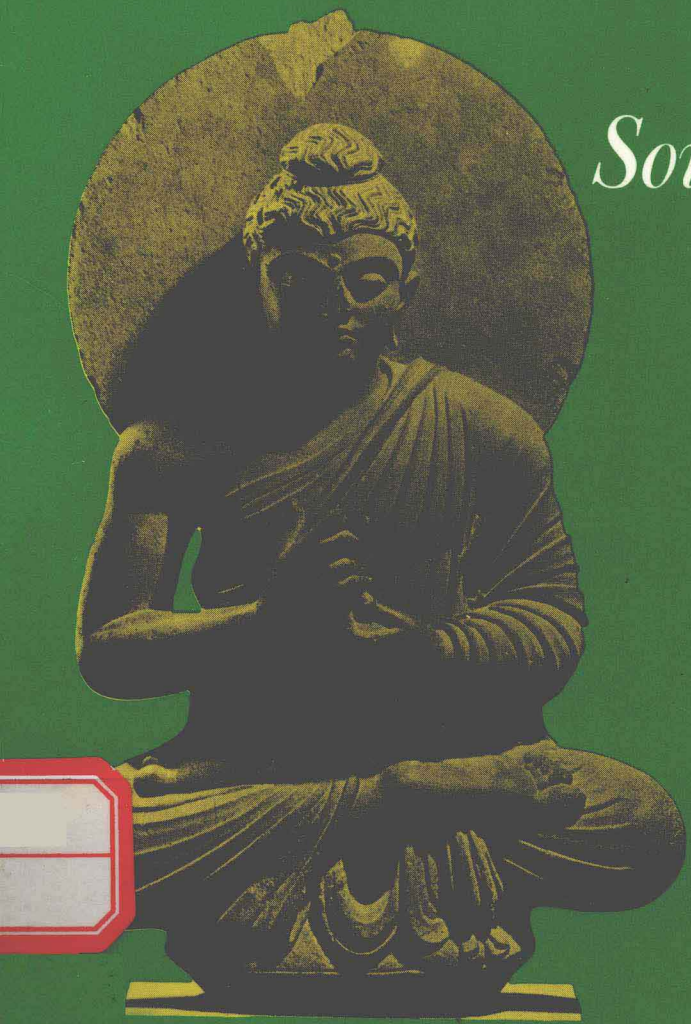
ROBERT C. LESTER

Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia



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Preface

This book is intended to communicate the major features of the present-day practice of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia in the perspective of scripture and history. It is my hope that it will be informative to the specialist as well as the general reader. I have chosen to survey the entire area of Theravada influence in Southeast Asia rather than comprehensively treat the Buddhism of a single country: first, because it is possible – the great majority of the peoples of Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia adhere to a single tradition, Theravada Buddhism, and have arrived at their present practice of this tradition through several centuries of interaction; second, because I desire to convey "flavor" rather than elaborate detail and the larger study lends itself to this end; third, because the distinctive practices of each of the various peoples of the Theravada area are most notable in the light of larger common patterns; and finally, because these variations within a single tradition frequently cut across national borders – e.g., the Buddhism practiced by the Shan people of Northern Burma is in many ways more akin to that practiced in Northern Thailand than to that practiced by the Burmese; the Buddhism of the Northeast Thai is more akin to that of the Lao than to that of the rest of Thailand.

Ceylonese Theravada Buddhism, except as to its historical impact on Southeast Asia, is excluded from this study. Ceylonese Buddhists played a major role in the early development of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia, and the three most significant orders within the Ceylonese monastic community today honor ordination lines established from Thailand and Burma. Even so, patterns of Buddhist life in contemporary Ceylon vary so significantly from those of Southeast Asia as to demand separate treatment and constant exception from the generalizations otherwise possible. Due largely to geographical location, Ceylon has been more heavily influenced by Indian culture than has Theravada Southeast Asia and correspondingly has not been party to the long-term interaction of the peoples of mainland Southeast Asia. Having sizable Hindu and Christian minorities, Ceylon is only 64 percent Buddhist; whereas Theravada Southeast Asia is 85 to 95 percent Buddhist. Unlike the monastic orders of Southeast Asia, the monastic community in Ceylon is internally divided by caste. Those ordained to the monastic life in Ceylon are expected to commit for a lifetime; whereas in Southeast Asia the great majority who become monks remain so for only a few months or few years, leaving without stigma attached. These factors together make for significant differences between Ceylon and Theravada Southeast Asia in patterns of monastic life and monk-lay interaction.

