Theravāda “Missionary Activity”: Exploring the Secular Features of Socio-Politics and Ethics

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THERAVĀDA “MISSIONARY ACTIVITY”:
EXPLORING THE SECULAR FEATURES OF SOCIO-POLITICS AND ETHICS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Philosophy and Religion
Western Kentucky University
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Master of Arts

By
C. Scott Brugh

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THERAVĀDA "MISSIONARY ACTIVITY":
EXPLORING THE SECULAR FEATURES OF SOCIO-POLITICS AND ETHICS

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To my ācarinī, Lindsay, and ācarinīpācariya, Bojjhā
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Buddhism provided me with both a clearer understanding on the Abhidhamma’s historio-cultural significance and the tools to more precisely articulate specific ethnographic information presented in the last chapter.

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Sincerely,

C. Scott Brugh
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The purpose of this thesis is to comprehensively explore Theravāda missionary activity. The philological, textual, theoretical, and ethnographic methods used to investigate the historical, sociopolitical, religious, and ethical aspects of early Theravāda, the U.S. Vipassanā (Insight) meditation movement, and modern Burmese Theravāda revealed nuanced meanings in the descriptions of these adherents’ endeavors with respect to proselytizing, converting, and the concept of missionary religions. By exploring the secular features that contributed to their religious appearances, a more developed contextualization of Theravāda “activity” reshapes understandings of the larger concept of missionary religions. I argue that what has been maintained in the establishment of early Theravāda, and continuance of Theravāda thereafter, is the preservation of a secular activity with respect to resolving diverse sociopolitical and ethical tensions through religious articulations and practices of tolerance and egalitarianism.

In brief, the first chapter is a philological study on the Pāli word “desetha” or “preach.” The word desetha, and thus its meaning, is traced to its Prākritic form—a contemporaneous language more likely spoken by Gotama Buddha—to posit a more accurate translation for this word. Next, a theoretical examination into early Theravāda’s sociopolitical, ethical, and religious environment demonstrates the larger secular, rather than religious, features that contributed to this ancient movement’s emergence. A contextual analysis comparing the emergence and establishment of the “secular” U.S.
Vipassanā (Insight) meditation movement to that of early Theravāda follows, in order to explore how the former aligns with Theravāda missionizing. Lastly, an ethnographic study on Burmese Buddhist monastics is presented. In relation to missionary activity, the Abhidhamma, a Buddhist doctrinal system, not only provides Burmese Buddhist monastics with a system of applied ethics that shapes how they interact with Buddhists and non-Buddhists in America, but also helps to explain the larger concern of viewing such activity as strictly “religious.”
Introduction

While all global religions have taken part in “missionary activity,” the misconception that religious and secular worlds or “categories” exist or operate apart from one another restricts our understanding of this concept.¹ The lack of consideration of how secular features both intersect with and influence perceptions of missionary activity has resulted in a non-comprehensive and unrealistic view with respect to Theravāda Buddhism. When strictly defined as religious activity, this concept seems maladapted or imposed into the expansion of early Theravāda and post-canonical Theravāda forms, such as the U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement and Burmese Theravāda Buddhism. This is because what underlies a more comprehensive understanding of missionary activity is not simply a matter of determining whether proselytizing and converting are Theravāda enactments, nor how these features might be enacted; it also becomes clear that what is being transmitted and preserved includes secular features appearing in the form of religion. Therefore, I argue that what has been maintained in the establishment of early Theravāda, and continuance of Theravāda thereafter, is the preservation of a secular activity with respect to resolving diverse sociopolitical and ethical tensions through religious articulations and practices of tolerance and egalitarianism.

¹ Three scholars, namely Talal Asad, Russell T. McCutcheon, and Jonathan Z. Smith, explain how these entities or “categories” are not “fixed,” nor “distinct” as the “sacred” or “profane,” but instead that “religion” is “created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization,” respectively. Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 25; hereafter, Asad, Formations of the Secular; Russell T. McCutcheon, Manufacturing Religion: The Discourses on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia (Oxford University Press, 1997), 18; hereafter, McCutcheon, Manufacturing Religion; Jonathan Z. Smith, Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 9; hereafter, Smith, Imagining Religion.
To address and explain this position, Max L. Stackhouse’s description of missionary activity is provided as a comparative tool. Stackhouse states:

Missionary activity always alienates its converts from previous belief and practice to some degree, for it introduces a different way of organizing faith and life. Both domestic and foreign missionary activity is marked by intense intellectual activity, for the whole of reality has to be reconsidered from the new perspective. It also is the breeding ground of freedom, for in conversion a person finds that he or she can make an ultimate choice about, or be drawn by grace into, a new relationship to the truly divine. Such a person no longer has an identity determined by age, gender, class, custom, status, ethnicity, or the dictate of any lesser authority—parental or political, cultural or economic. Having been drawn into freedom, all other areas of life are subject to reevaluation and reconstruction.  

The Encyclopedia of Religion, 2005

The activity conducted within Theravāda Buddhism does not fully accord with this description because it both includes and excludes such aspects. From an inclusionary standpoint, there are examples of dissociating former “belief and practice to some degree.” For instance, as the number of Theravāda monastics and Buddhist temples in the United States began to increase in the 1970s, American adherents with faiths and backgrounds other than Theravāda began disengaging in various ways from their religious upbringings upon their affiliation with the temples and involvement in “traditional” Buddhist beliefs and practices. However, a few salient exclusionary aspects are situated in Theravāda’s relationship to the “divine” and “freedom.”

For example, an articulated conceptualization of or relationship with the divine was neither the foundation upon which early Theravāda was formed, nor was there an emphasis on experiencing the type of “freedom” described above. In fact, when

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comparing the abovementioned explanation of missionary activity to Theravāda
philosophy, belief in the divine is a non sequitur. Moreover, this definition of religious
conversion presupposes both the divine’s existence and experience of what freedom
means. Thus, a definition of mission that characterizes it as an activity or intent to breed
freedom through a “new relationship to the truly divine” is problematic. In other words,
these significant incongruities indicate that Theravāda is excluded from such activity.
Nevertheless, the fact that Theravāda is a global religion indicates a need for a better
understanding of how the context from which early Theravāda originated shaped its
appearance, how it has spread, and what was missionized. By exploring and discussing
the secular features that contributed to early Theravāda’s emergence and establishment,
two post-canonical Theravāda forms—the U.S. Vipassanā (Insight) meditation movement
and Burmese Theravāda—are included to explain and support how Theravāda’s
expansion into diverse geographic locations continues to maintain these features.

Specifically, in terms of the contextual significance prior to and during early
Theravāda’s development, Gotama Buddha’s upbringing in a gana-sangha⁵ is considered
a pertinent influence for the origination of early Theravāda and the manner in which it
spread. Through presenting and analyzing the Indo-Aryans⁶ and gana-sanghas’ longer

⁴ In fact, one may find the aforementioned definition to be subtle or conspicuous theistic “missionary
activity.” It suggests that the “supernatural” provides a “freedom” to help converts rethink and approach all
facets of life in a “different way.” Moreover, such wording is, perhaps, intended to discreetly beseech
converts to Western theistic religions, such as Christianity; and therefore, continues and furthers the
deployment of such related “missionary activity.”
⁵ As a single or group of clan(s), such as the Sākyas or “Shakyas,” the term “gana” refers to “equal status”
and “sangha” to “assembly.” Romila Thapar, Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300 (New York: The
Penguin Group, 2002), 147; hereafter, Thapar, Early India. Also see, for example, Uma Chakravarti, The
Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism (New Delhi, India: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.,
2015), 10; hereafter, Chakravarti, The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism.
⁶ While “Indo-Aryan” or “Indo-European” refers to language and is shorthand for the more accurate
language description “Indo-Aryan-speaking people” and “Indo-European-speaking people,” respectively,
the phrase is used here as a noun. This problem arose in the 19ᵗʰ century, because these labels were used
incorrectly. Thapar, Early India, 105. As Thapar states, “Language is a cultural label, and should not be
historical contestation over differing sociopolitical hierarchies and ethically coercive authority, or “egalitarian tradition,” were secular features that Gotama Buddha philosophically and pragmatically transmuted into early Theravāda features. These once secular features were then transmitted through ancient India’s “public space of debates,” and were thereby preserved or missionized.

Particular to the U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement, academics have distanced the U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement from Theravāda by emphasizing the lack of

confused with race, which, although also a social construct, claims that it has to do with biological descent.” Ibid. Therefore, it is important to note that using the term “Aryans” to refer to a people as a race is an inaccurate description imposed by scholars, such as F. Max Müller. Thapar, *Early India*, 12. Although he later recognized this inaccuracy and attempted to make such a correction, by that time it had already become common usage. Thapar, *Early India*, 13. Moreover, as Thapar explains, this inaccuracy might originate in Rig-Veda distinguishing between “arya” and “dasa” based on physical appearance, and in particular skin color. Thapar, *Early India*, 13. In sum, the racial identity of Indo-Aryan speakers is unknown. Thapar, *Early India*, xxiii.


8 Thapar, *Early India*, 137.

9 Ibid., 147.

10 Henceforth, as Asad uses the phrases “public sphere” and “public space of debates,” these phrases, as well as “sphere,” “space,” and “spaces” are intended to be synonymous. Joy Manné also describes the ancient Indian religious “Debate” within a similar perspective, such as “public competitive occasions” that were “exercise[s] in publicity.” Additionally, both descriptions will be discussed further in chapter three. Joy Manné, “Categories of Sutta in the Pāli Nikāyas and their Implications for our Appreciation of the Buddhist Teaching and Literature,” *Journal of Pāli Text Society* 15 (1990), 73. Hereafter, Manné, “Categories of Sutta in the Pāli Nikāyas.”

Theravāda features in this movement, such as ritual, monasticism, and doctrine.\textsuperscript{12} However, while these religious features have been central to understanding diverse cultures’ relationships with early Theravāda and Theravāda,\textsuperscript{13} what seems conspicuously absent in academic works is that this U.S. meditation movement in fact exemplifies the aforementioned secular features that helped form and establish early Theravāda. This is because neither the manner in which the U.S. Insight meditation movement originated and expanded, nor what its adherents articulate, have been cross-examined, contextually, against early Theravāda. For example, while English translations on Pāli canonical words provide a starting place to understanding early Theravāda and the cultural context of ancient India, the reasons for certain words more or less frequent usage might have been because of cultural implications associated with them. Taken up in chapter three, for instance, is how the word “\textit{vimutti},” or “freedom,” appears infrequently in the Pāli canon, but used often by U.S. vipassanā meditation centers’ leaders and practitioners.

Furthermore, the notion that the gana-sanghas’ system and ethos are missionized or preserved features in early Theravāda is perhaps best understood by discussing the emergence and expansion of the U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement. In other words, a lineage—not of religion \textit{per se}, but instead of the gana-sanghas’ secular system and ethos—is contextually produced out of this ancient cultural contestation and maintained


through the emergence of early Theravāda that is identifiable in the Insight meditation movement. Therefore, when one examines what contributes to both movements’ manifestations and their features, it becomes clear that the U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement unequivocally mirrors that of early Theravāda.

Support for this understanding is found in Talal Asad’s anthropology on “the secular,” or “a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities.”¹⁴ He demonstrates how modernity is characteristically unfixed, nontransferable, and therefore a non-universal concept from one location to another.¹⁵ His description of the ways in which diverse cultures intersect to form “the secular” in differing geographic locations and periods expands our understanding of missionary activity in a similar manner. That is, the “behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities” that coalesced in both ancient India and the United States caused missionary activity in early Theravāda and the U.S. Insight meditation movement (as well as in Christianity and Theravāda) to be both unique and similar. More specifically, while Theravāda and the U.S. Insight meditation movement appear to be distinct from one another, they inevitably share a secular and religious lineage through social, political, ethical, and religious dimensions. However, because missionary activity is not imposed upon the Insight meditation movement’s expansion, the adherents’ behaviors or actions are academically misconstrued due to a failure to compare “the secular” and contextual originations.

¹⁴ Chapter three explains and incorporates further the concept of “the secular.” Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 25.
¹⁵ Asad explains that this is due to multiple histories converging in different geographic locations at different points in time. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*. The idea of “Theravāda” as an entirely movable concept has been explored and understood more recently as a more varied entity from geographic location to location through emphasizing differences in textual, ritual, and practical applications within Theravādin countries’ histories. See Blackburn, “Localizing Lineage,” 131-149; Peter Skilling, “Introduction,” in *How Theravada is Theravada?: Exploring Buddhist Identities*, eds. Skilling, Peter et al. (Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2012), xiii-xxx.
Therefore, both a more complete or genuine understanding of Theravāda and the concept of “missionary religions” are expunged. Thus, the notion of a contextual secular lineage—as way to both uncover buried aspects of Theravāda and reshape a concept through religion instead of the inverse—is supported further by ethnographic research conducted on Burmese Theravāda monastics living in the United States.

In brief, while the Burmese monastics’ appearances and approach to daily living typify a religious lifestyle, their application of the Abhidhamma (a philosophical, psychological, and ethical doctrinal system)\footnote{A system of Buddhist metaphysics laid out in the Pāli Buddhist canon, commentaries, and sub commentaries.} in interactions with both Burmese laity and Christians stems from the preservation of the aforementioned gana-sanghas’ features. Therefore, by examining the secular and religious features that contribute to how early Theravāda appeared, a comprehensive contextualization and understanding of Theravāda missionary activity is developed in the course of an investigation of the U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement and Burmese Theravāda.

In sum, what is presented is how the early Theravāda movement in ancient India, Burmese Theravāda in both Burma and the United States, as well as the U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement have preserved the gana-sanghas’ system or their socio-politics and ethos. This is executed by pointing out each Theravāda form’s relationship with this ancient culture’s tolerance toward individuals’ independent thoughts and eclectic views,\footnote{Thapar, \textit{Early India}, 149; Laksiri Jayasuriya, “Buddhism, Politics, and State Craft,” \textit{International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture} September 11 (2008), 47; hereafter, Jayasuriya, “Buddhism, Politics, and State Craft”; Aloysius, “Caste In and Above History,” 157.} as well as the equal, ethical treatment of diverse peoples. Before specifically discussing academic works on missionary activity, and the methodology and summary of the chapters, it is important to note first that, while there are exceptions to how missionary
activity in Theravāda is conducted or is reflective of the larger Christian missionizing history, “the secular” likely explains how such similar developments occur. In other words, there are certainly a few known contemporary examples of Theravāda missionizing that exhibit a potentially strong relationship with acts of proselytizing and converting.\textsuperscript{18}

A Conceptual Framework of Buddhist Missionary Activity

A broad scan of works on the global migrations of religions in a variety of academic fields indicates that “missionary religion” is used as an umbrella term covering numerous facets of activity. More specific to Theravāda Buddhism’s global expansion, an array of scholarly literature demonstrates the multiple modes by which adherents’ engagements within various geographic locations can be studied. Such categorizations include, but are not limited to, transmission, diffusion, and the adaptation of immigrant temples and lay Buddhist centers.\textsuperscript{19} In comparison with the given description of missionary activity, such studies suggest that proselytizing and converting might not be

\textsuperscript{18} For example, Theravāda Buddhist monastic movements—such as U Wirathu’s 969 movement in Burma specifically subjugating the Rohingya and Galagonda A. Gnanasara Thero’s Budo Bela Sena in Sri Lanka oppressing both Christian fundamentalists and Muslim extremists—are “not only political but also social,” as Mikael Gravers states. Mikael Gravers, “Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka: Religious Violence and Globalized Imaginaries of Endangered Identities,” \textit{Contemporary Buddhism} 16, no. 1 (May, 2015), 12. Hereafter, Gravers, “Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka.


18 For example, Theravāda Buddhist monastic movements—such as U Wirathu’s 969 movement in Burma specifically subjugating the Rohingya and Galagonda A. Gnanasara Thero’s Budo Bela Sena in Sri Lanka oppressing both Christian fundamentalists and Muslim extremists—are “not only political but also social,” as Mikael Gravers states. Mikael Gravers, “Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka: Religious Violence and Globalized Imaginaries of Endangered Identities,” Contemporary Buddhism 16, no. 1 (May, 2015), 12. Hereafter, Gravers, “Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka.

necessary or conceptually-fixed components that constitute Theravāda as a missionary religion.

Pioneering such a viewpoint in his 1990 dissertation titled "Rethinking Buddhist Missions," Jonathan S. Walters argues that "Buddhist missions" were misrepresented due to Western Buddhologists conflating nineteenth-century Protestant influences with analytical work on ancient Buddhist texts to parallel the formative years of Buddhism with Christian missionaries of the 1800s. In his view, Buddhologists and historians of religion are the "real Christian influences" who inscribed "mission" into Buddhism inaccurately due to Western dominion via the influence of publications. Walters regards proselytizing as the religious feature that ultimately represents the distinction between Christian and Theravāda Buddhist missionaries. He does so as a result of focusing on the word, in the Pāli form, "cārikāṃ," or "to wander." Since then, scholars have either continued to subscribe to the standard missionary activity model without considering Walters’s study, or instead challenged his argument directly.

Linda Learman is one of the latter; in an attempt to reposition Buddhism within the missionizing model, she claims that proselytizing and converting are but one of three typologies. Underscoring the late domestic and international missionary work of the 19th and 20th centuries’ through the typologies of “domestic revival,” “support for diaspora communities,” and “foreign conversions,” Learman consolidates a myriad of

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 187.
23 Ibid., 217-218.
24 Learman, Buddhist Missionaries in the Era of Globalization. Learman also bases her point on Walters’s historical account of Christian “missionary work.”
25 Ibid., 1-21, esp. 10-16. Where “missionary activity” is known more universally through acts of proselytizing and converting in foreign countries or “foreign conversions,” Learman includes “domestic
essays into the aforementioned categorizations by sharing a mixture of Buddhist missionary “strategies.”

For example, of the two contributions on Theravāda strategies, one is said to align with both “revival” and “conversion” typologies.26 Steven Kemper’s essay on Anāgārika Dharmapāla, a Sri Lankan Theravādin, is largely situated in Dharmapāla’s early childhood experiences with Christian missionaries and his address at the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago. While in agreement that Dharmapāla was certainly “influenced by Western practices,” such as his Christian schooling, understandings of “popularized science,”27 and comments about “the despotic administration of Anglo-Indian bureaucracy,”28 there seems to be a lack of specificity on his “reinvention of Buddhist missionizing.”29

Kemper presents Dharmapāla’s missionary activity from within “a” Buddhism.30 He includes Dharmapāla’s remark at the World’s Parliament of Religions: “I have come to the West… not to convert Westerners to Buddhism, but to bring some knowledge of a religion.”31 While Kemper points out that “[t]he distinction between conversion and ‘bringing knowledge’ is worth reiterating,”32 he explains further that Dharmapāla did not impose “Protestant ideas about conversion, but instead gave the West a Buddhism more

revival” with specific reference to Walters’s outline of Christian missionizing. In Walters’s outline, he includes the return of Christian missionaries to the United States between WWI and WWII. However, where Walters continues with proselytizing and converting in this particular missionizing period, Learman foregoes these acts in the typology of “domestic revival.” Additionally, “support for diaspora communities” is a newly created typology.

