

***Monks, Money, and Morality: The Balancing Act of Contemporary Buddhism.* Edited by Christoph Brumann, Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko, and Beata Świtek. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 255 pages. \$29.95 (paperback). ISBN 9781350213753.**

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Religion and economics is an area of ever-increasing scholarship, particularly within studies of Buddhism, despite still being in its early stages. The first book-length entry to Buddhism and economics, *Buddhism and Business*, edited by Trine Brox and Elizabeth Williams-Ørberg, explores the evolving relationship between Buddhism and business on a global scale, focusing on ethnographically grounded theoretical explorations of this area.¹ *Monks, Money, and Morality*, edited by Christoph Brumann, Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko, and Beata Świtek, fruitfully turns its focus to questions of money and its associated moral quandaries within Buddhist spaces. Indeed, explorations of Buddhist morality center this book, with contributors thinking through the impacts of contemporary capitalist social structures on a wide variety of Buddhist communities and cultures throughout Asia. Ethnographic considerations of what makes a good or bad Buddhist (or good or bad Buddhism) push readers to delve into the continual evolution and transformation of Buddhist practices in the contemporary world. This extensive collection covers locations where “Buddhism has been an accustomed practice for centuries or even millennia” (p. 2), established in ethnographic particulars to engage with questions of interest and import for all Buddhist studies scholars.

1. Trine Brox and Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg, eds., *Buddhism and Business: Merit, Materials Wealth, and Morality in the Global Market Economy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019).

In the introduction, the editors contend that “in a (mostly) capitalistic framework, religious specialists’ relationships with money have become a key moral issue, provoking a lively debate where the boundaries of the acceptable are to be drawn” (p. 3). The subsequent chapters use this framing device to consider the nature of contemporary Buddhist practice and identity. Focusing on money enables the authors to explore the complicated and oftentimes obfuscated nature of morality within Buddhist contexts. In addition, the contributors focus on “sangha economies,” which Brumann, Abrams-Kavunenko, and Świtek define as “(the way the community of Buddhist monks, priests, nuns, and priestesses, the sangha, deals with money, goods, and services) and how they interrelate” (p. 2). When examining the nature of money and morality, the question of *dāna*, often translated as “giving,” is central. *Dāna* is frequently thought of as the foundational relationship between sangha and laity. Contributors complicate this relationship, challenging the very nature of the perceived divide between sangha and laity (see especially chapters by Kristina Jonutytė and Martin Mills). Starting with a direct engagement with *dāna* and concepts such as the “field of merit,” the volume ends with an examination of the moralities surrounding money as a place for potential revitalization and renewal.

Part 1 focuses on the question of reciprocity and the relationships between sangha, laity, and donors. In “Economic Agency and the Spirit of Donation: The Commercialization of Buddhist Services in Japan,” Beata Świtek explores the changing nature of temples within the Japanese social sphere. She contends that Japanese temples have always had to engage with money, but the decentering of temples within Japanese social life has created images of a corrupt, greedy sangha because their wealth is now interpreted through secular definitions of private gain (p. 34). Interviews with parishioners and priests reveal that both recognize the necessity of money to support Buddhist services, but uncertainty remains about the “right” amount of monetary donations to temples and priests who are increasingly seen as isolated from social functions. This chapter is an excellent choice to start the book because it introduces some of the main questions addressed in other chapters: Is it a good idea to set prices for ritual services? How do prices for services affect relations between sangha and laity? How have these relationships changed and/or adapted to highly commercialized capitalistic societies? Świtek examines the delicate balance of

donations and perception of profit that neither priests nor parishioners find entirely satisfactory.

Shifting to Thailand, Thomas Borchert explores similar themes of social transformation in “Merit, ‘Corruption,’ and Economy in the Contemporary Thai Sangha.” In particular, he argues that the Thai government’s attempts to control monastic practices during the 2010s have directly increased concerns about monastic corruption, which in turn has forced monks to distance themselves more explicitly from money (p. 40). Both Borchert and Świtek discuss how monastics face critiques of corruption in societies that have changed around them, although the Thai government’s explicit engagement helps to illuminate the differences inherent in specific cultural and political situations.

