

Introduction

Don't overlook the chance of [a] lifetime. . . . It has been the tradition of Buddhists since ancient times to build Buddha images in temple grounds as an act of devotion and in homage and recollection of the supreme virtues of the Lord Buddha. . . . Creating a Buddha image is now no longer the realm of royalty and the aristocracy—but a gesture of devotion through which you can be one part of the Mahathammakai Chedi and the Mahathammakai Chedi can be a part of you!

—From a pamphlet distributed at the Dhammakāya Temple
in Pathum Thani, Thailand, 1999

In the spring of 2000, after a decade of arduous planning and construction, the Dhammakāya Temple completed its Mahathammakai Chedi, a massive monument that honored the Buddhist tradition and the Dhammakāya community.¹ Temple publications presented the *chedi* as a *sunruamphlangsattha* (a center for the power of faith) that would foster both inner peace and world peace.² The Temple engraved the names of the donors on individually commissioned Buddha images, which were cast by Dhammakāya monks in merit making ceremonies and subsequently affixed to the exterior of the chedi or housed within its interior. For one visiting the Temple today, the sight of these Phra Dhammakāya images reflecting and scattering the sun's light leaves an indelible impression, as does the sheer size of the monument—it occupies a space of one square kilometer and purportedly accommodates up to one million people on the grounds around its circumference. The chedi has become a focal point for pilgrims who travel to the Temple in Pathum Thani, Thailand each year to practice meditation and to participate in the Temple's numerous religious and social activities.

The building of a memorial monument (*chedi*, Thai; *stūpa*, Sanskrit) as a container for the Buddha's physical and symbolic relics has a long history in the Buddhist tradition.³ While the origins of the *stūpa* cult remain the subject of much speculation, it is clear that the construction of reliquaries played an important role in the first few centuries of Buddhist history. The *Mahāvamsa*, one of the Sinhalese chronicles, connects the founding of the Buddhist religion



Mahathammakai Chedi. (Photo courtesy of the Dhammakāya Foundation.)

in Sri Lanka with the building of a stūpa for the Buddha's relics.⁴ In the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, which recounts the Buddha's final days, the Buddha instructs his followers on how to enshrine his relics: "A [stūpa] should be erected at the crossroads for the Tathāgatha. And whoever lays wreaths or puts sweet perfumes and colours there with a devout heart, will reap benefit and happiness for a long time."⁵ In South and Southeast Asia, offerings made for the building of a stūpa are considered especially fruitful for the generation of merit (*bun*, Thai; *puñña*, Pāli). As a result, the history of Theravāda Buddhism recounts numerous stories of the building of stūpas and the donors who made them possible.

Given the long history of stūpa building in South Asia and Southeast Asia, it is intriguing that the construction of the Mahathammakai Chedi became the subject of a heated controversy in Thailand in 1998 and 1999. This controversy assumed center stage in Thai public discourse when the national media reported on the Temple's publicizing of miraculous events at the site of the chedi. The Temple reported that on September 6, 1998, as thousands of Dhammakāya practitioners meditated in front of the chedi, the sun appeared to be "sucked out of the sky." It subsequently was replaced by an image of Luang Pho Sot of Wat Paknam, the late founder of the meditation method used at the Temple. Some individuals saw him in the form of a golden statue, whereas others pictured him as a giant crystal. Not long after the event, the Temple published testimonials of eyewitnesses in their pamphlets and in newspapers.

Accompanying these testimonials were digitally rendered montages of the reported miraculous sightings.⁶

Critics quickly denounced the Temple's marketing of the "miracle in the sky" as a means to procure more donations for the construction of the chedi. After meeting with the Temple's abbot, Deputy Education Minister Arkom Engchuan told the press that he had informed the abbot that "[b]illboards picturing the miracle that are used to invite donations are not suitable. Instead, they should be used to invite the public to study the teachings of Lord Buddha at the temple."⁷ Criticism of the Temple's marketing of the "miracle in the sky" quickly merged with criticisms of the Temple's purported materialism and its distribution of amulets thought to attract wealth and prosperity (*dut sap*, literally to "suck material assets"). This situation, in turn, generated more discussion of the purported widespread commercialization and corruption of Buddhism in contemporary Thailand, as well as the inability of the monastic establishment—namely the Mahatherasamakhom (the Supreme Saṅgha Council)—to curtail it.

While it is tempting to reduce the controversy to yet another story of "a big temple gone bad"—the characterization that dominated the Thai and International press—far more than the purported materialism of a suburban Thai temple was at issue. Observing the tide of public opinion while living in Bangkok in 1998 and 1999, I was struck by the breadth and scope of the controversy: It literally dominated the headlines from November of 1998 to August of 1999. Its pervasiveness and longevity indicated to me that it raised broader questions about the state of "Thai Buddhism." Local debates over the Dhammakāya Temple's wealth, its construction of the Mahathammakai Chedi, its marketing and distribution of amulets, and its advertising of the "miracle in the sky," became a discursive site for an extensive discussion of Buddhist orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and identity at a critical moment in Thai history.

