

PART I

THE POPULAR TRADITION

All too often a textbook picture of Theravada Buddhism bears little resemblance to the actual practice of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. The lived traditions of Myanmar,¹ Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka seem to distort and sometimes subvert the cardinal teachings of nibbana, the Four Noble Truths, or the Noble Eightfold Path familiar to the Western student of Buddhism.² The observer enters a Theravada Buddhist culture to discover that ordination into the monastic order (*sangha*) may be motivated more by cultural convention or a young man's sense of social obligation to his parents rather than the pursuit of transforming wisdom; that the peace and quiet sought by a meditating monk may be overwhelmed by the amplified rock music of a temple festival; that somewhat unkempt village temples outnumber tidy, well-organized monasteries; and that the Buddha, austere imaged in the posture of meditation (*samadhi*) or dispelling Mara's powerful army (*maravijaya*) is venerated more in the hope of gaining privilege and prestige, material gain, and protection on journeys than in the hope of nibbana.

The apparent contradiction between the highest ideals and goals of Theravada Buddhism and the actual lived tradition in Southeast Asia has long perplexed Western scholars. In his study of Indian religions, Max Weber made a sharp distinction between what he characterized as the "otherworldly mystical" aim of early Indian Buddhism and the world-affirming, practical goals of popular, institutional Buddhism that flourished in the third century C.E. under King Asoka and later Buddhist monarchs.³ Even recent scholars of Theravada Buddhism have been influenced by Weber's distinction in their studies of Buddhism as a cultural institution and an ethical system.⁴

To be sure, the Theravada Buddhism of Southeast Asia, not unlike other great historic religions, defines ideal goals of moral perfection and ultimate self-transformation and the means to attain them, but at the same time, Southeast Asian Buddhism also provides the means by which people cope with day-to-day problems of life as well as a rationale to justify worldly pursuits. Both goals are sanctioned in the writings of the Pali canon, the scriptures of Theravada Buddhism.⁵ The way to the transcendence of suffering called the Noble Eightfold Path presented in the first public teaching attributed to the Buddha in the discourse known as “Turning the Wheel of the Law” (*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*), includes advice appropriate to monks, such as meditation, but also the laity, such as right ethical action. The goals of Buddhism are, in short, both nibbanic and proximate—a better rebirth, an improved social and economic status in this life, and so on; the two are necessarily intertwined. We find in the Pali canon justification for both spiritual poverty and material wealth. Even as the monk or almsperson (*bhikkhu/bhikkhuni*) is enjoined to eschew worldly goods and gain, it is wealth that promotes both individual and social well-being when generously distributed by laypeople unattached to their possessions.⁶

Any broad, holistic analysis of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia should take into account not only its highest ideals and varied practices, but also its seeming contradictions. For example, rituals designed specifically for the benefit of the soul of the deceased seem to undermine the central Theravada doctrine of *anatta* or not-self/not-soul. The student of Theravada Buddhism should keep in mind, however, that the not-self doctrine can be interpreted as sanctioning such monastic pursuits as meditation, whereas the doctrines of *kamma* (Sanskrit, *karma*) rebirth (*samsara*), and merit (*puñña*) justify a wide range of other moral and ritual acts.⁷ These are distinctive but related domains within the broader context of the Theravada tradition; they should not be seen as contradictory. In the Pali texts, both ultimate and proximate ideals are promoted. The tradition affirms that the Buddhist path is many forked and, furthermore, that people are at different stages along the path. Explanations that seek somewhat arbitrarily and rigidly to differentiate teaching and practice, the ideal and the actual, run the risk of

sacrificing the interwoven threads of religion as they are culturally embodied to the logic of consistency.

