wat Dhammakaya, the largest temple in Thailand, is seen by mainstream Thai Buddhist audiences, as represented by the media, to be a heterodox group within the Thai sangha. The abbot of the temple, Phra Dhammachayo, has been connected to financial scandals. In 1999 he was accused of embezzlement (Scott 2009: 129). However, the investigation failed to reach any kind of satisfying resolution (Scott 2009: 139). In 2016–2017, the scandal resurfaced and ended with a 23-day siege at

Wat Dhammakaya, after the police left the temple unable to locate the abbot.¹⁵ These controversies have been of particular concern in the media and demonstrate the importance of Buddhist economic practices in the Thai public sphere. This is despite the fact that, it can be argued, Dhammakaya Temple employs traditional Theravada practices of merit-making that relate to obtaining positive results (Scott 2009: 103). Followers of Wat Dhammakaya saw the temple's activities as within the sacred traditions of Buddhism, while the external opinion, for the most part, found the merit-making techniques to be outside of the realm of Buddhism.

In the months of May of 2018, the scandal of five monks arrested for alleged temple fund embezzlement in three Bangkok temples (Wat Sam Phraya, Wat Sa Ket and Wat Samphanthawong) was a huge news story. The Bangkok Post reports that two hundred police commandos raided the temples after complaints from the National Office of Buddhism that seven monks were involved in the embezzlement of funds meant for temple activities. Five were arrested on May 24, 2018, one later surrendered to police, and the last fled to Germany.¹⁶ In this case, of course embezzling temple funds would be considered business-like and outside of Theravada Buddhist monastic activity.

The interviews I conducted with Buddhist monastic abbots and principals involved in Buddhist volunteer tourism reveal that they believe, at their local scale, they are not involved in any kind of controversy that would cause concern among the community members. They are not violating the cultural logic of Buddhism or engaging in questionable economic activities. They believe they are not breaking the contract of merit exchange because they are not using any money for themselves. And they believe English-language teacher volunteers improve the educational quality they are able to offer the novice monk students. They must make these arguments in order to demonstrate their practices, unlike large-scale financial scandals seen in Thailand's capital, are within Theravāda Buddhism.

Wat Nong Bua

Wat Nong Bua is a monastic school about forty minutes outside of Chiangmai city that services novice monks aged 12–18, where Phra Maha Insorn is the principal. Phra Maha Insorn was interested in volunteer tourists teaching English because he has found that with Thai teachers, novices can read and understand English grammar, but not speak in English. His school has had volunteer tourists since 2009 and has affiliated with the company Future Sense Foundation since 2014. He has seen the results of the volunteer tourists' presence as now his novice monks are brave [*klā*] to speak with foreigners and have more motivation to study.¹⁷ Phra Maha Insorn is happy with Future Sense Foundation, which have located over one hundred English teacher volunteers every year.

¹⁵ Many articles were written on this story throughout Asia. For example, see Reuters article, "Thai police end search of temple without finding monk" by Aukkarapon Niyomyat and Patpicka Tanakasempipat.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-buddhism/thai-police-end-search-of-temple-without-finding-monk-idUSKBN16H18G>. Accessed June 15, 2018.

¹⁶ Bangkok Post, News Section, "Buddhist followers cling to their beliefs in wake of temple embezzlement scandal." https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/general/1482169/#cxrecs_s. Accessed June 14, 2018.

¹⁷ The Romanization system I use here follows a simplified version of that used by the Library of Congress.

The foreigners also benefit the school through their ability to attract donations. Usually when there is a large group of foreign volunteers, the temple sponsors an activity called an English camp [*khāy angkrit*]. The lay Buddhists in the community are aware of this through the temple's promotion on signs placed throughout the main street of this small town. Phra Maha Insorn stated that when Thai lay Buddhists see the good work the school is doing to educate the young males in the community [*chūai deknun yū nai chumchon*] and bring in foreigners from all over the world to teach, they want to donate by offering money to the school for electricity and food. In this way the foreign volunteers not only motivate the novice monks to learn English but also motivate the lay community to make merit here.

