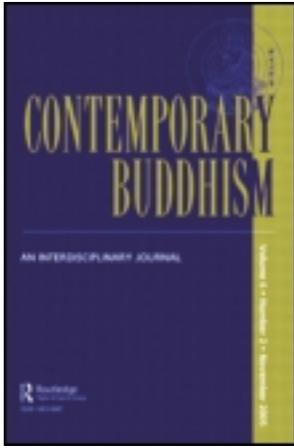


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BOOK REVIEWS

James Taylor, 2008. **Buddhism and postmodern imaginings in Thailand: The religiosity of urban space**, Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, Vermont, Ashgate. ISBN 978-0-7546-6247-1

James Taylor, author of *Forest monks and the nation-state* (1993) offers in his new book a range of perspectives and insights into scintillating and occasionally bizarre forms of modern 'religiosity' in contemporary Thailand—at a time when the country was still recovering from its first major financial crisis in 1997.

Taylor writes as an anthropologist and looks at Thai religion, society and Buddhist practice with a keen eye for transformations and what he calls 'varieties of cultural forms and religious transgressions' in Thai Buddhism. Some of these he extensively reflects in the light of postmodernist social theory. Beyond his academic anthropological background and reading in Thai, Taylor also draws from his considerable familiarity with Thai people and life in Thailand. He has been a student of Thai Buddhism for many years, especially the Forest Tradition (see his book about the 'forest monks' mentioned above), and, significantly, in 2007, has himself lived for several months as a temporary monk in northeastern Thailand.

In six case studies (based on his research begun in 2000–2001 in Thailand and completed in the following years in Australia) he is concerned with religious and social practices, religious experience, the creation of *sacra* and sacred space, and new sites of social encounter; typically all expressions of current Thai Buddhism—or what he calls its 'religious *assemblage*' (21). He reflects on areas as different as urbanity, global and local practices and their peculiar intersections in a complex post-modern country, monks and monasteries, specifically the role and reaction of the 'forest monks' to the recent social, economic and political developments, the impact of digital 'religio-scapes' and the function of—partly unexpected—'sacred spaces'.

In the midst of all apparent secularization and the 'laicization', Taylor sees 'a definite resurgence of sacred space' (2), particularly in urbanized Thailand. He observes and reflects on developments in the various 'religious spaces' and analyses how their inhabitants interact with notions of tradition, experience and identity.

Taylor follows his selected strands of religious narrative through a Thai Buddhism that he finds 'in a continued state of reflection with its own shadow, its own imagining' (2) and that keeps 'delving into a reinvented past' (27). He takes

up his notion of 'hybridization' from his earlier writings and elaborates: 'religious hybridization is not so much a singular or unidirectional emergent cultural process, rather a mixing and fusing of various ideas and practices' (38) and traces amidst such hybridization and 'religious bricolage' a 'distinctive new religiosity of everyday life' in Thailand.

Taylor follows the central theme of 'imagining' through the topics of identity construction, commodification of *sacra*, religious kitsch, the nostalgic re-enchancement with tradition, neo-conservatism and religious nationalism, specific salvation narratives and samples the ingredients for the sanctification of sacred places. All this is reflected on in the light of Taylor's wide reading of mostly postmodernist and poststructuralist social theorists (Benjamin, Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Lefebvre, Bhabha, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari and many more).

Chapter one contextualizes his studies in a *post-modern* Thailand: a place where religious practice and experience can no longer simply be understood as either local or as truly global, but can only be seen as a '*glocal* practice', since their 'intersections are neither wholly one nor the other' (3). He outlines his concerns in thinking about social practices as twofold: 'firstly an interpretation of the variety of religious (Theravada Buddhist) experiences and the particular sites of social encounter . . . ' and secondly, in attempting a new way of thinking religiosity in Buddhist Thailand, ' . . . as a process of recoding lived worlds, to situate the vernacular, particularized religious narratives in relation to wider global forces and sentiments' (2). Although Taylor's book inevitably presents only a selection of that 'variety of religious experiences' (notably absent are references to female religious practitioners), he clearly succeeds in offering new perspectives, tracing societal fault lines and generally offering much fresh understanding of the interconnections in Thai Buddhism and Thai society. One such insight is his central notion of the constructed, continually 'imagined' and re-imagined nature at the root of religious practice—whether this be for the disney-esque imaginings that underpin Wat Sanam's iconography and creation of *sacra*, the distinctly less charming imaginings that feed the '*new world*' Buddhism and 'religious spectacle' (62) of the consumerist *Thammakaai* movement, or the 'reinforced nostalgia' (30) of Thailand's barely 100 year old Forest tradition, rooted more in Sangha reforms of nineteenth century Thailand than in the scriptural accounts of forest-dwellers in the Pali canon.