With this admonition in mind, I use the term, “popular tradition,” with some hesitancy; no value judgment is intended. “Popular” in this context does not mean less serious, less worthy, or further removed from the ideal; rather, it refers to Theravada Buddhism as it is commonly perceived, understood, and practiced by the average, traditional Sri Lankan, Burmese, Thai, Cambodian, and Laotian. What defines their sense of religious and cultural identity, the contexts in which this identity is most readily investigated, are rites of passage, festival celebrations, ritual occasions, and behavior as exemplified in traditional stories. One goes to the temple or the temple-monastery (*wat*) to observe many of these activities, hear the teachings as handed down orally from monk to layperson, and view stories depicted in religious art and reenacted in ritual. Institutionally, the religious life of the Theravada Buddhist focuses on the place of public worship, celebration, and discourse. Symbolically, the temple-monastery is not only the “monk’s place”



Figure 1.1. Monastery compound. Wat Kukut, Lamphun, Thailand.

or *sangha-vasa* for the study of the dhamma, but also the “Buddha’s place” or *buddha-vasa* where the Buddha is made present and venerated in images and enshrined relics.

In the following section I shall explore popular Buddhism in Southeast Asia with a focus on Thailand, in these contexts: rites of passage, festival celebrations, and ritual occasions, beginning with ideal behavior or life models personified in traditional myths and legends. The two underlying themes will be: the syncretic nature of popular Buddhism as part of a total religious-cultural system; and the role of religion in enhancing life’s meaning through the integration and interpretation of personal, social, and cosmic dimensions of life.

IDEAL ACTION

Doctrinally, ideal action in Theravada Buddhism can be described as meritorious action (*puñña-kamma*) or action that does not accrue demerit (*papa-kamma*). At the highest stage of spiritual self-realization, the state of arahantship, one’s actions are totally beyond the power of kamma and rebirth (*samsara*). Terms used to characterize ideal behavior and attitudes are truthfulness (*sacca*), generosity (*dana*), loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), equanimity (*upekkha*), wisdom (*pañña*), and morality (*sila*), to name a few. In both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism these virtues are referred to as “perfections” (*parami* or *paramita*) of character associated with the person of the *bodhisatta* (Sanskrit, *bodhisattva*), one who is on the path to Buddhahood. These perfections are depicted in various ways appropriate to audience and context. They are exemplified in the narratives of moral exemplars, such as Vessantara and Sama who appear in the last ten of the 547 Pali *jataka* tales, other late canonical texts such as the *Cariyā-piṭaka*, the fifth century commentaries of Buddhaghosa and Dhammapala, vernacular narratives, and most important, in the life of the Buddha.⁸ Such stories are well known and are one of the principal means through which ideal life models are taught.



Figure 1.2. The main Buddha image at Wat Phra That Hariphunchai (Haripuñjaya), Lamphun, Thailand.

Historically, the Buddha is understood as the founder of the tradition (*sasana*) that is called Buddhism. Beyond that, however, his life story becomes paradigmatic for every devout follower who seeks the same goal of enlightenment/awakening he achieved, especially the Buddhist monk. Before Prince Siddhartha becomes the Buddha, he seeks to discover a deeper meaning to life beyond the inevitable limitations of old age, suffering, and death. He embarks on a quest for a personal knowledge that transcends the inherited traditions of his highborn social class. Departing from the life of a royal householder, he becomes a mendicant, seeking out learned teachers, engaging in the ascetical regimens of the renunciant, and training the mind in contemplative exercises (*samadhi*). Eventually, Siddhartha discovers a higher truth not limited to the conventional, dualistic perceptions of self and other,

