

Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things in the Buddhist Imaginary. Edited by Vanessa R. Sasson. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2021. 380 pages. \$72.00 (hardcover). ISBN 9780824887858.

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Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things in the Buddhist Imaginary is an edited collection of essays that, as described by its editor Vanessa R. Sasson, explores the category of jewels, broadly conceived, in a tradition all too often characterized by austerity. This book includes twelve essays on topics from South Asian, Newar, Tibetan, and East Asian Buddhism, covering a period of more than two millennia and drawing on both literary texts and material culture.

Although *Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things* engages the recent trajectories—sometimes gathered under the umbrellas of *the material turn* or *the anthropological turn*—that have reoriented both Buddhist studies and a wide range of related disciplines in recent years, Sasson’s introduction resists aligning the essays collectively toward one goal. Instead, the introduction takes as a case study the famous “Emerald Buddha” in Wat Phra Si Rattana Satsadaram, Thailand, as a way to explore the volume’s various themes. Among them, Sasson touches on the apparent paradoxes of possessing material wealth in Buddhism, the function of ornament, and the place of jewels in relic veneration. The task of aligning each essay within larger currents of scholarship is left to individual authors and approached differently by each.

The first three essays deal with images of jewels in literature. Wendy Doniger’s essay, “Jewels of Recognition and Paternity in Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu Traditions,” works from stories about wearable jewelry in ancient India in Sanskrit plays, Buddhist past-life narratives, and other Jain and Hindu sources. Focusing on signet rings and other forms of jewelry that could serve as personal identifiers,

Doniger examines the perceived connections between jewelry and its wearer. From this, Doniger identifies jewelry's ability to play the role of evidence in many of these stories—for example as proof of paternity. Throughout, of chief concern for Doniger is the tension between this evidentiary potential of jewelry and what she identifies as “common sense”—the quality of reasonable doubt always available to, but only sparingly employed by, storytellers.

In the next essay, “Taking Refuge in Jewels,” Maria Heim focuses on a single commentary, attributed to Buddhaghosa (act. fifth century), on the *Jewel Sutta* (*Ratana-sutta*). Her essay includes an appendix with a translation of that text. Buddhaghosa’s commentary examines the web of relations between physical jewels and the Buddha, who is often listed alongside the Dhamma and the Sangha as one of Buddhism’s “Three Jewels.” To this end, the commentary conducts an extended comparison of the characteristics of the Buddha and the qualities of jewels, especially those related to their effects on people—their ability to bring pleasure, their status of being greatly valued, their uses by high-status patrons. The comparison, argues Heim, not only works at the level of simile (the Buddha is *as honored as a jewel*), but also highlights a distinct kind of dissimilarity (the Buddha is unique in this class, and so *only* a buddha is truly a jewel).

Vanessa Sasson’s essay, “Jeweled Renunciation,” revisits a well-known narrative about jewels and wealth in the Buddha’s hagiography. There, an apparent paradox emerges during the “Great Departure,” before the attainment of buddhahood, in which, just as the Bodhisattva renounces the wealth he was born into, he is carried forward in his path with jeweled, magical, and royal imagery. As Sasson points out, the Bodhisattva is, in this moment, both a renunciant and at his most bejeweled. To show the ways that these jewels were written as active participants in both the Buddha’s hagiography and in past-life narratives, Sasson takes up the concept of “adornment” (*alamkāra*), drawing on a usage of this term proposed by Jan Gonda that highlights its potential to “make someone fit for a specific purpose.”

Taking up historically specific cases from the Kusāna empire, around Mathura, and the Sātavāhana empire, in the Deccan region, in the early centuries of the Common Era, Andy Rotman’s essay, “Are We All Merchants?” reconsiders another apparent paradox—the close alliance of early Buddhist and mercantile communities. Rotman looks at the ways that mercantile activities left imprints on early Buddhism,

especially in the market-based morality underlying the concepts of merit and virtue. Working from archaeological evidence and epigraphic records, Rotman returns to question what merchants gained from making offerings to Buddhist communities. Following the work of James Heitzman on “donated magnificence,” Rotman argues that the earliest Brāhmī inscriptions indicate an intense competition for status through conspicuous generosity. This aspect, which rendered merit and money as convertible forms of capital, provided the fields through which the identities of monks and merchants could develop in tandem.