Nicholas Sihlé turns attention to Tibet by exploring the vast networks of non-monastic ritual services experts in and around Repkong in “Ritual Virtuosity, Large-Scale Priest-Patron Networks, and Ethics of Remunerated Ritual Services in Northeast Tibet.” This focus on non-monastic ritual specialists challenges the existing over-emphasis on ordained monastics within Buddhist studies. This ethnography furthers the discussion of religious compensation and the nature of “good” and “bad” religious specialists through an examination of how specialists gain renown and earn their livings. Remuneration for services in this system is less stigmatized than in either the Japanese or Thai contexts above but can turn negative when specialists are perceived as being greedy.

Examinations of the interrelationships between sangha and laity are furthered through Hannah Rosa Klepeis’s “‘Bad’ Monks and Unworthy Donors: Money, (Mis)trust, and the Disruption of Sangha-Laity Relations in Shangri-La.” She argues that monastics’ ability to access funds outside the laity has had a disruptive rather than a binding effect on relations between the two (p. 75). In fact, these perceptions have worsened to the point that laypeople generally believe all monastics in Shangri-la to be corrupt despite there being little actual misdeeds recorded. However, this does not end the relationship; instead, laity place their faith (and money) in the area’s institutions that they believe will mitigate bad monks’ behavior. As with the other chapters in this part, Klepeis argues that the transformation of the relationship of sangha and laity in a capitalistic system based on market transactions has caused the decline in the perception of the sangha.

Part 2 consists of two chapters that delve into the interrelationships between sangha and laity to complicate and even collapse the traditional Maussian interpretation of exchange. In “Donations Inversed: Material Flows from Sangha to Laity in Post-Soviet Buryatia,” Kristina Jonutyte argues that Buddhist economies have multidirectional flows focused on “pooling,” which involves moving resources around within a group, rather than “exchange,” which transfers resources from one group to another. In the Buryatia context of southern Russia, monastics give back to the laity and use their own funds to support the building of temples in the hopes of inspiring and leading the laity to better Buddhist practice and devotion.

Martin Mills goes even further in “Exorcising Mauss’s Ghost in the Western Himalayas: Buddhist Giving as Collective Work,” arguing that *dāna* circulates within a collective of sangha and laity. In the Ladakhi context, merit is seen as collective action, so *dāna* then functions collectively. Indeed, the sangha blesses and purifies the gifts donated, which will ultimately end up back in the hands of laypeople. Both Mills and Jonutyte see the divisions between sangha and laity concerning *dāna* to be artificial at best and damaging to the essential place of the laity at worst, even as the two contributors disagree on how exactly to interpret that differentiation.

Part 3 focuses on Buddhist institutions and perceptions of wealth, exploring the nature of individual versus institutional wealth. Roger Casas continues part 2’s interest in challenging the nature of the relationship between sangha and laity but shifts his focus to the moralist elements of relationships within the Tai Lue people in “Monks and the Morality of Exchange: Reflections on a Village Temple Case in Southwest China.” Here, money becomes a point of contention when laity perceive that monks focus too much on it to the detriment of their other community obligations. Monks in Sipsong Panna must often balance personal wealth, frequently used to support their families, with institutional wealth and service dedicated to supporting the sangha and the needs of laity.

Prabhath Sirisena provides some much-needed detail and insight into contemporary forest monk traditions by drawing on his own experiences with the forest monastic organization *Samsthā* in “Wealthy Mendicants: The Balancing Act of Sri Lankan Forest Monks.” Through thick description of the everyday economic lives of the forest sangha, Sirisena reveals that even in a tradition that seems to enforce stark

lines between laity and monastics, materials rotate in circular patterns. Indeed, because of their perceived moral virtuosity, forest monks receive more donations than they can use. In turn, they craft complicated silent networks of redistribution that support nuns, poorer monks, and the larger community.

Jane Caple's "Monastic Business Expansion in Post-Mao Tibet: Risk, Trust, and Perception" examines the nature of monastic marketplaces within an economy that emphasizes the "path to self-sufficiency." Economic changes in contemporary Tibet under Chinese rule have forced monasteries and religious institutions to shift from inconsistent donations to stable investments in "profit-making enterprises, including moneylending, shops, medical clinics, and the manufacture of religious products" (p. 161). Caple is careful to point out that monastic management of money is historical within Chinese and Tibetan history. Indeed, the moral questions surrounding money echo long-held critiques of moral decline amongst the sangha, especially the Chinese sangha, while encompassing issues specific to the contemporary communist/capitalist context such as consumer choice.