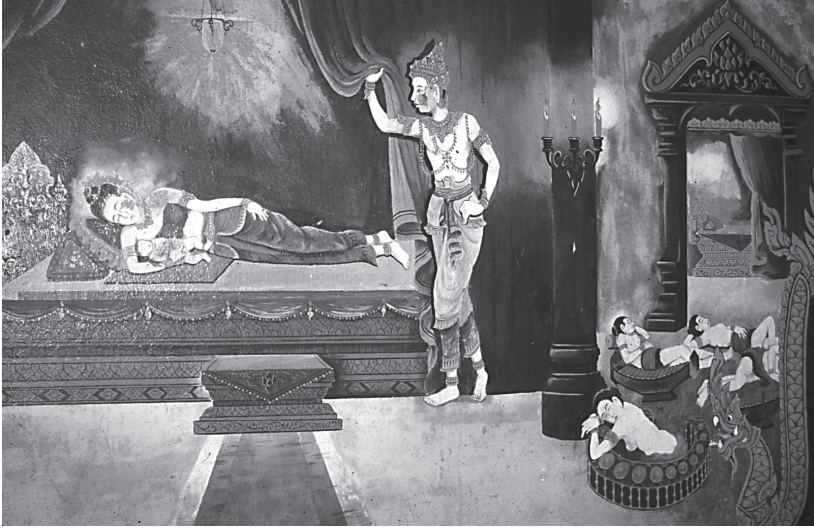


Figure 1.3. Temple mural showing Prince Siddhattha's renunciation. Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, Chiang Mai, Thailand.

or the philosophical constructions of eternalism and nihilism. His profound insight into the non-eternal and non-substantive (*anicca*), causally interdependent and co-coming-into-being (*idappaccayata*) nature of things enabled the future Buddha to overcome the anxiety (*dukkha*) rooted in the awareness of human finitude and of the conditional nature of life. In an ideal sense every follower of the Buddha seeks the truth he achieved at his awakening (*nibbana*). *Nibbana* is not an abstraction or a mystical, alternative reality but a mode of being-in-the-world. It signifies that way of life as an achievable reality. Although one cannot always ascertain the precise intentions that lead a young man to ordain in the Buddhist monastic order, symbolically his ordination reenacts the Buddha's story.

The central teachings of Theravada Buddhism emerge from the narrative of the Buddha's life. Broadly speaking, the *sutta* literature in the form of the Buddha's dialogues represents episodes linked together as segments of the Buddha's life, like pearls strung on a single strand. Each pearl can be admired in and of itself but only when the pearls are strung together on a thread do

they become a necklace. Similarly, each *sutta* episode conveys particular teachings, but these teachings are embedded in the narrative framework of the Buddha's life. The Buddha's teaching or dhamma is inseparable from the person and life story of the *bodhisatta* who sought to see through the apparent contradictions and sufferings of life to a deeper truth and, having succeeded, taught this truth by word, deed, and the power of example.

When Sri Lankan, Burmese, Thai, Laotian, or Cambodian Buddhists enter a temple or approach a reliquary (*cetiya*, Thai, *chedi*), they are in a sense encountering the Buddha.⁹ The reliquary enshrines Buddha relics, regarded as artifacts of his physical being or reminders of his life. Buddha images in varying postures remind the viewer of the Buddha's struggle with the tempter Mara, the Buddha's enlightenment and his teaching; murals visualize in a narrative form long-remembered, embellished episodes from his life. The most commonly seen murals are depictions of his miraculous birth; the four sights or scenes in which he encounters old age, suffering, death, and a wandering truth seeker that prompt him to renounce his princely life; his enlightenment experience under the Bodhi tree; and his first teaching delivered to five ascetics.

Bronze images and murals of the life of the Buddha tell a story that is not merely an inspired tale of the past, but also an ever-present reality. The Buddha represents the possibility of overcoming the blinding ignorance caused by sensory attachments and the attainment of the twin ideals of equanimity and compassion, and personifies the way whereby others may discover this truth for themselves, or by relying on the power of the Awakened One can at least improve their lot in this life or in future lives.

The Buddha's story, however, is not the sole ideal life model.¹⁰ In the Theravada tradition the lives of heroes and saints, particularly in the form of *jataka* tales that tell of the previous lives of the Buddha, embody highly regarded ethical virtues and spiritual perfections. In these stories the reader encounters narrative paradigms rather than scholastic discussions of Buddhist doctrinal ideals. The most celebrated *jataka* is the story of Prince Vessantara, the last life of the Buddha prior to his rebirth as Siddhattha Gotama, who exemplifies the perfection of generosity (*dana*).¹¹



Figure 1.4. Temple mural showing Vessantara, Maddi, and their two children walking to the forest hermitage. Wat Luang, Pakse, Champassak Province, Lao PDR.

