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Relics, Ritual and Representation in Buddhism: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravada Tradition. By Kevin Trainor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Pp. xiv + 223. ISBN 0-521-5820-6. \$60.00.

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JBE Online Reviews

This is a superb book. Trainor's well-written account of the Theravādin relic tradition in Sri Lanka begins by exploring the West's attention to the veneration of the Buddha's corporeal remains, including their politicization in the nineteenth-century scholarly acquisition of Buddhism. In his reflections upon the discipline of Buddhist Studies (which has to be recognized as a relic of British imperialist ideology), the subject of his chapter one, Trainor joins other scholars, including Gregory Schopen and Donald Lopez, who have encouraged us to deconstruct nineteenth-century scholarly constructions of Buddhism. Shifting our primary focus away from the texts—the preoccupation of the first generation of Buddhist scholars (a preoccupation which persists in the present)—toward inscriptions, art, and cultural patterns of worship, Trainor's work is a model of responsible scholarship. Which is not to suggest that Trainor ignores the evidence of the texts, but rather that he uses them properly.

Trainor insists upon textual study as a means for understanding embedded cultural patterns and continuities in traditions, which is apparent in his analysis of the canonical *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, and the post-canonical chronicles, including the *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvaṃsa*, *Thūpavaṃsa* and *Dhātuvavaṃsa*, among others. In chapters two and three Trainor explores these texts, ferreting out the ideology of relic worship in the chronicles and linking it to earlier practices attested to in the canon. Despite his twentieth century (and Sinhala nationalist) assumptions concerning the ideology of *dhammadīpa* in Sri Lanka's chronicles, Trainor manages to nuance the relationship between the establishment of the *sāsana* in Sri Lanka and the veneration of the Buddha and his remains. Moreover, in a sophisticated analysis of the strategies of the Theravādin tradition to make the "past" Buddha "present," in these chapters Trainor explores the relationship between relic worship and social identity, including that of the sangha and of the state. More importantly, in chapters four and five Trainor establishes that the chronicles are inextricably related to relic worship, primarily because they establish a relic's pedigree and authenticity.

Relic veneration, as Gombrich and Obeyesekere pointed out in 1988, is part of the changing face of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. In the present, Sri Lankan Buddhists appropriate relics and use them to procure objects of desire, including economic wealth and spiritual health. The relics, re-presenting the Buddha (who, according to an intellectual strand of Theravāda Buddhism, has passed out of *samsāra* and is no longer accessible), make available the Buddha's compassion in a personal, direct way. Though Trainor is more interested in establishing the precedents for contemporary relic worship than he is with the contemporary scene, his study culminates in his own encoun-

ters with people who experience, in the veneration of relics, the Buddha's continued presence. I, too, have known Sri Lankan Buddhists—both lay and monastic—who believe in the power of relics to transform the present and ensure a prosperous future. In 1989, while attending a conference of Buddhist nuns in Beruwela (on the southwestern Sri Lankan coast), I met an elderly gentleman who had all sorts of relics that, he claimed, were among the originals parceled out to the eight clans who arrived after the Buddha's death to claim their share (a scene in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* that is explicated in Trainor's chapter four). While most of the nuns, and two venerable old monks (the only monks in attendance at the conference) remarked that the gentleman was *pissu*, that is, disturbed, a few of the nuns and many of the lay people gathered were convinced by his claims. When I asked him how he had come by the relics, the gentleman told us of a woman who could 'materialize' the Buddha's bones and ashes.

Indeed, the man may have been *pissu*. On the other hand, his views on bones and ashes may be an example of the Theravāda Buddhist penchant for making material the abstract and efficacious qualities of the Buddha's personality, a penchant that is attested to in monkish canonical and post-canonical works. In his study, Trainor makes plain that, from very early on, and despite the nineteenth-century scholarly prejudice that relic worship is suggestive of the "corrupt" practices of the laity, both laity (like the elderly layman in Beruwela) and monks have been involved in the veneration of the Buddha's corporeal remains.

Of course, the Beruwela gentleman's claim—that the relics he had were once in the possession of others—calls up the question of ownership and theft, a subject taken up by Trainor in chapter four. Trainor's analysis of the theft of the presence of the Buddha reveals that relic robbery is at least as old as Buddhagosa's fifth-century commentary on the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. In his analysis of relic theft, Trainor reveals a tapestry of threads that do not conform to the basic fibers of Buddhism, namely, nonattachment and the avoidance of dubious ethical behavior. Indeed, in the fifth-century *Mahāvamsa*, relic theft is reported of an *arahant*. Which goes to show that the alleged powerful presence of the Buddha—associated with his corporeal remains—has been a source of attachment for those who the tradition argues are beyond desire. In chapter five, employing Catherine Bell's theory of ritual, Trainor argues that relic veneration can be beneficial in treading the Buddhist path, but that, given relic worship's relationship to desire and its negative emotional states, it also has the potential to obstruct progress. The tension between desire and its transcendence, the focus here of Trainor's look at relic theft, is at the core of relic veneration in Sri Lanka: the Buddha, who is beyond desire and thus 'past,' nonetheless has a 'presence' that has persist-

ently been sought by rulers, monks, and laity since early on.

Thus, Trainor's work, following H.L. Seneviratne's study of the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, helps to establish that relics have been a central feature of Sri Lankan religiosity, especially in the formal relationship between religion and political authority. While Trainor does a very good job at utilizing classical texts, archaeology, and contemporary theories of religion to draw out the richness of relic worship in Sri Lankan Buddhism (and its Indian antecedents), I wish that he had incorporated more evidence from studies of ancient Buddhist art. Though Trainor cites Susan L. Huntington's (1985) work in several footnotes, I would have liked to see him engage her recent work on evidence of relic worship in ancient Buddhist art (1990). Like Trainor, Huntington links ancient Indian practice encoded in artifacts to contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhist cultural patterns. And like Trainor, she argues that among the three types of relics—pieces of the body, things he used, and representations (or images) of him—the Buddha is said to have left after his death, contemporary Sri Lankan culture values physical remains above all. While they arrive at the same conclusions, their approaches are different; Trainor has a good deal to learn from Huntington (and art history in general). But this is a minor criticism of a very important book that goes a very long way in furthering our understanding of the relics of Sri Lanka's colonial period and of the Buddha himself.