In order to view Buddhism as it is actually lived, yet in historical perspective and in the light of the Buddhist's professed ideal, it is necessary to draw upon the insights of scholars representing several different disciplines. This is no doubt precarious — one is never certain that he is fairly applying insights taken out of the particular context in which they were first expounded. I hope that whatever the faults of this study it will at the least provide a basis for further, much-needed macrostudies of the culture of mainland Southeast Asia.

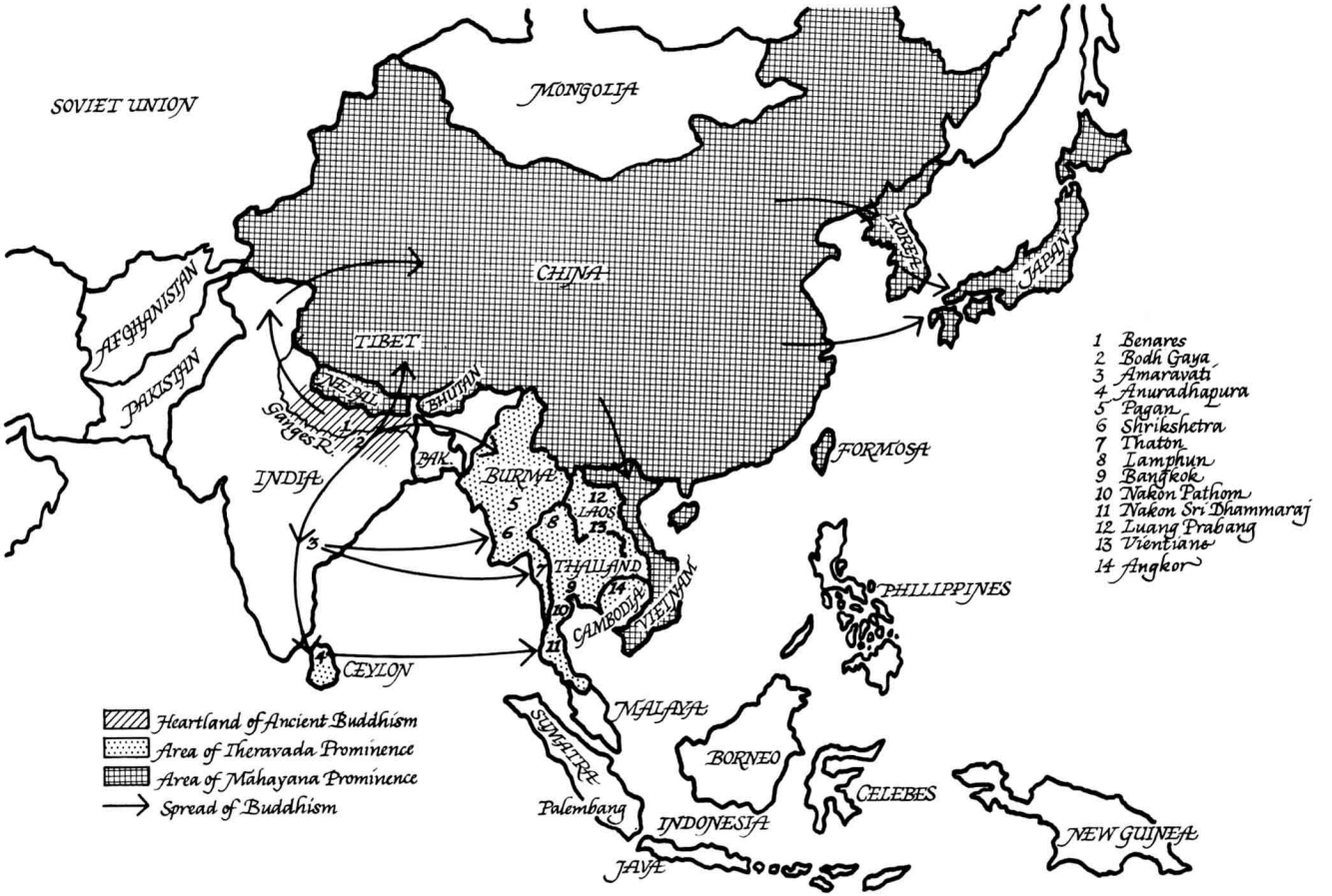
The fieldwork for this study was done under a Fulbright-Hays Faculty Fellowship. I wish to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the members of the faculty of the Southeast Asia Studies Program at Cornell University, and the South-Southeast Asia Study Center at The American University, Washington, D.C. I wish to thank the Pali Text Society for permission to reprint excerpts from *Dialogues of the Buddha* and *Book of the Gradual Sayings*. My special thanks to Mr. John Thomson, friend and former colleague, and to my wife, Donna, typist, consultant, and critic.