As the story begins, Vessantara, prince of Sivi, offers his kingdom's white elephant with magical rain-making powers to the neighboring territory of Kalinga to end their drought. The citizens of Sivi, incensed by this generous act that could jeopardize their own well-being, banish Vessantara and his family to the jungle. Before his departure he arranges a *dana* or gift-giving ceremony, wherein he gives away most of his possessions. Upon leaving the capital city, a group of Brahmans request his horse-drawn chariot, which he willingly surrenders, whereupon Vessantara proceeds on foot with his wife and two children into the forest. As we might expect and as the logic of true *dana* requires, soon after Vessantara and his family are happily settled in their

simple jungle hut, the prince is asked to give up his children to serve Jujaka, an elderly Brahman. When Indra appears in human disguise and Vessantara accedes to the god's demand that he surrender his wife, Maddi, the prince's trials come to an end. Having successfully met this ultimate test of generosity—the sacrifice of his wife and children—Vessantara's family is restored to him and he succeeds his father as king of Sivi.¹²

Whereas the Buddha story embodies the ideal of nibbana, the Vessantara story illustrates the doctrine of kamma, which in this instance is a reward for the meritorious act of generosity. Many Western scholars have focused attention on the differences between nibbanic or noble-path action and kammic-merit motivated action. But when these two types of action are placed within these two well-known narrative contexts, the interrelationships become more readily apparent. Both Siddhattha and Vessantara exemplify modes of selflessness symbolized respectively by a quest and a journey; renunciation marks the beginning of a critical threshold or testing period preceding a return or restoration. In the Buddha's case, the threshold state is one of intensive study and ascetical practice from which he emerges transformed as the Buddha. Vessantara's residence in the forest represents a testing ground from which he returns, not only to have his family and possessions restored, but also he is rewarded with an enhanced degree of royal power.

Even with their similarities, the stories do differ. Prince Siddhattha becomes the Buddha, the Awakened One, the *tathagata* who has realized the perfection of the truth (*saccadhamma*). Nonetheless, both stories exemplify the principles of nonattachment and selflessness as time-honored ideal values. In Vessantara's case, the ideal value is generosity, and in the Buddha's case, a total personal transformation designated by the term, not-self (*anatta*), that is, a state in which the individual's self-perception is no longer as an autonomous, self-existent agent, but as part of a dynamic, interrelational process.¹³ The two stories also point to the tension in the Theravada tradition between renunciant and householder values. Although the circumstances differ, both Siddhattha and Vessantara sacrifice the duties and responsibilities of their social location as husbands, fathers, and *khattiyas* (noblemen) for a higher goal. The dramatic social tension produced by this conflict is the subject of

the text, *Yasodaravata*, the lament of Siddhattha's wife in reaction to her husband's "desertion" of family, his renunciation of social and political duties, and her consequent status of what amounted to widowhood.¹⁴

Despite the general tenor of androcentrism in the Pali texts, paradigmatic tales of women, both monastic and lay, also exemplify the perfections of generosity, selflessness, and equanimity.¹⁵ In the Buddhist tradition these virtues are valued regardless of gender. Visakha's selfless sacrifice of her wedding dowry to support the monastic order is as unbounded as that of her male counterpart, Anathapindika.¹⁶ Even though an order of nuns was only grudgingly permitted by the Buddha, and institutionally female monks were subject to the authority of their male counterparts, the poetry of the *Therīgāthā* (Poems of the Nuns) testifies to the high spiritual attainments of female members of the sangha. The following poem is attributed to Sakula, from a Brahman family, who reached arahanthood and was recognized by the Buddha as the foremost among nuns for achieving the "eye of heaven," the psychic power that enabled her to see all worlds far and near:

When I lived in a house
 I heard a monk's words
 and saw in those words
nirvana
 the unchanging state.

I am the one
 who left son and daughter,
 money and grain,
 cut off my hair,
 and set out into homelessness

Under training on the straight way
 desire and hatred fell away,
 along with the obsessions



Figure 1.5. Temple mural showing laypersons presenting alms food to nuns. Wat Phra That Pha Ngao, Chiang Rai Province, Thailand.

of the mind
that combine with them.

