Pact-Making Within a Material Nodal Network: Ethnographic Findings on Accessing Buddhist Potency[1]

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Abstract

According to the chronicles of Nakhon Si Thammarat, stormy seas and Buddhist fate auspiciously marooned the bearers of the Buddha's left eyetooth on the shores of Siam. Eventually, the relic would become the treasure of Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan (hereafter: Wat Phra That), a Buddhist monastery beloved by locals of the bustling city in Thailand's upper south, and renown throughout the country and beyond. This article argues that the Buddha relic functions as a nexus, infusing nearby objects and people with its potency, to create a material nodal network. Importantly, while the relic is enclosed in the principal *chedi*, and is the figurative and literal center of the monastery, the relic is but one component in a complex space and does not necessarily function as the focal point of devotion. Therefore, we must also look to supplemental, material nodes of this potency and potentiality. To do so, we move outward from the relic in all directions – to the diverse structures, statues of local historical and legendary figures, and countless objects and images – which make Wat Phra That an ideal site for the study of how material culture shapes and is shaped by the practices of its visitors. It is further argued that as the nexus and nodes mutually reinforce each other, an expansive network is created, sustained and then utilized; not all components of this network contribute equally, but they all actively participate in and reinforce the nodal complex. While the relic has

innate power because it was at one point physically connected to the Buddha, people who practice *dhamma* within the space sustain the network itself. Based on ethnographic findings, how practitioners variously conceive of this Buddhist power is explored – manifest through the nodal material complex – as multifaceted (e.g., understood through the dynamic concepts of *amnat, itiphon nai chai*, *saksit* and *sirimongkhon*) and accessible for personal use. For example, one's proximity to the relic or a node, and the more effortful a relationship one has with a material object, the greater the potential for them to reap personal benefits. As such, devotees may form long-lasting, personal relationships with various images and enter into what can be called pacts (*kho bon kae bon*). Thus, through exploring lived practices that are situated within the nodal network of materiality, we can see how contemporary practitioners conceive of and utilize this monastic space.

Keywords: the chronicles of Nakhon Si Thammarat, Buddhist potency, a material nodal network

"Even when he tells of various miracles and garuda*s and* nāga*s, he does so as if he believed in them. To tell the truth, people still believe in the miracles of holy relics to the present day."* – Prince Bidyālankarana, Preface to the 1960 edition of the chronicles of Nakhon Si Thammarat (Wyatt 23)

Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan,[3] known locally as Wat Phra That (hereafter: Wat Phra That), is a repository of local history and culture, housing the left eyetooth of the Buddha (*phra that kiao kaeo*)[4] within its golden *chedi*. This sprawling monastic complex in Nakhon Si Thammarat (hereafter: Nakhon) is a bustling haven replete with a museum and large market, as well as various halls for veneration, chanting and ordination, gardens and image galleries. The grounds serve a place of social gathering for local devotees and

non-believers alike, as well as hosting amulet making ceremonies, cultural events celebrating Southern Thai heritage and an occasional spirit medium. Youth volunteers and adult caretakers work alongside merchants selling snacks, souvenirs and lottery tickets near resting dogs lounging in the cool umbrage of *bodhi* trees. This monastery is a destination for pilgrims, who have travelled from afar to Thailand's upper south for the opportunity to enter the relic shrine and pay homage before the great reliquary. Wat Phra That almost always teems with Buddhist devotees who come to perform quotidian Buddhist activities or participate in special rituals and celebrations.

Based on ethnographic findings, this article posits that the monastery's various buildings, objects, images and the Buddha relic each contribute to a complex material nodal network, pulsing throughout and permeating this monastic space with Buddhist potency; the relic is the nexus, while all the other objects within and persons moving throughout the space are supplemental nodes. The expansive network created through the mutual reinforcement of the nexus and nodes can be tapped by devotees to affect particular, desired outcomes. This theoretical understanding allows us to view individual materials as dynamic, active agents, but importantly reminds us that it is through the relationships and networks created in a space that lived practice can be understood. As Daniel Miller reminds, "[. . .] what matters may not be the entities themselves, human or otherwise, but rather the networks of agents and relationships between them" (11).[5]