The controversy erupted in the midst of the Asian economic crisis of 1997 to 1999. During this time, many Thais reevaluated notions of prosperity, development, progress, and "Thai values." As the Dhammakāya Temple marketed its new religious monument, two populist discourses emerged within the public sphere that questioned the effects of global capitalism on Thai society. A new form of Thai nationalism blamed Western capitalism, especially the institutions of the IMF and World Bank, for Thailand's economic woes, and a new form of Thai localism urged Thais to reject Western development models and return to their agrarian roots.⁸ The critique of the Dhammakāya Temple's wealth and alleged heretical teachings and practices fit within this broader discussion of the erosion of Thai values and the disastrous effects of global capitalism on Thai society.

Today, Buddhists are redefining Buddhist religiosity within contexts of dramatic social, economic, and political change. This atmosphere breeds discussions regarding the "state of Buddhism" and the integrity of the saṅgha in

the contemporary world. The integrity of the saṅgha has long been a central issue within Buddhist communities because members of the saṅgha are the principal preservers of the tradition through their orthodox teachings and purity of practice. But the modern period has ushered in an unprecedented number of challenges to the institution of Buddhist monasticism around the globe. Over the past two centuries, the integrity of the saṅgha has come under scrutiny as the dramatic forces of colonialism, modernization, secularization, and most recently, globalization have affected monastic institutions. In Sri Lanka, Burma, Laos, and Cambodia, European colonialism fostered the destabilization of the monastic community, which in turn laid the foundation for new forms of monastic and lay practice.⁹ In Thailand, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the centralization of religious authority and the homogenization of Buddhist teaching and practice under the guise of modern saṅgha reform.¹⁰ In China and Tibet, Buddhist monks and nuns faced the serious challenge of political opposition to institutional religion.¹¹ In Japan, during the Meiji period (1868–1912), Buddhist institutions lost their privileged status when nationalists increasingly identified Buddhism as a “foreign religion.”¹² And in the West, as convert Buddhist communities arose, individual practice and religious thought were privileged over the establishment and maintenance of Buddhist monasticism.¹³

The effects of these challenges to the saṅgha continue to shape Buddhist practice in countries across the globe, but the postcolonial world offers new challenges to Buddhist communities as they navigate their religious paths within the culture of global capitalism. This culture provides new avenues for religious expression and critique, particularly in relation to ideas concerning consumption, the sine qua non of capitalism. Consumption is “*the factor, the principle, held to determine definitions of value, the construction of identities, and even the shape of the global ‘ecumene.’*”¹⁴ As such, contemporary religious identities are often constructed either in synergy with consumption or in direct opposition to it. Consumption can be viewed either as a vehicle for the enjoyment of the fruits of religious piety or as the mechanism of its destruction. At the forefront of these debates over contemporary religious identity are varying appraisals of the proper relationship between wealth and piety.

The correlation between wealth and piety has engaged religious thinkers throughout history. At the heart of many of these religious discourses is a discussion of “worldliness”: To what degree does a particular religious perspective embrace or reject this-worldly values such as wealth, health, and an abundant number of sons. For religious persons who posit a theory of the ultimate as distinct from the world, the act of being religious often entails strategies of rejection—discourses and practices aimed at separating one’s self from this-worldly values and goals. The disciplinary practices of monastic communities, for instance, aim to create new selves through the renunciation of familial roles and

obligations. Some monastic communities may view renunciation as an absolute rejection of the world (the Christian anchorite tradition is one example), but not all monastic traditions possess an ethos of radical rejection. In some cases, renunciation may be better viewed as akin to basic training in the military, where the focus is on the creation of new ways of being. Other religious orientations recommend ideals of selflessness and simplicity within families and communities. Still other modes of religiosity embrace this-worldly benefits, such as health and wealth, as signs of religious piety and as a legitimate aim of religious practice. In this case, religiosity is deeply embedded in the material fruits of everyday life.

While we commonly label particular religious traditions as other-worldly or this-worldly in orientation, the reality is far more complex than such simple categorizations suggest. Religious traditions are dynamic and encompass a wide variety of perspectives, many of which are influenced by the power relations and historical circumstances of a given community at a particular moment in time. Specific religious assessments of the “world,” therefore, do not simply reproduce a given religious orthodoxy; they also reflect broader assessments of the state of society at a particular historical moment.

Today, debates over the relationship between wealth and piety reflect differing orientations towards global capitalism, as it redefines communal and individual identities and promotes consumption-oriented markers of success. In the United States, the signs of global capitalism are readily apparent on the grounds of mega-churches, with their McDonald’s and coffee shops, day spas and recreational climbing walls. Their leaders commonly preach a religious message of self-improvement or personal fulfillment that mirrors the discourses of prominent self-help gurus. An example is Joel Osteen, the senior pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. He spreads a message of personal fulfillment that is explicitly couched in this-worldly terms. The titles of some of his sermons include, “Enlarge Your Vision,” “Financial Prosperity,” “Do All You Can Do to Make Your Dreams Come True,” and “Developing Your Potential.”¹⁵ In his best-selling book, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*, he merges standard discourses on divine relationships with practical advice on personal success.¹⁶ This fusion of religion with self-improvement, health, and prosperity is, of course, not limited to the United States. It is a global phenomenon, from Sweden and West Africa to Australia and Chile.¹⁷ While all of these forms of “prosperity-religiosity” share common features, such as the use of new media for the dissemination of the message, there are significant differences as well. Joel Osteen preaches his message of “religious self-improvement” within a relatively affluent and stable cultural context, whereas religious persons in other parts of the world, such as in Africa or Latin America, embrace the “prosperity gospel” as they grapple with radically shifting, and sometimes devastating, socio-economic and political realities.