27 Ibid., 25.
28 Ibid., 27.
29 Ibid., 25.
30 Ibid., 30.
31 Ibid., 29-30.
32 Ibid., 30.
agreeable to seekers abandoning religious traditions that insist on religious identity as an exclusive commitment."\(^{33}\) That is, upon facing Protestant conversion, Buddhism would be presented without such features. However, this approach is in line with the “traditional” practice of Theravāda, if one considers Bhikkhu Ariyesako’s remark that, “A monk will usually wait for an invitation to speak on Dhamma, so there is no question about him proselytizing.”\(^{34}\) Therefore, the focus on “bringing knowledge” does not constitute a reinvention of Theravāda missionary activity. Moreover, the larger misleading notion of Dharmapāla’s missionizing is that his reinvention includes “a Buddhism” that he “gave the West.”

As interpreted by most Western scholars, Dharmapāla’s attendance at the World’s Parliament of Religions represents something other than the promotion of a traditional religion. However, as Todd LeRoy Perreira explains, Dharmapāla’s real reason for attending the World’s Parliament of Religions was to promote the usage of “Arya Dharma” rather than “Buddhism”\(^{35}\)—and therefore not to “missionize.” Perreira, more specifically, remarks that Dharmapāla was contesting “the Japanese delegation’s concerted efforts to identify the Buddhism that Dharmapāla represented… as ‘Hīnayāna’”—a derogatory identification, because the phrase “Theravāda” (system of the elders) had not yet become mainstream.\(^{36}\)

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\(^{33}\) Emphasis added. Ibid., 30.


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 500.
Furthermore, quoting from one of Dharmapāla’s writings, Kemper supports the idea of a reinvention of Buddhist activity through a confluence of religious and secular features. For instance, Dharmapāla writes that “the custodians [Sinha] of an ancient religious literature for 2200 years… should be allowed to die out slowly from inanition,” and that “[t]he history of evolution can point to no other race today that has withstood the ravages of time and kept its individuality for so long as the Sinhalese people.”

Therefore, an attempt to correct a sociopolitical injustice brought about by the tyrannical governance of “Anglo-Indian bureaucracy” or the preservation of a sociopolitical status amidst cultural tension is mistakenly conveyed as a solely religious activity.

Equally important to the strategies that Kemper discusses, in terms of the creation of typologies, is that the works presented conversely support a modicum of Theravāda Buddhist “proselytizers” today. Where the focus of seven of the nine essays is on forms of Mahāyāna and Vajrāyāna missionary activity in an era of globalization, there is further support for the notion that early Theravāda missionaries and Theravāda thereafter have not engaged communities as proselytizers aimed toward converting others. Moreover, the creation of these typologies is inherently situated in the location rather than the strategies. That is, the specified typologies differentiate modes of missionizing more through Buddhism’s presence in different geographic locations and less through the strategies performed. Moreover, what becomes clearer upon surveying other scholarly research pertaining to Buddhist missionaries is a misleading picture that newly-created typologies are neither imbricated nor ultimately distinguishable.

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37 Kemper, “Dharmapala’s Dharmaduta,” 27.
For instance, there is a contemporary transnational study on Thai monastics identified as “overseas Buddhist missionaries” and “home Buddhist missionaries,” Learman’s “domestic revival,” “support for diaspora communities,” and “foreign conversions,” as well as a U.S.-based study demarcating the boundaries of transmission with three typologies—“Elite,” “Ethnic,” and “Evangelical”—from the 1960s to just before the turn of the twenty-first century. However, these studies’ typologies, and studies like these, are often premised on little, if any, philological or ethnographic investigation into, for example, how words in the Pāli canon have been mistranslated and how doctrine is actuated in the lives of those studied, respectively. Therefore, often absent is a rich contextualization that would help identify both the nature of Theravāda’s origination and what underlies the activity conducted.

It may be, then, that missionizing is currently addressed and articulated within a misinformed academic framework that dictates how to study religions. Incorporating world religions into this Western concept by creating typologies or categories to linguistically justify the inclusion of religions other than Christianity, such as Theravāda, perhaps belies their more genuine nature and meaning within their diverse intersecting cultural histories. Instead, research on missionary religions must consider how adherents’ activities manifest both with and without consideration of Western conceptual influences. Hence, there are conceptual challenges regarding both the theoretical perception that distinct typologies exist in Theravāda missionizing and that religious and secular

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categories are separate\textsuperscript{40}—both of which contribute to a misunderstanding of this "activity." Therefore, the term "missionary activity" seems to underrepresent the complexity of cultural influences forming adherents’ religious identities, such as the preceding and contemporary tensions over socio-political hierarchies and cultural ethics.

To understand this perspective further, consider how the Western concept of missionizing takes on the contextual elements of globalization that both scramble the lines demarcating conceptual boundaries and motivates what Peter Berger describes as a need for "a more nuanced understanding"; a need that must take into account "both the homogenizing forces and the resistance to them."\textsuperscript{41} However, when specified boundaries are applied to concepts, the "more nuanced understanding" that emerges within the academic lens endangers the subject’s authenticity. In other words, conceptually maintaining such religious typologies not only blur this particular concept’s meaning, but also diminishes the chances of obtaining a better representation, and, therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the people studied.

Resulting from both the lack of a comprehensive contextualization of early and post-canonical Theravāda, as well as of the development of or force behind Western linguistic homogenization, the inclusion of Theravāda Buddhism in the scope of missionary religions has devalued its evolution and general global presence. This is because Western studies and interpretations of Theravāda Buddhism reflect the West’s historical domination and subordination of foreign cultures and their practices, with little

\textsuperscript{40} Russell T. McCutcheon, for example, explains that, "Whether or not religion is to be promoted or combated, described and interpreted or explained away, to deploy the concepts of religion, religious experience, the sacred, \textit{Homo religiosus}, and the like, ontologically presumes the self-evidence of the sui generis character of this one portion of human experience and action and suggests a disregard for political, economic, and sociological (namely, historical and material) factors." McCutcheon, \textit{Manufacturing Religion}, 67.

\textsuperscript{41} Peter Berger, "Four Faces of Global Culture," \textit{The National Interest}, no. 49 (1997); 1. Hereafter, Berger, "Four Faces of Global Culture."
consideration that these cultures’ religious thoughts and practices were or are either partially or altogether unique. Steven Collins, for example, remarks that Western philosophy linguistically renders contemporary “native English speakers”\textsuperscript{42} an “exaggeratedly and self-protectively tolerant” noetic disposition because of the tendency “to accord to different cultures, under the names perhaps of ‘forms of life’ or ‘language games’, a kind of immunity from external historical or sociological criticism and comparison.”\textsuperscript{43} In other words, the linguistics applied to represent such “immunity” is cultural or representative of inculcated Western thought-processes. Such articulations are strategic, for they attempt to exonerate ill-viewed historical Western behaviors and actions that have taken place globally. Linguistically granting diverse cultures a sense of freedom or dissociation from study and empirical interpretation through a particular cultural history that informs the “conceptual and linguistic habits of [Western] ‘common sense,’” in turn, provides the “native English thinker” with a preemptive mental protection from scrutiny or the potential to be culturally subsumed. Although this “self-protectively tolerant” tendency might have arisen from a fear of inferiority,\textsuperscript{44} it was certainly related to an inaccurate association with diverse cultures due to a lack of knowledge, understanding, or lived experiences.


\textsuperscript{43} Ibid. Collins references Wittgenstein, and although Wittgenstein depicts “language games” through different scenarios and specific word examples, “language games” is perhaps best understood here as: “I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven, a ‘language game.’” See bibliography: Ludwig Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2009), page 8\textsuperscript{e}.

\textsuperscript{44} For example, Juliane Schober explains how the British government’s perception of a colonial curriculum in late 19th century Burma legitimated attempts to colonize “native peoples.” As understood by the British, this particular cultural aspect was a “presumed ideology of cultural evolution… [that] obliged them to fulfill the ‘White Man’s Burden’ by bringing progress to the colonies.” Emphasis added. Juliane Schober, \textit{Modern Buddhist Conjunctions In Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society} (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011); 50. Hereafter, Schober, \textit{Modern Buddhist Conjectures in Myanmar}.
While the Western mental culture described above helps to explain some of the reasons for expanding the boundaries of concepts such as missionary religions, and complements Berger’s remarks, diverse aspects of differing religions have nevertheless been aligned with one another due to “globalization.” However, this conceptual global process has been more accurately identified in studies on religions in other ways. Therefore, it is important to discern that “missionary religion,” as an academic, linguistic framework in which to situate world religions in a singular, conceptual global process, misleadingly accommodates such developments, because it also erases the unique histories of world religions such as Theravāda Buddhism. That is, where Berger includes secular and religious dimensions in the larger framework of globalization, “missionary activity” falls short. Thus, this study on Theravāda comprises an attempt to demonstrate this religion’s similarities and differences in relation to the previously given understanding of missionizing through elucidating the central secular features that motivated its emergence.

**Methodology and Chapter Outline**

I utilized an array of resources and implemented a multidisciplinary approach to effectively examine missionary activity in both early and Burmese Theravāda Buddhism, for example, regarding commentaries on five canonical works, John B. Henderson explains that, “In fact, it may be stated as a general rule that the further commentarial traditions developed away from their canonical sources, both chronologically and conceptually, the more similar they became to one another.”


as well as in the U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement. A more comprehensive contextualization of Theravāda missionary activity was sought by utilizing historical, philological, theoretical, and ethnographic methods. By applying these approaches to studies on Theravāda in different geographic locations and varied periods, the “activity” conducted appeared to consistently preserve the gana-sanghas’ secular system. More precisely, both greater socio-mobility and a “more egalitarian ethos” or “tradition” were identified as the foundation blocks both for and in such “activity.”

Chapter 1 incorporates epigraphic, philological, and historio-linguistic scholarship. Additionally, I applied an integral practice in philological study known as “back-translating.” This type of translating is an approach in which language is contextualized, thus making it possible to move beyond literal translations in order to understand the meanings of words. This method was applied to the word “desetha,” or “preach,” as it is commonly translated in Western scholarship, because scholarship largely agrees that Gotama Buddha’s spoken language was Prākrit. However, in order to begin employing this approach, this Pāli canonical word-form’s tense, placement, and grouping were identified as causative, second person, and plural, respectively.

Additionally, both Pāli to English and Sanskrit to English dictionaries typically present words in present tense, third person, and singular form. Therefore, in order to uncover the

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47 Thapar describes this characteristic in reference to the “hunter-gatherers,” however, he later explains how the gana-sanghas kept with the “egalitarian tradition” of the earlier clans. Thapar, Early India, 66 and 147.
49 Norman, A Philological Approach to Buddhism, 12.
50 Ibid.
derivation of desetha in its Sanskrit form, and that of Prākrit, the declensions in each language-form were traced or compared and contrasted to one another to identify this word’s earlier definition. Upon using historical information to help contextualize further the meaning of desetha around the time of the Buddha and within a missionizing context, I retranslate specific verses from “Mara’s Snare,” a discourse in the Pāli canon said to account for proselytizing in Theravāda. I argue that, the Buddha’s missionary activity did not include proselytizing and converting, as is currently understood.

An unconventional theoretical approach to missionary activity in ancient India, namely Talal Asad’s anthropology on “the secular,” was utilized for the history described in Chapter 2. Asad describes and analyzes the complex conceptual relationship between religion, “the secular,” and “secularism” through the “public sphere” in modern times. I situate these concepts into the ancient Indian context through explaining what each concept is, according to Asad. Given the complexity of these concepts, I find it best to address and articulate further both the relationship between each of these elements and how missionary activity relates to them, specifically, in this chapter. However, what is explained here is from where this notion, on such relationships, begins.

In particular, I examined the contestation between the gana-sanghas and Indo-Aryans that preceded and concomitantly occurred during the life of Gotama Buddha. The fact that the Sākya clan, and thus Gotama Buddha, was part of the larger gana-sangha culture, the differing socio-political hierarchies and ethical treatments of diverse peoples are understood as influences behind his articulations and behaviors in early Buddhism. Therefore, in considering Asad’s statement that we must first “discover what people do
with and to ideas and practices before we can understand what is involved,” I complicate the understanding of early Theravāda as strictly religious, by including how this movement was oriented within and formed upon notions of “the secular” and missionized through the “public sphere.”

While I continue to draw on Asad’s work in Chapter 3, I also include a study by Anne Blackburn to both explain the genesis of the U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement in comparison to that of early Theravāda and how these movements’ activity are similar. Through discussing how the successful localization or importation of Theravāda hinges on political and lay support, monastic leadership, and textual selection, Blackburn points out that there is an “illusion of continuity” with respect to Theravāda lineage. However, because scholarship depicts the U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement as largely distinct from Theravāda through using similar features as those in Blackburn’s study, I utilize these features to elucidate an “illusion of discontinuity” between these movements. In particular, I use local and global events of the 1960s and 1970s to illustrate the latter movement’s emergence in a contentious religious and political landscape that is similar to early Theravāda’s beginnings. This history also helps connect Burmese monastic leadership with the U.S. meditation movement’s co-founders, the appropriation of political and lay support, and a link in textual selections.

The final chapter comprises the findings of ethnographic work conducted over a four-month period. At the time this research was conducted, three Burmese Theravāda

51 Asad, Formations of the Secular, 194.
52 Blackburn, “Localizing Lineage.”
Buddhist monastics—Ashin Pannavata, Ashin Narāda, and Ashin Mohnyin—had been living in three different U.S. States for a minimum of five consecutive years and a maximum of 11, were between 43 and 47 years of age, and were similarly educated. Over the course of study, interviews were conducted with each of the monks, Burmese Buddhist festivals were attended, and I participated in other activities, such as tutoring sessions.

In the interviews two formats were applied: “unstructured” and “semi-structured interviews.” Bernard describes the former as the grounds for establishing a rapport prior to the formal process. For example, meeting with two of three monks at least once prior to asking prepared questions, I began with common, introductory questions. Having personal experiences in the United States and Burma as a monastic allowed for the sharing of experiences during the interviews. In hindsight, this component played a significant role in building trust with each participant and facilitated a better understanding to “know about the lived experience of fellow human beings” without imposing preconceived notions.

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54 An honorific religious title. Moving forward, the title will no longer be included in front of these three monastics’ names. All participants’ names have been changed for confidentiality purposes.
55 Each monk became a samanera (novice monk) by age ten, earned his Dhammacariya (Dhamma teacher), practiced intensive vipassanā meditation during retreats for forty days and upwards of seven months, and currently teaches the Dhamma. Variations after receiving their Dhammacariya include Pannavata’s lecturing position beginning in 1999 at a State University in Yangon, Burma. Narāda received his Ph.D. in India and was a meditation instructor/assistant for the late Sayadaw U Pandita in both Burma and America. Lastly, Mohnyin, having written and published books in Burma previously, is planning to publish a work he is currently writing that includes an account of his experiences in the United States.
56 Interviews were conducted both in-person and by phone.
57 For example, katthina, or “robe offering ceremonies,” were attended at two temples.
59 For example, “How are you doing?”
60 Ibid., 213. In the original text, the words “lived experience” are in bold.
61 That is, not only did they dictate the focus of this chapter, but also the direction of this thesis. In fact, I initially resisted the idea of engaging in the concept of “missionary activity” during this part of the research.
I subsequently designed and administered “semi-structured” or “open-ended” interviews that uniformly covered a range of interrelated questions. Situated in the intersection between Burmese monastics and the American lifestyles, my initial questions were to locate a place of experienced cultural tension and understand the shared value or values that enabled monks to negotiate their cross-cultural experiences. Differences in missionizing—that is, how Christians and Burmese Theravāda Buddhist monastics spread their religions—became the predominating tension. Therefore, the larger questions explored were, “What is influencing their unique, but consistent behaviors?”; “How do other additional behaviors help explain ‘missionary work’ in a Burmese Buddhist context?”; and “How do these findings contribute to our understanding of what a missionary religion is in the relatively nascent twenty-first century?”

Ultimately, this ethnographic work, in concert with the posited fallacy of missionizing typologies, is the reason for a new approach to examining missionary activity—the *missionary spectrum*—that is suggested at the end of the final chapter.

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63 Although an initial concern regarding language barriers presented a challenge while speaking with one interviewee, I mitigated uncertainties with responses that protected the project’s accuracy. For example, I restated answers, both to ensure appropriate responses and to precipitate further clarification when needed. Additionally, I included a third monastic to either validate or eschew the responses of the other two monastics. In noticing early on that I might be misinterpreting some of his responses, I restated his answers for further clarification and was correct. To an extent this is related to what Bernard calls the “deference effect.” Described as interviewees telling you what you want to hear regardless of accuracy “in order not to offend you.” In this case, he was confirming my restated misinterpretation. Once discerned, two actions were taken to help with the matter: I included a third Burmese monastic who was fluent in English via phone interviews (due to his long-distance location) to help ensure accuracy and, secondly, albeit unintentionally, after more than 20 hours engaged in interviews, discussions, and religious events with this particular participant, I became aware of my inaccurate restated responses through kinesthetic observation during the interview process. By correlating specific physical and verbal expressions, such as his shift from a forward lean, indicating active engagement in discussion, to an upright position, with a sense of frustration and finality as his arms crossed, along with a more intentional laugh and slight smile, I had become aware of my misunderstanding, requested further clarification, and found that my observations were correct.
Chapter 1

Missionizing “Desetha”: A Western Misinterpretation

The language of Kachchayano’s Grammar is nearer that of Asoka’s rock-cut inscriptions than the language of modern Ceylonese Pali. Thus, on the second tablet at Girnar, the word chikîchhâ occurs three times. Prof. Wilson wrote: “The term chikîchchâ is said by Mr. Pinsep to be the Pali form of chikîtsa, the application of remedies; but in fact the Pali form as it appears in vocabularies is tikîchha or tikîchichhâ. The word is more probably the Prakrit form of chikîrshâ, the wish or will to do; and the edict in fact announces that it has been the twofold intention of the Raja to provide not physic, but food, water, and shade for animals and men.¹

From his analysis, Francis Mason concludes this excerpt with the remark: “And this change of a single letter makes the interpretation of the whole edict altogether different from that given by Prof. Wilson.”² By tracing declensions and derivations of “desetha” from Pâli to Sanskrit and then to Prâkrit (the latter of which was most likely spoken by Gotama Buddha), I do not provide an “altogether different” meaning of “missionary activity,” but instead present an incisive study of how missionizing was conducted in early Theravâda.³ More specifically, morality and secular practices are features that contribute to how missionary activity was conducted in early Theravâda.

