Buddhism illuminated

L
ike the Abrahamic religions of the West (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), Buddhism has employed art in many forms to convey its message to people. In the Theravada Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia (Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos), a well-known and visually arresting expressions of Buddhist teachings have been monumental or finely-crafted structures (e.g., pagodas, temples, and monasteries) that have over the centuries functioned as places of study, meditation and pilgrimage for devotees. These include the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon/Yangon, Burma, the temples and pagodas of Pagan/Bagan in central Burma, the Phra Phuttha Chedi (pagoda) outside of Bangkok, Thailand, Wat Del Suthap on a mountain outside of Chiang Mai, Thailand, and the Phra That Luang Chedi in Vientiane, Laos. Also playing a role in the propagation of Buddhist teachings have been famed Buddha images such as the Maha Myat Muni image in Mandalay, Burma, and the Emerald Buddha located in the royal temple-palace complex in Bangkok, as well as colossal reclining Buddha figures of which the most famous are found in Pagan (Bago), Burma, and the palace in Bangkok. Many of these sacred places have been elaborately decorated with frescoes and paintings illustrating the life of Gotama Buddha or the Jataka Tales, which tell of his previous lives before becoming the Enlightened One, as well as representations of elephants, nagas (serpents), demons, and other real or fantastic creatures from Hindu and Buddhist mythology.

In 21st century Burma, where Buddhist values remain exceptionally strong, the primacy of Buddhism is one of the things that impresses the visitor the most, as military governments in recent years have striven to add to the country’s inventory of Buddhist sites (for example, the White Stone Buddha image in Rangoon and the Uppatasanti Pagoda in Naypyidaw, Burma, new construction). The government’s military rulers has been not only to earn Buddhist merit for themselves (Burmese: kuthe) as pagoda-builders or restorers, but to assert their political legitimacy in Buddhist terms. The old saying, ‘to be Burmese is to be Buddhist’ clearly indicates the political and cultural link between Burma and Buddhism. The rulers has been not only to earn Buddhist merit for themselves and their political legitimacy in Buddhist terms. The old saying, ‘to be Burmese is to be Buddhist’ clearly indicates the political and cultural link between Burma and Buddhism. The rulers has been not only to earn Buddhist merit for themselves and their political legitimacy in Buddhist terms.

Although such large and splendid Buddhist structures and imagery are difficult for the visitor to miss, the Theravada countries of Southeast Asia also possess a much less known art form that is very similar to the illuminated manuscripts of medieval Europe. Like their western counterparts, they present intimate and condensed visual religious ‘lessons’ in bright and appealing colors, highly stylized (there is little room for innovation) and directed toward helping the viewer to make or his or her own progress on the road to nibbana (nirvana). Usually consisting of miniature pictures with sacred text or at least an explanation, they encompass depictions of the Cosmon in Hindu-Buddhist terms, the Birth Tales, the lives of the Buddha, his teachings (Dhamma), the Buddha monkhood (the sangha), cause and effect (kamma, more widely known as karma), and the supreme important of making in daily life through donations to Buddhist monks and holy places the performance of good deeds (puna). For western readers interested in Buddhism, “Buddhism Illuminated” provides a compelling combination of pious-sounding pictures and clearly-written text that is necessarily missing from prose-only books — with perhaps only a few illustrations of pagodas or Buddha images — that attempt to explain the religion in abstract terms. For example, on page 11, the authors provide a 19th century Burmese illumination of the legend of Taphussa and Bhallaka, two merchant who meet the Buddha just after his Enlightenment, giving him offerings and hearing his first sermon. The Buddha bestows on them eight hairs from the top of his head, which after many adventures they take back to their native country (in Lower (southern) Burma and enshrines in the Shwedagon Pagoda, recognized by Burmese Buddhism as the single most sacred place in their country. This illumination is far more arresting visually than the text that is shambhala — is realized as a potent and transcendent space of spiritual transformation. The understanding of the cosmos as a dynamic aspect of the process of enlightenment ramifies us that, in the

Creating the universe

When the 19th century Mongolian monk-poet Danzanravjaa named a small rectangular area of the Gobi Desert close to his monastery at Hamarlin Hid “Shambhala”, he was showing his students how Indro-Tibetan Buddhist cosmology could be translated into their own lived experience of the teaching in Mongolia. Right before then the Gobi was transformed into a Pure Land, and their world was forever changed at the point of the intersection of the guru’s teaching with their practitioners’ minds. Today, Shambhala remains a place of pilgrimage for Mongolians and foreigners alike, its reputation in spiritual power growing even as its appearance remains essentially the same.

Eric Huntington’s lucid and beautifully-illustrated book deals with how, through image and through contemplative practices, the mundane world — such as the otherwise unremarkable part of the Gobi Desert that is Shambhala — is realized as a potent and transcendent space of spiritual transformation. The understanding of the cosmos as a dynamic aspect of the process of enlightenment ramifies us that, in the

Vajrayana practice of Himalayan Buddhism, the world and the mind are reflections of one another, and in the recognition of the cosmos as inherently enlightened, the practitioner likewise recognizes the inherent enlightened state of mind.

The book’s four chapters explore this complex process of realization through four key ideas. The first offers an examination of the creation of the cosmos through text, one which is, as with the others, a collaboration between scholar, practitioner, and manuscript. Like many other religious texts, this one alone, that such a description (as with any text) is merely an approximation, bound in time and place. The nature of the practice, and the spiritual power from the pages, and the omissions make the unmediated use of his texts in other contexts problematic” (p.30). This acknowledgement of the slippery quality of spiritual texts is nothing new in scholarship, but for this book it bears repeating insofar as texts such as this can be elevated by practitioners, who rely upon such descriptions

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