Christopher Emmrich’s essay, “I Don’t Want a Wife without Ear Cuffs,” looks at Newar jewelry of Nepal, where the jewelry market has for centuries been dominated by Buddhist makers. Focusing on questions about how jewels and jewelry mediate relations between people, Emmrich examines these objects in two registers: as commodities that circulate in markets, and as figures in literary discourses from lyrics and narrative texts. In discussing practices of jewelry making and use, Emmrich highlights the role of the goldsmith. As one whose work facilitates ritual milestones, like marriage, and enables the material exchanges that create bonds between families, the goldsmith is in constant contact with clients, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. Serving as a kind of vernacular, like the Newar language itself, the work of these jewelers cuts across perceived boundaries in Newar communities, servicing both Buddhist and Hindu human clients, as well as Buddhist and Hindu images.

The essays that follow explore facets of jewels and jewelry within the contexts of relic culture. In “Ornaments of This World,” Nancy Lin takes up the uses of jewels in the reliquary *stūpa* of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso (1617–1682), currently housed in the Potala Palace in Lhasa. Masterminded by the Dalai Lama’s regent, Desi Sangyé Gyatso (1653–1705), the 12.6-meter-tall *stūpa*, named the “Sole Ornament of the World” (*‘dzam gling rgyan gcig*), is coated almost entirely in gold and ornamented with jewels, serving as a monument to the Gelukpa lineage. Lin argues that the extravagance of the *stūpa*’s production was inextricable from its transformative capacity to produce effects in the world. Lin also uses as evidence contemporaneous written sources surrounding this object to challenge longstanding assumptions about “ornament,” which has tended to draw a line between a structure and its superfluous embellishments. Working from

a late seventeenth-century catalogue of the donors of gold, silver, and other precious materials underwriting the construction of the *stūpa*, Lin argues that these donors sought to cultivate karmic connections through proximity to the Fifth Dalai Lama's corporeal remains. In this, Lin is concerned not only with the social functions of "donated magnificence," but also with a broader courtly aesthetic that celebrated radical ornateness and its capacity to transform the world.

John Strong's "Beads and Bones" looks at the archaeological discovery of relics made in 1898 at a *stūpa* near Piprahwa in Northern India. One of Strong's goals in this essay is to examine the relations between these bones and beads in the various afterlives of the Piprahwa finds, which, not long after their discovery, were dispersed to monasteries and collections in India, Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Japan, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. Building on the recent work of Wannaporn Rienjang on relic deposits in Greater Gandhāra, Strong discusses four functions of the beads placed alongside corporeal remains: as offerings to honor the deceased and make merit for the devotee, as adornments to relics of the bones, as extended stand-ins for the personhood of the devotee in lieu of a burial next to the relic, and even as relics in their own right—a quality established through their own resemblance to the glittering particles thought to typify *śarīra* relics.

Ellen Huang's essay, "Translating the Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing," like Strong's, turns to look at the material qualities of relics. Huang focuses on the Bao'en Monastery Pagoda in Nanjing, well-known historically in European sources as the "Porcelain Pagoda" for its ceramic-tiled exterior. Huang diverges from previous scholarship on this building, which has centered on its relation to *chinoiserie*, to explore a potential connection between the ceramic material of the pagoda and the jewel-like quality of the Buddhist relics held within. In teasing out this connection, Huang works also with the objects recently excavated from its underground chamber and, in doing so, interrogates the relation between relics and their containers. Huang's argument that the ceramic material of the pagoda's exterior should be understood as possessing a jeweled sheen akin to that of *śarīra* relics, however, appears to conflate two time periods: late-imperial constructions of the pagoda's aboveground architecture, and the early eleventh-century underground relic deposit. If there is a material resonance to be detected between porcelain and relics, ultimately, more work is necessary to understand for whom that resonance resonated.

The next essay, “Luminous Remains,” by Francesca Tarocco analyzes the affinities between relics, jewels, and the material of glass in the context of the spread of Buddhism to China through the tenth century. After providing an overview of major sources on relics in China in hagiographies of eminent monks, Tarocco looks at how certain qualities of glass—its transparency, its ability to shimmer and gleam, and its creation through fire—were adopted in Buddhist contexts. She discusses the use of glass materials as offerings in relic deposits, such as that at Famen Monastery in Fufeng, Shaanxi, and at Jingzhi Monastery in Dingzhou, Hebei. Tarocco argues that the qualities of glass were directly connected to its uses as a tool in the Buddhist ritual repertoire, where it may have been adopted deliberately not only as a container for relics, but also in the making of the luminous remains themselves. Like several other contributors, Tarocco is thus interested in glass both as a container for a corporeal relic and as a relic in its own right. Through interviews with contemporary practitioners, Tarocco also looks at how these affinities between glass and relics continue to the present day in China, where the belief that extraordinary Buddhists will produce vitreous relics after cremation persists.