G. Aloysius states that language serves as a way to represent “kinship systems,” illustrate the “material culture,” and house “thought-affect systems, worldviews and politico-cultural values.”⁴ In concert with his statement, linguistically tracing desetha to its Prâkrit form and meaning to better understand how early Theravâda missionary

² Ibid., 183. Although Mason ultimately agrees with Wilson, the point is that understanding the context is central to understanding foreign words’ meanings.
³ Because Prâkrit was most likely Gotama Buddha’s native tongue, the word “desetha” is “back-translated” to this particular Middle Indo-Aryan language form. This philological approach involves contextualizing words; thus, the behaviors and practices associated with “desetha” in its Prâkrit derivative take on new meaning.
⁴ Aloysius, “Caste In and Above History,” 152.
activity was conducted reshapes this concept’s meaning—for the English translation of this Pāli word is more accurately “show,” rather than “preach.” In moving onward, a philological study on desetha would perhaps be misunderstood or incomplete without a brief explanation on the relationship between the Pāli, Sanskrit, and Prākritic language-forms.

The Preserve of Prākritic Words’ Meanings: The Pāli Language-Form

Scholarship supporting Prākrit as Gotama Buddha’s spoken language⁵ suggests how English translations on canonical words, in the Pāli language-form, may obscure the meanings of words contemporary with the life of the Buddha. If so, translations on Prākritic words’ meanings offer a more accurate understanding of the socio-political and religio-cultural differences that contributed to early Theravāda’s manifestation and expansion. Given the non-Aryan descent of the Buddha’s Sākya clan, the development of Pāli engendered from Sanskritic speaking Indo-Aryans’ slow domination, enculturation, and alienation of Prākritic speaking non-Aryan communities.⁶ Madhav M. Deshpande, for example, remarks that the Aryans viewed non-Aryans as “substandard human beings […] whose language was obscure and unintelligible.”⁷ Furthermore, as Sanskrit would

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⁵ Although Gotama Buddha’s spoken dialect is not known with absolute certainty, there is considerable support for his spoken language having been a Prākritic form, such as Margaret Cone and Richard F. Gombrich, The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara: A Buddhist Ethic (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), xxiv; hereafter, Cone and Gombrich, The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara; Norman, A Philological Approach to Buddhism, 61; Oskar von Hinüber, “Hoary Past and Hazy Memory. On the History of Early Buddhist Texts. (Presidential address at the XVth Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, June 23–28, 2008),” Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies 29, no. 2 2006 (2008), 209. It is thought that the Buddha spoke either dialects of Prākrit or solely Māgadhī.
⁶ Over a millennium prior to the manifestation of early Theravāda and the latter establishment of Pāli, the Indo-Aryans had begun migrating into India.
eventually supersede Prākrit, the competition over which language would officially represent the peoples underlays the tensions of differing cultural systems, views, and values. Therefore, the development of the Pāli language-form encapsulates a complex, longstanding cultural contestation. However, where Pāli also symbolizes the entanglement with and influence of Sanskrit words and their meanings, it more importantly acts as the preserve for those in Prākrit forms.

For example, described in the Ṛig-Veda (a text preceding early Theravāda and thus Pāli), contestation arises in Magadha between the pre-Buddhist kingdom of the Kīkaṭas (the region’s ruling clan) and the Indo-Aryans and Brahmins. This pre-Upanishadic account of opposition lends evidence towards this geographic location having been occupied first by a non-Aryan community. Although most societies were “converted” or “subordinated” by the Indo-Aryans—and that Prākrits were the “popular or natural” languages predominating India during this period—A. B. Keith summarizes how this particular location not only supported early Theravāda’s expansion, but therein the preserve of Prākritic components.

Keith states that if the Kīkaṭa’s “dislike of the country” is true, “[t]he cause must probably have been the imperfect Brāhmanisation of the land, and the predominance of aboriginal blood, which later in history rendered Magadha the headquarters of

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8 Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy*, 72. Prākrit, in other words, would eventually become obsolete.
9 Aloysius, “Caste In and Above History,” 152. Because Aloysius points out that “language is not only an embodiment of kinship systems, and an expression of the material culture but also the dynamic repository of thought-affect systems, world views and politico-cultural values,” the Pāli language-form also symbolizes the preserve of earlier Prākrit words’ meanings as well as the entanglement with and influence of those in Sanskritic form.
10 RV 3.53.1-3.53.14. This Vedic text precedes early Theravāda’s manifestation.
11 Thapar, *Early India*, 422.
12 In introducing a “reconstruction” of Proto-Indo-European language, Mallory and Adams describe the culture of Proto-Indo-Europeans. They explain that, “Sanskrit refers to the artificial codification of the Indic language about 400 BC, i.e. the language was literally ‘put together’ or ‘perfected’, i.e. sanśkṛta, a term contrasting with the popular or natural language of the people, Prākrit.” Mallory and Adams, *The Oxford Introduction*, 32.
Buddhism.”

More specifically, because the Kīkaṭas did not adhere to Brahmanical ideology, such as conducting rituals to the god Soma, this was an “impure” political region based on the marked difference with Brahmanic beliefs. While this account reflects the socio- and religio-political opposition of non-Aryan communities toward Indo-Aryan and Brahmanic culture, it also foreshadows the continuance of linguistic contestation.

Around 5th century B.C.E., philologist and grammarian Pāṇini produced a theoretical treatise on or standardization of Sanskrit that would eventually become the “official” form of communication. However, all known Indian epigraphy from the 3rd to 1st century B.C.E. was written in Prākritic forms. Therefore, both the described cultural opposition by the Kīkaṭas and the Aryans’ disparaging views of non-Aryans and their language likely align with K. R. Norman’s comment that the Buddha wanted to “aid the non-Sanskrit speaking population.” Moreover, Norman states that, in all likelihood, “the Buddha’s sermons were preached in a non-Sanskritic language, i.e. Prakrit.” Pāli, then, represents the confluence and elision of multiple language-forms, dialects, sub-dialects,

15 Thapar, Early India, 138.
16 Although there is not an exact date for when Pāṇini lived, Richard Salomon states that “an authoritative recent opinion is that “the evidence available hardly allows one to date Panini later than the early to mid fourth century B.C.”” Salomon, Indian Epigraphy, 11-12.
17 Ibid., 72. Salomon also comments that Prākritic forms were spoken between the Vedic and Modern Sanskrit periods. In northern India, there are no traces of Prākrit epigraphy after the fourth century A.D. or in the southern part the fifth century A.D. For historical information pertaining to the formation of major and minor language groups in early India see Mallory and Adams, where they discuss twelve “devolved” forms of proto-Indo-European—Celtic, Italic, Germanic, Baltic, Slavic, Albanian, Greek, Anatolian, Armenian, Iranian, and Tocharian—including Indo-Aryan. Mallory and Adams, The Oxford Introduction, esp. 12-37.
18 Norman, A Philological Approach to Buddhism, 61.
19 Ibid.
and various meanings of spoken and written words over the centuries preceding and following the Buddha’s *parinibbāna* (death). Thus, through the historio-cultural processes of alienation and enculturation in ancient Indian, Prākrit words’ meanings, contemporary with the expansion of early Theravāda, are left uncovered as English translations on the canon focus solely on Pāli words’ definitions.

Considering the passing of over two millennia since the canon’s initial inditement, what is reasonable to assert is that English translations on what the Buddha intended are both accurate and inaccurate. Upon this position and the previously described cultural and linguistic differences in ancient India, the way in which early Theravāda missionizing was conducted may be defined better by tracing the meaning of *desetha* first, through its Sanskritic derivatives and then, through those in Prākrit. Before engaging in this undertaking, however, to explain further how this word’s meaning has likely changed, the implications of Western views and English translations on the Pāli canon are addressed.

**Reevaluating Early Theravāda Missionizing through Western Interpretations**

During the late 1830s, Western scholarship began attributing “missionary” to translations on similar, Pāli canonical discourses that some forty years later would develop into “The Great Commission.”²⁰ This Biblical imputation developed from the intersection between Christian missionaries and Western scholars’ interests in Buddhism. Moreover, both Sanskrit and Pāli to English lexicons were utilized to translate the Bible

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²⁰ In his dissertation, Jonathan S. Walters explains that this title references the accounts of the Buddha’s said injunction to missionize by eighteenth and nineteenth century Western scholars or “Buddhologists.” He remarks that the title may have come from Hermann Oldenberg’s 1879 translation of the Mahāvagga (the third of five books contained in the Vinaya Piṭaka) and reflects Matthew 28: 19-20 and Mark 16: 15-16. Walters, “Rethinking Buddhist Missions,” 128-265, esp. 130-131.
into these languages or aid Christian missionaries in the conversion process.\textsuperscript{21}

Furthermore, around this time, mistranslations and redactions on early Indian languages ensued in Western scholarship.\textsuperscript{22} Therefore, translated Pāli words may fail in adequately symbolizing lived meanings.

Where recent scholarship underscores the challenges in accurately capturing Pāli words’ meanings,\textsuperscript{23} larger concepts, such as missionary religions, further complicate studies on early Theravāda. For instance, early Theravāda as a missionary religion is implicitly and explicitly portrayed as having a shared approach with the West’s religious missionary history, the aim of which was to spread Christianity across the globe through proselytizing and converting. And the word “preach,” as a translation of desetha, not only negates how the Buddha emphasized conduct through action, but also embeds early Theravāda within this Western religio-cultural framework. Whether subtle or salient, this presupposition onto diverse cultures steeped in Buddhist histories misrepresented their longstanding Buddhist community identities, thereby losing the contextual meanings.

\textsuperscript{21} Sanskritist M. Monier-Williams shares his missionary purpose in \textit{A Sanskrit English Dictionary}: “The main object was really a missionary one, as I have shown in the Preface to this volume (p. viii).” Monier-Williams, \textit{A Sanskrit English Dictionary}, x, fn. 2. In reference to “p. viii,” is his statement: “I have made it the chief aim of my professional life to provide facilities for the translation of our Sacred Scriptures into Sanskrit... My very first public lecture delivered after my election in 1860 was on ‘The Study of Sanskrit in Relation to Missionary Work in India’” (2008: viii). In Robert C. Childers and Charles Rockwell Lanman's first Pāli to English dictionary, \textit{A Dictionary of the Pāli Language}, one translation of “deseti” is “to preach” (1872: 114). Childers seems to have been a Buddhist sympathizer; nonetheless, his work was instrumental for Christian missionaries. In volumes 9-10 of Trübner’s \textit{American and Oriental Literary Record}, “\textit{the Westminster}” contributes a review that states: “[T]he valuable Dictionary by Professor Childers... will also be found of the highest value to the Christian missionary” (1876: 94).

\textsuperscript{22} Along with my position that desetha was mistranslated, there were discrepancies between words on Asoka’s rock-edicts. See, for example, Mason, “The Pali Language from a Burmese Point of View,” 177-84; J. F. Fleet, “The Meaning of Aduhakosikya in the Seventh Pillar-Edict of Asoka,” \textit{Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland} (1906), 401–417.

\textsuperscript{23} Speaking on translations from Sanskrit and Pāli to English, K.R. Norman summarizes this point where he states that, “[I]f I wish to give a more adequate translation I am forced to give a phrase in English, or perhaps even a whole sentence... or even a whole paragraph.” Norman, \textit{A Philological Approach to Buddhism}, 21.
As mentioned in the Introduction, for example, Jonathan S. Walters posits such a notion in his 1992 dissertation, “Rethinking Buddhist Missions.”

He focuses on the Pāli word “cārikum”—“to wander”—in Mara’s Snare to differentiate how Buddhism spread without proselytizing. While academic concerns have arisen over this particular point, the underlying difference is the ethical nature of preaching and proselytizing. In other words, the notion that early Theravāda spread by “proselytizing,” rather than simply “preaching,” is likely indicative of the dominating Western religio-cultural framework’s affect on such studies. In positing that early Theravāda shifted from “conversionism” to “introversionism,” Torkel Brekke’s study tends to support such a point.

Discussing “modern psychology in ancient and alien religious traditions,” Brekke inserts various psychological motivations or stimuli that could have influenced individuals to convert in Buddhism’s formative years. Given Hosiar and Singh’s remark that there was deep-seated oppression and severe discrimination disallowing the lowest vāṇṇa (class), the suddas (servants), the rights to be in public places or to touch a higher caste member, it seems logical to suggest that there were particular motivations to

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24 See page 9.
25 Specifically, he utilizes the second of two Pāli canonical discourses titled “Mara’s Snare.”
26 See pages 217-220 in Walters’s dissertation, “Rethinking Buddhist Missions.”
27 For instance, although Linda Learman’s collection of essays focuses on late nineteenth and twentieth centuries domestic and international Buddhist missionary work, she comments that, “I remain unconvinced by Walter’s arguments about pre-modern Theravada Buddhism.” Learman, Buddhist Missionaries in the Era of Globalization, 2.
28 Distinguishing between proselytizing and preaching, Learman states that, “Walters wanted to reserve the rubric ‘missionary’ for only those religions for which proselytization is the defining and essential characteristic; a preaching tradition is not sufficient.” Learman, Buddhist Missionaries in the Era of Globalization, 5. Also, see page 220 in Walters’s dissertation, “Rethinking Buddhist Missions.”
29 Torkel Brekke, Religious Motivation and the Origins of Buddhism: A Social-psychological Exploration of the Origins of a World Religion (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 21-44. Hereafter, Brekke, Religious Motivation and the Origins of Buddhism. While introversionism is irrelevant to this discussion, Brekke states that conversionism is said to “denote the great emphasis that is put on the conversion of new members to the Saṃgha and the lack of restrictions on admittance.” Ibid., 26.
30 In Sanskrit, “class” is written as varṇa and “servants” as śūdras.
31 Hosiar and Singh, Indian Administration, 341.
convert for this class. However, motivations to proselytize seem unwarranted for this specific *vaṇṇa*, for potential converts would have joined without such activity. Brekke also claims that proselytizing is both aimed towards the other three *vaṇṇas*—Brahmins (priests), *khattiyas* (royalty and warriors), and *vessas* (artisans and merchants)—and a conspicuous feature in the Vinaya Piṭaka.

For instance, he states that early Theravādins “engaged in fervent and competitive proselytizing activity towards both other sects and Brahmins and other important members of society.” Brekke describes members of a wealthy *vessa* family meeting the Buddha in order to support *conversionism* in early Theravāda. Representing “other important members of society,” Brekke remarks that the Buddha uses “his charisma to win over Yasa as a monk and his father as a lay disciple. When the great merchant sees his son, who has run away from home in order to join the Buddha’s following, he begs him to come home for his mother’s sake.” However, in response to his claim that the Mahāvagga gives “the impression of a sect [early Theravāda] with a desire to convert that is reminiscent of Christian sects,” at least two significant factors are obscured. First, the Buddha’s involvement in religious competition seems unfounded. Second, a clear indication of “proselytizing” is absent. Yasa, for example, enters the woods and is said to have called out asking if there was “distress” or “danger” around. Upon hearing the Buddha’s reply that neither was present, Yasa went to

\[32\] Respectively, “royalty and warriors” is also written as “*kshatriyas*,” and “merchants” as “*vaishyas*.”
\[36\] Ibid., 32.
the Buddha and sat down. In fact, each example discussed lacks compelling evidence for “competitive proselytizing.”

As examples of the Buddha’s encounters with “other sects and Brahmins,” interactions with a group of matted-hair ascetics are described. He comments that, “The competitive element in the proselytizing activity of early Buddhism is clearly expressed in MV I.15–20.” However, instead of this excerpt illustrating such aspects, it illustrates how the Buddha aided the ascetics in performing their religious practices.

For instance, the Buddha, “wandering from place to place,” arrives at the hermitage of ascetic Kassapa of Uruvelā. He asks Kassapa if he may stay the night in the room where his sacred fire burns. He is permitted to stay after being warned that a savage naga (serpent) lives there. By morning, the Buddha had killed the naga through an “appropriate exercise of miraculous power” and shows it to Kassapa. Because the naga occupies the room where he keeps his sacred fire, Kassapa has been unable to enter this room and perform certain rituals. Therefore, what seems more conspicuous is a different ethos applied in the Buddha’s daily interactions: as an outcome of the Buddha’s moral practice, Kassapa is able to reenter this room and perform religious rituals. Thus, proselytizing and converting seem superimposed onto early Theravāda’s establishment.

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37 On Mv I.14, for example, Brekke remarks that: “[I]t is while the men are looking for the woman that they meet the Buddha.” Ibid., 27. More specifically, upon a group of men searching for a prostitute who had taken their belongings, one individual sees and approaches the Buddha, who is sitting under a tree. Brekke does include the equivalent of Mara’s Snare—the Mārakathā—in his analysis. However, since Mara’s Snare will be retranslated in the last section of this paper, it is not discussed here.

38 Ibid., 29. In this section of the Mahāvagga, the Buddha is said to have performed five “wonders.” Brekke continues by explaining how “the Buddha demonstrates his superior magical powers to a community of matted hair ascetics (jātila).” Brekke, Religious Motivation and the Origins of Buddhism, 29. Important to point out, here, is that the Buddha’s magical powers are observed only in the fifth wonder (Mv I.20). Again, a “competitive element” is, therefore, largely absent.

39 In Mv I.15.

40 Moreover, Kassapa seems religiously competitive, rather than the Buddha. In seeing the naga’s body, Kassapa then thinks to himself: “Truly the great sanaṇa possesses high magical powers and great faculties; he is not, however, holy like me.”
In another subsection, people are traveling from different regions to see Kassapa’s “great sacrifice.” Kassapa fears his “gain and honour” will diminish if the Buddha performs a “wonder” in front of them. With the power of his mind, the Buddha is said to know and understand Kassapa’s worry. Exemplifying the paucities in proselytizing and religious competition, the Buddha purportedly leaves and returns only after the assembly’s departure.

While other examples render similar shortcomings, one of the Buddha’s final statements to Kassapa is: “Neither are you, Kassapa, a perfected one nor have you entered on the way to perfection, and that course is not for you by which you either could be a perfected one or could have entered on the way to perfection.” On this verse, Brekke concludes, “In other words, the Buddha wants to bring about *samvega*, emotional disturbance that leads to religious motivation, in the ascetic to convert him to Buddhism. The only reason that the Buddha stays with the matted hair ascetics is to win them over to his own sect, and this is his only motivation for humiliating Kassapa of Uruvelā.” While this is an interpretation, what is apparent is the Buddha’s consistent demonstration of acceptance and tolerance.