Because of this ability to educate novice monks and attract donations, Phra Maha Insorn argues that volunteer tourism can be a part of the appropriate [*mōsom*] practice of Buddhism. Many members of the Thai Buddhist lay community accept this as a legitimate entwinement of the two economies of merit and the market, as witnessed by the school's ample donations. Part of the reason for this is that it is clear Phra Maha Insorn is benefiting his community through his relationship with Future Sense Foundation. Wat Nong Bua, with its population of over a hundred novice monks from disadvantaged backgrounds, needs to be understood in its particular context in order to frame the connection with volunteer tourism companies not as an adaptation from Buddhist textual ideals, but as part of the cultural logic of Buddhism from the point of view of Buddhists themselves, which is focused on benefitting their community and attracting donations. In this case, there is no debate about whether this practice fits within Theravāda Buddhism, or whether Phra Maha Insorn is a "good monk," because he has made arguments internal to the tradition that do not cause any questioning or concern from his community members.

Plik Wiwek Dhamma Center

Phra Ajahn Dr. Thani Jitawiriyo is the founder of Plik Wiwek Dhamma Center, established in 2011. He chose to locate his center in Wieng Haeng, about three hours outside of Chiang Mai city, because of the population here. On the border with the Shan State in Myanmar, there are many orphans and refugees living in this region who ordain as novice monks. Ajahn Thani envisions his Dhamma center as a place of development [*kān pawanā*] for the novice monks where they can learn how to live their life as good citizens and Buddhists who can take care of themselves and their societies [*dū lā tūa ēng kab sangkhom*]. Beyond this, Ajahn Thani also has a goal for his novices to know English, in order to be able to exchange with [*kān lāk plian*] and learn new things from different kinds of people. Because of this, Ajahn Thani has been interested in receiving volunteer English teacher tourists at his temple.

Ajahn Thani spoke warmly of the many volunteers he has hosted at Plik Wiwek, who he thinks of as members of the center's family [*yū nai khrōb khrūa khōng rao*]. The volunteers who became family, for the most part, did not come through the volunteer tourism companies Ajahn Thani has affiliated with. He has noticed that the volunteers who do come through volunteer companies have to report to or speak with the staff there regularly. He felt that because of this, it seemed as though their volunteering was not from the heart [*āsāsamak mai chai mā chāk hūa jai*] as they could just leave and go teach at another temple, village, or school. But the foreign volunteers can adapt better and

integrate into the community, through the networks of Ajahn Thani and Plik Wiwek Dhamma Center, when they come on their own. Ajahn Thani sees these volunteers as volunteering as from the heart [*āsāsamak c̄hāk hūa jai*].

Because of this difference he sees between volunteers who come on their own and volunteers who come through a company, he has chosen to stop his affiliation with volunteer tourism agencies. Instead, he exclusively uses his own international networks to find volunteers who will be dedicated and stay for a long period of time, at least three months. But unlike Phra Maha Insorn, Ajahn Thani does not believe that foreign volunteers motivate the laypeople to offer donations. When discussing donations from his lay supporters, Ajahn Thani stated that they contribute to this center because of the population of novice monks. The donors are happy that novices have opportunities to speak English but if the volunteer tourists did not come, he believes that the donors would still offer the same amount.

In this dhamma center, Ajahn Thani has similar arguments about the relevance and importance of volunteer tourism for his temple as Phra Maha Insorn. He finds that his particular population of novice monks benefits from interaction with foreigners. He seeks particular kinds of volunteers, ones that will be best suited for the lifestyle of Plik Wiwek and will volunteer from the heart. Even though foreign volunteer tourists in this context do not motivate lay people to give donations, their presence benefits the novice monks. Ajahn Thani regards this volunteer tourism as a legitimate part of Buddhist practice that accords with the economy of merit, and not an accommodation of Buddhism to tourism companies as part of the market economy. He did not stop his affiliation with the volunteer tourism company because he felt this practice was un-Buddhist or violating some aspects of Buddhist texts. Instead, his reasoning had to do with the particular conjunctures of his temple, novice monks, and the dynamics of volunteer tourism. Lay Buddhist donors do not question his opening his temple to volunteer tourism because of Ajahn Thani's work to find quality volunteers and his arguments about their benefit to his particular group of novice monks.