Contents

Introduction

Buddhism as philosophy and as a meditative discipline has been known and appreciated in the Western world for some time. Buddhism as the way of life of a people, an all-encompassing, multileveled life-style, the instrument of a people's identity and cultural continuity, is not so well known. This is regrettable considering the present worldwide interest and involvement in mainland Southeast Asia, where the great majority of the peoples indeed adhere to Buddhism as a way of life – here the whole drama of human existence is played out in the framework of Buddhist values.

In recent years the peoples of Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia have appealed to Buddhism as the ground of nationalism and not without justification. There is a profound sense in which to be Burmese, Thai, Lao, or Cambodian is to be Buddhist. In these Theravada[1] Buddhist countries Buddhist values inform and inspire basic social, economic, and political patterns of life for the individual, family, village, and nation. Theravada Buddhism is the established religion of the kingdoms of Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia and as such receives extensive patronage and guidance from king and government. In Burma Buddhist revival has proceeded hand in hand with Burmese nationalism. Buddhism, established under U Nu (1961) only to be disestablished a


SOVIET UNION
MONGOLIA
CHINA
KOREA
JAPAN
AFGHANISTAN
PAKISTAN
TIBET
NEPAL
BHUTAN
Ganges R.
INDIA
BAK
BURMA
LAOS
THAILAND
CAMBODIA
VIETNAM
FORMOSA
PHILLIPPINES
CEYLON
MALAYA
SUMATRA
Palembang
BORNEO
CELEBES
INDONESIA
NEW GUINEA
JAVA
1 Benares
2 Bodh Gaya
3 Amaravati
4 Anuradhapura
5 Pagan
6 Shrikshetra
7 Thaton
8 Lamphun
9 Bangkok
10 Nakon Pathom
11 Nakon Sri Dhammaraj
12 Luang Prabang
13 Vientiane
14 Angkor
Heartland of Ancient Buddhism
Area of Theravada Prominence
Area of Mahayana Prominence
Spread of Buddhism

short time later under Ne Win, still enjoys substantial recognition and support from government.

We will have great difficulty in understanding Buddhism as practiced in Southeast Asia unless we attempt to take it on its own terms. If we think about Buddhism in general terms as a 'religion', rather than as a particular way of life of a particular people in a time, place, and circumstances, we inevitably apply to it certain Western stereotypes, a Western cultural bias, concerning religion. We may, for instance, think about religion as having to do with 'God' when Theravada Buddhism does not recognize 'God'. We may think about religion as a realm of human experience and institutions distinct from politics, commerce, and general social patterns when neither the Buddhist ideal embodied in scripture and tradition nor the practicing Buddhist recognizes such distinctions. The religious-secular dichotomy applied so extensively in Western thought is inappropriate to the Buddhist way in Southeast Asia. The Theravada Buddhist (aside from a small minority of somewhat Westernized urban Southeast Asians) thinks of his whole way of life as Buddhist – his individual, family, village, and national cultural identity is established with reference to Buddhist values. Western notions of 'Church' and 'State' are not appropriately applied to a Buddhist frame of reference – even to use the word 'Church', no matter how well defined, is to occasion an illegitimate transference in the Western mind from a Judeo-Christian heritage to Buddhism. We must recognize not only that the Theravada countries of Southeast Asia own a long-standing tradition of close association and cooperation between government and expressly Buddhist organizations and leadership but that government itself rightly viewed is a Buddhist institution. Even the 'sacred-profane' dichotomy has limited applicability in Buddhist cultures. To the Buddhist there is something special about a Buddha-image, a monastery, and a Buddhist monk, but special in degree rather than kind. Inasmuch as all life is understood in terms of Buddhist values, everything is 'sacred'. Thera-