Specifically, by ridding a sacred room of a savage serpent, Kassapa is able to enter the most important room in his hermitage. And by intentionally leaving the area prior to Kassapa’s “Great Sacrifice,” Kassapa neither endures worry nor the loss of

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41 Mv I.18.
42 In other examples, the ascetics experience an inability to split wood; a disablement that would ultimately lead to the extinguishment of their sacred fires (Mv I.20). Upon the Buddha asking Kassapa if he would like the wood split and Kassapa responding in the affirmative, the Buddha uses his power to do so. Additionally, a flood is said to have manifested (Ibid.). The Buddha causes the water to recede around him so that he may pace “up and down in the midst of the water on a dust-covered spot.” Upon checking on the Buddha from their boat, the ascetics see the Buddha’s performed miracle.
44 Ibid.
devotees. However, if the Buddha wanted to bring about emotional disturbance, and the only reason he stays is to convert the ascetics by way of humiliating Kassapa, there is the question of why he likened himself to Kassapa on the matter of perfection—“Neither are you, Kassapa, a perfected one.” As a response, and to explain further how these particular missionizing features are incorrectly transplanted into studies on early Theravāda, Hugh Nicholson’s study on the “Unanswered Questions” is briefly discussed. Although Nicholson does not specifically address Theravāda missionary activity, his examination on the Buddha’s refrainment from answering the ten stereotypical questions offers indirect support for and insight into the posited, differing ethical practices that expanded this movement. In particular, the ethical practice of tolerance is enacted rather than “proselytizing” and “converting.”

Discussing the “Brahmajāla Sutta,” a parallel in missionary activity is drawn between the former discourse and the Mahāvagga. For example, where the Buddha did not compete with Kassapa, this Sutta describes the Buddha’s censuring “practices,” such

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45 Furthermore, in relation to the additional examples provided on page 34 (footnote 42), by acknowledging Kassapa’s response for the Buddha to split lumber, the ascetics keep their sacred fires burning.

46 Hugh Nicholson, “The Unanswered Questions and the Limits of Knowledge,” Journal of Indian Philosophy 40 (2013), 533-552. Hereafter, Nicholson, “The Unanswered Questions and the Limits of Knowledge.” Summarizing the ten or fourteen “stereotypical” questions, Nicholson writes, “The four questions comprising the first set concern the nature of the self and world (attā loko ca). The first two of these deal with the question of whether or not the self and world are eternal (sassato); the third and fourth with the question of whether self and world have a limit (anīta). The second set contains two questions which concern the relationship between the soul and body (jīva and sarīra, respectively): are they one and the same (tām jīvam tām sarīram) or is the soul one thing and the body another (aṁhāṃ jīvam aṁhāṃ sarīram)? The third set deals with the question of whether the enlightened saint or Tathāgata exists after death (hoti tathāgata paraṁ marañā). The question of the Tathāgata’s existence after death is expressed in terms of a list of four logical possibilities familiar in the catuṣkoṭi formula of the Madhyamakas: Does the Tathāgata exist after death? Does he not exist after death? Does he both exist and not exist after death? Does he neither exist nor not exist after death?” Nicholson, “The Unanswered Questions and the Limits of Knowledge,” 533-534.

47 It is important to note that the latter is from one of the earliest written texts in the canon, the Khandhaka (Brekke, Religious Motivation and the Origins of Buddhism, 2), and the former was composed centuries later.
Nicholson remarks that the Buddha’s reason to disallow this practice is based on the limited knowledge and understanding of those posing them. While this seems partly correct, the manners in which the Buddha does and does not speak as well as act are consistent. That is, his attributed superiority in these canonical examples is described more through his demonstrations of tolerance and less through imposing unsolicited personal views and practices onto others.

Buttressing this point further is Nicholson’s concluding statement: “Originally, the list of positions on the nature of self and world may have served simply to contrast the Dhamma with a proliferating welter of partial and exclusionary views.” In other words, “Dhamma” was contrasted against the multitude of religious views that excluded others—in practice—through actions that conveyed meanings of inclusivity. Therefore, the ethical practices depicted in the Mahāvagga and “Brahmajāla Sutta,” more convincingly, forwent proving others wrong as well as “proselytizing” and “converting.”

Thus, Brekke’s analysis on an ancient foreign culture’s underlying motivations to proselytize and convert others seems guided largely by the modern Western imposition that humans’ identities are connected only to one religious belief and practice. Through reexamining Brekke’s discussed excerpts, his interpretation indicates how the predominating Western conceptualization of religions’ expansions both limits access into

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49 Ibid., 545.
50 Given that the Buddha is from a gana-sangha, the Sākya clan, the clan culture in which he is brought up in is a significant influence underlying his worldview and how he thinks, speaks, and acts. More precisely, these clans had a more “egalitarian tradition” than that of the Indo-Aryans’ caste system. Thapar, *Early India*, 147. For example, the gana-sanghas likely treated diverse people equally, as they maintained a “secular-flexible stratification.” Aloyisius, “Caste In and Above History,” 157. A system, in other words, that allowed for greater socio-mobility.
52 For example, it is well known that Modern Chinese adherents, for example, refer to themselves as Buddhists, Confucists, and Daoists.
this movement’s ethical culture and reinforces notions of proselytizing and converting in early Theravāda, whether intentionally or not. What is more likely, then, is that early Theravādins were not prohibited from practicing aspects of Hinduism. While scant, scholarship in support of this understanding implies that missionary activity in early Theravāda was focused less on converting others of differing religious beliefs and practices and more on the way in which the hierarchical socio-political system was justified.

Y. Krishan explains that the Buddha recognized the existence of the caste system and appealed to morals rather than birthright, wealth, and appearance to decide a person’s purity or impurity. Furthermore, Jeffrey Samuels posits a more plausible viewpoint on the affect of caste in early Theravāda by bridging dichotomous scholarly positions—that the Buddha was staunchly anti-caste or accepting of and even maintained the caste system. Analyzing a healthy number of discourses in the Pāli canon, Samuels points out that “while the Buddha may have taken a very antibrahmanic stance in numerous discourses, he was, ultimately not opposed to the caste system as a social institution.”

Given that Gotama Buddha was from the gana-sanghas’ two-tiered system, his point is perhaps the most accurate explanation, because the gana-sanghas’ governance of territories was based on a more “rational” and “egalitarian” system. Additionally, he

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55 Ibid., 122.
56 At the time of the Buddha, the gana-sanghas’ hierarchical system was two-tiered. Also, Thapar specifically addresses geographic locations for kingdoms and gana-sanghas. She includes the location of Gotama Buddha’s hometown in the following statement: “Whereas the kingdoms were concentrated in the Ganges Plain, the gana-sanghas were ranged around the periphery of these kingdoms, in the Himalayan foothills and just south of these, in north-western India, Punjab and Sind, and in central and western India.” Thapar, Early India, 147.
57 Ibid., 149-150.
comments that weighing the significance of “one’s spiritual potential,” based on caste, makes for an “irrelevant category.” Therefore, as part of the Sākya clan, the Buddha’s mission seems aimed at how brahmins distinguished between vaṇṇas, rather than, for instance, proselytizing or seeking to challenge peoples’ worship of gods. Therefore, Gotama Buddha’s recognition of secular systems and the differing ways in which these systems functioned indicate secular influences or motivations.

The first of two reasons for this claim is the Sākya clan’s recent allowance into the khattiya class through caste retainers in ancient India. More specifically, the Buddha’s family was not of Indo-Aryan origin. Therefore, the bestowed status of khattiya, through a retainer, contradicts the legitimization of birthright. That the brahmins justified a caste-based society through this premise suggests that birthright, for Gotama Buddha, was understood as an immoral means “preached” by brahmins in order to

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58 Ibid., 65-66.
59 Ibid.
60 Thapar, Jayasuriya, Chakravarti, and Aloysius (specific to Aloysius, see page 33, fn. 50) explain how the Sākya clan was a gana-sangha; a clan of more equal status as compared to that of the caste system. Thapar states that they had a less ethically coercive authority. Thapar, Early India, 137. She also comments that the Sangha “borrowed” its structure from the gana-sanghas’ which “led” to its demand to be recognized as a distinct entity from that of the monarchy. Romila Thapar, From Lineage to State: Social Formations in the Mid-First Millennium B.C. In the Ganga Valley (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1984), 148; hereafter, Thapar, From Lineage to State. Similarly describing how gana-sangha culture impacted Gotama Buddha, Jayasuriya comments that the Buddha’s inclination toward “a more open society” was reflective of “what prevailed” in the gana-sanghas’ governance rather than the monarchical kingdoms. Jayasuriya, “Buddhism, Politics, and State Craft.” Additionally, Chakravarti discusses how the evolution of the gana-sanghas into “republican units” was both a “reaction against” the increasing authority of and control by the monarchies “in the latter part of the Vedic period and the divinity beginning to be attributed to the king.” Chakravarti, The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism, 7. Moreover, on the their resistance toward enculturation into the caste system, both Thapar and Chakravarti state that these republics were those from the earlier Vedic period who had previously migrated eastward to keep with “egalitarian traditions” and “preserve their political system.” Respectively, Thapar, Early India, 147; Chakravarti, The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism, 7.
61 Norman, A Philological Approach to Buddhism, 25.
62 Ibid., 23. In a footnote, Norman includes “retainers” as understood through an example of the Rajputs.
63 Thapar states that, “For a society to become a caste-based society there have to be three preconditions: the society must register social disparities; there has to be unequal access of various groups within that society to economic resources; inequalities should be legitimized through a theoretically irreversible hierarchy and the imposition of the hierarchy claim to be based on a supernatural authority.” Thapar, Early India, 63-64.
support their hierarchical structure. There was likely then either already a questionable trust towards the brahmins’ birthright-emphasis or an elicitation thereof during this time. For, at the very least, the Buddha’s articulated position on the individual as ultimately responsible for her or his rebirth, into one of six realms, through moral and immoral behaviors challenged this legitimizing component of the caste system.

Second, a Buddhist precept that bans worshipping gods, Hindu or other, does not exist. This fact coincides and bolsters the likelihood of Gotama Buddha belonging to a non-Aryan clan; for, as Deshpande remarks, non-Aryan communities were viewed as “godless non-sacrificers” and “worshippers of dummy gods and phallic gods” by the Aryans.\(^64\) In other words, there is evidence apart from the Pāli canon that the Buddha accepted the existence of gods, and likely Vedic gods. However, he delimits their status and power in the universe through articulating how they are subjected to the same experiences of dissatisfaction or the cycle of samsara. Therefore, opposed to legitimizing birth status through the power of the gods, “conversion” is likely inserted into early Theravāda through Western articulations.

Adducing this notion of morality or ethos, as the Buddha’s mode of proselytizing, is his post-enlightenment reflection. In the “Sukhamala Sutta,” the Buddha purportedly stated, “Whereas the servants, workers, & retainers in other people's homes are fed meals of lentil soup & broken rice, in my father's home the servants, workers, & retainers were fed wheat, rice, and meat.”\(^65\) This statement, in concert with the Sākya clan’s inclusion

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\(^64\) Deshpande, Sanskrit & Prakrit, 2.

into the khattiyas, elucidates that there was already in place a somewhat different ethical system established in Gotama’s family.

Therefore, if the Buddha attempted to convert others, it was not simply religious. Instead, he aimed toward assuaging life’s dissatisfactions and generating wellbeing through focusing on daily moral living in thought, speech, and action as tensions over the differing socio-political systems’ structures persisted. Thus, there was certainly a mission, but the extent to which it was pursued through “proselytizing” and “converting” others seems minimal, if not entirely absent. Upon this background, I now turn to philologically tracing the word desetha to its Prākrit form and meaning.

“Desetha”: From Pāli to Sanskritic and Prākritic Word-Forms

According to the Mahāvaṃsa and Dīpaṃka, the Pāli canon was written during the 1st century B.C.E. in Sri Lanka. However, from the intermingling of pre-canonical spoken and written languages in ancient India, many questions remain regarding canonical translations. On the complexity of translating Pāli texts, Norman writes,

It is very difficult to give a one for one translation of Sanskrit and Pāli words into English. It is very rare that one Sanskrit or Pāli word has exactly the same connotations, no less and no more, as one word in English. This means that if I wish to give a more adequate translation I am forced to give a phrase in English, or perhaps even a whole sentence… or even a whole paragraph. Consequently, if I am translating a Buddhist text into English, it is very difficult to produce something which approximates closely to the meaning of the original, and yet appears in good, clear, concise and readable English.66

Unpacking the word desetha is no exception. First, the tense, placement, and grouping of desetha are causative, second person, and plural, respectively. In the Pāli lexicon, this word happens to appear in the causative, third person, and singular form—

66 Norman, A Philological Approach to Buddhism, 21.
Therefore, *desetha* or *deseti* is defined as, “[Sk. deśayati, Caus. of disati, q. v.] to point out, indicate, show; set forth, preach, teach; confess. Very freq. in phrase dhammaṃ d. to deliver a moral discourse, to preach the Dhamma.” However, because *desetha* and *deseti* are in different causative forms, but synonymous, then *disati* must be included in a retrospective study pursuing a contextual meaning. For this word, included in the definition above, represents the standard format in which most Pāli to English dictionaries present words (i.e., present tense, third person, and singular). Although the meaning of *desetha* may seem more easily traced and understood contextually through back-translating *disati*, problematic is the lack of this word’s appearance in earlier Pāli to English dictionaries.

Interestingly, the 1872, 1875, and 1909 *Pāli-English Dictionary* editions, edited by Robert C. Childers, do include “preach” as a translation for *deseti*. However, not one of these dictionaries includes a definition of *disati*. In fact, translated meanings of *disati* were absent until almost fifty years after the first edition was published.

In a 1921 *Pāli-English Dictionary*, edited by Davids and Stede, the word *disati* first appears. In contrast with Childers’s meanings of “*deseti,*” Davids and Stede’s definitions of *disati* neither includes “preaching” nor “teaching”: “Ved. diśati, *deik to show, point towards;[… to point, show: to grant, bestow etc. Usually in comb. with pref. ā, or in Caus. deseti (q. v.).” However, where the Sanskrit word “*diśati*” is provided, its root—*diś*—is tied to *disati* in the Pāli form.

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68 Ibid.
69 In each edition, “DESETI” is located on page 114.
70 My source, more specifically, is a 1972 reprinted edition.
72 Ibid.
Due to the lengthiness, only those definitions of *diś* that pertain to this study follow: “to order, command, bid (inf.), Kir. V, 28: Pass. *Diśyate*, MBh. etc.: Caus. *deśayati* ०*te*; aor. *adidiśat*, to show, point out, assign, MBh.; R.; to direct, order, command, ib.; teach, communicate, tell, inform, confess, Buddh.: Desid. *didikṣati*, ०*te*, to wish to show etc.: Intens. *dēdiṣṭe*, 3. Pl. ०*śate*, (p. f. pl. ०*śatīs*) to show, exhibit, manifest, RV.”\(^{73}\) Although there are familiar synonyms, such as “teach” and “inform,” “preach” is, again, not included.\(^ {74}\) Additionally, since the meanings provided are relative to specific texts, and that these texts are written in different periods, the uncovering of *desetha*’s meaning hinges on textual dating.

For example, the Kiratarjuniya, listed above as “Kir. V, 28,” is an epic written in the seventh century C.E. Therefore, given the anachronistic period in which it was composed, as compared to early Buddhist usages, further explanation is needless. While the text “Buddh.” or “Buddhist Literature” seems promising, it contains definitions that would have been borrowed from Pāli. More specifically, because Pāli is the language in which the canon was written, these translations reflect the coalescence of Prākrit and Sanskrit over the centuries that followed, rather than those of the spoken language. Ultimately, the definitions corresponding with this text bring the word *desetha* back to its meaning in the Pāli form. However, as “to show” is a meaning of *diś* in both the Ramayana (“R.”) and Mahābhārata (“MBh.”), the coeval placement of Gotama Buddha’s life with these texts indicates how the Pāli word *disati* is entangled with the Sanskritic

\(^{73}\) For a complete list of definitions for “*diś*,” see Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, 707-708.

\(^{74}\) As an aside, this is an interesting omission given the editor’s opportunity to missionize as discussed in footnote twelve.
word diś. Therefore, to explain how a more accurate meaning of desetha is “show” in Mara’s Snare, Alfred C. Woolner’s *Introduction to Prakrit* is utilized.

Woolner provides “diṭṭha” or “seen” as the past participle form of the Prākrit word “disadi” in the present tense, third person, singular form. In addition to this translation, he includes the process by which the comparative Sanskritic form appears through applying one of the compound consonant rules in Prākrit to Sanskrit translations. Specifically, he explains that, “ṣṭa and ṣṭha become ṭṭh” (Ibid.: 19). Therefore, reversing this translation process, the “ṭṭh” in the past participle form of “diṭṭha” or “diṭṭhati” (Prākrit) is changed to “ṣṭa” or diṣṭa (Sanskrit). In *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, Monier-Williams also provides the definition of diṣṭa as: “shown, pointed out, appointed, [and] assigned.” And Woolner includes the Prākritic present tense form “disadi” or “to see,” which corresponds with the Pāli form: disati.

Thus, in consideration of both Norman’s statement at the beginning of this section and that a consistent overlap in each language’s equivalent form emphasizes the visual over auditory sense, the most accurate word choice for the causative form of “desetha” is “show.” Contextually, this English translation encompasses how the Buddha imparted particular moralities to those around him through action, non-action, speaking, and silence. In other words, in relation to the previous examples from the Vinaya and Sutta Pitakas, the meaning of the Pāli word desetha is ultimately derivative of and comparable to disadi (Prākrit) and diṣṭati (Sanskrit). Upon concluding with “show” as the meaning of “desetha,” the next section provides a new translation on “Mara’s Snare.” In so doing,

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75 Working from Sanskrit to Prākrit, Woolner explains that, “Ṣṭa and ṣṭha become ṭṭh.” Moving from Prākrit to Sanskrit, one example given is: “diṭṭhi=ḍṛṣṭi.” Alfred C. Woolner, *Introduction to Prakrit* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1917), 50. Hereafter, Woolner, *Introduction to Prakrit*. In other words, from Prākrit to Sanskrit, “ṭṭh” (Prākritic form) becomes “ṣṭa” or “ṣṭha” (Sanskritic form), i.e., ḍṛṣṭi=diṭṭhi.
77 Woolner, *Introduction to Prakrit*, 50.
not only is early Theravāda missionary activity redefined, but also then the concept of missionary religions.

A Retranslation of Mara’s Snare

Located in the Sutta Piṭaka, the second of two discourses entitled “Mara’s Snare” is part of the Mārasaṃyutta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya.78 This discourse is said to recount the Buddha’s act of sending out sixty arahants79 to “preach the dhamma.” Therefore, it has been the basis for early Theravāda as a missionary religion. Before providing this discourse in Pāli and then an English translation, it is important to note that scholars insert period marks in Pāli readings.80 In both paragraphs below, the placement of these marks corresponds. While this helps to both more easily locate the respective word-forms and understand how declensions are translated, the placement of the period mark and translated declension are, at times, subject to interpretation.