After my ordination,
I remembered
I had been born before.
The eye of heaven became clear.

The elements of body and mind
I saw as other,
born from a cause,
subject to decay.
I have given up the obsessions
of the mind.
I am quenched and cool.¹⁷

Both men and women have the potential to achieve the perfections of selflessness and equanimity, ideals associated with the highest level of spiritual attainment in Buddhism.

The stories of those individuals who have traveled to the highest stages of the Buddhist path appear in narratives written in vernacular languages as well as canonical Pali texts and commentaries. Hagiographic legends of past spiritual exemplars offer moving examples for present belief and practice. Moreover, modern Buddhist saints, meditation masters, and exemplary teachers—both monastic and lay—whose lives are portrayed in written narratives, oral legend, and living personal examples continue to inspire the lives of contemporary practitioners. The well-known Burmese meditation masters, Mahasi Sayadaw, a monk, and U Ba Khin, a layman, are major figures in the promotion of *vipassana* (insight) meditation in Myanmar as well as other Theravada countries and internationally.¹⁸

The tradition of forest monks, in particular, has contributed significantly to the literature of spiritual virtuosos and hagiographic lore in the modern period as well as the past. In Sri Lanka the Sinhalese monk, Puvakdandave Paññananda, founded a forest hermitage that represented one of the high points of the revival of Buddhism in that country in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹⁹ In Thailand the life of the forest monk, Achan Man (Mun) Bhuridatta (1870–1949), as told by one of his disciples, Achan Mahabua (Boowa) Ñanasampanno, has taken on a normative significance for the lives of other forest monks.²⁰ As the paradigm of the ideal forest-meditation monk, Achan Man has been elevated to the iconic status as the founder of the modern forest tradition in Thai Buddhism. According to James L. Taylor, Achan Man has become a “hagio-legend of national proportions” and, “Although marginal to the formal monastic establishment and to the routinized monastic hierarchy, forest monks . . . are *the mystical core of orthodox Thai religion*. In Thailand, the transformative and integrative process of hagiography turned local legendary recluses into institutionalized national figures.”²¹ As is true in other religious traditions, Buddhist monks are venerated not only for their spiritual attainments, but also for the extraordinary powers they are believed to have achieved through ascetical practice

and meditative states of consciousness. This belief has led to a cult of holy monks or saints throughout Buddhist Asia, including Theravada countries. The veneration of material artifacts associated with holy monks—relics, amulets, and images—has become an especially prominent feature of popular belief and practice in Thailand.²²

Modern exemplars of dedication, perseverance, and spiritual realization include both men and women. Achan Naeb, the daughter of a provincial governor of Suphan Buri Province, Thailand, achieved a national reputation as a noted teacher of *Abhidhamma* and for a method of meditation based on the teachings of the Burmese meditation master, Sunlun Sayadaw.²³ By the 1970s, approximately twenty major and minor centers in central Thailand under her inspiring leadership were teaching meditation to both monks and laity, and her Buddhist Studies Research Center at Wat Sutat, also known as the Golden Mount Temple in Bangkok, received the honor of royal patronage. In Ratchaburi Province, Upasika Kee Nanayon (1901–1978), who took the *nom de plume*, Kor Khao-suan-luang, from the name of the forested hill where she established a women's center for practicing the dhamma, became one of the foremost women teachers of meditation in Thailand. Known for her simple way of life and the direct style of her teaching, many of her talks were transcribed and printed for free distribution, including the following translated excerpt from the collection, *Looking Inward: Observations on the Art of Meditation*:

The Buddha taught that we are to know with our own hearts and minds. Even though there are many, many words and phrases coined to explain the Dhamma, we need focus only on the things we can know and see, extinguish and let go right at each moment of the immediate present—better than taking on a lot of other things. Once we can read and comprehend our inner awareness, we'll be struck deep within us that the Buddha awakened to the truth right here in the heart. His truth is truly the language of the heart.