vada Buddhists speak of their way of life as the Buddha-Sasana – the 'Buddha-context'[2] within which all kinds and conditions of men (and all other sentient beings) pursue the Buddha-enlightenment according to their individual capacity and circumstances – some take up the way of the monk, others follow the lay way; all are on the path of the Buddha. There are here no 'religious' persons as opposed to 'nonreligious' persons; there are only those who are as individuals at one stage or another of self-discipline along the same path.

Due in part to cultural bias, but also to a misreading of Buddhist texts and a failure to examine the Buddhism of twentieth-century practice as well as the Buddhism of the scriptures, most Western studies of Theravada Buddhism promote a wrong image. If our intent is to understand living Buddhism in Southeast Asia, we must not only examine Buddhist texts through the eyes of practicing Buddhists, but also become familiar with present-day Buddhist patterns of life. An attempt to understand twentieth-century Buddhism on the basis of ancient scripture alone is comparable to attempting to comprehend twentieth-century American Protestant Christianity simply by studying the Bible. Western historical-textual studies consistently present Theravada Buddhism as a rigorously monastic, ascetic, and meditative discipline pursuant of liberation from the sorrow and suffering of human existence.[3] This view not only excludes the nonmonk, but also distorts the way of the monk by examining it apart from the way of the layman. Further, characterization of Theravada Buddhism as a way of monks has moved some observers of Buddhist Southeast Asia to conclude that the mass of the people are not Buddhist at all but animists.[4] This is a rather gross distortion of scriptural Buddhism as well as practiced Buddhism.

Recent sociological and anthropological studies of Southeast Asian Buddhist peoples provide needed new insight on the practice of Theravada Buddhism and encouragement to take a fresh look at Buddhist texts. Village studies inventorying and analyzing the various symbols, rituals, and

patterns of life operative among Buddhist peoples reveal the depth and breadth of the sphere of Buddhist influence, the social dynamics of life lived in accordance with Buddhist values, and the nature of the inspiration which Buddhist peoples derive from ancient texts. The careful, empathic analysis of patterns of life can give insights into living Buddhism which can never be provided by historical-textual studies. This is not, however, to dismiss historical and literary studies as irrelevant to our subject. The social scientist is no less subject to cultural bias, inference from the standpoint of alien values, than is the historian or textual analyst. And more importantly, social studies frequently lack 'depth perception'. The social scientist may come at his subject without sufficient historical and theoretical (doctrinal, etc.) perspective and thereby elaborately describe what he does not really understand. We must work for a balanced view of contemporary Southeast Asian Buddhism receiving insight from various quarters.[5] Social studies tell us something of the way people believe and act; historical-textual studies tell us something of why they believe and act the way they do. One must continually go back and forth from the surface phenomena to history and tradition. This is necessary not only with respect to Southeast Asian Buddhism generally but also with respect to the Buddhism of each of the different peoples of the area. The Burmese, Thai, Lao, and Cambodians adhere to the same Theravada tradition and some generalization is possible. Yet, each people has its own particular history, and significant variations thereby occur.

Given the insights of the historian, textual analyst, and social scientist, we gain a view of Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism rather different from the presently prevailing image. One who becomes a monk does indeed renounce the world but in and through this very renunciation he becomes a 'saving' instrument *for* the world, a mediator of the Buddha-power. At one and the same time he is renounced and yet thoroughly involved in the society around him – through withdrawal he achieves among his people a status without

equal; he is seen as the embodiment of the ideal life-style. He cultivates, carries, and radiates the wisdom, compassion, and power of the Buddha to all beings. He may serve his community as preacher of the Buddha-word; teacher of youth; healer of the sick; respected counselor of all kinds and conditions of men; hallower of the great occasions of family, village, and national life; exorcist of the malevolent spirit forces which play upon worldly human existence; social welfare worker; and political integrator – key agent in social, economic, and political change. This is nothing essentially new to Theravada Buddhism. From time to time throughout a long history the specific way in which the monk has exercised his status has changed, and it is changing with considerable significance in our time; but he has always enjoyed such status, he has always existed for the world. This was true of the Buddha himself who, respected by kings, settled quarrels between great powers, healed the sick, and counseled on the whole gamut of worldly affairs.