Wander about on wanderings, monks. For the good of many folk, for the happiness of many folk, out of compassion for the world, for the good and the happiness of gods and men, don’t two of you go by one [road]. Preach the Truth, monks, which is lovely at the beginning, lovely in the middle, lovely at the end, in

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78 This discourse—Dutiyaṁrāpasasuttaṃ (Second Discourse on Mara)—is found in the Mārasaṃyuttaṃ (Discourses on Māra), located in the Sagāṭhāvaggaṇī (the first of five “vaggas” or “sections” in the Saṃyutta Nikāya). Two other versions exist. The other version found in the Sutta Piṭaka is from the Mahāvaggaṇī—the second section of discourses in the Dīgha Nikāya. In this section, the more precise location is the “Cārikāṇuñjananatā,” found within the “Mahāpadāṇasuttaṃ.” The third writing is found in the Vinaya Piṭaka’s third section, the Mahāvaggaṇī. This section begins with the Mahākhandhako, wherein the comparative version, the Mārakathā, is located.

79 A simple translation is “enlightened beings.”

80 The writings in the canon did not originally use such markers. Denoting a direct quotation mark, however, it the ending “iti.” Therefore, a typical approach has been to locate the verb, which most often comes at the end of sentence, but certainly not always.
the letter and in the spirit. Demonstrate the purified holy life which is fully complete. There are beings with little dust in their eyes; they are falling away from the Truth because they do not hear it. There will be people who understand, monks.\footnote{As Jonathan S. Walters’s dissertation inspired me to pursue this philological study, I use his translation. Walters, “Rethinking Buddhist Missions,” 218. Other associated phrasings and translations from Pāli canonical texts are from the Dīgha Nikāyas: DN II 119–120. Rupert Gethin (2004: 538), for example, translates “desitā,” the past participle form of “deseti,” as “taught.” Rupert Gethin, “He Who Sees Dhamma Sees Dhammas: Dhamma in Early Buddhism,” Journal of Indian Philosophy 32 (2004), 516, 518, 521, and esp. 517, endnote 14 on page 538. Specifically, this discourse appears as follows: “ye vo mayā dhammā abhiññāya desitā te vo sādhukaṃ uggahetvā āsevitabbā bhāvetabbā bahuliṭātthabbā yathayidaṃ brahmacariyām addhaniyām assa ciraṭṭhitikām. tadassa bahujaṇa-hiṭāya bahujaṇa-sukhiyā lokānukampāyya atīṭhāya hiṭāya sukhiyā deva-manussānām. katame ca te bhikkhave dhammā... seyyathi idaṃ cattāro satipaṭṭhānā cattāro samappadāhānā cattāro iddhipādā pañc’ indriyāni pañca balāni satta bojjhāngā ariyo atthaṅgiko maggo.” Gethin’s translation is as follows: “So, monks, those practices that I have taught to you for the purpose of higher knowledge – having properly grasped them, you should practise them, develop them, make them mature so that the spiritual life might continue and endure long; this will be for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, for the sake of compassion for the world, for the benefit, good and happiness of gods and men. And what are those practices . . .? Just these – the four ways of establishing mindfulness, the four right endeavors, the four bases of success, the five faculties, the five powers, the seven factors of awakening, the noble eightfold path.” Ibid., 517.}

While period marks are certainly needed, when not initially removed from other scholars’ previous sentence arrangements, a problem that arises in translations on Pāli texts is a lack of investigating meanings, contextually. From above, for example, the word “kalyāṇaṃ” comes from the Sanskrit word, “kalyāṇa.” With a wide range of definitions for this word and through the present attempt to contextualize further Gotama Buddha’s surroundings, “kalyāṇaṃ” seems less likely to mean “beautiful,” and instead more likely “morally good,” as defined in both Pāli and Sanskrit dictionaries.\footnote{This usage is also found in both the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa; see Monier-Williams, A Sanskrit English Dictionary, 390; Davids, The Pāli Text Society’s Pāli-English Dictionary, 199.} Next, words and phrases are often incorporated into translations to describe the Buddha’s message. For instance, the word “road” is inserted above, although an equivalent Pāli word does not appear here. And while a phrase that suggests missionizing is not used
above: “let no two go in the same direction,” it is used in other translations. Therefore, the following is a new translation with period marks corresponding:

Oh monks, wander to benefit many people, to please many people, to sympathize with the human world, for wellbeing, [and] to utilize for pleasantry. The gods and humans came by two not one. Oh monks, show the dhamma that is morally good in the beginning, morally good in the middle, and morally good in the end. Illustrate good and moral living, pure in its entirety as an indication of meaning. Calm beings with little dust on their eyes dwindle not paying attention to the dhamma. They will become knowers of the dhamma.

From this translation, the Buddha’s message emphasizes demonstrating a particular ethos as a missionizing mode: to tolerate or “sympathize” with others in face of encountering others with different beliefs and practices. The Buddha’s differences with the brahmins was not in the idea of gods or worshipping them, although he did not prescribe these ritualistic practices to others. To be a “Hindu” and a “Buddhist” was permissible—neither encouraged nor derided by the Buddha. For, where “Dhamma” is often set in opposition to brahminical ideology, this word’s conceptual meaning is differentiated by this ethos of tolerance. Discussing early Theravāda, Richard F. Gombrich remarks that the “Buddhist monk is pervading the universe with his consciousness, but it is an ethicised consciousness. In enlarging his mind to be boundless (metaphorically, of course) he is emulating the brahmin gnostic who identifies with

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84 This is more likely to be a reminder that gods and Brahmins are not the same according to the Buddha. Therefore, this translation takes into account the Buddha’s distinction between gods and humans; and perhaps more likely, that birth status within the caste system was not based on being more or less moral, as claimed by the Brahmins.
universal consciousness—or rather, going one better, showing the brahmin what he really should be doing.”

Thus, by the Buddha “showing” the brahmin what he should do as a way to rebirth in the most esteemed realm, that of humans, rather than privileging oneself within the human realm upon birth status, early Theravāda was ethically tolerant of, although opposed to, the underpinning upon which Brāhmanism was justified.

Both this translation and abovementioned example support my argument that Buddhism was not a “missionary religion” in the same way as understood to include proselytizing and converting. Furthermore, Max L. Stackhouse defines a “missionary” as: “one who seizes or is seized by a universalistic vision and who feels a mandate, a commission, or a vocation to bring the vision and its benefits to ‘all.’” In both prior translations, the Buddha seems very empathetic to the idea that the moral path he discusses is not for “all,” but instead for individuals interested in a particular secular mode of living that was either in concert with previous beliefs and practices or, if so chosen, solely undertaken. Thus, Gotama Buddha wanted to delimit the power of birthright, which informed and established an inexorable caste system, by “showing” a lived morality that, at the very least, intended not to harm either oneself or others through “proselytizing” and “converting.”

Conclusion

While the argument in this chapter demonstrates the need for more philological research, it also suggests the opportunity to reshape conceptual boundaries and cultural histories. The fact that proselytizing and converting others were not conducted in early

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86 This realm, in Theravāda, is the only way to cease *samsaric* existence.
Theravāda, as is generally understood, is evidence that this concept does not include the abovementioned missionizing modes. If the aim of missionary activity was not to seek to establish “a new relationship to the truly divine,” this “breeding ground of freedom” must then be reinterpreted to incorporate a new understanding of what underlies “freedom.”

Understanding the interconnection between a word and its true definition situated in the appropriate context has contributed to a more accurate understanding of early Theravāda’s “missionary activity.” Thus, there are concerns with proselytizing and converting appearing as solely religious activities, because there is a difference between social and religious freedom, as well as between moral conduct and religious morality. To understand these distinctions, and therefore missionizing more completely, in the next chapter I incorporate some of Gotama Buddha’s experiences both prior to and after his enlightenment, an examination of the social and political environment from whence he came, and how his “activity” was less of a response to religious opposition and more of a response for his clan, the Sākya gana-sangha. Therefore, this chapter concludes that, although a “missionary religion,” the way in which early Theravāda spread expands our understandings of proselytizing and converting as articulated in the Western definition. In concert with this conclusion, in the next chapter I argue that while Gotama Buddha entered the public space of debates in ancient India’s religious setting, the early Theravāda movement was an effort to preserve secular freedom or the gana-sanghas’ socio-political and ethical system.

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88 Ibid.
Chapter 2
The Secular Underpinnings of “Missionary Activity” in Early Theravāda

Mistaking the samaṇa (renunciate) Gotama for a deva (deity) as he sat beneath a banyan tree, Sujātā, drawing closer, instead found the golden-hued bodhisatta. She offered him a bowl of milk-rice. Emaciated after practicing asceticism for six years, Gotama accepted the bowl and ate. Afterwards, he bathed in the river. And as he stood on the riverbank, he placed the bowl in the water, saying that if he were to become a Buddha that day, then let the bowl float upstream. Counter to the river’s flow, the bowl streamed upwards, sank, and came to a rest next to the bowls of the three previous Buddhas. Thus, Gotama would become a Buddha.

Upon examining the context surrounding early Theravāda’s origins and the way in which missionary activity was likely to have been conducted, such imagery of Gotama’s bowl flowing upstream symbolizes liberation or “freedom.” In particular, this canonical vignette helps to open an explanation on how the preceding and contemporary socio-politics in ancient India motivated this movement’s formation; and thereby how missionary activity, engendered and formed through secular intersections, is mistakenly regarded as exclusively religious. More specifically, it indicates that, in light of the fact that the Indo-Aryans restricted the gana-sanghas’ social system of mobility and its more “egalitarian ethos” or the “earlier tradition” of these clans, such as Gotama Buddha’s Sākyas, “missionizing” was predicated upon various secular features. For the phrase that defines the bowl’s movement upstream is “paṭisotagāmi.”

Comprised of two words in the Pāli form, “paṭi” is translated as “against,” and “sota,” the “stream of cravings.” This phrase, then, is often translated more simply as
“against the stream.”\(^1\) Furthermore, the meaning of *patisotagāmi* is associated with one’s “insight” into the thoughts, speech, and actions that feed ignorance and are thus “against the stream” of everyday or religious understanding. However, insight is premised on the individual’s ability to enact moral conduct, as outlined in the first training or discipline in the Eightfold Noble Path.\(^2\) Moreover, Cone and Gombrich remark that Buddhist ethics are not based on the act, but rather the intention or “thought behind it.”\(^3\) Where the intention behind *patisotagāmi* is cutting off one’s desires through understanding ignorance, the ability to do so requires, first, the cultivation of proper ethical behavior. Therefore, “against the stream” also signifies the necessary grounding in ethical conduct, or what the Buddha “showed” those he encountered as a way to liberate oneself from a competing and oppressive caste system. That is, the formation of early Theravāda and its social system was a mission; however, it was a mission that was established predominantly upon and oriented toward preserving secular features. This phrase’s meanings then suggest that such modes of conduct originated from and were developed upon a previous clans or community’s cultural history.

What influenced Gotama Buddha’s philosophical conception and practices was the Sākya clan’s worldview.\(^4\) With this understanding, *patisotagāmi* seems traceable to and more indicative of a sociopolitical and ethical countercultural movement, rather than

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\(^1\) May be defined as “against the current/stream”; Collins, *Selfless Persons*, 250; additionally, see 306, fn. 15. Also, for more information on this word pertaining to the Buddha’s and brahmins’ worldviews, “aticonca-samuppāda” or dependent-origination, and several problematic translations, see Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (revised and enlarged edition) (New York: Grove Press, 1974).

\(^2\) To be discussed further on page 92; however, this training includes: right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

\(^3\) Cone and Gombrich, *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara*, xxii.

\(^4\) For example, Russell T. McCutcheon, on Mircea Eliade’s *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, explains that “through the remarks on the process of rationalization, a process whereby human beings clothe and interpret religious experiences in rational and secular terms, the text entrenches the assumption that, in their essence, all religious experiences—or hierophanies—are fundamentally alien to such secular and historical issues as politics and economics [but certainly then ethics, too].” McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 44.
simply religious opposition or “freedom.” Contributing to the latter misrepresentation, for instance, is Stackhouse’s depiction of missionary activity, where he explains that this activity is the “breeding ground of freedom.” In converting and establishing a relationship with the “truly divine,” he remarks that “all other areas of life are subject to reevaluation and reconstruction.” Not only does such a description articulate that religious experience precedes that of the secular, but also the misconception that these dimensions are initially separate. Therefore, with respect to religious and secular categories, are concepts and ideologies, such as missionary activity and freedom, mutually exclusive? As will be explicated here, a response to this question reshapes the current understanding of missionary activity.

Together, the sociopolitical hierarchy and ethos of the Sākya gana-sangha formed a system that had a longstanding tension with that of the Indo-Aryan, brahminic culture. Distinct from the latter system because it functioned upon a “rational” rather than a divine underpinning, the former system was secular in nature. This clan’s system, for example, conflicted with the stringently varied levels of “purity” and “impurity,” and treatments accorded to each echelon in the intransigent caste system. A few previously mentioned distinctions were that clan bonding occurred through eating together, women were seen more as equals and thus less subordinate, and both a change in one’s profession and ability to ascend into the upper caste were possible in this two-tiered system. Therefore, in relation to patisotagāmi, what is also misrepresented in the given definition of missionary activity is the relationship between converting and freedom as

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6 Ibid.
7 Thapar, Early India, 149-150.
8 Ibid., 66.
solely religious. What will become more apparent is that early Theravāda Buddhism is excluded from such a definition because secular contestation over socio-mobility and ethical equality are the basis for this religious movement’s formation. Thus, what was transmitted through early Theravāda was the preservation of secular features.

In sum, this chapter clarifies how early Theravāda’s origin was centuries old, initially stemming from secular differences with the Indo-Aryans and the latter’s support for and endorsement of divinity, as articulated by the brahmins. Moreover, the content presented bolsters the previous chapter’s conclusion—that early Theravāda was opposed to the ethos of Brahminism—by incorporating Talal Asad’s concepts of “the secular,” the “public sphere,” and “secularism.” The focus of the next section, therefore, is how each concept pertains to the development of early Theravāda in relation to “missionary activity.”

The Development of Pre-Modern Missionary Activity

To begin, “the secular” is to be understood as “a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life.”\(^{10}\) While discussed as a concept “in modern life,” these constituents of the secular most certainly existed in pre-modern life as well. Asad explains further that “the secular” is also “neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred).”\(^{11}\) In other words, “the secular” precedes religious movements and is not an entity that is distinct from religion. However, in order to elucidate how this concept helps

\(^{10}\) Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 25.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 25.
to explain the development, manifestation, and then spread of early Theravāda as a secular movement, the “public sphere” or “public space of debate” is discussed.

While the public space of debate is understood as “the equal right of all to participate in nationwide discussions,” this notion is illusory. For instance, Asad states that, “There is no space in which all citizens can negotiate freely and equally with one another.” And that these spaces are illusory is equally applicable to local and regional discussions in ancient India. He also explains that the public sphere is a space, neither vacant nor meaningless when considering the debates held within it, because it is “constituted by the sensibilities—memories and aspirations, fears and hopes—of speakers and listeners.” Moreover, access to the public debate is subject to limitations and delimitations.

For example, Asad comments that “historical forces” not only shape whose voices can be heard and by whom, but also the conditions of when and where. Furthermore, he remarks that in speaking toward a consequence, the “political world is affected”; that a conclusion is reached; and, upon this conclusion, there is an “authority to make practical decisions.” He explains, however, that the aforementioned are mistakenly presupposed “performatives” in the public sphere of debate. And what makes these presuppositions erroneous is the caveat that they are “not open equally to everyone because the domain of free speech is always shaped by preestablished limits.”

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12 Ibid., 2.
13 Ibid., 4.
14 Ibid., 184.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 184-185.
17 Ibid., 184.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
To position Asad’s work directly in the context of early Theravāda’s emergence, upon Gotama Buddha’s entrance into this sphere, he spoke about both the loss of an ethos and the gana-sanghas’ “secular-flexible stratification”20 due to a long-endured tension with the Indo-Aryan culture. Also, the previously mentioned caveat is a significant reason Gotama Buddha was able to influence, transmit, and preserve his culture’s sociopolitical and ethical system within this sphere. That is, in being recognized as a khattiya, he was not prohibited from being heard in this free speech domain, although from the gana-sanghas. Therefore, where Asad demonstrates that secular and religious worlds do not function as separate and “fixed categories,”21 it is within the religious space of debate that the development of early Theravāda became the alternative conclusion. That is, it was the place where Gotama Buddha was able to become an “authority to make practical decisions.”

For example, in listening to king Bimbisāra’s concerns over the acceptance of certain types of people into the Sangha, such as thieves and murderers, Gotama Buddha instituted a new rule in the Vinaya Piṭaka;22 a rule that was, first and foremost, political in nature. In more detail, other examples will be discussed in this chapter to demonstrate how “the secular” is the grounds from which early Theravāda’s formation is evinced as religious. However, what is important now is to address how the modern concept of “secularism” fits into missionary activity in ancient India. In so doing, this “activity” may provide an avenue to explain the development of secularism.

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21 Asad, Formations of the Secular, 25.
In his last chapter, Asad explores an anthropological investigation into secularism through discussing a study by Marcel Mauss. Because Mauss refers to ancient Indian practices of yoga and meditation, and remarks that these practices spread through religions, the concepts of “the secular” and the “public sphere” fit with my effort to more comprehensively understand missionary activity in pre-modern times. Supporting how Asad’s study—and in particular, secularism—is related to missionizing, a few scholars’ arguments are perhaps best summarized by Jonathan Z. Smith. He comments, “Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization.” Asad’s point is not dissimilar. He contends that “there is nothing essentially religious, nor any universal essence that defines ‘sacred language’ or ‘sacred experience.’” With this understanding of religion, missionary activity finds theoretical grounds upon which it may stand, but also from which it has the potential to fall in relation to secularism. To begin explicating both relationships, the connection between missionary activity and secular living is addressed first.

What is called “religious” activity is both reaffirming of and reaffirmed by the conceptualization of a “modern” secular world. How missionizing is commonly described, in other words, suggests that the acts of proselytizing and converting others are entirely separate acts from those of secular interactions. Such a view reaffirms religion as

23 Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 252.
24 Ibid.
25 As a reminder, along with Talal Asad’s book, *Formations of the Secular*, there are also works by Russell T. McCutcheon and Jonathan Z. Smith, such as *Manufacturing Religion* and *Imagining Religion*, respectively, as noted on page 1, fn. 1.
26 Prior to this statement, Smith remarks that, “While there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religion—there is no data for religion. Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 9.
being a distinguishable and distinct entity. The fact that modern society has conceptualized secular living as discernable from religion, the idea that religious adherents missionize is reaffirmed. The missionizing concept, however, must not be limited to the general assumption that adherents conduct this activity in only one way, such as seeking out others to convert. For example, a child is both taught to believe in a particular religion and how to demonstrate religiosity, such as how to pray.\footnote{This example is from a discussion with Dr. Eric Bain-Selbo on Russell T.’s articulation on learning how a “wink” has varied meanings. McCutcheon is utilizing this symbolic gesture as explained by Clifford Geertz to express how such acts are learned. McCutcheon, \textit{Manufacturing Religion}.} This is then, fundamentally, missionizing. A child, who once had no conceptions of religious beliefs and practices, is not simply converted upon the caregivers’ proselytizing efforts, but also inculcated with what a particular religious freedom is supposed to mean to her or him. Therefore, from childhood onwards, missionary activity both reaffirms and is reaffirmed in this way as well. However, this relationship between a religious life and ideas about converting and freedom are, in all likelihood, misunderstood.