As self-help gurus and prosperity-gospel preachers seek to merge the values of late modern capitalism with religion, their critics insist on the centrality of simplicity and renunciation in religious worldviews over and against that of modern, consumer-oriented, hedonistic materialism. In fact, contemporary debates over religion and worldliness are often framed in reference to questions concerning the relationship between religion and our contemporary culture of consumerism: Should religions co-opt the language and models of consumerism? Is religion a product that can be sold with Madison Avenue marketing techniques? Or should religion be used as a vehicle for critiquing the market and our contemporary culture of consumerism? Some commentators even posit the possibility that consumerism itself is a religion that is competing with the values of other religions. This argument is put forth by David Loy, an outspoken Buddhist, social critic, and academic who argues that consumerism is perhaps the first truly global religion.¹⁸ He identifies consumerism as the most influential value system in late capitalism. As such, he suggests that consumerism should be viewed as a religion with its own conception of the divine (the Market) and its own soteriology (the consumption of consumer goods). He insists that if we view consumerism as a “secular” ideology, we miss the depth of its impact on contemporary values.

When debates emerge within religious communities over the relationship between religion and wealth or religion and consumerism, they typically extend to broader issues involving religious identity, belief, and practice. This is especially true in the case of religious scandals, which tend to recast religious difference as simply sensationalized stories of the faults and indiscretions of wayward individuals. In an instructive essay on the analytical value of religious scandals, Frances Fitzgerald argues that the case of Jim Bakker, the former PTL (Praise the Lord) head and founder of Heritage USA, was more than simply an investigation into Bakker’s alleged embezzlement of church donations.¹⁹ The scandal played into an existing debate within Pentecostal and charismatic circles over the relationship between God and personal and corporate finance. To reduce the scandal to a tale of Bakker’s personal shortcomings fails to recognize this larger debate over conceptions of contemporary Pentecostalism. While the popular press may reduce religious controversies such as those involving the Dhammakāya Temple and Jim Bakker to stories of corruption, materialism, and greed, these stories shed light on important debates concerning orthodox religiosity within religious communities.

Orientalism and the Study of Theravāda Buddhism

Contemporary debates over the Dhammakāya Temple’s purported commercialization of Buddhism reflect internal struggles over the representation of

Thai Buddhism, particularly the question of whether so-called popular religious practices reflect authentic Buddhist piety and practice. For over two centuries, reformers within the Buddhist tradition have sought to extricate and banish permanently those elements of “cultural Buddhism” that reflect animistic, magical, and mundane concerns. Practices that were particularly abhorrent to these reformers included astrology, the chanting of Buddhist *suttas* for protection and blessing, and the veneration of Buddha images, to name only a few. Reformed Buddhism, on the other hand, represented the pristine and authentic religion of the founder, Siddhattha Gotama (Siddhartha Gautama, Sanskrit), which emphasized the perfection of ethics and wisdom. Contemporary debates over Dhammakāya amulets, miracles, and the construction of impressive (and costly) pieces of art and architecture are an extension of this modernist debate within both Buddhist and academic circles.

The Buddhist modernism of the nineteenth century, which sought to distinguish authentic Buddhism from its popular forms, emerged within contexts of colonialism, Christian proselytization, and emergent discourses on the nature of religion, reason, and progress. The presentation of Buddhism as inherently rational and consistent with modern science was not merely a statement of religious orthodoxy, it was a discourse that countered the portrayal of Buddhists as backward, primitive, and entrenched within superstition and magic. Like Hindu Modernists in India who promoted pristine versions of Hinduism (such as Ram Mohan Roy, 1772–1833), Buddhist modernists perceived a disparity between authentic Buddhism and the religion of the masses that in their opinion led to mischaracterizations of the tradition as a whole. To repair the image of the religion and its practitioners, reform was necessary, and the heart of this reform was aimed, as in the past, at the *saṅgha*. In Sri Lanka, Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) argued that Buddhist monks should become “a spiritual army” whose task it was to eliminate traditional ritualism from popular Buddhism and reform the practice of errant monks.²⁰ In a similar manner, the reformed monastic lineage of King Mongkut (Rama IV, r. 1851–1868) in Thailand, the *Thammayut* order, embodied a renewed commitment to discipline and orthodoxy, and was used as a vehicle by the government for religious reform and the centralization of authority.²¹