When we look at the conjunctures of tourism, Theravāda Buddhism, and globalization, and have an understanding of the cultural logic of Buddhism, then Buddhist volunteer tourism is not a transformation from the earliest Buddhist communities as represented in texts, but a practice that monks engage in after reflection on their goals for their novice monks and temple spaces. The voice determining what constitutes "Buddhism" here belongs to the interpretations within religious communities. Ajahn Thani and Phra Maha Insorn have evaluated and justified their economic entanglements correctly and effectively, because they continue to be seen as pure fields of merit with many donations from their lay Buddhist supporters. They seek to limit the potential for their engagements with volunteer tourism companies to be seen as business-like. They do this especially because of the larger context of national scandals taking place in Bangkok concerning temple fund embezzlement. These monks, on a small, local scale, do not want to be placed in a similar camp. In my interviews with these two monks about their temple's connections with volunteer tourism companies, they quickly seek to frame it as beneficial to the temple or community, not themselves or any individual monks.

Conclusion

I have argued that there is a complex relationship between Theravāda Buddhism and economics that can be understood as a series of contextually situated entanglements. Buddhists make their own arguments regarding Theravāda Buddhist practices in connection with the economy, seeing religious value in certain economic practices that resonate with the Buddhist economy of merit. Utilizing this modified lived religion approach helps us to determine not what Buddhism is but which interpretations of the cultural logic are possible from the Theravāda Buddhist point of view within particular contingent conjunctures.

Instead of transformation from the idea of an otherworldly monk above economics, we can instead understand Buddhists as responding to contingent, complex, and specific interconnections of history and economic situations. The legacy of Weber and his doctrinal approach labels Buddhist monks as otherworldly and any change from this ideal as inauthentic. This approach and its implications have been overturned by scholars, especially in the realm of Buddhists and political involvement. However, there has so far been no alternative method to understand Buddhist economic activity, which could combat the temptation to understand Buddhist involvement with money as an external change and transformation of a pure Theravāda monasticism.

The modified lived religion approach offers this alternative to understand Buddhist relationships with economics. Focusing on lived religion for Theravāda Buddhists means paying attention to Buddhism's internal economy of merit. The tradition itself has its own cultural logic for evaluating how and when money should be used, especially for its monastic members. This evaluation is contingently framed, based on different contextual factors for each situation. In the brief examples above highlighting the economics of volunteer tourism in Buddhist temple schools, the factors were 1) international processes of globalization, modernization, and tourism, 2) Thai Buddhist society's value placed on monastic education and scandal-free monks in an era of increasing scrutiny of monastic behavior at the national level, along with 3) local considerations including the particular location and population of both monastic institutions. All of these factors come together to understand Buddhists' entrance into the economic sphere. Because the monks discussed above argued that the economics of volunteer tourism were not benefitting them as individuals but instead added value to the education of the novice monks under their care, their communities accepted their choices. Their statements were framed within the cultural logic of the economy of merit, where these monks maintain their status as fields of merit, who can transfer this merit onto lay donors to their schools.

In conclusion, we must look to emic perspectives rather than textual interpretations to understand this complex relationship between Buddhism and economics. Instead of the doctrinal approach, the lived religion approach, along with contingent conjunctures and an understanding of the economy of merit, allows for a more complex analysis. From this perspective, Buddhist texts and the monastic life of early Buddhism are an insufficient standard to judge how monastic actors are making economic decisions in the contemporary world.

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