The Buddha relic is central at Wat Phra That, both literally and figuratively, and relic veneration offers a good paradigm for Buddhist propitiation.[6] However, while recognizing the relic as the epicenter of Buddhist potency at Wat Phra That, we must simultaneously realize that it is but one component in an elaborate space. Moreover, the same descriptors commonly attributed the relic – auspicious (*mong-khon*), sacred/holy (*sing sak ti*[7]), influential (*ithiphohn*) and having power (*amnat*) – are also applied to other materials, and certain people, at the monastery. While other scholars have often the historical Buddha,[8] a different approach is taken here. In fact, even while venerating a "relic of the Buddha" (*phra bawrohm sarerikhathat*),[9] devotees are often unaware which specific relic is contained behind the ornate,

locked doors of the relic chamber. Thus, rather than prioritizing the relic's previous bodily connection to the historical Buddha, and thereby isolating it at the expense of accounting for the relational and situational dynamics in which relics are located, one can view the relic as but one integral component within a complex monastic space, replete with meaningful buildings, objects and images and inhabited by mobile and diverse practitioners.

Importantly, the nodal network of materiality is accessed and thereby sustained through devotional action directed at certain images. Over time, the same image may be propitiated repeatedly as a meaningful relationship is created and maintained between it and a loyal devotee. One way this is done is through what can be called "pact-making" (*kho bon kae bon*) among the most ubiquitous practices throughout Thai monasteries. In this practice, objects are petitioned for a specific result with an accompanying corollary promise should the request be fulfilled. Moreover, often inherent in pact-making is the maintaining, increasing or encouraging of one's *dhamma* practice (*patibat tham*), which in turn is thought to bolster the righteousness one's self, community and even Buddhism itself.[10]

Buddhist Potency and Potentiality through a Nodal Network of Materiality

There are a seemingly countless number of materials at Wat Phra That – the central *chedi* covered in about 142 kilograms of gold, tens of surrounding smaller stupas, the gallery of 173 Buddha statues (*wihan tap kaset*), a pagoda base replete with countless images of the Buddha, and highly ornamented chairs that were previously used for giving sermons, an elaborate relic chamber (*wihan phra song ma* or *phra ma*; itself replete with a staircase flanked by lions, demons, and *yaksa*, gilded plaster reliefs of Gotama's exit from the palace on his horse, Kantaka, and a large, standing Buddha image), a small building housing a replica of the Buddha's footprint, Bodhi trees, shrines dedicated to local heroes of legend, chanting and ordination halls (the largest in the south of Thailand), a small building housing an image of Phra Gatjaiyana, known for his unique ability to help cure infertility and backaches, a statue of King Taksin, venerated by those looking

for success in their businesses, a display room full from ceiling to floor with donated gifts and much more. Each of these functions as a supplemental node of Buddhist potency and potentiality. Monks, manuscripts, amulets, *mae chi,* [11] and ordinary practitioners can all be supplementary nodes, as well. Justin McDaniel argues that within Thai monasteries an individual image is "made more ritually powerful when situated among other images from which it draws concomitant associative power [. . .] These images exist in mutually empowering relationships with other images. The greater the number of images there are, the greater the ritual and votive attention" (McDaniel, "The Agency" 249-250). At Wat Phra That, the Buddha relic, the nexus, provides an immense source of ritually efficacious potency, which infuses the surrounding images,[12] and is in turn, itself enhanced by them. The Buddha's tooth is hidden from sight within the golden *chedi* and, unlike other Buddha relics throughout the globe, it is never displayed or paraded. Nevertheless, its previous bodily connection to the Buddha causes it to function as the nexus of Buddhist potency, making it a particularly efficacious point of access to the network, especially for visitors who may have not developed a personal relationship with another object.

Each node within the network is not equally potent, since certain images, monks and objects have relative power based on their particular history, previous relationship to persons or other objects, previous success stories, or, particularly for Buddhist ascetics, their meditative or magical achievements. The practitioner's personal relationship with the object also affects the node's potency; just as a chief disciple gleans more from their teacher than a distant student, so too does a devotee reap the rewards of a deep, sustained and meaningful relationship with an image. As such, certain nodes offer greater ease and efficaciousness in assisting with the production of specific, desired ends. For example, the image of Phra Gatjayana, continues to become more popular as word spreads of his ability to end infertility; his shrine, flanking the principal *chedi* is replete with a display case and boxes of albums full of photos of infants, including many twins and triplets (a true testament to his immense power), whose births are wholly credited to the intervention of the golden,

round-bellied image. The statue of King Thaksin is known to aid businesspersons in achieving success or overcoming hardship. Located near the entrance to the chanting hall, it is often propitiated with ceramic roosters by those hoping to curry favor from this image. As the heroic king's favorite animal, this is a welcome offering.