These internal discourses of reform promoted a rational, textually based, philosophical Buddhism. It constituted a form of indigenous Orientalism or an “Orientalism of the Orientals,” which informed and was informed by the emergent study of Asian languages and religion in the West.²² As a category, the term Orientalism initially referred to the study of the “Orient” by European philologists and historians, but since the publication of Edward Said’s exceedingly influential study, *Orientalism*, the term has been embedded within critiques of power and representation, the dichotomy between the East and the West, and the construction of the “Other.”²³

In the case of Buddhism, several studies have focused on the European construction of Buddhism as an object of study. One of the most influential and controversial of these studies is Philip Almond's *The British Discovery of Buddhism*.²⁴ Following Said's assessment of Western representations of Islam, Phillip Almond has argued that "Buddhism" as an object of discourse (and hence of analysis and comparison) was created by the Victorian culture in which it emerged. As a result, this "construction and interpretation of Buddhism reveals much about nineteenth century concerns and can be read as an important sign of crucial sociocultural aspects of the Victorian period."²⁵ The product, according to Almond, is a textually based form of Buddhism that emphasizes philosophy and ethics. Within this Victorian construction, the Buddha, is portrayed as a great historical figure (similar to the historical Jesus), a liberator of the masses, and an "enlightened" being.

More recently, Richard S. Cohen has convincingly demonstrated how the usage of "enlightenment" as a translation for *nirvāṇa* became popularized in the nineteenth century. He argues that by the mid-1870s "it had become commonplace to call the buddha 'enlightened,' and by the end of the 1880s, the terminologies of 'enlightened' and 'enlightenment' dominated the English-language literature on Buddhism."²⁶ This was due, in part, to the efforts of Max Müller, who consistently used it in his analysis of the Buddha and the Buddhist tradition. Cohen argues that the word enlightened fits perfectly within Müller's science of religion, which sought to uncover the pristine forms of religion and ultimately prove the superiority of Christianity. According to Cohen, Müller's use of the terms enlightened and enlightenment made Buddhism more religious and universal by making it more comparable to Christianity (which provided a basis for the comparison of religions). The presentation of the Buddha as a rational philosopher who succeeded in becoming fully enlightened fit nicely within the context of Europe's own Enlightenment. This envisioning of the tradition was subsequently transported to America through such media as European scholarship and literature, the Theosophical Society and other new movements, as well as through various forms of Buddhist modernism. In both Europe and America, "enlightened Buddhism" was viewed as consistent with modern science. Paul Carus (1852–1919), the editor of Open Court Publishing Company and avid student of comparative religion, wrote in a letter to Anagarika Dharmapala that in his opinion "Buddha's intention was nothing else than to establish what we call a Religion of Science. 'Enlightenment' and 'Science' are interchangeable words."²⁷

For early European scholars of Theravāda Buddhism, this "enlightened" Buddhism was located within the Pāli canon since they believed that it contained the earliest and hence purest form of the historical Buddha's teachings. The locating of "pure Buddhism" within the Pāli canon reflected not only the Protestant preoccupation with texts,²⁸ but also the modern emphasis on

historical religious figures. As Christian theologians embarked upon the search for the historical Jesus, European and American Orientalists sought to reconstruct a biography of the Buddha based upon historical facts, not religious myth. Within this framework, they portrayed the Buddha as a great reformer and egalitarian, who rejected caste and Hindu ritualism and preached an inherently agnostic, ethical, and rational religious message. Aspects of his biography that did not fit this paradigm, such as the tales of miraculous events in his numerous lives, were reduced to examples of “the love of exaggeration and of mystery universal among rude peoples” rather than viewed as key components of his sacred biography.²⁹

This nineteenth-century focus on the life of the historical Buddha led to the general assessment within Orientalist scholarship on Buddhism that the Theravāda tradition in its ideal practice (i.e., Pāli canon Buddhism) was the most authentic form of Buddhism. Some commentators viewed other forms of Buddhism as appealing, such as Marquis Lafayette Gordon, a missionary to Japan who wrote that the Pure Land tradition was the best “gospel” of Buddhism. But all concluded that these later forms were less “purely Buddhist” since they did not emphasize the teachings of the historical Buddha.³⁰ Within European Orientalism, therefore, Theravāda became known as the most orthodox school of Buddhism. As a result, the Theravāda tradition, despite significant diversity within it, has been labeled by many commentators as the most conservative branch of Buddhism and hence closest to the original teachings of the Buddha. Pāli-canon Buddhism then became synonymous with early Indian Buddhism. Little attention was paid to commentarial or vernacular texts within distinctive local forms of Buddhism.³¹ These Theravāda texts, along with the entire corpus of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna texts, were viewed at best as significant alterations of the tradition, and at worst as signs of the tradition’s decay.

The valorization of Pāli-canon Buddhism as the true embodiment of the historical Buddha’s rational and ethical religion inevitably set up a marked distinction between so-called pure Pāli Buddhism and the corrupted local forms of the Theravāda tradition. Whether this contrast was viewed as the result of natural decay³² or of the lamentable devolution of a great tradition,³³ it reified the distinction between the rational and ethical Buddhism “preserved” within the Pāli canon and the ritual-oriented, cosmologically rich Buddhism of the masses (both lay and monastic). The sharp distinction was one that led to the championing of reform by both European sympathizers such as Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) and reform-oriented Buddhists such as Anagarika Dharmapala and King Mongkut.