The monastery, seemingly shut off from the world by its compound walls, is in fact the very hub of village life. It may serve not only as a place of residence, study, and meditation for the monk, but also as school, social center, medical dispensary, and counseling center, home for the aged and destitute, news and information center, and social work and welfare agency for the larger society.

Of course, monk and monastery neither hold this status nor function in such roles without the laity. The monk may be closest to the top of the mountain, the end of the path, but he exists and functions as part of a mutually supportive universe of beings. The layman as well as the monk is on the path of the Buddha. Scripture, tradition, and contemporary practice recognize the various kinds and conditions of men – indeed, all living beings, spirits, gods, animals, and so forth – as at different levels of self-discipline on the road to enlightenment. Each individual being 'plugs in' to the Buddha-power, wisdom, and compassion according to his present capability (merit-status) conditioned by his past. But more,

each being enhances his own status through service to other beings – *this is the peculiar dynamic of the Theravada way of life,* that each man's fate is in his own hands, yet advancement toward the ideal depends upon meritorious interaction with other beings. The Buddhist speaks of self-discipline status as merit-status. The monk is a 'merit-field' for the layman, the layman a 'merit-maker'. The layman is a 'merit-field' for the monk, the monk a 'merit-maker'. The monk, uncompromised by the world, most truly exemplifies the ideal – the layman recognizing, honoring, and serving the monk (and thus the ideal) enhances his merit-status; that is, he cultivates and manifests a certain self-discipline, a quality of life characterized by 'giving'. But this is mutual, not one way – the monk in providing the layman with the opportunity to give enhances his own merit-status by cultivating and manifesting humility and compassion. Stated in practical terms from the two different angles, the monk voluntarily gives up the joys of life in the world toward the development of high character, wisdom, and compassion – the layman moved by such an example of purity responds by feeding, clothing, and housing the monk, calling on his aid, and in every way honoring him; the layman grapples with the exigencies of life in the world in order to support the monk – the monk in gratitude responds by preaching, teaching, counseling, and blessing. Merit-interaction takes place in numerous different ways and at various levels in the society. King and government make merit and give merit for a nation – at this level merit-action may be a key means of national integration and unity. When we have considered the various patterns of merit-activity, we shall see how an entire social system operates with reference to Buddhist values.

Given this kind of society the layman must be considered as much a Buddhist as the monk. Further, it must be noted that in the Theravada societies of Southeast Asia the line between monk and layman is not a hard one – the male member of the society may move between the status and role of monk and of layman with relative ease. Ideally, every

male should at some time in his life, preferably when coming of age and just before marriage, take up the way of the monk for at least a short time. One of the greatest sources of merit for all involved is an ordination to the monkhood. For the purpose of discussion we must label and categorize Buddhists and their activities, but we must bear in mind that we are dealing with a living fluid entity, many-faced and moving, never fully comprehended by the concepts of man's mind.

It is readily evident that Buddhist values signally condition patterns of life in Theravada Southeast Asia. It is also quite evident that today there are strong forces at work in Southeast Asia, pressures for rapid change toward Westernization and so-called modernization, and foreign agencies, which do not necessarily recognize or respect Buddhist values or those who most clearly exemplify these values, the Buddhist monks. Throughout our study we shall try to take cognizance of these forces and the ways in which Buddhism has responded to them, the potential in Buddhist values and institutions for permitting, supporting, and/or motivating certain kinds of social, economic, and political change. There are many concerned with development in the underdeveloped nations of Southeast Asia, particularly non-Asians, who consider the monk and Buddhist values antithetic to modernization. Of course they make this judgment without knowledge of the Buddhist tradition and in light of modernization ideals based on non-Asian values. Whether or not Buddhist values foster realization of modernization ideals depends very much on the value-framework assumed, the ideals sought after. We must ask: What kind of a society and world does Southeast Asian Buddhism intend? What are the forces at work in the context of Buddhist values? What ideals do they and can they foster? Is it necessarily the case that a more satisfactory life for Buddhist peoples must be built on the basis of Western models?

PART I

The Ideal in Scripture and Tradition