To elaborate, many explain efficacious nodes as those which augment one's ability to recall and implement *dhamma*, and further, yield tangible results (e.g., improvement in mood, health, fortune). Of course, one can call to mind bits of a teaching or one's general idea of Buddhist virtue whenever one likes, without the aid of another or any object. However, as these nodes provide key points of access to Buddhist potency, one's proximity to them increases this potentiality; the nearer one is to the nexus or a node, the easier it is to access its potency potential and thus drawing from that of the entire network. Likewise, the more intimate and effortful a relationship one has with the nexus or a node, the greater the potential for them to reap benefits. So, while it is possible to recall Buddhist teachings and act according to their prescriptions anywhere, it is more efficacious to do so near nodal points (e.g., one can venerate a shrine in their house, but if particularly upset or in need of assistance, one is far more likely to visit the monastery). In turn, when attention is paid to particular nodes (e.g., during pact-making to which we will soon turn), the agency of the object is reinforced and the overall power potentiality of the monastery increases.

Individually, the nodes are physical harbingers of the immaterial, Buddhist potency that remains in the world and, since they joined in a collective network, their potential to act efficaciously is even more vast. To be sure, a relic of the Buddha automatically increases the power-store and potential of surrounding objects. Nonetheless, the entire relational network, including the potency of the relic itself, is sustained through the meanings it is invested with through various practices. Ultimately, these devotional activities and practices serve to preserve the Buddhist teachings (*dhamma*) and tradition (*sasana*) as practitioners are continually reinvesting in and bolstering this complex network at material points of access and in the process cultivating wholesome mentalities and encouraging righteous practices.

Buddhist Potency and the Underlying Mechanics of the Nodal Network

It is helpful in understanding the Buddhist potency at work throughout a nodal network to consider the intersection of a few concepts that animate objects. To do this, practitioners' articulations of why propitiation works is relied upon. As one would expect, these complicated concepts are often conceptualized and ascribed variously among individuals. However, auspiciousness (*mong-khon*), sacredness/holiness (*sing sak ti*), being influential (*ithiphohn nai chai*) and having power (*amnat*) were considered as key components that combine to create Buddhist potency.[13] Like an electrical power circuit, this current of potency is constantly pulsating throughout the space, amplified at certain nodes while veneration or ritual affords them particular attention, but always connected to and supported by nodes that are not being directly engaged. This circuit creates the network that gives the space, and particular objects within it, the capacity to influence the thoughts and actions of those who engage it. This inherent circuitry of a Thai monastery imbues it with great potential to affect change within individuals and throughout the community and give certain objects and people both the authority and agency to act in the world.

Perhaps the most widely ascribed of these is "*saksit*," sacredness or holiness, as almost everything within a monastic space can potentially be *saksit* (trees, monks, statues, monastic building materials, items within the museum collection, stupas, etc.). Endowed with *saksit*, someone or something is able to affect the world both positively and negatively. Thus, a sacred object can both provide assistance and inflict harm. Additionally, it can be obtained by, for example, something's ability to stand the test of time (e.g., ancient wares or weapons), through blessings, physical connection to another *saksit* object (e.g., a clipping of *bodhi* tree from Bodhgaya), righteous birth, ordination, connection to a town's history, or by being fashioned in the likeness of another *saksit* object. Because of this broad definition, objects described as *saksit* are not necessarily consecrated nor venerated (e.g., stones with ancient inscriptions on them are *saksit*, but not necessarily venerated in hopes of future action).

A second key attribute associated with Buddhist potency is *sirimongkhon*, auspiciousness. Although often equated with *saksit*, auspiciousness is a subset of *saksit* as this adjective is applied more selectively. For example, the relic is *sirimongkhon*, as are some larger, more popular, or more famous images, but smaller, more ignored objects may not be. Also, *sirimongkhon* is ascribed to those who lead or are born an especially auspicious life, like venerated monks and the royal family.