When they translate the Dhamma in all sorts of ways, it becomes something ordinary. But if you keep close and careful watch right at the heart and mind, you'll be able to see clearly, to let go, to put down your burdens. If you don't



Figure 1.6. Phra Malai teaching men and women about the punishments of hell and the rewards of heaven. Wat Phra That Hariphunchai, Lamphun, Thailand.

know right here, your knowledge will send out all sorts of branches, turning into thought-formations with all sorts of meanings in line with conventional labels—all of them short of the mark.

If you know right at your inner awareness and make it your constant stance, there's nothing at all: no need to take hold of anything, no need to label anything, no need to give anything names. Right where craving arises right there it disbands: That's where you'll know what *nibbana* is like . . . "Nibbana is simply this disbanding of craving." That's what the Buddha stressed over and over again.²⁴

Stories, both traditional and modern, also illustrate different facets of morally objectionable, as well as spiritually praiseworthy behavior with their respective punishments or rewards. By way of contrast, they offer a counterpoint to ideal exemplars. A prime negative example is the evil Devadatta. Motivated by selfish jealousy, Devadatta, the Buddha's cousin,



Figure 1.7. Monk seated on a preaching chair. Chiang Mai, Thailand.

attempts to create a schism in the monastic order and even tries to kill the Buddha. For such maleficent deeds he is reborn in hell.²⁵ Other tales illustrate the punishments for violating the five moral precepts or training rules fundamental to the normative ethical system of popular Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia. The five moral precepts are prohibitions against: taking life, stealing, lying, committing adultery, and drinking intoxicants. One such tale tells of the pious monk, Phra Malai, who is given the opportunity to visit the Buddhist hells, populated by those who have broken the precepts, as well as the heavens, enjoyed by those who have faithfully kept them.²⁶ After these visits, Phra Malai instructs humankind about future rewards and punishments for present actions. One can view the graphic details of Phra Malai episodes from this popular story on temple walls, not for a model of ideal behavior, as in the case of the Buddha and Vessantara, but as a vivid illustration of the consequences for failure to follow the Buddhist moral code.

Theravada Buddhism teaches the ideals of selflessness, wisdom, and compassion that are identified with the life of the Buddha, saintly monks, and observant laity. It also establishes normative moral principles and rules necessary for social harmony. These rules are reinforced by the story of Phra Malai, tales from the *Dhammapada* commentary (*Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā*), and canonical *suttas* such as the *Sigālaka*. In this *sutta*, the Buddha teaches a Brahman youth, Sigalaka, about the duties and responsibilities that should obtain between parent and child, husband and wife, teacher and student, friends, servants and masters, mendicants and lay supporters (see appendix 1). However, Southeast Asian Buddhism encompasses more than just the individual and social ideals represented by the Buddha, Sakula, Vessantara, Visakha, Phra Malai, and Sigalaka; it constructs an ethic of human flourishing within a complex cosmology of divine, human, and subhuman beings.²⁷

Popular Buddhist moral tales assume an inherent interrelationship among these various cosmological levels and states of existence. As the following brief narrative from the *Cariyāpīṭaka* (Basket of Conduct) illustrates, the dramatis personae of these moral fables are often animals like monkeys, deer, buffalo, fish, *yakkhas* (demons), and *nagas* (serpents) as well as human beings. The following story illustrates the perfection of moral virtue (*sīla*). In the tale, a buffalo upholds the precept against taking the life of a sentient being by controlling its anger, which is occasioned by social humiliation and ritual pollution.

When I was a buffalo roaming in a forest . . . strong, large, terrifying to behold . . . Wandering about in the huge forest I saw a favourable place. Going to that place I stood and I lay down. Then an evil, foul, nimble monkey came there and urinated and defecated over my shoulder, forehead and eyebrows. And on one day, even on a second, a third and a fourth too, he polluted me. All the time I was distressed by him. A *yakkha*, seeing my distress, said this to me, 'Kill that vile evil one with horns and hoofs.' This spoken, I then said to the *yakkha*, 'How is it that you (would) besmear me with a carcass, evil and foul?' If I were to be angry with him, from that I would become more degraded than him; and morality [*sīla*] might be violated by me and wise

men might censure me. Better indeed is death through (leading a life of) purity than a life subject to disdain. How will I, even for the sake of life, do an injury to another?²⁸

The moral of this folkloric tale is conveyed, in part, through the medium of humor. In modern Western society there is a tendency to see religion as a sober and serious enterprise devoid of humor, but that is not the case for traditional, oral-based religious instruction in Buddhist Southeast Asia. Lay storytellers and even monk-preachers often used humor—occasionally ribald—to keep the attention of their audience.