In chapter two, Taylor elaborates on the concept of hybridization and examines the phenomenon of Wat Phra Dhammakāya (*Thammakaai*)—a Thai religious movement that has, since its inception in the 1970s, come to staggering economic and political power and, in many ways, epitomizes the notion of commodified Buddhism (*phuttha phanit*). The movement has been at the centre of much controversy since the late nineties, is notorious for its 'merit-making' schemes and fundraising campaigns, its innovations of Buddhist doctrine and for the charges (later dismissed) of fraud, embezzlement and corruption against its leader Phra Dhammajayo. The movement has come under much public criticism, especially for continued aggressive fundraising towards an outlandish building

project at a time of Thailand's worst financial crisis and for the financial dealings of its central figures. *Thammakaai* has also drawn severe criticism by Thailand's revered scholar monk Bhikkhu Payutto and by social critics for distorting central tenets of Buddhist teaching and for 'doing business in selling religious pleasure'. Taylor investigates the surprising appeal that the movement continues to have for urban middle-class Thais and how this 'spectacular organization' (62) successfully navigates the waters of 'heresy and hybridization'. Noting that many of *Thammakaai's* members are of Chinese descent (an ethnic group prominent in the commercially successful sectors of Thai society), Taylor sees several parallels between the wealthy and politically influential Taiwanese temple of Fo-kuang-shan and Thailand's *Thammakaai*: the shared commercial mentality (marked by advertising, marketing and media), the fact that both movements represent 'modern' Buddhism for their respective followers, and even some doctrinal points he refers to as 'selected Chinese Mahayana beliefs' that can be found in *Thammakaai's* teaching, which 'would surely appeal to disenchanting Chinese-Thai Buddhists'.

This seems all highly plausible, even though I have reservations about identifying *Thammakaai's* idiosyncratic personalist leanings with the historical teachings of the '*Pudgalavāda*' (92). Also, the latter is usually understood as being an Early Buddhist rather than—as Taylor states—a Mahāyāna school. Taylor succinctly summarizes the parallel between *Thammakaai's* and Fo-kuang-shan's public success: 'Essentially, globalization (and the project of modernity) conjoins various cultural forces and conflates individual and collective identity construction. As a consequence, this accounts for the mass appeal of hybrid religions' (62).

In chapter three, Taylor turns to look at the very opposite end of 'New Buddhism' and finds in the chaotic *Wat Sanam Chan* the antithesis to *Thammakaai's* neat and glossy interpretation of modernity. The chapter is devoted to reflections on the role and function of imagery and what he calls 'religio-scapes' (65). Taylor is particularly interested in their differing degrees of illusoriness and considers his findings in the field in the light of postmodernist theory. Before looking more closely at *Wat Sanam Chan's* controversial 'Superman Buddha-image' (74)—depicted on the cover of his book—he starts off discussing Feuerbach's, Benjamin's and Baudrillard's respective notions of 'sacredness', 'aura and reproduction' and 'imitations, simulations and simulacra'. Taylor argues, interlaced with much theoretical footwork, that particularly what Baudrillard coined as *simulacra*—'copies with no connection to an original order or reference point'—can be found abundantly in Thailand's *New Buddhism* and must be seen as 'a clear challenge to the established order of *sacra*' (87). He sees such *simulacra* exemplified by two very different types of Buddhist Disneyland evoked by *Thammakaai* and *Wat Sanam Chan* and embodied by their temples, respectively.

With digital Buddhism, chapter four considers a different kind of social and 'sacred' space. Taylor calls it 'cyber-Buddhism' and he sees in it, as in *Thammakaai* and *Wat Sanam Chan*, a further 'contested' space that creates 'a radical challenge to the power of the religious and politico-administrative centre' (87). In this

'disembodied and non-locatable' social milieu of virtual religious internet communities, Taylor sees a 'radical rhizomatic potentiality' (90)—taking up Deleuze's and Guattari's famous notion—and senses a form of 'counter-hegemonic discourse' (90) in Thailand's 'dispersed and fragmented' culture with its strongly feudal roots. Taylor, mustering up much social and cultural theory (e.g. around Homi Bhabha's notion of 'third space' and Lefebvre's 'representational space'), reflects on the changing relevance of material spaces, indeed the loss of any territorial place within cyber-Buddhism. He visits various 'nomadic' and 'marginal' spaces appropriated by movements of *New Buddhism* and considers cyber-Buddhist networks as the beginning of a trend that is already transforming religious space as a whole in Thailand. The appearance of cyber *sanghas*, entire networks and web-masters as potentially new 'religious specialists', the mushrooming of Buddhist websites and blogs are revitalizing not just the social and political but, also, the religious discourse; a discourse that partly challenges the traditional stratification of expertise in a Buddhist world, where mainly monks—with positions of uncontested authority—have been the religious experts. Taylor concedes 'limitations' in the 'third-space possibilities' of digitalized Buddhism compared with face-to-face social (embodied) arrangements' (107) but reckons that we have only just seen the beginnings of its impact.