When something has *itipon nai chai*, it is able to positively influence one's thoughts and dispositions. Many people experience calm or joy just by entering the monastic grounds and indeed this experience of mental quiet, happiness and satisfaction is often the reason people give for visiting a monastery. Thus, the ability to influence one's mental and emotional state is fundamental in understanding the potency of the nodal network (Cassaniti).[14]

Finally, *amnat* is typically glossed as power or authority. Something or someone with *amnat* may affect one's mind and heart (*amnat nai chai*), but can also act more outwardly in the world (e.g., a prime minister exercising power over a population). Additionally, *amnat* can be utilized for righteous or unwholesome ends, as this power is quite vast.

This multifaceted complex of characteristics is at the root of how an object can act in the world. They are, of course, not mutually exclusive and devotees apply them differently (e.g., some see objects in the museum as sacred, but lacking influence since they are not propitiated regularly). Nonetheless, they all work in conjunction to imbue objects with Buddhist potentiality and also to connect them within and the space. Devotees preserve this network, and so its potency remains accessible to them.[15]

Tapping the Network by Making Pacts

Pacts (*kho bon kae bon*) are practitioners' relational engagements with physical structures through requests and promises. This involves first, a request (*kho bon*) and a promise made at the same time; second, if the request is fulfilled, there is an obligation to keep

the promise (*kae bon*). In this practice, people enter the relic shrine or venerate another object and ask for assistance for themselves or their family in matters troubling them at the time (e.g., their health, love life, an upcoming exam, a pregnancy, personal finances). When asking for this assistance, if a practitioner promises to do something specific if the request is fulfilled (e.g., if one's illness is cured, they will ordain as a monk for some time period), they are entering into a pact.

For example, I spoke with a woman, clad in the all-white dress of laity temporarily staying at the monastery, in her early 20s with her black hair pulled loosely back in a scrunchi, as she leaned intently over a book of Buddhist chants. In the hopes of passing an upcoming employment competence examination, she previously had come to Wat Phra That to enter into a pact. If she passed, she promised, she would return to ordain as a lay ascetic at Wat Phra That for three days – focusing on Buddhist chanting, meditating and receiving teachings from elders. She smiled widely, speaking with a bit of relief in her voice as she boasted about being successful in her exam. Thus, she was completing her three-day stay at the monastery and fulfilling her promise (i.e., the *kae bon* aspect of a pact).

On a bright Saturday afternoon, sitting in Wat Phra That's large ordination hall, I spoke with a woman wearing a stylish white dress with gold accents. She eagerly took countless pictures of the ceremony accompanying the ordination, which would last fifteen days, of her husband. Her young daughter and a large cohort of family surrounded her as they all proudly watched this soldier don his saffron robes and take the monastic vows. Working in the far south, amongst a volatile conflict, he had remained safe while his wife and young daughter were happy and healthy. This was his wish and he was ordaining to fulfill his previous promise. Being the most auspicious and powerful monastery in the region, he had made his pact and subsequently ordained at Wat Phra That, even though he would reside as a monk in a local monastery near his home. The same day as the soldier's ordination, there was another ordination in which the man was temporarily ordaining since he had recovered from a grave illness through the power of pact-making. In fact, there were often multiple, ordinations of this type on any given day.

On another day, I spoke with a woman strolling through the on-site market, who was scanning the booths filled with Buddhist accouterments, souvenirs representing Nakhon culture and silver jewelry, of which the local craftsmanship offers great pride to residents. Years earlier, she was having complications during her pregnancy and no doctor could determine the medical problem. Thus, she had come to Wat Phra That, desperate for a solution to any mother's gravest fears and promised to ordain as a lay ascetic for several days if her baby was born and remained healthy. When I spoke with her she beamed about her jubilant three-year-old as she was, at last, fulfilling her promise.

In addition to physical and moral commitments, one may also promise to donate an expensive or elaborate gift to *kae bon*. Each time this is done, another object is added to the network. As such, there is a massive and continually growing collection of these types of objects at Wat Phra That including gems, jewelry, statues and Buddha images, gold and silver decorative trees, and currency from throughout the globe. Many of these images are on display in the on-site museums; however, I have been told that the collection is so robust that a mere quarter or perhaps third of all the donated gifts can be displayed in the large space.