While calls for reform have existed within the Theravāda tradition throughout its history, especially when new political authorities sought legitimacy and centralized power, modern calls for reform were unique in that they were, in part, embedded within a global conversation about the nature and

character of orthodox Buddhism. This is not to say that Western constructions of Buddhism determined how Buddhists conceived of their tradition, but rather that they constituted part of a dialogue about authentic Buddhist doctrine and practice and the need for reform in Theravāda countries. One instance of this exchange is King Chulalongkorn's 1904 essay on the *jātakas*, in which he relied heavily on the work of T. W. Rhys Davids (the founder of the Pāli Text Society). In this essay, King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910) dramatically redefined the *jātakas* as examples of pre-Buddhist folklore, rather than as stories told by the Buddha about his former lives. This served to rationalize the tradition, undermine the focus on *jātakas* within the Buddhist tradition, and reinterpret the life of the Buddha in modern historical terms.³⁴

A common theme in both Western and Asian discourses of reform was the need to eliminate the “magical” and overly “ritualistic” elements of the tradition—to redirect the focus away from mundane concerns (health, happiness, and prosperity in this and future lives) to the ultimate concern of *nirvāṇa* with its focus on the perfection of ethics and wisdom. Take, for instance, the case of the miraculous powers (*iddhi*) of meditation adepts. Stories of these abound within vernacular texts such as the stories of Phra Malai in Thailand and within anthropological portraits of “living Buddhism,” but few references are made to them in canonical-based descriptions of Theravāda Buddhism. Winston King's classic examination of meditation in the Theravāda tradition, *Theravāda Meditation: The Buddhist Transformation of Yoga*, makes only one reference to the miraculous powers of meditation adepts. In that comment, he states that while the “magical and psychic powers that accompany meditative achievement probably have always been a part of the Buddhist schema . . . [t]heir casual, self-serving manifestation, as their direct pursuit, has always been condemned in the mainstream teaching.”³⁵ This sentiment is echoed by many modernist Buddhists today; when referencing miracles in the tradition, they tend to focus on the canonical proscription found in the *Kevatta-sutta* against seeking miraculous powers and against using them to procure support.

While not being the dominant theme within these modern discourses of reform, the topic of monastic wealth and the desire for wealth among the laity was clearly present in early modern Orientalist and Asian critiques of contemporary popular Buddhism. The image of the ideal otherworldly renunciant was contrasted with the reality that many monks were the recipients of lavish gifts. In T. W. Rhys Davids' historical overview of Buddhism, he describes Buddhist monasticism as embracing the spirit of poverty with its admonition against various forms of personal property, an ideal that becomes “swallowed up by the permission given to the community to possess not only books and other personal property, but even lands and houses. Gautama himself is related to have received such gifts on behalf of the Sangha, which, at the time when it flourished in India, must have rivaled in wealth the most power-

ful orders of the Middle Ages; and in Buddhist countries at the present day the church is often as wealthy as it is among ourselves.”³⁶ In European scholarship, such “excesses” were often characterized as representative of the general decline of the religion since the time of the Buddha. Monastic wealth, merit-seeking laypersons, and Buddhist ritualism were all viewed as the corruption of a once pure, and in many cases, highly rational religion.

This portrait of Buddhism and Buddhist history that was created by nineteenth-century European Indologists provided the basis for Max Weber’s famous characterization of early Buddhism as an other-worldly religion of “cultivated professional monks,” aimed at the salvation of the individual.³⁷ This religion of the monastic “virtuoso” is distinct from the religion of the householder whose focus is on the procurement of “worldly goods, such as “riches, a good name, good company, death without fear, and betterment of rebirth opportunities.”³⁸ Weber’s Buddhism of the monastic virtuoso functioned as an ideal type, an example of “other-worldly” asceticism, in his typology of the world’s religions. As one of the founding fathers of modern sociology, Weber’s interest in the study of religion was intimately connected to his analysis of social action—of how particular religious ideas might affect social behavior. In particular, Weber wanted to answer the question of why capitalism emerged in Europe rather than China or India. To this end, his portrait of Buddhism as a religion of other-worldly ascetic virtuosos provided a useful contrast to his presentation of the “inner-worldly” ascetics of Protestant Christianity, whose desire to validate their state of salvation led to the rise of modern capitalism. Weber’s analysis of early Buddhism set the stage for numerous discussions of the relationship between wealth and piety in Buddhism, especially in the anthropological study of Buddhism.