Asad’s work, for instance, strengthens the particular point on missionary activity as ostensibly distinct from that of secular life. For what ultimately negates missionary activity as having an “essential” nature is how it fails to materialize as something strictly religious in both pre-modern and modern times. That is, the standard concept of missionizing does not take into account the secular interactions that preceded religious movements. That there is a common conceptualization of religious and secular worlds being distinguishable entities is only the larger perception or understanding that explains their relationship. This perceived differentiation is perhaps due to the slow development of individuals forming communities, states, and then nations in relation to sociopolitics, such as the intersections of state formation and who has power or control over a given...
geographic space, against religions. There are instances of this perceptual facade regarding these two entities’ distinctness having been discounted.

Religious schisms constitute such an example. Although these types of schisms are a subtle example of missionary activity, they certainly would have had individuals proselytize and convert adherents to a new way of considering religious freedom, because, as Stackhouse states, “Having been drawn into freedom, all other areas of life are subject to reevaluation and reconstruction” for converts.29 This relationship between missionary activity and freedom indicates how religious conversion changes the subsequent secular world for individuals. However, it also conveys that what is called “successful missionizing” is determined by the reshaping of individuals’ mental and physical identities, which were tied to their communities’ cultural histories. It is on both of these points that religious schisms help offer an explanation of how freedom in missionary activity is founded through secular living.

Paul Robinson, for example, states that the Reformation was a “political event” because “the medieval church had become a political power and the popes had claimed authority over the secular rulers.”30 He also remarks that Martin Luther “believed that Christians had the duty and the freedom in the Gospel to live as citizens and even to serve in government, engaging actively in the world of politics.”31 Furthermore, while the Reformation did include “a matter of faith and devotion,” he states that it was “most certainly, a matter of subjection to a political order.”32 Here, Robinson exemplifies the fact that religious divides are not strictly religious. Tensions between religion and

31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
politics, in this particular case, indeed preceded and concertedly generated missionary activity.

Moreover, Robinson’s statement addresses how religious adherents vied for political power. However, as an account of Christian missionary activity, this example does not include the larger history of Christianity’s development. Similarly, academics have not explored a longer history of what precipitated early Theravāda’s activity. This schism, in other words, is a more recent representation of this complex relationship, and one that aligns with brahminic influences in ancient India. For throughout history, individuals have unequivocally identified their personhood with their relation to the external world in which they live. Therefore, enmeshed in this said “religious” activity are also contemporary politics. Thus, sociopolitics are always partially responsible for what “alienates its converts from previous belief and practice to some degree.”

Furthermore, as explained earlier, missionary activity is said to be “the breeding ground of freedom, because in conversion a person finds that he or she can make an ultimate choice about, or be drawn by grace into, a new relationship to the truly divine.” However, this “freedom” is ultimately a matter of responsibility, whereby one is identifying with a religious life over secular living. That is, without the inclusion of politics, and with the belief that individuals are presumably interacting with others upon and through articulations and actions that are interpreted as solely religious, adherents have relinquished personal responsibility to an authority other than oneself. For instance, the presumed power—ascribed to the divine—is that beseeched forgiveness has been, is, or will be granted in some form. Therefore, “missionizing” removes and imposes aspects

34 Ibid.
of individuals’ identities when encountered in *any* public space, thereby reshaping and reconstituting their identities, and thus that community’s.

This process takes place even if there is a complete resistance to the missionaries’ attempts to introduce a differing form of religious beliefs and practices. For example, identities are challenged and built upon through such conflict, which nonetheless is a change relative to the individuals’ previous perception before such encounters. Therefore, whether brief or longstanding, and unsuccessful or successful in their attempts, such intended interactions by missionaries *always* subject those approached to a personal historio-, socio-, religio-cultural, and/or ethical questioning. Thus, religious missionaries disengage individuals and communities from their previous personhoods and cultures through varied degrees of resistance or acceptance within varied durations of time. In this way, missionary activity acts in a similar manner as that of secularism.

Remarking on Mauss’s essay, Asad states that the former’s study has “perhaps the most far-reaching implications for an anthropological understanding of secularism.”35 In particular, not only are “socio-psycho-biological” “embodied practices,” such as yoga, meditation, and the “language-in-use,” ways in which preconditioned the “varieties of religious (and secular) experience”36 perhaps manifesting an erroneous understanding of religious and secular worlds being distinct today, but also that acts of proselytizing and converting are perhaps then similarly justified as *solely* religious actions.37 Within this perspective, one’s innate or personal moral responsibility shifts to a different authority

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35 Asad, Formations of the Secular, 252.
36 Ibid.
37 Hence, my earlier point explaining how “missionary activity” may be erroneously reaffirming and reaffirmed by the concept “secular” living today.
from which moral “conduct can be sought.”\textsuperscript{38} Therefore, from these preconditions and the subsequent shift, this “authority itself comes to be understood not as an ideologically justified coercion but as a predisposition of the embodied self.”\textsuperscript{39}

Concertedly then, where Asad, on Mauss, states that “the inability to ‘enter into communion with God’… becomes a function of untaught bodies,”\textsuperscript{40} such “activity” imposed onto pre-modern and modern societies’ religiosities is to be understood more simply as enacted functions of secularism. In other words, because secularism is to be understood as “requiring the separation of religious from secular institutions in government,” but “distinctive” in that it “presupposes new concepts of ‘religion,’ ‘ethics,’ and ‘politics,’ and new imperatives associated with them,”\textsuperscript{41} missionary activity as an internally developed function or understanding is then the coercive justification that a religious experience \textit{truly} founded the personal interpretation or decision to separate the innate authority from that of something divine. However, compounding the complexity of this study is the later shift in the development of the state as unopposed or opposed to a divine authority. That is, there was first a shift in the location of moral authority from the internal to the divine; and second, the questioning of and shift toward who would be granted societal power within the formation of the state.

Specific to the latter, secularism in modern times is also understood to be “an enactment by which a \textit{political medium} (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through

\textsuperscript{38} Asad, Formations of the Secular, 252.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 1-2.
class, gender, and religion.” More simply, secularism is said to move beyond such identifications of self through another authority—a political medium—that unites individuals through their adherence to or belief in a particular citizenship. And how missionary activity relates to this shift is through what “freedom” means. For the difference between the development of the state in pre-modern and modern societies is that the pre-modern state’s mediation process was not aimed at such identity transcendence.

Therefore, while secularism is not an explicit concept identifiable in ancient India under the exact applications articulated today, there is, nevertheless, a better understanding of its potential origins through a historical conceptualization of missionary activity. Specifically, “missionary activity” seems to help explain the earliest conversion of the internal authority to an interpreted extension of some divide from an external divine power. Additionally, this not only calls into question the idea that proselytizing precedes converting, but, more particular to this study, that the conflict between an internal and said external moral authority was present in the contextual development of early Theravāda. Thus, such activity is more precisely understood as “[the] imaginative acts of comparison and generalization,” there is “nothing essentially religious, nor any universal essence that defines ‘sacred language’ or ‘sacred experience,’” and “secularism” having been cut from the same cloth.

With this grounding in the relationship between missionary activity and secularism, what then appears as the Buddha’s religious opposition to Brahminism was

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42 Ibid., 5.
43 Ibid.
44 That is, unless these initial engagements and explorations into the body and “self” are reconsidered as, for lack of better phrasings, innate or self-proselytizing.
previously an acceptance of and resistance to the established alignment between the monarchy and brahmins’ sociopolitical structure and associated ethos—the vaṇṇa stratification or caste system. As G. Aloysius astutely points out with respect to the gana-sanghas and Indo-Aryans’ contestation: because these two distinct socio-political systems differed so greatly, the “very origin of the caste-varna in the sub-continent was tension-ridden and contained the seeds of its own negation, flagging off the very real possibility of historical development along either course—caste or no/anitcaste.”

Therefore, it seems more apparent that early Theravāda’s manifestation, although academically enveloped and presented in a context of religious debate against Brahmanism, is the result of the gana-sanghas and Indo-Aryans’ preexisting competition over state formation. In lieu of the former culture’s demise by the latter, early Theravāda, in its most fundamental nature, was a movement to preserve a more egalitarian system. Thus, where Asad states that religion is presupposed in societies, the intersection of these differing culture’s “knowledges, behaviors, and sensibilities” informed the way in which early Theravāda Buddhism appeared. More specific to missionary activity, the account of the origination of “Theravāda” has been rooted in

46 “Brahmanism” being the post-Vedic religious context, and “Brahminism” being the development and establishment of brahminic ideology and power. Also, see Gombrich, How Buddhism Began; Cone and Gombrich, The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara, xxiv; Thapar, Early India, 149-150.
47 Here, I am referring to Theravāda as a concept. “Theravāda” is to be understood within the scope of McCutcheon’s “The Politics of Nostalgia” in Manufacturing Religion. For instance, he states that, “The politics of nostalgia, therefore, denotes an ideological position in which, for example, things purportedly archaic are unilaterally prevalued as essential and beneficial, becoming the norm against which other social arrangements and forms of human behavior are judged and found wanting.” In other words, while “Theravāda” or “system of the elders” intends to denote something distinctly specific (or that certain human behaviors and experiences are “religious”), this phrase is conceived—over the course of “a series of ideological strategies” implemented by scholars—to represent that a clear distinction between “religious” behaviors and experiences lived in a “secular” world indeed exist. However, this position is “undefendable.” McCutcheon, Manufacturing Religion, 32-35. Also, more specific to the multifaceted misconceptions of “Theravāda,” see Peter Skilling et al., eds., How Theravada is Theravada?: Exploring Buddhist Identities (Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2012).
the mistaken notion that such activity existed apart from “the secular,” largely due to the absence of considering secular activity prior to this movement’s appearance. Moving forward, the following section is the beginning of the discussion on this a lack of consideration.

Religious Features in a Sociopolitical Movement

In her multifaceted exploration of and guidance on Theravāda Buddhism, Kate Crosby insightfully comments that the “categorization” of Buddhism into Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrāyāna “make us blind to the fluidity, complexity, diversity, and richness of any actual manifestation of Buddhism in real people and communities.” In agreement with the described flaws of “categorizing,” Crosby’s point also supports this investigation into the intersection of religio-cultural, socio-political, and ethical facets in ancient India that engendered early Theravāda’s beginnings. For her comment articulates that other categorical concepts and ascribed terms or boundaries, such as missionary religions, proselytizing, and converting, may ultimately remove the “richness” in Buddhism. Aimed toward recovering this richness in early Theravāda missionary activity, the juxtaposition of differing sociopolitical hierarchies and ethical conduct in Hindu and Buddhist texts becomes central to such a pursuit. Therefore, with the provided theoretical understanding of “the secular,” the sociopolitical hierarchies described in the two texts are addressed first.

49 With respect to Walters’s position—that Buddhologists around the turn of the twentieth century mistakenly ascribed “missions” into early Theravāda—, there seems then, to be further support for the claim that Western academic research has misrepresented much of Buddhist “missionizing.”
Precisely, Hindu and Buddhist texts depict a conflicting arrangement of the tiered hierarchy; where brahminic texts position the *khattiyas* as subordinates, the Pāli canon describes the obverse.\(^5^0\) In consideration of these competing ideological hierarchies and to help address the larger question in this chapter, a response to the following query is provided. Why would Buddhist monastics refrain from the opportunity to insert the Sangha (monastic community) into the caste hierarchy by way of the Theravāda Pāli canon?

At a glance, a valid response is that the Sangha would have identified with Gotama Buddha’s *khattiya* birth status, mostly due to the earliest monastics being *khattiyas* who had “abandoned a life of luxury.”\(^5^1\) Early Theravādins might have then already found themselves directly, or later indirectly as caste diversity within the Sangha flourished, part of the existing hierarchy. Also, Romila Thapar comments that *khattiyas* were placed above the brahmins in Buddhist sources due to either the king’s “social and political power” because they were “representatives in the assembly” or because of “Buddhist opposition to Brahmanism.”\(^5^2\) Each of these responses is a tenable explanation of why early Theravādins resisted both including and positioning the Sangha either above or directly beneath the *khattiyas* in the hierarchy—and, in either case, superior to the brahmins. However, there seems to be a reason that is perhaps even more significant.

Tied to *gana-sangha* culture, Gotama Buddha and early Theravādins conceptually and pragmatically positioned themselves outside the caste hierarchy to politically


\(^{52}\) “Assembly” refers to the *gana-sangha* format for politics. Thapar, *Early India*, 149-150.
preserve this culture’s more fluid socio-hierarchical and egalitarian ethical system.

Scholars such as Thapar, Laksiri Jayasuriya, and Uma Chakravarti have alluded to this.\textsuperscript{53} However, they have neither directly approached how nor supported this claim in the area of missionary activity.

The closest allusion to this is in Thapar’s study on ancient Indian societies’ development from lineage systems to state formations. She comments that the Sangha “borrowed” its structure from the \textit{gana-sanghas}, which “led” to its demand to be recognized as a distinct entity from that of the monarchy.\textsuperscript{54} Similarly describing how \textit{gana-sangha} culture impacted Gotama Buddha, Jayasuriya examines three dimensions of Asokan statecraft in relation to Buddhism and politics.\textsuperscript{55} He states that the Buddha’s inclination toward “a more open society” was reflective of “what prevailed” in the \textit{gana-sanghas’} governance rather than the monarchical kingdoms.\textsuperscript{56} Additionally, Chakravarti discusses how the evolution of the \textit{gana-sanghas} into “republican units” was both a “reaction against” the increasing authority of and control by the monarchies “in the latter part of the Vedic period and the divinity beginning to be attributed to the king.”\textsuperscript{57} Moreover, on the resistance toward enculturation into the caste system by the \textit{gana-sanghas}, both Thapar and Chakravarti state that these republics were comprised of those

\textsuperscript{53} Thapar, \textit{From Lineage to State}; Jayasuriya, “Buddhism, Politics, and State Craft”; Chakravarti, \textit{The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism}.

\textsuperscript{54} Thapar, \textit{From Lineage to State}, 148.

\textsuperscript{55} Jayasuriya contends that the values forming the Asokan welfare state embodied particular “principles and practices such as the rule of law, deliberative democracy, procedures of governance and the social policies” to align similarities of the former and the “Enlightenment values in Europe,” rather than the more often depicted “East-West dichotomies.” Jayasuriya, “Buddhism, Politics, and State Craft,” 41.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 47. The kingdoms that are specifically mentioned are Kosala and Magadha.

\textsuperscript{57} Chakravarti, \textit{The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism}, 7.
from the earlier Vedic period who had previously migrated eastward in order to maintain their “egalitarian traditions” and “preserve their political system.”

In the interplay between the slow demise of *gana-sangha* culture and early Theravāda’s arising, the latter undeniably instills the former’s sociopolitical viewpoints and ethical practices. Aloysius, for instance, discusses the ancient Aryan’s surmounting the *gana-sanghas*. His deductive analyses on Thapar and Chakravarti’s works are useful in terms of explaining how early Theravāda enveloped, transmitted, and thus missionized secular features from the *gana-sanghas’* culture. The twofold implication from his following statement is that the appearance of early Theravāda was not generated by opposition to another religion and nor does its emergence within a religious sphere necessitate its beginning as a religious endeavor. Aloysius states that,

> [T]he apparent submergence and collapse of the relatively secular-flexible stratification of the *gana-sanghas* under the pressure of the monarchy and its rigid-religious *varna* hierarchy was not a matter of course, of natural or internal evolution but a result of historical confrontation between the two and [the] vanquishing of one formation by the other, after much contestation and resistance.

This description, and in particular “the monarchy and *its* rigid-religious *varna* hierarchy,” implies that sociopolitical systems chose to align with, enforce, and preserve its specific social structures through religious means. The *rishis* (seers) and brahmins’ articulations of *how* the caste system was developed does not necessarily mean that they indeed established this system. Considering Asad’s work, discussed earlier, a secular system is more than likely to have existed prior to or alongside their religious

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59 He does so to explain how the caste system had become entangled in India’s modern nation and religion. Aloysius, “Caste In and Above History,” 152.
60 Their studies include examinations on lineage, state development, and religion in ancient Indian.
62 Emphasis added. Ibid.
practices.\textsuperscript{63} The monarchy, then, had legitimized the religious aspect in this hierarchical system.

Comparatively, the manifestation of early Buddhism strongly suggests that not only did Theravāda borrow from or transmit the \textit{gana-sanghas’} political and ethical system, but also that an earlier Indo-Aryan system developed in the same manner. Therefore, upon such contention with this monarchical system and the aforesaid divinity element, the previously established social, political, and ethical system from which the \textit{gana-sangha} operated were the “thought[s] behind” early Theravāda’s development. In fact, there is textual support for the notion that Gotama Buddha and early Theravādins preserved these secular features; hence, the posited expansion of the meaning of \textit{paṭisotagāmi} as a secular movement. Such evidence is found by interconnecting textual descriptions from the Dīgha and Aṅguttara Nikāyas.