Importantly, pacts can be made before the object of the devotees choosing. Often, as in the stories above, because the relic is considered the most powerful object – the nexus within the network – practitioners *kho bon* within the relic chamber. However, visitors, especially locals, develop personal relationships with different objects or statues within the monastic complex.[16] For example, one local businesswoman's favorite statue stands tall in an entrance room to the gallery of Buddha images. Venerating this image of Hemachala, the woman who originally brought the relic, harbored securing in her updo, to Nakhon, had led to the successful fulfillment of a request of hers in the past. It also helps that Hemachala was a strong, righteous woman – something she could relate and aspire to. Therefore, when she visits Wat Phra That, she spends most of her time at this image, often bypassing the busier relic chamber all together. A couple of older, local men told me that they preferred to venerate the statues of Hemachala and Thontakuman standing together in front of their

junk ship holding the relic in its gilded container, which are located in the side courtyard near the ordination hall. Since the siblings are heroes of local import, they remain interested in the well-being of the town's citizens, the men explained.[17] This historical connection makes them particularly efficacious in carrying out the wishes of those who propitiate them regularly.

These are long-term, sustained relationships between objects and practitioners that are actively maintained through visitation, bodily propitiation, common offerings (e.g., flowers, incense, gold fleck, candles and coins), as well as other gifts (e.g., personal photos, small images of the Buddha, other deities, famous monks, historical royalty, local heroes, and other trinkets). As nodes within the network, each time they are propitiated their significance and potency is reinforced and grows. This then mutually reinforces the other objects, including the relic, within the space.

Indeed, visiting a Buddhist temple is in and of itself a moral act. Yet, beyond that, the act of making a pact can lead to embarking on projects of self-improvement, guided by Buddhist principles (*dhamma*). In these instances, these pacts form the basis for righteous self-cultivation, a striving for a more ideal self through the cultivation of virtuous behavior. In fact, many I spoke with did not expect to have any type of request filled if they did not "practice *dhamma*" in their daily lives, most commonly articulated as, at a minimum, keeping the five precepts for the laity.[18] The active practice of self-cultivation is further thought to lead to a more wholesome family, local community and Buddhist *sasana* (i.e., the "dispensation" of the Buddha, including the teachings, practices, and community of practitioners). People are not passive and powerless as they wait for desired results. As these members of their community return to their daily routines, they are often driven to behave more wholesomely.[19] Even those who take the five precepts regularly will take them more seriously while engaged in a pact. This benefits their family, community and even the environment, while Buddhist tenets are enacted and preserved. I have been told that not only are people trying to commit fewer negative acts, they are doing so while specifically keeping Buddhism in mind. In a more direct way, if the request is fulfilled, the practitioner returns

to the monastery to fulfill their part of the agreement. This end of the agreement is typically more rigorous – and therefore more wholesome – than simply, or perhaps casually, maintaining the five precepts.[20] It may be, and often is, suggested that asking for improved health, luck in love, help in conceiving a child or for success on an upcoming exam, for example (which are common requests made at the monastery, and often in the relic shrine), are "materialist," "worldly," or more harshly, selfish, for distracting from the so-called "true," supramundane goal of Buddhist practice, *nibbāna* and total escape from the rounds of rebirth, *saṃsāra*. How then could these objectives be the basis of cultivating an ideal self? Contrary to these claims, I argue that the practice of entreating the objects for aid leads to the active cultivation of moral behavior in the daily lives of many practitioners, who are continuously striving to become better Buddhists and who are driven to keep wholesome commitments made in a pact.[21]

Further clarification will be helpful here. Gotama Buddha was the most recent in a line of perfectly enlightened Buddhas, each with a finite material existence in this world. The *dhamma* and *sasana*, by contrast, are not only ongoing, but also dependent upon the preservation of texts that contain teachings, and, importantly, upon practitioners' moral maintenance through virtuous action.[22] These teachings lose their value if nobody is using them. Therefore, preserving texts slows the inevitable loss of the teachings in material form; practicing virtuously allows for the embodiment of its lessons, and so the tradition. Gotama Buddha, even in his lifetime, was never dependent upon such maintenance; Buddhas during their lifetimes do not require incense or offerings, for example, to retain their power and offering cannot increase it. According to Buddhist thought, however, with the death of a Buddha, the presence of the *dhamma* immediately begins deteriorating and so it becomes the duty of followers to actively preserve it. The material relics of the Buddha, in contrast to historical Buddhas, exist within complex networks, radiating influence and power, inspiring devotion, dramatically affecting their surrounding spaces and, crucially, being impacted by all of this as well. Relics cannot be thought of as existing outside of these relationships that inscribe them with meaning. For the majority of Thai Buddhists, their

contribution to this preservation is through "practicing *dhamma,*" and thus improving their own well-being in various ways (e.g., self-cultivation through pact making).