Anthropological descriptions of Theravāda Buddhist societies commonly framed the contrast between the “original spirit of renunciation” and the realities of wealthy monasteries and prosperity-seeking laypersons in terms of the distinction between the Great Tradition of Theravāda Buddhism and the little traditions of Sinhalese, Burmese, Thai, and other local Buddhisms. While many of these accounts insisted upon the importance of examining local versions of Buddhism, they continued to reify the idea of a Great Tradition that transcended local variations. In “The Great Tradition and the Little in the Perspective of Sinhalese Buddhism,” the renowned anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere contrasted the Great Tradition of Theravāda Buddhism, “with its corpus of Pāli texts, places of worship, and a great community of monks” and that of Sinhalese Buddhism, the religion of the masses. He argued that this perspective enabled us to acknowledge the differences among the various local religions of South and Southeast Asia, while simultaneously acknowledging their shared lineage (Theravāda Buddhism).³⁹ While sensitive to diversity, his perspective assumes that the Great Tradition transcends local context and history, and re-

ifies it as the essential, permanent form of the religion, in contrast to local, inherently dynamic traditions. But among those traditions identified in the modern period as a “World Religion,” every envisioning of a Great Tradition—such as Theravāda Buddhism, Christianity, or Hinduism—⁴⁰ occurs within local contexts subject to culture, history, and relations of power. Contrasts, therefore, between so-called transcendent Great Traditions and local religions are acts of authorization—they identify that which is essential to the religion and that which is subject to reinterpretation (religious change) or misinterpretation (heresy).

One result of this authorization process in the modern period has been the separation of mundane concerns from that which is deemed to be authentic and ultimate. Obeyesekere, for instance, argued that “a monk rarely or never participates in the rituals of the lower cults, with their purely material rewards”; whereas the shaman addresses the “gross material aspirations of the masses.” The Theravāda portion of Sinhalese Buddhism emphasizes the other-worldly “salvation idiom,” while “the rest of the system has to do with the quest for material objectives and this-worldly goals.”⁴¹ In a similar vein, Melford Spiro distinguishes between “normative” Buddhism, which focuses on the pursuit of *nibbāna* (soteriological Buddhism), and “non-normative” forms: kammatic Buddhism, which is focused on the improvement of one’s next lives through kamma, and apotropaic Buddhism, the religion of “man’s worldly welfare” are examples.⁴² Obeyesekere’s description of the Great Tradition of Theravāda and Spiro’s description of normative soteriological Buddhism sound surprisingly similar to the descriptions of Buddhism presented by Buddhist modernists and European Orientalists who presented orthodox Theravāda as an inherently rational and ethical religion of personal liberation.

To their credit, both Obeyesekere and Spiro directed a shift in Buddhist studies towards the analysis of “Buddhism on the ground,” which helped to lay a foundation for the anthropological study of Buddhism. They recognized aspects of Buddhist religiosity, such as a focus on magic, miracles, and special powers, which European Orientalists had either ignored or devalued. However, their distinction between two radically different kinds of Buddhism (great versus little and normative versus non-normative) rests on two fundamental errors. First, it generates a sharp divide between monastic and lay religiosity when, in fact, the distinction between the monastic and the layperson is more a difference of degree than of kind. On the one hand, monks and laypersons both practice renunciation, albeit to different degrees: monks renounce their obligations as householders; whereas laypersons practice renunciation through generous acts of giving to the saṅgha. On the other hand, not all Buddhist monks live lives of deprivation. In fact, Buddhist monks historically have possessed material wealth, acting as both patrons of the tradition and recipients of support. Commonly held distinctions between ascetic monks and a merit-hungry

laity, therefore, simply do not reflect the myriad of ways in which Buddhist life and practice exist within given communities.

The second problem with Obeyesekere's and Spiro's categories is their failure to recognize the polemical nature of religious categorization. The classification of a particular doctrine or practice as normative or non-normative is not simply the domain of the unbiased, objective scholar. The process of classification is fundamental to internal debates within religious communities over religious identity and authority.⁴³ In Buddhist societies, when critiques of monastic wealth or lay religiosity emerged within a given community, they were typically aimed at a specific group and hence reflected local power struggles.⁴⁴ The condemnations of lax, lazy, and decadent monks, therefore, were not disinterested historical assessments of the "state of the religion"; they functioned to support the authority of specific groups of monks and laypersons over others.

Today the politics of classification continues as Buddhists around the globe seek to define Buddhism within dramatically new social, political, and economic contexts. For some Buddhists in Asia and most Buddhists in the West, a new Orientalism has emerged over the past few decades. Whereas nineteenth-century European scholars viewed Buddhism as an atheistic, individualistic, and rational religion that offered a sharp contrast to Christian faith and piety, today neo-Orientalists represent Buddhism's focus on simplicity and moderation as the antithesis of Western materialism, capitalism, and consumption.⁴⁵ Buddhism, with its critique of greed, hatred, and delusion, its discourses and practices of renunciation, and its emphasis on generous giving, appears to undercut the values, processes and effects of global capitalism. This view of Buddhism dominates Western practice, and clearly informs the reformist platforms of many Buddhists throughout Asia. Because of the assumption that Buddhism is an antidote to the ills of global capitalism, neo-Orientalists tend to attack the association between wealth and piety in Buddhism with as much passion as early Orientalists lamented the corruption of rational Buddhism by magic and superstition.