RITUAL OCCASIONS, MERIT, AND THE APPROPRIATION OF POWER

Buddhist rituals can be classified in various ways. Melford Spiro characterizes Theravada ritual action in Myanmar in terms of a fourfold typology: commemorative, expressive, instrumental, and expiatory.²⁹ Commemorative ritual is performed in remembrance of historical, legendary, or mythological events; expressive ritual serves to manifest emotions and sentiments felt toward objects of reverence, such as the Buddha, his teaching, and the monastic order; instrumental ritual aims to achieve some goal in this life or in future lives; expiatory ritual is performed to atone for misdeeds.³⁰ Like most religious phenomena, rituals can be interpreted on several levels. Spiro's useful analysis should not be regarded as definitive nor should these categories be construed as mutually exclusive. Furthermore, although rituals vary in nature, function, and intent, Theravada rituals in Southeast Asia often appear calculated to address a wide spectrum of beneficent and malevolent powers.

Broadly speaking, these powers can be defined as either Buddhist or non-Buddhist. The Buddhist symbols operative in various ritual contexts are most often associated with the Buddha himself, images of the Buddha, his relics enshrined in reliquary mounds or *cetiya*, and Buddha amulets. Symbols associated with individual Buddhist monks or nuns reputed to be particularly

holy are an important extension of these objects. The charismatic power ascribed to individual monks derive, in part, from the power represented by the Buddha because monks follow his dhamma; even more so, monks' charisma stems from their reputed ability to foresee the future, to heal psychic and physical maladies, and exhibit other extraordinary powers associated with trance states (*jhana*). As a consequence, images, relics, and amulets of famous monks are venerated in and of themselves.³¹

On the level of popular cult, the nonphysical, nibbanic values and ideals represented by the Buddha, his teachings, and the Buddhist sangha assume specific physical or material characteristics. Even the Buddha's teaching has a physical representation in the material form of inscribed palm leaf texts. Because of their association with the Buddha's teaching, palm leaf manuscripts become objects of power in their own right. The term, "sacred text," in this sense refers not only to its content but also to the text as a material object of sacred power.

Scholars have classified symbols to which special powers are ascribed within ritual contexts—which may or may not be overtly Buddhist—as animistic or Brahmanistic.³² They include Brahmanical deities such as Indra (Sakka in the Pali canon) and Vishnu who may be invoked to guard a specific site or be present upon the occasion of a Buddhist ceremony; a pantheon of Hindu gods in Sri Lanka that include Vishnu and Kataragama;³³ and other indigenous deities and spirits that include the *nats* in Burma³⁴ and the *chao* and *phi* in Thailand and Laos.³⁵

A syncretic flavor imbues most popular festivals, ceremonies, and rituals in Theravada Southeast Asia. In some, such as the Visakha Puja festival celebrating the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death, the Buddhist element dominates. But Buddhist monks are invited to chant protective *suttas* (*paritta*) at a variety of rituals, ranging from house dedications to weddings, whose underlying significance seems remote from the Buddhist ideals of self-transforming knowledge.³⁶ If religious ritual is interpreted as a system for gaining access to a broad range of powers constituted within a cosmology of human, superhuman, and subhuman realms, then the ritual context itself determines its precise meaning rather than a predetermined



Figure 1.8. Monks on their morning alms rounds (*pindapata*).

definition of what is considered as Buddhist or non-Buddhist (e.g., animistic or Brahmanical).