When we shift the focus away from *what* people are asking for (and thereby eliminating the unhelpful distinction between "this-worldly" and "other-worldly" goals, which themselves only fit awkwardly into idealized Buddhist narratives), we can instead focus on a larger process of moral self-cultivation, part of which is developed in ritualized veneration of objects, but which also continues as people move through the monastery and return to their homes. The mere act of visiting the monastic complex helps foster wholesome dispositions and reduces negative ones, thereby aiding in the prevention of moral atrophy. What is more, regardless of what the practitioner requests while making a pact (health, financial gain or assistance in meditation), through these individual commitments, the nodal network is reinforced and the *dhamma* and Buddhist community (i.e., Buddhism itself) are preserved.

The relic in Nakhon is not powerful simply because the Buddha himself is thought to be present in it, nor is it a substitution for him, functioning just as he would if he was not so physically and temporally distant. The relic is also certainly more than a symbol of this power as it inspires and invigorates practitioners and acts within a nodal network. Individuals function within this networks of religiosity, mutually strengthening and reinforcing other practitioners (ascetics and laity), materials (from relics of the Buddha to images of him to donated jewelry in a temple) and the Buddhist *sasana* as a whole. Not all parts of this network can contribute equally, but they all contribute – a monk cannot exist without society and a relic cannot exist without practitioners; as practitioners actively cultivate virtue through participating in pacts, they strengthen and reinforce this network.

Notes

[1] Portions of this article are part of the author's doctoral dissertation for the University of Chicago. The research for this article was partially funded by the Empowering Network for International Thai Studies (ENITS), Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn

University, with support from the Thailand Research Fund (TRF). The Committee on Southern Asian Studies at the University of Chicago also generously provided funding.

[2] The author is currently a doctoral candidate in History of Religions at the University of Chicago.

[3] In 1915, Prince Vajiravudh visited and renamed the monastery from Wat Phra Borommathat to Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan, upgrading it to a first grade royal monastery. Wat Phra That was built as a "*puttha-wat*", indicating that it housed Buddha images, stupas, etc., but did not include living quarters for monks. Eventually, it annexed nearby "*sangha-wats*" that housed monks, and therefore now has monks' quarters (Wat Phra That Museum, visited by the author).

[4] The peninsula on which Nakhon (from Sankhla to Nakhon) is situated is called the "Tooth Peninsula" on early maps (Wyatt 65).

[5] "Agents" in Miller's sense are not equal to personhood.

[6] Since in this article we are dealing with a bodily relic of the Buddha, his left eyetooth, we need not embark into discussions of the other types of Buddhist relics (e.g., the Buddha's bowl, fingernails, robes, hair, footprints, Bodhi tree clippings, etc.). See Strong for a thorough account of the various types of relics and their accompanying narratives.

[7] Etymologically from the Sanskrit, *śakti* (Pali: *satti*) and *siddhi*; *śakti* is power, strength; *siddhi* is accomplishment, usually of a spiritual/religious nature. Together they can mean the "obtainment of power." I thank Victor DaVella for this helpful clarification. Since, the relic has attained its power through a physical connection with the Buddha, "sacred/holy" has been chosen to convey this particularly Buddhist sense, since *amnat* conveys a different sense of "power."

[8] Many scholarly debates about relics of the Buddha have centered on how the Buddha's presence can be instantiated through relics given his physical and temporal absence; that is, by arguing that the temporally and spatially distant Buddha is somehow made "present" via his relics. See Strong for a summary of these scholastic arguments, and the influence of Protestant Christianity on their formulation (2-5). See Spiro for a classic example of presence/absence language being invoked (203-204).