Debates over the role of wealth in Buddhism, once again, are not restricted to academic circles nor are they merely the concern of Euro-American Orientalists. They are central to many discussions about Buddhist identity and practice within Buddhist communities. The Dhammakāya controversy of the late 1990s, as it emerged within the context of the Asian economic crisis, prompted many Thai Buddhists to ask, What is the role of golden stūpas, Buddha images, amulets, miracles, and merit-making within Buddhism? Critics of the Temple viewed its marketing of amulets and miracles as signs of the corruption of the Buddhist tradition by the forces of global capitalism; Temple elites and practitioners situated Dhammakāya amulets and miracles within the tradition of Theravāda Buddhism. These differing visions of Buddhism provide us with an opportunity to analyze debates over Buddhist religiosity at a new

moment in Thai history, as Thais grapple with the implications of living within a global consumer culture.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

A primary goal of this book is to demonstrate how Buddhist interpretations of the relationship between piety and wealth are historically contingent and embedded within authorizing discourses and within relations of power. Following the suggestion of Charles Hallisey to approach Buddhist ethics historically rather than searching for a single moral theory,⁴⁶ I do not seek to identify the place of wealth in Theravāda Buddhism. This task would presuppose that the tradition has a single orientation towards wealth. Rather, I examine the relationship between wealth and piety historically: through Buddhist texts and narratives, through expressions of piety, and within the broader field of discourses about wealth and society at a specific place and time (postmodern Thailand). This approach enables us to ask, When and under what circumstances is the relationship between Buddhist piety and wealth described in favorable terms and when is it viewed critically in terms of decadence and corruption? This question moves us away from our own assumptions about the relationship between wealth and piety, and towards the historical analysis of how specific Buddhists envisioned their tradition. In this way, my approach to the topic of wealth and piety resembles Tessa Bartholemeusz' approach to the just war tradition in Sri Lanka.⁴⁷ In her book, *In Defense of Dharma: Just-War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka*, Bartholemeusz effectively contextualizes both just-war and pacifistic ideologies within the tradition. She argues that many scholars of Sri Lanka have privileged the canonical narrative of pacifism in their constructions of authentic Theravāda Buddhism, "thus prompting us to accept that imagined and ultra-pacific Buddhism as the real one."⁴⁸ Rather than asking the question of why Buddhists today ignore their pacific roots, Bartholemeusz focuses on the historical construction of varying forms of authentic Buddhism—some of which justify violence, others that do not. As Talal Asad argues, anthropologists may note the conformity between the past and the present but they must also examine the "practitioners' conceptions of what is apt performance, and of how the past is related to present practices, that will be crucial for tradition, not the apparent repetition of an old form."⁴⁹

The primary case study of this book will be the Dhammakāya Temple, which has effectively linked traditional Buddhist discourses on wealth and piety to contemporary practice and identity. On the one hand, I will argue that the Dhammakāya Temple has successfully incorporated a modern ethic of prosperity within its platform for personal and social transformation, while simultaneously emphasizing the traditional practices of meditation and merit-making

(albeit in new ways). On the other hand, I will examine how the Temple's collective wealth and the wealth of its lay followers have led critics to question their motivations, the integrity of their piety, and the legitimacy of their practice. My analysis of the Dhammakāya Temple and other cases of wealth and Buddhist piety will not seek to either prove or disprove the authenticity of pro-wealth forms of religiosity. The latter claim is especially important, as there is a tendency for commentators to assume that any conflation of wealth and piety is necessarily disingenuous.

An instance of this is Lise McKean's book *Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist Movement*, in which she argues that there is an asymmetrical exchange between renunciant gurus and their followers.⁵⁰ This exchange system, according to McKean, is supported by moral arguments that represent the gurus as disinterested and benevolent, and establishes relations that "yield handsome profits for gurus."⁵¹

Exchanges between devotees and gurus, like those between patrons and Brahman ritualists, bear the promise of social use value. . . . Those who enter into these circuits of commodity exchange and consumption seek to profit by them. The ideology of spirituality and renunciation makes it possible for gurus and their religious organizations to not only mask the drive for profits that underlies exchanges with followers but also renew the promise of value which they offer to followers.⁵²

McKean's analysis of guru wealth is informed by a Marxist perspective, from which she seeks to highlight the domination and exploitation inherent within these movements, as well as their failure to address so-called real problems. In her analysis of Gayatri Parivar, a new religious movement in Hardwar, she argues that the movement portrays wealth as a product of hard work and a partnership with God, but that it presents no challenge to the problems of the unequal distribution of wealth or mass poverty.

