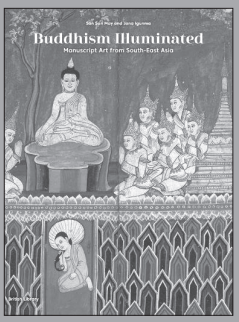

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Book Review:

San San May and Jana Igunma.

Buddhism Illuminated: Manuscript Art from Southeast Asia

London: The British Library, 2018. 272 pages.

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This stunning book is superb in every way. Immediately obvious is the quality of the photographs of the British Library's extensive collections; equally remarkable is the amount of information about the objects in the collections and how they relate to local histories, teachings, sacred sites and legends. Then there is the writing — clear and succinct, free from academic jargon and egoistic agendas. The authors state in the preface that through this book they wished to honor Dr. Henry Ginsburg, who worked for the British Library for 30 years, building up one of the finest collections of Thai illustrated manuscripts in the world before his untimely death in 2007. Dr. Ginsburg would surely be delighted at this magnificent way of paying tribute.

The authors, San San May and Jana Ignunma, hold curatorial positions at the British Library, and thus are in close contact with the material they write about. In organizing a book that aims to highlight items in a museum's or library's collection, authors are faced with many choices. Should it be organized by date, theme, medium, provenance etc.? Here they have chosen to examine the items in terms of their relationship to the essential aspects of Theravada Buddhism as practiced in mainland Southeast Asia: the components of the Three Gems (the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha) and the concepts of *Kamma* (cause and effect) and *Punna* (merit). This seems like a well thought-out choice and the authors have been creative in selecting a variety of objects to fit each chapter.

Chapter 1, "Introduction," lays the groundwork by enumerating the extent of the British Library's holdings and recounting the indigenous histories of Buddhism in Thailand and Burma. The holdings include approximately 1800 manuscripts from Burma and 400 from Thai, Lao, Cambodian and Shan traditions. Moreover, this chapter allows us to see not only manuscripts, but also the elements that go into their creation—the leaves of palm trees, styluses, and coal for palm leaf manuscripts; mulberry paper, brushes and inks for folded page manuscripts; wood or, occasionally, ivory for the covers; cotton or silk for the wrappers; and carved wooden boxes or black lacquered wooden cabinets for their storage. One of the most interesting wrappers here is made from a hand-woven silk *phasin* (woman's skirt) from northern Laos (Fig. 1.22).

Chapter 2, "Buddha – The Enlightened One," concerns the historical Buddha Gotama, as well as his predecessors, the other three Buddhas of the present *kalpa* or world cycle and the future Buddha Metteyya, and the 28 Buddhas of previous cycles (better known in Burma than in Thailand), the 547 *Jataka* (previous lives of the Buddha). The last ten *Jatakas* (Thotsachat) are the most well known in the Thai and Lao traditions and the only ones depicted in Thai manuscripts. In the Burmese tradition, however, the other *Jatakas* are also depicted in art, and in fact, paintings of six such stories from Burmese manuscripts are included in this chapter (Figs. 2.3 - 2.8). Notable are the vast, detail-filled panoramas seen on these pages. Although the size of the paintings is not given, it appears that the panoramas are possible because the paintings in Burmese manuscripts occupy several pages and the text occupies a relatively small amount of space below the painting.

By contrast, Thai manuscript paintings include only the essential characters and props of a scene; they share the width of the paper with the text, which is in the center, and are placed on either side of it. Portrayals of the *Suvannasama Jataka* from both traditions appear in the book, allowing for comparisons. The Burmese rendering (Fig. 2.12) occupies six pages with only a brief caption beneath, and resembles a detailed mural painting, while the Thai version (Fig. 2.13) occupies only two pages and depicts a close-up scene on each side of the text.

Chapter 3, "Dhamma – The Righteous Way," begins with an explanation of the many meanings of the word "Dhamma," and a summary of the Buddha's first two sermons, in which he identified the Four Noble Truths and the noble Eightfold Path. Examples from Burmese manuscripts depict the Buddha delivering various sermons to different audiences – the first sermon in Deer Park, the Fire Sermon at Varanasi, preaching the Abhidhamma to his mother, and teaching the Dhamma to Buddhist disciples (Figs. 3.1 - 3.5). We are not told how these texts were used. By contrast, the examples from Thai manuscripts that follow depict, not the Buddha, but mythical and real animals in three cases, and in the fourth, two devata sitting in a worshipping pose (Figs. 3.6 - 3.9). The Thai manuscripts contain excerpts from texts and were probably used for chanting to make merit or bestow protection.