For narrative explanations, see Strong; Collins. To avoid what he views as the fundamentally Christian logic underlying previous positions, John Strong posits that Buddha's relics are "*expressions and extensions of his biography*," embodying the whole of his existence; an existence that began long ago before he became the Buddha (e.g., in his previous births recounted in the Jātaka tales), during his most recent lifetime, and extending now, via his relics, into contemporary times. In this way, the Buddha's relics constitute his "'posterior lives'" (Strong 229); and yet, they "do not make manifest some transcendent or immanent reality, but retell a tale; they sum up a biographical narrative; they embody the whole of the Buddha's coming and going, his life-and-death story; they reiterate both his provenance and his impermanence." Strong is emphasizing not the "presence" of the Buddha, but an extension of the "powerful narrative," by which the Buddha's life ends at his *parinirv*āṇa, but his biography continues. In this way, relics while filling "roles the Buddha filled," also continue with their own lives and adventures, in ways the Buddha never did (Strong 7-8).

Collins also argues against the presence/absence model, by positing that relics can allow the sight of the Buddha in a similar way to how the *dhamma* is "seen"—in the mind's eye by being "imaginatively present." Collins, through an analysis of Pali texts, asks if Buddhas that have passed into *nirv*āṇ*a* can "somehow 'remain' (√*sthā*)" and be "seen (√*dṛś*)" in their relics. He argues that there is no Pali term that can be translated as "presence," and so if this language is invoked, scholars "are not thinking as Pali texts do." He writes, "There is, indeed, no Pali systematic-metaphysical account of all this. They [the authors of the Pali texts] could have said that relics, and images are 'alive' (*sajīva*, for example: there could be many possible terms), but they don't. We should, I suggest, respect the silences in Buddhist thought and leave them as silences" (Collins 8). Collins, like Strong, also suggests that relics can be understood through a conception of an extended biography, (Collins 10-11) and may bring to mind the whole of the Buddha's biography while being venerated (Collins 242 [cited in Strong 233]).

These textual approaches, while both novel and uniquely illuminating, maintain a focus on the life and person of the Buddha. However, even if this is the focus within Pali texts, the situation becomes more complicated in contemporary practice.

[9] Relics of the Buddha are called *phra bāwrohm sārērikhathat* (Thai), which are not to be confused with the relics of other famous monks who are thought to have attained enlightenment.

[10] I argue that we must study the variety of relationships between persons, images and objects within the monastic space. While in this article pacts are being examined, it should be emphasized that there are many and varied types of relationships occurring at Wat Phra That. For example, the most common type of activity throughout any monastery is the making of offerings (*kho pawn*), whereby, most commonly, flowers, incense, candles and/or gold leaf are placed before or on an object, often times with an accompanying devotional prayer. During this act, a devotee may wish, for example, for happiness for themselves and their family, general well-being and good fortune, etc. In making an offering of this type, there is no promise made that if a wish is fulfilled a specific action will be taken. Some utilize particular spaces to meditate, hoping to draw on the power of the space or objects within it to improve their practice. Less frequently, spirit mediums utilize the potency of the space to become possessed more easily by various deities in order to give blessings and fortunes to visitors at the monastery. Friends and lovers make vows of loyalty (*saban*) to each; if the vow of devotion is made before the relic, breaking of which poses a serious risk to one's physical well-being and even life. Additionally, in a controversial practice, some people seek revenge before the relic (*saban bon*). In these instances, one has caused harm to another (e.g., by stealing or causing a vehicular accident) and thus the relic is petitioned by the victim to inflict harm on the perpetrator. Here, the former appeals to the ability of certain sacred objects to sow pain and destruction on one deserving of it. To be sure, many I spoke with thought of this as a particularly non-Buddhist practice. Nonetheless, the fact remains, this is a way the nodal network is tapped.

[11] *Mae chi* are female Buddhist practitioners in Thailand, who dress in white robes and formally take eight vows (although,

informally, *mae chi* can keep many more). Like monks, they shave their hair and eyebrows monthly and may participate in Pali studies, meditation, chanting and giving sermons. *Mae chi* are not fully ordained Buddhist female monks (*bhikkhuni*).

[12] This was once explained quite literally in that the golden, bejeweled cup atop the *chedi*'s spire collects rainwater and morning dew, which after becoming infused with the potency of the relic, evaporates and spreads this over and throughout the entire city.

[13] These components were selected since they were the most commonly invoked during conversations with visitors to Wat Phra That. However, they should not be considered exhaustive.