Part 4 closes out the volume with an exploration of visions for the rebirth and renewal of Buddhism in contrast to a perceived current moral degeneration. Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko's standout contribution, "Regeneration and the Age of Decline: Purification and Rebirth in Mongolian Buddhist Economies," draws together her interlocutors' critiques of fixed, printed prices for services, similar to Świtek above, as one aspect of a larger dissatisfaction with contemporary Buddhism in Mongolia to think through its implications as a place of opportunity. Mongolian Buddhists see Buddhism as foundational to traditional cultural practices and consider this background as an ideal launching pad for global Buddhist renewal. It ties many of the preceding chapters together in considering what monastics can and cannot do related to money and the perceptions surrounding conceptions of proper Buddhist moral action.

The final chapter is "Saintly Entrepreneurialism and Political Aspirations of Theravadin Saints in Mainland Southeast Asia" by Alexander Horstmann. Drawing on portraits of three monks, Horstmann argues that contemporary charismatic monks are a new type of monastic saint who combine prosperity religion with ascetic dedication to practice "wealthy asceticism" (p. 196). Similar to Sihlé's chapter in this

volume and Dan Smyer Yü's chapter in *Buddhism and Business*,² "Saintly Entrepreneurialism" explores the constellations of Buddhist networks that comprise contemporary Buddhist communities. His contribution ends by thinking through the future of the Buddhist sangha in the multivarious ways that monastics are choosing to extend, expand, and cultivate their networks through new technologies such as social media.

When considering the volume as a whole, it is difficult to avoid making comparisons to *Buddhism and Business*. Both edited volumes address Buddhism and economics, but their approaches are very different. Both are the better for it. *Buddhism and Business* engages with more abstract ideas of "business" as a driving force for the book while *Monks, Money, and Morality* is much more grounded in the everyday ethnographic realities of morality and money in situated contexts. In addition, *Buddhism and Business* explores Buddhism around the globe, including in diaspora communities, while this volume does not. Although the editors point this out early in the introduction, there is no concrete justification for this decision. So, while the locations were extensive, I was left wondering why diasporic Buddhist communities were not represented.

As an ethnographer interested in Buddhism and gender, it was also surprising that no contribution, save that of Roger Casas, engages with gender much at all, and no contribution focuses on nuns or "female ritual specialists" (p. 9). The editors do make clear that they attempted to include contributions on this area and were unsuccessful (p. 9), but the volume is missing their voices.

Each chapter was able to explore a different facet of sangha-laity relations in numerous different locations, yet at times I was left wanting more background information. The sheer breadth of contributions means that the reader is carried across Asia from chapter to chapter in a very well-constructed manner that thematically builds up a robust vision of attitudes towards money and morality within numerous different sangha communities, but the location shifts and lack of contextual knowledge can sometimes be a little disorienting. Part of this

2. Dan Smyer Yü, "A Sino-Tibetan Buddhist Modernism: Religion Marketplace, Constellative Networking, and Urbanism," in *Buddhism and Business: Merit, Materials Wealth, and Morality in the Global Market Economy*, ed. Trine Brox and Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020), 40–58.

might stem from my background as a scholar of Japanese Buddhism while most of the contributions are from Tibetan-influenced or, to a lesser extent, Theravādin contexts with which I am less familiar. Nevertheless, a little more contextualization in each chapter would better situate the reader in the constantly changing settings.

Overall, the book convincingly addresses questions about the relationships between sangha and laity through multiple lenses, forcing the reader to reconsider reconceptualized notions of the “field of merit” and *dāna* that are so foundational to Buddhist studies. The volume is an excellent contribution to the new and essential area of Buddhism and economics and would be appealing not just to ethnographers of Buddhism, but to any scholar with an interest in how morality is conceptualized and enacted within contemporary Buddhist communities. It also contributes to the burgeoning area of “Bad Buddhism” and what constitutes a “good” or “bad” Buddhist.³ The extensive use of native terminology is extremely helpful for scholars but could be a barrier to use in undergraduate classrooms. Graduate students of Buddhism, contemporary religions, and morality will benefit from the granularity of the chapters, although most chapters might be best supported with additional instruction in the particular Buddhist, cultural, and linguistic contexts. In particular, the chapters by Jane Caple and Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko would be excellent stand-alone pieces needing little extra context, especially if accompanied by the introduction. I strongly recommend this compelling volume to all scholars of Buddhist studies as an essential foray into the recent Buddhist past and potential future of Buddhist practice across Asia.

3. Hannah Gould and Melyn McKay, eds., “Special Focuses: Bad Buddhism and Alternate Buddhist Modernities,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 21 (2020): 141–294.