In the Dīgha Nikāya, the “Sīgāla Sutta” demonstrates the connection between the \textit{gana-sanghas’} stratification and behavior by describing how “masters” were to treat “servants.”\textsuperscript{64} This Sutta explains that the “masters” are to uphold certain ethical responsibilities when considering a “servant’s” wellbeing.\textsuperscript{65} One responsibility of the former was to dispense food to the latter and another was to share “special delicacies with them.”\textsuperscript{66} Capturing both how and where early Theravāda transmits the \textit{gana-sanghas’}

\textsuperscript{63} For reference, see pages, 49-60.\textsuperscript{64} The Siṅgālasuttam is contained with the Pāthikavagga pāli section of the Dīgha Nikāya.\textsuperscript{65} The “masters” are to accord the work of servants with their strength, dispense food and wages to them, provide care to them when ill, share “special delicacies with them,” and dismiss them from work at an appropriate time. Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed., \textit{In the Buddha’s Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pāli Canon} (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 118.\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
ethos is the Buddha’s comment on such treatments found in the “Sukhamāla Sutta,” described in the Aṅguttara Nikāya.⁶⁷

In this Sutta, the Buddha is said to have recounted how his family fed servants “wheat, rice, and meat,” but that “lentil soup” and “broken rice” where given to servants in others’ homes.⁶⁸ The Buddha, in this reflection, described the times before he departed the family’s palace in Kapilavatthu. Since the subordinated khattiya groups would have been prohibited from eating beef in caste society, the fact that this four-tiered system disallowed certain tiers from eating together and that the types of food eaten were not the same or shared in the caste system,⁶⁹ his reflection points toward both the secular-flexible and more egalitarian system that early Theravāda was founded upon, as well as the imposition of being subsumed into this structure. Then, regarding social disparities, a more flexible socio-hierarchy and universal ethical system in a changing society were likely to have been “intentions” to transmit or missionize. This argument is especially convincing when there was a desire “to opt out of social obligations” due to a resistance to a “changing society” and the individual’s “struggle for status in the current defining of social hierarchies.”⁷⁰

Furthermore, Aloysius extrapolates and describes how the gana-sanghas’ system disappeared; namely, that it was externally overtaken rather than dissolving or imploding from within the clan.⁷¹ However, he seems to have overlooked Chakravarti’s description of these republics being compromised by internal vices as well. This point buttresses the notion that early Theravāda was a means to preserve the earlier gana-sanghas’ system.

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⁶⁷ Within the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the “Sukhamāla Sutta” is contained within the Tikanipātapāli, under the Devadūtavaggo.
⁶⁸ Thanissaro (trans.), “Sukhamala Sutta: Refinement.”
⁶⁹ Thapar, Early India, 66.
⁷⁰ Ibid., 169.
⁷¹ Specific to these remarks, Aloysius analyzes and summarizes works by both Thapar and Chakravarti.
Remarking on the *Pācittiya*, Chakravarti describes how tensions over the emergence of distinct stratifications between “masters” and “servants” disrupted the internal sociopolitical hierarchy and ethos. She writes that the Sākyan *dasa-kammakaras* (working population) attacked “their masters’ womenfolk as an act of revenge” for the “sharp differentiation” that was “beginning” to form between the two groups around the time of the Buddha. Because a more discernable internal stratification was developing, where each tier had previously reasoned “existential inequalities” to simply be the way things were, the intention to preserve these waning secular features was motivated by both internal and external forces. Moreover, if both secular forces contributed to the *gana-sanghas*’ demise, the “activity” conducted by Gotama Buddha may be understood as less religiously motivated.

Moreover, one can extrapolate from Chakravarti’s point that the *gana-sanghas* or clans’ earlier system was previously more flexible. Therefore, the Pāli canon may provide somewhat of an accurate reflection of state formation. More specifically, on the latter point, the canon’s theory on the origin of the state might well describe the Sākya’s earlier socio-hierarchical and ethical system. While difficult to ascertain, Thapar provides a description of the “living prehistory” of ancient India, in which four types of societies are

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72 From the Vinaya Piṭaka.
73 Thapar states that the term, “republic,” has been preferred to describe *gana-sanghas* because “it conceded social-stratification but was distinct from monarchy. Another term used is ‘oligarchy’, which emphasizes the power of the ruling families. More recently, early forms of such systems are seen as chiefdoms, underlining their particular genesis, suggesting that they might be pre-states or proto-states, and, at any rate, different from kingdoms.” Thapar, *Early India*, 147. It seems that this particular point by Chakravarti, and others like it, might explain how there was an evolution from republics into oligarchies. Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*, 26-27.
described. Although this prehistory might be speculative, the presence of these groups until recent centuries and the new studies on them support the claim.

What is particularly striking about the brief historical account of the first society—the hunter-gatherers, consisting of “forest-dwellers,” “sedentary” and “shifting cultivators,” and “horticulturalists”—is how it operated. In contrast to other societies, the hunter-gatherers seem to have upheld a system similar to that of the gana-sanghas and perhaps, then, also to that of the early Theravādins’ account of the origin of state. It should be noted that the latter is, in and of itself, indicative of early Theravāda’s emergence from a secular system. Thapar comments that hunter-gatherer “societies were organized into clans” and that, “Social hierarchy received little attention and generally the differentiation was only between the chief, who had the highest status, and the other clansmen.” Described as “intruders” in this society’s prehistory, Indo-Aryan settlers were in opposition with these clans. Moreover, the ideal forest-dwelling clan would have shared a “defined space” and “near egalitarian status” or, in other words, “the notion of hierarchy in caste was opposed to the more egalitarian ethos of the clan.” Therefore, this earlier society’s opposition to the territorial occupation by the Indo-Aryan settlers resulted from a differing system.

As the Indo-Aryan’s slowly took control of territories and regions, specific groups, such as the hunter-gatherers with their “earlier tradition,” were either “converted” to or “subordinated” by the settlers’ system. Part of the process by which the latter

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76 Thapar, *Early India*, 55.
77 The other three are: “pastoralists,” “peasants,” and “townsmen.” Ibid., 54-62.
78 Ibid., 56.
79 Ibid., 55-57.
80 Ibid., 65-66.
81 Ibid., 422.
subordinated the former included “forest-chiefs” becoming “the founders of dynasties.”

Whereas Thapar remarks more generally on the dynastic evolution of subordinated khattiyas as either solar or lunar, Singh specifically states that the Sākyas described their clan as being from the solar dynasty. Therefore, the hunter-gatherer’s earlier system seems to have evolved into gana-sanghas, thereby establishing a traceable hierarchical and ethical system similar to that of the Sākya clan. While perhaps this account of an earlier society and its respective system’s historical lineage remains tenuous, there is further support from the different statuses given to the Moriya family in brahminic and Buddhist textual sources.

The conflict over this family’s societal standing is perhaps key to understanding how the near egalitarian status and more egalitarian ethos of the clan are related to missionary activity in the early Theravāda movement. Brahminic texts, for example, claim the Moriya family to be “shudras [or suddas] and heretics” and Buddhist sources identify them as khattiyas. Through these ascriptions, perspectives on the earlier stratification of and more integrated relationships between diverse peoples corroborate both the lineage of a system and the secular features that motivated this “religious” movement. Of importance here is that the Moriya family in the brahminic source was considered heretical due to being under the rule of a “heterodox sect.” Because the

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82 Ibid., 422.
83 Ibid., 176 and 420.
84 Upinder Singh, A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century, (Delhi, India: Person, 2009), 266.
85 Thapar, Early India, 176.
86 Ibid.
Moriyas were seen in this way in brahminic sources, at the very least the Sākyas would have been considered “heretics,” if not suddas as well.87

The Puranas,88 for example, depict the successor dynasties to the “kshatriya [as] heroes of the solar and lunar lineages…would be of shudra origin.”89 From this account, Thapar concludes that, “This shift in the status of the ruling family is an aspect of the coming of the state, where political power was to be increasingly open—virtually accommodating any varna.”90 Another point is that the earlier positioning of diverse groups or families by the settlers into a caste system did not apply to the earlier tradition of gana-sanghas. In other words, upon the subordination of diverse peoples by the Indo-Aryans, the early community of gana-sanghas mostly saw diverse peoples, such as the Moriyas, as equals. Each of the aforementioned points constitutes further support for both the development of hunter-gatherers evolving into gana-sanghas and that diverse peoples or suddas were regarded more as equals. Therefore, in light of the Sākya clan’s long-enduring historical tension with Indo-Aryans, Gotama Buddha’s mission to preserve a previously existing secular system allowing for greater socio-mobility and a more universal ethos would have been paramount.

On maintaining this ethos, the Buddhist account of the origin of the state constitutes a description of the earliest account of a social contract.91 As a contract or agreement made by individuals to structure society based on political and/or moral obligations, in which some of the majority’s rights are relinquished to an authority for the

87 Thapar, Early India, 148. Further support is found in the Aryans’ views of non-Aryan ritual and worship, as the Sākya clan would have been scrutinized for being “godless non-sacrificers” and “worshippers of dummy gods and phallic gods,” Deshpande, Sanskrit and Prakrit, 2.
88 Part of the Vedic corpus, the composition of the Puranas began in the fourth century B.C.E. and lasted until around 1,000 A.D.
89 Thapar, Early India, 176.
90 Ibid.
91 Gokhale “Early Buddhist Kingship,” 16-17; Thapar, Early India, 149.
protection of their remaining rights, the early Theravādins saw the cause of the state’s emergence as an “agency” to be a result of a decline in morality.\textsuperscript{92} Moreover, evidence for the development of and transmission from an earlier system into both the later clan system and the early Theravādins’ theory does seem to exist.

Brahminic texts describe the “intruders” as having cleared forests and capitalized on its resources, including people.\textsuperscript{93} These settlers did exploit forests for resources.\textsuperscript{94} In this process, what is clear is that these communities’ systems were essentially disbanded. In light of the fact that they were facing an inflexible caste system, it is highly plausible that the \textit{gana-sanghas’} secular-flexible stratification and ethos were transmuted, transmitted, and thereby missionized through early Theravāda, because the manifestation of early Theravāda and its determinate feature of moral conduct as a way to move within the various Buddhist realms of rebirth (\textit{samsara}) is representative of a longstanding egalitarian secular system.

More specifically, two of the most notable aspects of this early religious movement are found in the novel relationship between \textit{kamma} and rebirth. Moreover, the concept of “the secular” helps explain how this relationship and these terms’ meanings were reconceptualized. Where \textit{kamma} is taken to mean the volition or intention behind one’s thought, speech, and action in Buddhist philosophy, an individual’s rebirth into one of six realms\textsuperscript{95} is contingent on both past and present \textit{kamma}. In the pursuit of enlightenment, the individuals’ volitions are therefore contextualized in the community’s

\textsuperscript{92} Gokhale, on the Buddhist origin of the state, comments that the state developed out of necessity “for the moral transformation of man as a political animal.” Gokhale, “Early Buddhist Kingship,” 20.

\textsuperscript{93} It is uncertain, but there is an opinion that these clans believed that trees housed “spirits”, which were revered, which could be the reason groves in the Pāli canon are significant.

\textsuperscript{94} Thapar, \textit{Early India}, 422.

\textsuperscript{95} The six main realms of existence in Buddhism are as follows: gods, demi-gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings.
historical ethos. This particular historical facet or dimension within volition underlies three disciplines or trainings—the first being morality or *silakkhandha*, the second is concentration or *samadhikkhandha*, and the third is wisdom or *paññakkhandha*—that constitute the Noble Eightfold Path through particular “components.”

While progress through these disciplines is not linear, they do represent higher stages of training, of which the latter two are established on the ability to refrain from immoral actions. Therefore, proper moral conduct is necessary for the development of concentration and wisdom. Moral conduct is also the mainstay in the early Theravāda movement, in which the underpinning of the philosophical emphasis encapsulates and reflects the *gana-sanghas*’ system to “tolerate unorthodox views” and include others through its “egalitarian ethos.” In early Theravāda and the *gana-sangha* system, tolerance is the ability to refrain from immoral behavior and therefore tolerate opposing views and actions. Rebirth, regardless of an individual’s caste, is a matter of extinguished cumulative volitions or underlying ethical intentions of the past, present, and future that subjects *all* beings, equally, to the same universal law. Simply stated, the early Buddhist system of *kamma* and rebirth certainly represents the transmutation of the egalitarian nature of the *gana-sanghas*’ system and perhaps this clan’s earlier system or “contract.”

More specifically, the early Theravādin conceptualization of rebirth preserved a previously established structure of society with both its sociopolitical and moral obligations through *kamma*. That is, *kamma* is a matter of personal responsibility articulated and aimed toward transcending the inequalities found in the “casting” of

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96 Considered a discipline or training in morality, *silakkhandha* includes right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Concentration or *samadhikkhandha* includes the components of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Lastly, wisdom or *paññakkhandha* includes right view and right intention.


98 Thapar, *Early India*, 149.
individuals. The Buddhist position on kamma, in contrast to brahminic notions, was one that “was not tied to the regulations of varna society, nor were social ethics measured by the rules of varna.” Furthermore, the early Theravāda community was divided into a two-tiered system—the Sangha and laity—which is representative of both the Śākya clan’s socio-hierarchy and that of the hunter-gatherers’ clans. Thus, in contrast to the caste system, the majority or laity relinquished some rights, such as those associated with status, to an authority or Sangha in order to protect rights associated with equality through a similar system reflecting a more casteless identity.

Moreover, as the antecedent to early Theravāda development, “the secular” explains the emergence of this movement. As it relates specifically to early Buddhism’s arising, the concept of “the secular” in ancient India may not be considered “continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it,” nor is it “the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred.” In fact, “the secular” unequivocally engendered early Theravāda, and it did so through partly including within it both the recognition of and tolerance for the divine. Thus, “early Theravādins,” their preservation of an egalitarian system, and, in all likelihood, social contract, were the result of “the secular.” Each of the previous points supports the reasons for or “intentions” behind early Theravādins positioning themselves outside the dominating caste hierarchy.

As a final, symbolic example of such an intention, it can be recognized that, prior to the Sangha’s formation, Gotama Buddha had situated himself apart from the predominating contemporary conventions that were taught and practiced. His formative

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99 Asad comments that “pre-modern” societies, in contrast with those of “modern” times, included “ways in which the state mediates local identities without aiming at transcendence.” Asad, Formations of the Secular, 5.
100 Ibid., 169.
101 Ibid., 25.
meditation experiences prior to his enlightenment are indicative of Gotama’s dissatisfaction with the imposed system. There is, perhaps, no greater testament to his dissent toward the predominating system than his exceptionally quick mastery of the practices taught by brahmins Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, and the more or less insufficient realizations Gotama attained from these teachings relative to his goal. Albeit a subtle point, the meaning here, in relation to a chronological account of Gotama Buddha’s life, reflects how the underlying secular context influenced him to enter the public space of religious debate and dissociate himself from such a system—as the “Buddha.”

In sum, the underlying and broader reason for the monks’ catechizing and later scribing the Pāli canon without their direct, competitive insertion into the caste-hierarchy was not only to assume a casteless sociopolitical identity, but that, in so doing, early Theravādins placed themselves in the most culturally mobile position, thereby preserving the clans’ history and culture. Moreover, the moral positions or enacted inequalities leading up to this particular period and how diverse peoples responded to sociopolitical and ethical biases reflect the presence of “the secular” in ancient India. In other words, it seems more apparent that the confluence of “knowledges, behaviors, and sensibilities” engendered the philosophical and practical system of early Buddhism. Therefore, the volition behind early Theravāda’s appearance was almost completely informed by complex secular tensions. Still needing to be addressed, however, is missionary activity in the “public sphere” or “public space of debate.”

Therefore, in the subsequent section, I discuss the importance of this space as a place where Gotama Buddha was able to transmit and preserve or missionize these
secular features. While having met with kings in their residences, places assumed to be political in nature, the focus is on Gotama Buddha’s entrance into the sphere of religious debates. I explicate further how early Theravāda, even in its appearance in the latter, was a secular mission through exploring the relationship between enlightenment and its associative meanings with converting, freedom, and identity.

Missionizing, Enlightenment, and Freedom in the Public Space of Debates

Described as “public competitive occasions” that were “exercise[s] in publicity,” the public space of debates is the assumed place in ancient India where “religious” ideologies could be expressed. For example, Manné’s specific depiction of what took place in this space, and indirect description of it, includes an event or “Debate” as “an opportunity for propaganda” where, “Something is always at stake.” However, exactly what was propagandized and “at stake” in this space is not easily discernable.

This space, Asad comments, encapsulates an individual’s “particular argument” about “the kind of person one has become, and wants to continue to be.” More specifically, this sphere reveals an individual’s identity in articulations on lived experiences related to politics, ethics, religion, and the larger sense of belonging. While the meaning and utility of this sphere seem to be identifiable aspects, neither is uniformly fixed for each who entered and participated in it. In other words, each individual’s relationship to this space is similarly formed through particular personal and cultural

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102 On Joy Manné, Brekke, Religious Motivations and the Origins of Buddhism, 34 and 33, respectively. Also, see, Joy Manné, “Categories of Sutta in the Pāli Nikāyas,” 73.
103 For example, Thapar remarks that, “It was from the gana-sanghas that there came the two teachers of what were to become the most important heterodox sects: Mahavira, associated with advancing Jainism, belonged to the Jnatrika clan which was part of the Vrijji confederacy located at Vaishali, and the Buddha grew up in Kapilavastu, the town of the Shakya clan.” Thapar, Early India, 149.
104 Brekke, Religious Motivations and the Origins of Buddhism, 34.
105 Asad, Formations of the Secular, 184.
histories. Therefore, the individual’s agenda or “thought behind” an entrance into this sphere was and is not exactly the same as others entering it.

Expositions on enlightenment, for example, were espoused in relation to various paths toward liberation or freedom. Considering how Gotama Buddha interpreted enlightenment is then a matter of who he had become and wanted to continue to be. In negating various purposive, secular reasons for entering, participating, and engaging others in this space, both his purported expositions on and modeled behavior of what is considered moral and immoral are definitively assumed to be associated with religion. With this understanding, “converting” as a means to “liberate” oneself or attain enlightenment is erroneously categorized as solely religious in this space, for there is most often an absence of considering diverse preceding and contemporaneous secular cultural elements.

The pre-modern public sphere consisted of these particular physical spaces wherein individuals, such as Gotama Buddha and like-minded individuals from the larger gana-sangha community, could compete with the Indo-Aryan system. By the time of the Buddha, the gana-sanghas had become aware of an inevitable, complete absorption into the caste system. Therefore, an emphasis on a degree of civic duty or virtue, and thereby citizenship, seems to have been present in preserving his community’s socio-hierarchical and ethical system. As Frank Lovett states, “[C]ivic virtue is simply the

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106 Again, a potentially validating study could include another khattiya or kshatriya, Nigantha Nātaputta or Nātaputta Mahāvīra, who was also from a gana-sangha, because he championed the Jain movement within the same period.

107 Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*, 10. Only two gana-sanghas existed around the time of Gotama Buddha. The rest had evolved into monarchies that competed, eventually through Buddhism, with the predominating system.
character of a good citizen.” Upon other communities’ incorporation into the caste system, a multitude of individuals entered into and sought to do the same in this space. The rise in articulations and practices of diverse moral systems at this time corresponds with this larger history of Indo-Aryans overtaking peoples and their territories or regions.

Remarking on moral heterogeneity and its growth within the period surrounding Gotama Buddha’s life, Jarl Carpentier characterizes these times as “unusually fertile.” On specific reasons for such diversity, Romila Thapar explains that an increase in heterogeneous representation among castes and classes hinged on inclusion and exclusion factors, such as spoken language(s), belief, ritual performance, and acceptance of social codes, as urban cities formed. Therefore, as the caste system subordinated or converted more diverse communities, a more geographically widespread sense of citizenship did and did not develop with the formation of the state. As such, the relationship between converting, attaining enlightenment or freedom, and identity as either religiously or secularly defined should not be a factor in conceptualizing citizenship in a pre-modern or modern state, but rather the individuals’ sense of belonging to a community and being tied to its ethos.