[14] See Cassaniti for a detailed analysis of how these emotions are experienced by those visiting a monastery.

[15] I spoke with a few Muslims who also view the space as quite powerful and important, although they acknowledge the ultimate power in the creation is from Allah; it was Allah who created the Buddha, someone who can be admired although not venerated and everything within the beautiful monastic complex. Nonetheless, when they enter the space, they too feel calm, joy and also admiration.

[16] See McDaniel, "The Agency"; He writes, "Many Thai Buddhists do not give gifts blindly to random images simply out of custom. Gifts and incantations are often catered to particular images with which they have developed a relationship" ("The Agency" 257).

[17] I do not have space to delve into the narrative complexities of the relic story here. In brief: The historiographic accounts set forth in the town and relic chronicles describe how the Buddha's tooth arrived in Nakhon. According to the chronicles, siblings Princess Hemachala and Prince Thontakuman smuggle the left eyetooth out of India, destined for Sri Lanka. However, stormy seas (and Buddhist fate) maroon the tooth relic in Siam, where it was hidden in a sand dune on the shores of Nakhon. After making this important detour on its way to Lanka, so the story goes, the Lankan king sent the relic back to Nakhon, where half of it is eventually enshrined in the town's *stupa*. This narrative contests those set forth in famous Pali texts, including, for example, the *Dāṭhāvaṁsa* (12th century Lankan chronicle) and the *Lokapaññati*, a popular Southeast Asian cosmological text.

[18] In short: no killing, stealing, lying, having affairs, or taking of intoxicants

[19] To be sure, some people I spoke with did not believe they had to behave more wholesomely to have a request fulfilled. Nonetheless, many did and it is to them who I refer in this section.

[20] As explained earlier, these usually come in the form of concentrated piety (e.g., asceticism, veneration, intensified precept keeping), and/or monetary and gift offerings to the monastery.

[21] Among the most common ways Theravada Buddhism, and particularly Buddhism in Thailand and Southeast Asia, has been explained is through the dichotomy of worldly (Pali: *lokiya*) versus non-worldly (Pali: *lokuttara*), or mundane versus supramundane. In this formulation, the former aspect of the binary includes concerns with wealth, health, power, love, safety, fame, long life, etc. It also includes the goals of gods, goddess, and hell beings (McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost* 113). *Lokotarra* aims, on the other hand, are focused exclusively on obtaining enlightenment. As such, so this reasoning speculates, righteous monks ought to be focused only on reaching *nibbana* by "leaving" society and concentrating on meditation; the layperson's aims, achieved through making merit, can only be worldly.

Spiro's categorization of village Buddhism in Burma is a classic example of this type of classification. He argues Theravāda Buddhist practice can be divided into three types: nibbanic (attaining enlightenment), kammanic (striving for a better rebirth by making merit), and apotropaic (magic that enlists immediate aid or protection, and is focused on the avoidance of harm). Nibbanic practice is *lokotarra*, but the latter two are *lokiya*. Spiro writes, "Far from being a means to salvation, worldly activity in nibbanic Buddhism is its irreducible obstacle; rather than a proof, worldly activity constitutes a disproof for one's chances of being saved" (Spiro 453). In another example, Yoneo Ishii writes, "The orthodox doctrines of Buddhism, those oriented to the otherworldly realm, hold little interest for the majority of Thais. Their concern is not to transcend the cycle of rebirths but to improve their position in this world" (Ishii 14). These distinctions have often been used to criticize monks who practice

magic, tell fortunes, or otherwise meddle in the affairs of everyday folk. They are thus classed pejoratively as concerned with *lokiya* matters. The noble monk, on the other hand, has retreated away from these types of societal concerns, and instead, focuses on his meditation and path towards enlightenment. Indeed, some Thai Buddhists make a similar claim, arguing, in brief, "real" Buddhists focus on meditation and *dāna* (giving) without any expectation of return or reward.

[22] By *dhamma* is meant Buddhist teachings in the sense of actual texts (i.e., both oral and preserved in writing), as well as in broader sense of the truths described (however these are understood by devotees). The *dhamma* as explicated by the Buddha describes a particular reality, how to most successfully function in it, and ultimately how to escape from it. The nature of this reality never changes. However, its explication fades.

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