Other manuscripts presented in this chapter contain specialized texts, including *paritta* (used to ward off danger or bad omens), meditation manuals, commentaries, and two texts in the Shan language. Also seen here is the elaborate front cover of a manuscript from Central Thailand containing extracts from the Tipitaka and the extracanonical *Phra Malai,* the story of the magical monk who travelled to hell to help the suffering beings, and to Tavatimsa Heaven where he conversed with Indra and the future Buddha Metteyya about meritorious acts and the future of humankind.

This chapter also includes numerous *Kammavaca* (Buddhist ordination texts), collections of passages from the *Tipitaka* concerning rituals of monasticism. These elaborately decorated manuscripts are donated to monasteries by laypeople upon a son's ordination. Burmese *Kammavaca* manuscripts have a base of palm leaf (or gold, or an ordinary metal) overlaid with lacquer and gilded figures, including birds, Buddhas, leaves and geometric designs. The text is in Pali, but while some are written in ordinary Burmese round script, others are in the distinctive Burmese square script. Some leaves, such as that seen in Fig. 3. 24, are incredibly delicate compositions of scenes from the life of the Buddha. It is unfortunate that this example was not enlarged.

The examples of Thai *Kammavaca* in the book all come from Northern Thailand. One is an unusual paper folding book with a painting of an elephant ridden by a nobleman and his mahout. Two others are incised on palm leaf and have wooden covers decorated with gold designs on black lacquer, and one of them has a matching wooden case (Fig. 3.28). Both, as the author points out, have a floral pattern similar to carvings on temple buildings in Northern Thailand and Laos.

Chapter 4, "Sangha – the Monastic Community," details the origins and way of life of the order's members, ordination, stories about the Buddha's disciples, and interaction with the lay community. The chapter begins by explaining the importance of monks and ordination in Theravada Buddhism, followed by paintings depicting scenes from the lives of the first monks, the Buddha's disciples, all in rich detail. A captivating Burmese scene is that of the Buddha's conversion of the hermit brothers by displaying his power to catch a frightening *naga* and place it in his alms bowl (Fig. 4.2). The lively postures and facial expressions of the hermit brothers provide a wonderful pantomime of the story.

The chapter also features ornate Burmese manuscripts of the *Patimokkha* (rules for fully ordained monastics) and other texts pertaining to the Sangha, written in the Pali language in square Burmese script. It is interesting to note that one of the texts is for *Bhikkhuni*, fully ordained female monastics, with 311 rules, compared to the 227 for males. As the book points out, there is currently no formally acknowledged order of *Bhikkhuni* in Burma, Thailand or Laos, although there is currently a strong movement to revive such an order.

Members of the Sangha, in addition to following these rules, in the past interacted with the lay community in many other ways, including serving as medical practitioners, predicting natural disasters, reciting sacred phrases for protection, telling fortunes and performing various kinds of divination. Thai paper folding books for these purposes often have charming drawings of animals next to the Thai text. Some of the most rare and beautiful examples of protective yantra designs are Fig. 4.24, a Shan paper amulet with illustrations of a deity and animals,

and Fig. 4.25, a paper folding book from Central Thailand with deities and mythical animals finely drawn in yellow ink on blackened paper.

Chapter 5, "Kamma – Cause and Effect," explains this concept in several ways, stating and restating the idea of a universal principle similar to one of science, that is, every action produces an effect. Related to *Kamma* are ideas of rebirth in any number of forms or realms. Portraying these realms, the thirty-one planes of existence, is a challenging task since they are often described in abstract terms, such as the realm of formlessness, where the inhabitants have no physical body. The authors have provide an excellent outline of the 31 planes of existence, the three realms into which they divided, and the components of each (pp. 168-169).