Chapters five, six and seven all deal with the Thai Forest Tradition, its *kammaṭṭhāna* (meditation) monks, their lifestyles, historical and current role in Thai society. Chapter five is devoted to one of Thailand's national icons, the recently deceased Ajahn Mahā Bua, a monk affectionately known as 'venerable maternal grandfather' (*Luang Taa*) Mahā Bua, treated as a living saint and, of late, as famous for his unabashed claim to enlightenment as his astounding fundraising campaign (towards Thailand's massive International Monetary Fund [IMF] repayments subsequent to the Asian economic crisis in 1997). He is also known for his strident criticism of the—deposed—Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. While chapters five and six are written descriptively and with much historical background, chapter seven takes up the theoretical discourse again and exemplifies the themes of 'marginality', 'nomadism', 'body', 'mobility' and 'sanctification of place' as they can be found enacted in modern and postmodern Thailand. All three chapters delve deeply into the complexities and apparently inseparable connections between national identity, socio-political concerns and Buddhist ritual and practice. Taylor takes up the biographies of famous monks (Ajahns Sao, Mun, Khao, Bua), follows current Thai politics, traces the history of monastic reforms since King Mongkut's creation of the *Dhammayuttika* movement in 1833, the influence of the Mon-lineage and documents his ethnographic passion and his reflections on the changes he has witnessed during the past 25 years in Thailand's 100-year-old Forest Tradition. I have found these chapters to be the most alive and stimulating in the book. Taylor's fascination and familiarity with the world of *kammaṭṭhāna*-monks, their role and history, and his corresponding disillusionment about developments in the Forest Tradition during recent years are evident to this reader.

Taylor sees that the earlier wandering meditation monks, after having inspired and revitalized much of Buddhist practice in the earlier and middle parts of the twentieth century have—parallel to the disappearing forests in Thailand—gradually lost their ‘nomadic’ power, increasingly becoming ‘co-opted’ and ‘re-territorialized’. The early meditation monks expressed resistance not just against worldly desires, but also against domestication and the normative forces of state and civil society and were de facto ‘autonomous nomads’ (187), literally and metaphorically crossing the borders and thereby avoiding or even subverting institutional powers. With their dedicated and radical lifestyles, their charisma and message, they revitalized the country’s Buddhist vision of religiosity, brought forth impressive teachers and practitioners and inspired much of religious life in Thailand and beyond well into the latter part of the last century.

Today, with the generation of Ajahn Mun’s disciples almost completely passed away, instead of influencing religious life from the frontiers of society, forest monks and their monasteries have become mainstreamed or even hubs of political ‘neo-conservatism’ and ‘new embodied religion-nationalism’ (5) as Taylor outlines in the case of the revered Ajahn Mahā Bua. The national saint—and in some ways also national saviour after the financial crisis—has, with his request for donations from well-off Thais, as of 2007 collected and passed on to the government the staggering amount of 11.5 tonnes of gold and more than \$10 million in foreign exchange. Taylor notes: ‘the national saving-nation campaign was in great part responsible for Thailand’s post-crisis fiscal recovery and importantly in servicing its IMF loan repayments’ (120). By this ‘bold worldly engagement and stated desire to “save the nation”’ (167), as an icon of the Forest Tradition and otherwise stern critic of ‘*bhikkhus* of the modern kind’ looking for ‘burdensome pursuits to take up and get involved in’ (167), Ajahn Mahā Bua has in his old age become an overt political and economic power himself and—while helping his country immensely—has further weakened the image of forest monks dedicated to simplicity and ‘the direct route’; the very qualities he himself epitomized and became famous for prior to his country’s crisis.

Taylor, earlier on in chapter one, stated his goal of showing ‘varieties of cultural forms and religious transgressions in Thai Buddhism’ (20). He now makes clear that the ‘normalization’ of forest monks is also the result of larger economic, political and societal factors and reflects on the intimate and inseparable connections between Thai national identity and Buddhist ritual and practice. He suspects the ‘new religiosity in everyday life’ (35) and the fecund ‘new borderlands’ of the religion are more likely to be found in urban and ‘post-metropolitan’ spaces rather than in the ‘normalized’ forest monasteries. While staying as a temporary monk in the Northeast of Thailand in one of Ajahn Mahā Bua’s branch monasteries during the monsoon season of 2007, he finds confirmation for what he had earlier called a sense of ‘reinforced nostalgia’ in many parts of the Forest Tradition. He sees a romanticized ‘re-creation of history as an allegorized, pristine past’ (137) to be widespread and finds a dramatic increase

in the number of 'saintly shrines and relic-museums', growing parallel to the domestication of monks in *kammaṭṭhāna* monasteries.