As true as this may be, we must ask the question, Does Gayatri Parivar need to address these problems in order to be a legitimate religious organization? McKean would answer in the affirmative, as would many other critics of global capitalism. Such assessments, however, are steeped within specific ideological stances or religious beliefs about wealth and piety. The analysis of capitalism's effect on Buddhism, for instance, is usually posed in terms of the negative impact of capitalism on Buddhism—how Buddhist practices and objects become the means by which one accumulates and secures material capital rather than tools that lead to the cessation of greed, hatred, and delusion. One example of this approach is that of Phra Phaisan Wisalo, a "socially-engaged" Thai monk, who writes:

The distinction between religious faith and consumerism is becoming increasingly vague these days. Although religious worship may involve physical objects such as Buddha images, living within a moral discipline to keep oneself grounded in Dhamma is required in every religion. Nowadays, religious faith has been altered to the degree that it means purchasing auspicious objects to worship. One's faith (*saddha*) is no longer measured by how one applies it, how one lives their life, but by how many holy or sacred articles one possesses.⁵³

This is a fascinating analysis of recent changes in Thai Buddhism, but we need to recognize that it is a religious reaction to these changes. Phra Phaisan Wisalo is writing as a Buddhist monk, as a representative voice of Buddhist orthodoxy. The value of material objects within a given religious tradition is a subject of great debate within religious discourses, and it is a topic worthy of exploration. However, the judgments themselves—such as this passage by Phra Phaisan Wisalo—are the subject of my inquiry, not the basis for it.

As a result, I do not begin this book with an assessment that the Dhammakāya Temple has, in fact, commercialized Buddhism nor do I seek to prove that this is so, for this approach requires a judgment of what constitutes authentic Buddhist religiosity. The identification of orthodoxy and orthopraxy is an act of power, as is its use in the critique of the teachings and practices of others.⁵⁴ Talal Asad highlights the implications of this power in his “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam.”⁵⁵ He states that “[o]rthodoxy is crucial to all Islamic traditions,” but anthropologists often overlook a vital component of it, that “orthodoxy is not a mere body of opinion but a distinctive relationship—a relationship of power. Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust *correct* practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace *incorrect* ones, there is a domain of orthodoxy.”⁵⁶ One who condemns the Dhammakāya Temple's marketing techniques as “commercialized,” therefore, enters into the domain of the *authorization* of Buddhist orthodoxy.⁵⁷ This is not my intent. Rather, I am concerned with the dynamics of religious traditions—how particular religious discourses and practices are situated in reference to real or perceived pasts in order to authenticate (or reject) their place within the tradition. Religious persons are, in the words of Thomas Tweed, constantly engaged in processes of “crossing and dwelling” within their traditions.⁵⁸ Buddhism, as with all religions, is not a static entity; it is continually created through space and time. Thai Buddhists today “make religious homes” or construct religious identities through interactions with a variety of textual, ritual, artistic, and institutional traditions, personal and collective memories, and new religious experiences. Whose voices are heard and by whom are historical questions of the utmost importance, and they require an examination of the fields

of discourses—participants, consumers, strategies, and mechanisms—in the context of their construction and dissemination.⁵⁹

The chapters in this book provide this kind of examination. Chapter 1 sets the stage for an analysis of Dhammakāya discourses on wealth and piety by demonstrating the dynamic character of Buddhist renunciation itself, as it is constructed within specific historical and cultural contexts. Once we envision Buddhist renunciation as a construct, we can then address how varying discourses on renunciation affect attitudes towards wealth in the Buddhist tradition—how monastic wealth, for instance, can serve both as an index of prosperity and effective righteous rule and as a sign of decadence and the need for monastic reform. Chapter 2 begins my analysis of the specific case of the Dhammakāya Temple, which exemplifies the fusion of social and personal prosperity and modern piety. This chapter examines the history and success of the Temple within the context of modern urban Buddhism, and it offers several explanations for the Temple's phenomenal growth and popularity, including its lineage of charismatic leaders (Luang Pho Sot, Khun Yay Ubasika Chan, and Phra Dhammachayo) and its unique dhammakāya meditation technique. Chapter 3 examines the ways in which the Dhammakāya Temple utilizes the narratives and practices of generous giving and merit-making in its fund-raising for the Mahathammakai Chedi. One strategy is the linkage of contemporary donors to the tradition of exemplary donors; they accomplish this by inscribing the names of individual donors on the base of the Phra Dhammakāya images, by distributing Phra Mahasirirattat amulets to these donors, and by telling the stories of donors in amulet magazines and at Temple services. Chapter 4 presents the late 1990s controversy over Dhammakāya teachings and practices as an example of a specific debate over the relationship between wealth and piety. The controversy is set within the historical context of the Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s, which spurred a heightened re-evaluation of social and cultural institutions and values. Chapter 5 relates the Dhammakāya controversy to the broader field of debate over the commercialization of Buddhism, the marketing of Buddhism as a product for consumption, and the effects of consumerism on contemporary Thai society. The principal voices within this discussion are the late Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa, the well-known promoter of dhammic socialism; Phra Payutto, the most prominent scholar-monk in Thailand today; Sulak Sivaraksa, the outspoken and controversial social critic; Samana Phothirak, who was formerly known as Phra Phothirak, the founder of the back-to-basics Santi Asok movement; Dr. Suwanna Satha-Anand, Professor of Philosophy at Chulalongkorn University; and Phra Phaisan Wisalo, abbot of Wat Pha Sukato. Finally, the Conclusion addresses how the Dhammakāya Temple controversy served as rallying cry for religious reform in postmodern Thailand.