In gaining access to power, Buddhist ritual in Southeast Asia functions in two primary ways: reciprocal exchange and appropriation. Reciprocal exchange emerges from the donor-recipient relationship found in merit-making rituals. The layperson-donor offers material gifts for the benefit of the monastic order. In return, the virtuous power of the sangha engenders a spiritual reward of merit (*puñña*), thereby enhancing the donor's balance of kamma/karma, which in turn, affects the status of the person's rebirth on the cosmic scale. All ritual situations, in which presentations are made to the monastic order, function in this way. These include acts as frequent and informal as giving food to monks on their morning alms rounds (*pindapata*), to the annual and formal presentation of new robes and other gifts to the sangha at the end of the monsoon rains retreat after the October full-moon day. Even though the form of merit-making rituals in Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia varies greatly, the structure of reciprocal exchange remains a constant.³⁷

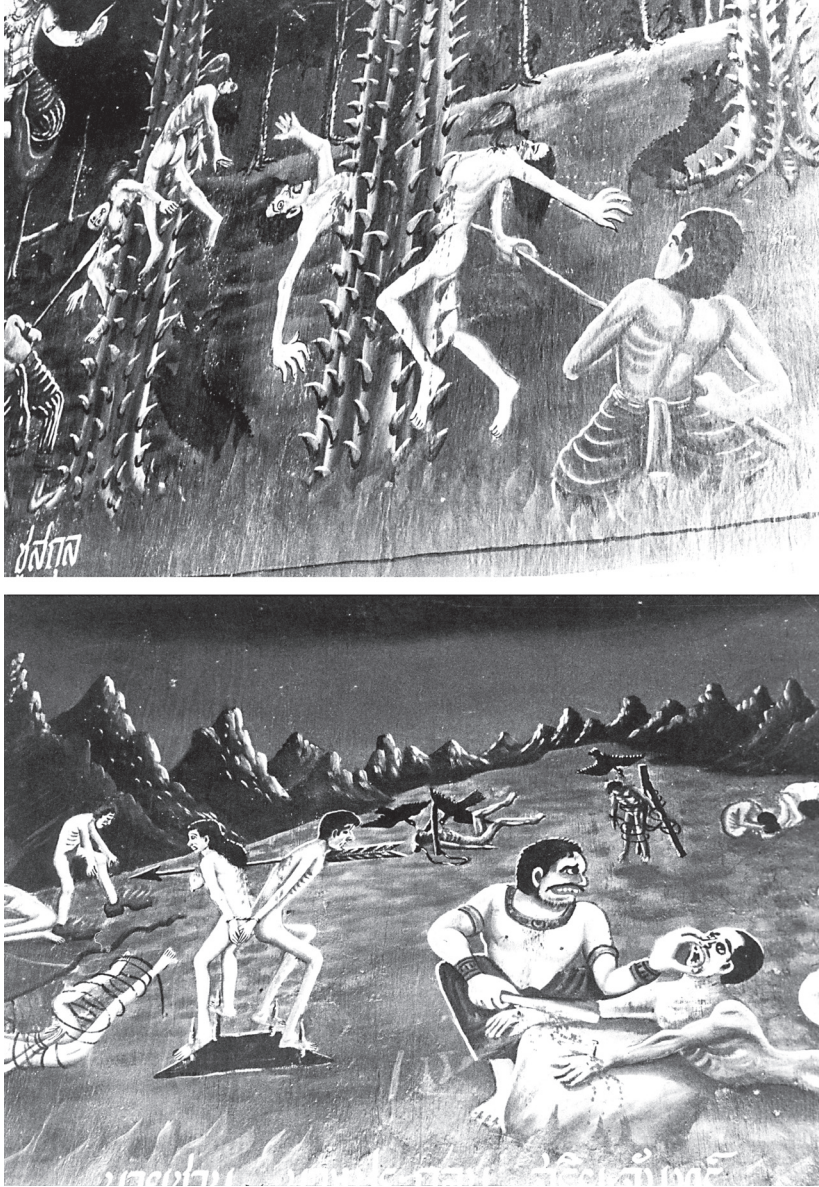


Figure 1.9. Buddhist hells. Punishment for breaking the precepts. Phra Malai murals. Wat Hariphunchai, Lamphun, Thailand.