The volume’s final two essays discuss the “wish-fulfilling jewel” (*cintāmani*). Richard Payne’s essay, “Offerings for Prosperity to Wish-Fulfilling Jewel Cakra Avalokiteśvara,” focuses on the deity Wish-Fulfilling Jewel Cakra Avalokiteśvara and their history across India, China, and Japan. Pointing out that this deity adopted a female form only in Japan, Payne looks at how the two overlapping symbols of this deity, that of Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, and that of the wish-fulfilling jewel, were modified in Japan according to local conceptions of legitimate sovereignty. Payne also takes up the concept of the “cult”—the linking together of deity, ideology, and practice—to reconsider what has previously been regarded as a gender transformation in this deity. On this topic, Payne argues that we can understand the cult of the Wish-Fulfilling Jewel Cakra Avalokiteśvara as taking a particular form at a particular time and place, rather than possessing an identity that could ever remain static.

In “Hidden Treasures,” Casey Collins examines the uses of the wish-fulfilling jewel in the contemporary lay Buddhist community Shinnyo-en. One of Collins’ goals in focusing on this community is to show how new understandings of religious practice and the shaping of devotee’s identities can be discovered through object-based or

image-based approaches. In the case of Shinnyo-en, which is one of several religious organizations influenced by Shingon that formed in Japan during the twentieth century, the founders and practitioners added new meanings to “classical” Buddhist symbols and practices. For example, the community’s founders, Fumiaki Itō (1906–1989) and Tomoji Itō (1912–1967), by adapting the wish-fulfilling jewel from Shingon Buddhism for use in devotional images, developed a large community around new symbols that retained older, Buddhist meanings. The very community of Shinnyo-en, argues Collins, came to present itself as a wish-fulfilling jewel, created by the sacrifices of the two founders.

Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things is a collection that, by design, defies expectations. As noted in Sasson’s introduction, one of the volume’s main aims is to counter assumptions about austerity and renunciation with which students often approach Buddhist traditions. Taken together, this volume’s essays do not so much converge in the promise of a new intellectual position on this point, but rather serve as a sweeping introduction to the potentials of looking closely at “shiny things” in Buddhism.

Several underlying questions, for example those about the relation between the renunciation of monastics and the wealth of householders, though perhaps not unfamiliar to Buddhist studies, take on new significance through the volume’s dual emphases on the uses of “jewels” (and the attendant concepts of wealth, ornament, and adornment) and the ways that they slide between metaphor and reality. And, although the volume’s title indicates that these undertakings were happening mainly in the “Buddhist imaginary,” many of the contributors, explicitly or not, approach their evidence with the aim of understanding this bejeweled Buddhism as it was lived “on the ground.” To this end, contributors explore not only the representation of jewels, jewelry, and shiny things, but also what we might call their agentive qualities—their sensorial encounters with people, their abilities to intervene in the social sphere, and their abilities to produce effects in the world. With this approach in mind, this reviewer cannot help but feel that the impression of encountering a more material world of Buddhism would be greatly strengthened by the addition of color reproductions in the volume. Though hardly a requirement for an interdisciplinary edited collected like this one, a close formal analysis

of source materials would have, for many essays, augmented the contributors' observations and arguments.

This is, however, a minor issue when compared to the many stimulating contributions of *Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things*. The volume is a valuable addition to the rising current in Buddhist studies that takes seriously visual and material cultures and their relations with written texts, if nothing else, for the wealth of sources and contexts that it incorporates. The more one knows about the history of Buddhist studies, which has in some ways resisted fully attending to the "glittery materiality" of Buddhist traditions, the more this shift is appreciated. Readers of the volume will find much to praise in the individual case studies while gaining a better understanding of the striking continuities and divergences across Buddhist traditions in Asia. In collecting scholarship with such varied approaches and far-reaching conclusions, the volume will surely inspire future research and teaching in Buddhist studies, material culture studies, and art history.