In his conclusions, Taylor stitches together narratives from a country in crisis and disorientation—the strands of these narratives lie beneath the surface of the apparent and run from Queen Suphankalaya (however historically real or imagined) via Luang Taa Mahā Bua to the future Buddha Metteya, all of whom are united in their role as saviour figures in the national psyche. Taylor sees a deeper pattern of 'neither global nor local religious practices but truly *glocal* practices' and recognizes this pattern underpinning both the creation of a perfect Buddhist world and 'glocalized religion of spectacle' (*Wat Phra Thammakaai*) and the 'carnavalesque' flight into the imaginary of *Wat Sanam Chan*. He also witnesses that with the normalization of the once resistant wandering forest monks—now settled, domesticated, preoccupied with building large monasteries and museums and at the stage of 'circulating biographies and autobiographies all claiming some association with the founding masters' (202)—they have become 'co-opted through patronage', ecclesiastical nomenclature, have lost their power to operate from the boundaries and 'other-spaces' and have become 'reinserted into the vertical and ordered apparatuses of the urban-centered state' (202). From there the forest monks—now the 'forest tradition'—engage in nostalgia, mythologizing of their own historical roots, 'tradition' and the imagining of a pristine past and intact order.

Taylor summarizes aptly: 'It's people that make space/s into places, inscribing narratives and various meanings to place' (202). And he sees precisely in some of the new 'post-metropolitan' borderlands a definite resurgence of sacred space and that 'for many people, religion has taken on a new sense of purpose in response to the contemporary urban experience' (203).

Taylor, in writing about Thailand, engages in lengthy interludes with the postmodernist thinking of the likes of Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault, Lefebvre, Baudrillard, de Certeau, Bhabha and a few others. In these excursions I feel that he occasionally loses the clarity that I appreciate in his writing about Thailand and I sense a blurring in his line of thought that makes me wish he had separated out some of the more theoretical reflections, possibly exemplifying these with references to his Thai field-observations.

Throughout the book I have found the author's handling of Pali terminology infelicitous: the terms occur partly with and partly without diacritica; sometimes, when referring to general aspects of Buddhist Teaching, the transliterated Thai version for a Pali term is confusingly indicated in parenthesis (as if the proper technical term) rather than the romanized version of the original Pali – thus *nippḥitaa* instead of *nibbidā*, *winyaan* instead of *viññāna*, etc. Occasionally, the translations leave much to be desired—*citta* as 'mind' is not simply an equivalent to 'the one who knows' (= *puu ruu*) (124); or *rūpa* just as 'body' is a simplistic rendering (instead of the usual 'form' including all things reified).

The book could also have benefitted from more editorial care; besides many typos (in both English and Pali), doubled or omitted words, grammatical mishaps,

wrong dates (134, fn. 8), there are a few factual points worth mentioning: Mahājanaka (6, fn. 26) is not just 'a popular tale' but also a Buddhist Jātaka story; Santikaro was a monk-disciple of Ajahn Buddhadasa and never 'a former senior monastic disciple' of *Wat Phra Thammakaai* 'and now critic of the movement' (here probably confused with the erstwhile Phra Mettānando—now Dr. Mano Mettanando Laohavanich—who is both); when tracing the use and meaning of the term *kammattḥāna* in Thai (133, fn. 3) to Ajahns Sao and Mun, it may be worth acknowledging that it already occurs in the early Buddhist canon and its commentaries.

Taylor's book succeeds in provoking the interested reader to rethink much of what we believe to know about Thailand's recent religious history and current developments from a time when confusion and fascinating changes shake hands. Personally, I have found it valuable and insightful reading—and a refreshing and intelligent break from other perspectives on Buddhist life in Thailand: blue-eyed devotee literature and hagiographical accounts on the one hand and—either indignant or despondent—eager listings of recent monastic misdemeanours on the other. I share much of the author's (restrained but unmistakable) sentiment about what he refers to as 'digressions' in the religio-scape of Thai Buddhism and resonate with his genuine inspiration and consequent disappointment about recent developments in the Forest Tradition. Taylor's thoughtful book is recommended for anyone curious about undercurrents in living Theravada Buddhism and undaunted by postmodernist social theory.

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Jeffrey Samuels, 2010. **Attracting the heart: Social relations and the aesthetics of emotion in Sri Lankan monastic culture**, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press. ISBN 978-0824833855 (hbk)

Attracting the heart: Social relations and the aesthetics of emotion in Sri Lankan monastic culture is one of the most readable ethnographic books about contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhist monastic culture. Jeffrey Samuels is a specialist on contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhism, monasticism and Buddhist education. In the book, he offers a new perspective on monastic vocation, social bonds and