Not surprisingly, attempts to depict these realms have resulted in vastly different illustrations. Examples are Fig. 5.1, an austere schematic rendering of the four great continents, from Burma, and by contrast, Fig. 5.2, a colorful painting in various shades of blue resembling a grand multi-tiered layer cake that depicts Mount Meru surrounded by seven mountain ranges with red pagodas on each, from Thailand.

Apart from these two cosmological treatises, the other manuscripts in this chapter related to the theme of *Kamma* contain the Thai *Phra Malai* text and hell scenes (Figs. 5.17 and 5.21). In the former, the magical monk hovers in the air above a group of grotesque *preta* (hungry ghosts) suffering in hell because of sins committed in former lives. Another Thai manuscript in Khmer script depicted here contains extracts from the *Tipataka* and *Phra Malai,* as well paintings of Brahma and Indra in their respective heavens (Fig. 5.5). Here, as in several other Thai manuscripts, the painting does not correspond entirely with the text; although Indra plays a role in the Phra Malai story, Brahma does not. Neither does the female figure identified as White Tara or Sarasvati, a female Bodhisattva in Tusita heaven (Fig. 5.8). A footnote explaining possible reasons why this figure from Mahayana Buddhism was included in a manuscript of Theravada texts would have been helpful.

Chapter 6, "Punna - Making Merit in Everyday Life," deals with the principal way in which Buddhists in mainland Southeast Asia practice their religion – through acts of making merit or *dana* (practicing generosity). This chapter is perhaps the most complex, as the ways of making merit are numerous and diverse.

The most obvious examples are supporting the Sangha through donations of food and other basic necessities; and sponsoring temple building, temple fairs, and the creation of Buddha images and manuscripts. Acts like these can be seen in the Burmese paper folding book (*parabaik*) on p. 206, a ceremony with dancers and musicians. Similar acts are the following *parabaik*: a painting of monks receiving offerings (Fig 6.4); offerings by lay people (Fig. 6.5); and *Upasotha* observances every eighth day of the year (Fig 6.5). In all of these examples, figures of people are highly stylized and carefully placed in groupings or small clusters against a background of abstracted trees. Thai examples include a scene from *Phra Malai* in which a couple are shown carrying food to present to the Sangha (Fig 6.3) and a poor man presenting eight lotuses to the monk (Fig. 6.16).

Royal donations played a large role in Southeast Asian Buddhism, as can be seen in Fig. 6.8, an elaborate composition from a Burmese manuscript consisting of diversely fashioned groupings of highly stylized figures, each making merit in a different way. Some walk in procession, some play music, others dance. Other examples of *punna* appear in manuscripts depicting communal festivals where laypeople observe special ways of making merit by incorporating music and dance, as in Figs. 6.29 and 6.32, from Burma, both depicting processions of elaborately costumed participants and musicians.

Still another example of *punna* consists of scenes from the *Vessantara Jataka*, the ultimate expression of generosity, in which the bodhisattva gave away all that was valuable or dear to him (Fig. 6.1, painting of Vessanatara's wife, Maddi, in the forest, Thai paper folding book). Here, it should be mentioned that there are some minor inaccuracies in several statements describing the *Bun Phawet* (*Vessantara Jataka* festival) in Laos and northeastern Thailand. One is the statement

(on p. 253 and again on p. 265) that the *Jataka* is performed by puppet or shadow theaters in the monasteries. Although such performances might have occurred in the past, they do not take place currently. Moreover, the banners that accompany this festival are made of cloth by workshops, not of paper by individual laypeople, as the text says, and are hung in the *sala* or assembly hall and not the ordination hall.

The volume ends with three very useful appendices, a glossary and an index. The first appendix is a list of the 28 Buddhas of the past, which includes the names of their parents, place of birth, names of wife and son, and place of first sermon. The second identifies the 108 auspicious symbols on the footprint of the Buddha. The third is an overview of the *Tipitaka* (Three Baskets, also known as the Pali Canon). The glossary defines relevant terms from various languages, including Pali, Pali-Thai, Pali-Burmese, Sanskrit, English and others. These helpful tools, together with the descriptions and photos throughout the book, provide an unparalleled body of knowledge for scholars of traditional Southeast Asian painting and Theravada Buddhism. The book's only weakness is the lack of footnotes through which the authors could have added supplementary information, such as specific sources or knowledge gained from personal experiences.