Asad comments that “premodern” societies, in contrast with those of “modern” times, included “ways in which the state mediates local identities without aiming at

110 Thapar, *Early India*, 136. Also, Krishan remarks, “T.W. Rhys Davids, in Buddhism *India adduces considerable evidence from the Jātakas to establish that caste-based occupational rigidity had ceased to exist and that there were marriages between members of higher and lower castes (including suddas or śūdras) that did not lead to loss of caste.” Krishan, “Buddhism and the Caste System,” 73.
111 Magadha, for example, became “the headquarters of Buddhism.” Keith, “The Period of the Later Saṃhitās, the Brāhmaṇas, the Āraṇyakas, and the Upanishads,” 123.
transcendence.” On the one hand, his position seems to differ with my previous assertion regarding how the greater importance of belonging is categorized, given the pre-modern period in which this study is based. However, his remark paradoxically supports the notion of the lack of mediation within the gana-sanghas’ socio-hierarchical and ethical system. As a mediating agency, for instance, this clan’s system was rooted in “rational” thought, exemplified by its practice of tolerance of others’ “unorthodox views.” Therefore, the gana-sanghas seem to have mediated individuals’ differing thoughts and behaviors without attempting to transcend diverse identities: for the sociopolitical and ethical nature of the gana-sanghas’ system had indeed transcended the identity associated with that of early Theravāda. In other words, early Theravāda’s manifestation, as a movement inclusive of diverse peoples, or without censuring others’ religious beliefs and practices, demonstrates how this clans’ system transcended “local identities.” More simply, the gana-sanghas’ system was borrowed or transmuted and then transmitted into early Theravāda.

Where Gotama Buddha’s endeavors are understood as a mission to religiously convert others in this sphere, such efforts were initially propelled by a civic duty to preserve secular features. Therefore, not only had the gana-sanghas’ efforts toward state formation already transcended this religious identity, but it was also significantly responsible for how the latter identification arose. Thus, a more advanced representation of citizenship and secular freedom underlay the early Theravāda movement than previously considered. Gotama Buddha’s entry into this space to articulate an opposing

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“religious” view would then be better explained as founded, but less significant in a comprehensive contextualization of this movement’s historical development.

Both past and contemporaneous histories of political tensions in ancient India influenced Gotama Buddha’s interpretation and articulation of enlightenment within the space of debates. For example, his analogy regarding what he did and did not discuss about enlightenment—comparing a handful of leaves to all the leaves in the forest—represents the importance of who he had become, wanted “to continue to be,” and why he chose to articulate enlightenment in a particular way. For instance, it is well known that he did not explicate what happens to a Tathāgata (enlightened person) upon death.

Perhaps one of the most distinguishing factors of early Theravāda was the Buddha’s deliberateness in not responding to ten “stereotypical” religious questions or the Avyākata (Unanswered or Undetermined) Questions. These inquiries dealt with relational ideas of the “self” and “world,” “soul” and “body,” and “existence” or “non-existence” after the death of a Tathāgata. Richard P. Hayes states that the Buddha’s refusal to answer these inquiries was because “he recognized all possible answers to these questions presuppose the existence of an enduring self.” In other words, a response that differentiates between views on such matters as correct or incorrect implies that the “enduring self” does in fact exist. While Hayes’s response is plausible, such reasoning

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114 A “Tathāgata” is a fully enlightened being. On the 10 or 14 “stereotypical” questions, Nicholson writes, “The four questions comprising the first set concern the nature of the self and world (attā loko ca). The first two of these deal with the question of whether or not the self and world are eternal (sassato); the third and fourth with the question of whether self and world have a limit (anta). The second set contains two questions which concern the relationship between the soul and body (jīva and sarīra, respectively): are they one and the same (tam jīvam tam sarīram) or is the soul one thing and the body another (aṇṇham jīvam aṇṇham sarīram)? The third set deals with the question of whether the enlightened saint or Tathāgata exists after death (hoti tathāgato pari maranā). The question of the Tathāgata’s existence after death is expressed in terms of a list of four logical possibilities familiar in the catuṣkoti formula of the Madhyamakas: Does the Tathāgata exist after death? Does he not exist after death? Does he both exist and not exist after death? Does he neither exist nor not exist after death?” Nicholson, “The Unanswered Questions and the Limits of Knowledge,” 533–534.

does not occur in a vacuum. Therefore, Hayes’s conclusion is likely to be partially correct, because Gotama Buddha’s lack of explanation subjects both Brahminism and the Indo-Aryan system to questioning.

By refraining from such formalities, Gotama Buddha disrupted the predominating system. Asad, for example, states that when a religion accesses the political debate “on its own terms,” it may necessitate a threat against “the authority of existing assumptions.”

In this vein, our current understanding of this space as solely religious is reshaped, because answering these specific questions in this space—legitimized by the endorsement of the governing bodies—would have directly positioned the gana-sanghas’ system and early Buddhism within the conceptual contours of the Indo-Aryan system. His refusal, in other words, called into question the previously held religious considerations from which one would gauge the worth or value of the brahmins’ articulations and practices, but, more importantly challenged the larger Indo-Aryan system. Therefore, what liberation or freedom included was a matter of each individual’s identity in relation to a previous sense of citizenship.

In her remarks on public debates, for example, Manné explains, “Not only must the best questions be asked, and the best answer given, but converts must be won and lay support must be gained.”

That silence was Gotama Buddha’s “best answer” indicates the reasons for khattiyas abandoning “a life of luxury,” disagreements over “social and political power,” and this cohort’s “Buddhist opposition to Brahmanism.” Through a less myopic view of what constituted these “religious” spaces and the debates had within them, individuals were most likely converting to a secular system. More specifically,

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116 Asad, Formations of the Secular, 185.
117 For reference, see page, 63-64.
118 Brekke, Religious Motivations and the Origins of Buddhism, 34.
whether or not “converting” existed, the early Theravādins’ identity was related to an interpretation of enlightenment and associated with a sense of both socio-mobility and a more egalitarian ethical system that preserved these freedoms. Therefore, the utility in this sphere was how it reflected who individuals such as Gotama Buddha had become.

Moreover, describing the Buddha’s reasoning for refraining from such questions, the following Pāli verses from and translation of the Dīgha Nikāya I.189 help to differentiate between the meanings of morals and religious principles through a more inclusive relationship with the features of belonging, citizenship, converting, enlightenment, and freedom. Furthermore, this excerpt reflects who the Buddha wanted to continue to be:

\[
\text{na h’etām poṭṭhapāda attha-samhitām, na dhamma-samhitām, na ādibrahmacariyakām, na nibbidāya, na viragāya, na nirodhāya, na upasamāya, na abhiññāya, na sambodhāya, na nibbānaāya samvattati.} \] \text{119}

This is not connected to purpose, nor is it connected to virtue, nor is it connected with the religious life, nor does it lead to humility, nor to dispassion, nor to cessation, nor to tranquility, nor to superior understanding, nor to supreme awakening, nor to nirvana. \text{120}

In light of the fact that Gotama Buddha’s explanation for not answering these particular religious questions included a lack of connection to “purpose,” “virtue,” and enlightenment, this space may be understood more completely, as how he adapted or reflected previous and contemporary “knowledges, behaviors, and sensibilities” to maintain his identity with both the earlier and contemporary gana-sangha culture. \text{121}


\[\text{121 What is also significant, perhaps, is that Gotama Buddha did not answer the ten questions but rather articulated the concept of anatta (no-self or no-soul) along with a supporting explication through the doctrine on paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination).}\]
heterodoxy, promote egalitarianism through civic duty or virtue, and build upon a past ethos in a particular way—precisely by not making pronouncements about enlightenment. The understanding that “sectarian debate” was “singled out for censure” by the Buddha supports this interpretation of these missionized secular features.\footnote{122 Nicholson, “The Unanswered Questions and the Limits of Knowledge,” 543.}

To truly preserve these features, such engagements would have detracted from the gana-sanghas tolerance of “unorthodox views.” Moreover, considering that both his refusal to answer these questions is found throughout the Pāli Nikayas,\footnote{123 Footnote 1, of Nicholson’s article, includes: “S.IV. 374–403 (Avyākatama Samyutta); M.I. 426–432 (Cūla-Mālunīkya Sutta); Udāna 66–69 (Jaccandha-Vagga 4); M.I. 483–489 (Aggi-Vacchagotta-Sutta); D.I. 187–195 (Poṭṭhapāda Sutta); S.IV.287; S.I. 257ff. (Vacchagotta Samyutta); D.I. 159–160 (Jāliya (Aggi-Vacchagotta-Sutta); D.I. 187–195 (Poṭṭhapāda Sutta); S.IV.287; S.II. 60–62 (Nidāna Samyutta 4).” Nicholson, “The Unanswered Questions and the Limits of Knowledge,” 533.} and that this space and his responses were pivotal to gaining support, why is the “prominent theme in many of the texts dealing with the Unanswered Questions: the Buddha’s aloofness from such debate[?]”\footnote{124 Ibid.} This could be answered by the translation of “ādibrahmacariyakam,” as “the religious life” instead of “the moral life.”

The “Access to Insight” website, for example, translates this phrase as, “the holy life.”\footnote{125 K. R. Norman defines this phrase as “the practice of a brāhmaṇa.”\footnote{126 Norman, \textit{A Philological Approach to Buddhism}, 28.} Then he distinguishes between the lives of the renunciate and laity by adding that the Buddha’s usage should be understood as “to live the best life; i.e. a holy, celibate (or in the case of married couples, a chaste and moral) life.”\footnote{127 Ibid.} And while Monier-Williams’s Sanskrit translation of the equivalent phrase, “brahma-cārya,” includes “study of the Veda, the

\begin{verbatim}
\end{verbatim}
state of an unmarried religious student,” it also emphasizes the phrase’s meaning as “continence and chastity.” Grangier and Collins’s translation of Mohan Wijayaratna’s *Buddhist Monastic Life* defines “brahmacariya” more vaguely as a “life of purity.” However, in the *Pāli-English Dictionary*, “ādibrahmacariyakaṃ” is translated as “belonging to the principles or fundamentals of moral life.” Moreover, this particular dictionary uses this exact textual location—Dīgha Nikāya I.189—as the source from which this definition should be applied.

Therefore, the connotations of these foreign phrases involving morals and religious principles seem obscure at best when considering who or what makes an act or person moral. These different interpretations also demonstrate a tendency to conflate or interchange “the religious life” and “the moral life” in relation to Buddhist doctrine. Morals, then, are largely equated with religion instead of the individuals’ ability to choose how to think, speak, and act within a larger community apart from, or completely without, a religious dimension. As previously discussed, religion seems largely absent from or at the very least less important to the *gana-sanghas*.

To better understand both how morals and religious principles are independent of each other, and how this relates to identity or citizenship, converting, enlightenment, freedom, and early Theravāda’s presence in the public space of debates, Penny Edgell et al. states that U.S. religious adherents, in contrast with atheists, are identified as “pluralistic, voluntary, and moral, [and] the refusal to embrace a religious identity is a

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128 The “specific emphasis” is asserted with regard to the placement of these two words listed as definitions under the term “brahman” on the same page. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, 1071.
131 Ibid.
choice that others may understand in moral terms."

There is then the premise that when any set of religious principles is not embraced, those individuals considered non-religious might be equated with being immoral. Furthermore, Edgell remarks that an “anti-atheist sentiment” derives from a “perception that atheists are morally suspect” when cultural values are linked to “religiosity, morality, and citizenship.”

Therefore, it is not that an atheist lacks the “principles or fundamentals of moral life” when compared to a Christian in the United States, but instead, as Will Gervais states, that “a moral community is defined as much by those included within it as by those excluded from it.”

Gervais explains further that while religious principles are likely to influence individuals’ moral behavior, the extent to which the community plays a role in shaping the individuals’ morality is most likely underestimated. Therefore, he rightfully points out in a similar study that there “is one potentially pernicious outcome of this exclusion: intuitive associations of immorality with disbelief in God.”

From Edgell and Gervais’s studies, there is then an understanding of how the meanings of morals and religious principles are conflated. That is, the ideation of one’s religiosity as moral and the belief that a divine being does not exist as immoral is a matter of citizenship and related to the larger community’s predominant religious views.

The Vedic period’s emphasis on the community, for instance, certainly excluded the gana-sanghas and their secular system. As a reminder, the gana-sanghas migrated eastward during the early Vedic period due to contestation with Indo-Aryan culture, and

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133 Ibid., 629.
135 Ibid.
136 Ibid.
they were viewed as “heretics,” and perhaps ultimately as suddas for being “godless non-sacrificers” and a “heterodox sect.” In other words, the gana-sanghas were morally “suspect.” This was at least partially due to the lack of or little emphasis they placed on religiosity. Therefore, the relationship between a particular political entity dominating a region and who is religious is most significant when considering who is bestowed the attribute of morality in the larger community. Early Theravāda’s appearance in the public space of debates was then not only the means to preserve a system of morality and egalitarianism, but also included a history of being morally “suspect.” Thus, as these two phrases are not necessarily inclusive of the other, what underlies notions of “converting” within early Theravāda are secular features appearing through this religious movement in the ancient Indian space of debates.

While there are differences between the gana-sanghas within the predominant Indo-Aryan socio-political and religious community and atheists lacking a community in the larger U.S. political system promoting Christianity, the gana-sanghas’ differing system indeed reflects a sense of non-citizenship within the larger Indo-Aryan community. Moreover, “inclusion and exclusion factors” connect ideas of being moral and immoral to notions of citizenship and non-citizenship in both pre-modern and modern communities’ geographic locations. When one discusses converting in terms of the relationship between community and citizenship, as well as differences in morals and religious principles, the influence of who ultimately controls the space of debates is paramount. For making political appeals over the centuries, the gana-sanghas spoke toward a consequence without affecting the political world. Therefore, a conclusion was not reached. Then, by means of political force, the space of debates became the place
from which the *gana-sangha* system was transmuted and transmitted. In this context, a
culture’s way of conceptualizing secular freedom was preserved through early
Theravāda.

Moreover, an underlying facet of Gotama Buddha’s unwillingness to respond to
stereotypical questions provides further evidence of his identity as a renunciate
“preaching” a “religious” doctrine to be misleading. Both his lack of response and his
monastic appearance, in other words, were pragmatic solutions when considering that
civic virtue was tied to morality—for he became an “authority to make practical
decisions.” On the Buddha’s refusal to answer these inquiries, for example, Abraham
Velez remarks that, along with “pragmatic and metaphysical reasons,” both “cognitive
and affective reasons” explain his silence. Therefore, not only are the unanswered
questions interpretations of ignorance, but, as Velez states, they are also “expressions of
‘identity views,’” that is, they are part of the problem of suffering. And this
“suffering,” as related to “expressions of ‘identity views,’” is resolved through
castelessness, or the establishment of early Theravāda.

Although Velez explains that answering either “yes” or “no” to any of the
questions would have respectively “led to eternalist views” or “to nihilist views,”
religious differences do not solely account for his lack of response. It may be gleaned
from his statement that the larger surrounding historical tension between two differing
cultural systems is central to understanding the identity of the earliest Theravādins. That
is, Gotama Buddha’s metaphysical reasoning of the self is also castelessness when

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138 Abraham Velez, “Buddha (c. 500s B.C.E.),” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,
https://www.iep.utm.edu/buddha/.
139 Ibid.
140 Ibid.
considering the historical intersection and longstanding tension between the Indo-Aryans and *gana-sanghas*. Furthermore, that his approach to answering these questions was silence, indicates further the “pragmatic” nature of the *gana-sanghas* conception of “existential inequalities” tending to be “taken for what they were,” which allowed for “a certain measure of fluidity and mobility of groups.”141 And that such a response was based on “cognitive and affective reasons” points toward the *gana-sanghas*’ ability to “tolerate unorthodox views.” For without such a cultural feature, there would be a sense of less “egalitarianism,” if any.

In order to preserve *gana-sangha* culture and maintain the “authority to make practical decisions,” Gotama Buddha would have had to appeal to individuals by mirroring, or more strongly mimicking, aspects of brahminic customs outwardly to appear less threatening, such as wearing robes. For example, Asad states that, “Far from having to prove to existing authority that it is no threat to dominate values, a religion that enters political debate *on its own terms* may on the contrary have to threaten the authority of existing assumptions.”142 Presenting himself and early Theravāda both similarly to and differently from Hinduism, Gotama Buddha gained access to the public space of debates by balancing this threat and based upon the aforementioned secular reasons preceding this “religious” movement. Therefore, Gotama Buddha’s refrainment from responding to each of the stereotypical questions certainly included the presupposition of an existing and “enduring self,” but more so because disrupting the predominating hierarchy and ethos, without directly threatening them, was central to missionizing this particular secular freedom.

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141 Aloysius, on Chakravarti, “Caste In and Above History,” 157.
142 Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 185.
The public space of debates for Gotama Buddha necessitated a relatable or less threatening identity in order to engage within it. Moreover, where Asad insightfully remarks that “there is no public sphere of free speech at an instant,” early Theravāda was a movement impelled by the imposition of secular limitations and delimitations that stemmed from an opposing, dominating culture. Thus, his lack in articulating enlightenment was inspired by or founded upon secular reasons inevitably appearing as a religion.

While the space for articulating a more flexible socio-mobility and cultural ethos has given the Buddha an appearance of religiosity, early Theravāda originated and was, more simply, founded upon intersecting communities’ histories and an individual’s dissatisfaction with his lived experiences—those of Siddhattha Gotama Buddha. What underlies his monastic identity, then, is not a newly-formed movement simply through converting to attain religious enlightenment, but instead that how enlightenment or freedom is interpreted and espoused is signified through the phrase, pāṭisotagāmi. For this phrase is a matter of “knowledges, behaviors, and sensibilities” coalescing in complex intersections between two differing social, religious, political, and ethical systems. Therefore, what looks like a religious movement in opposition with another, in the end encapsulates more meaning than our academic understanding of missionizing provides. Thus, the concept of “missionary activity” must include how socio-politics are related to the interfacing of cultural systems related to status and ethos, or, respectively, to socio-hierarchies and ethical treatments. In sum, where Stackhouse states that, “Having been drawn into freedom, all other areas of life are subject to reevaluation and

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143 Ibid., 184.
reconstruction,”144 all those “other areas of life” must be considered as the constituents required to create such a “freedom.”

Conclusion

The formation and establishment of early Theravāda was a long, slow process that had a great deal to do with the way in which diverse peoples were socially organized and treated. Although academic studies tend to lean toward early Theravāda having arisen out of contention with brahminism,145 early Buddhism’s origination seems less motivated by religious differences when one considers the ancient Indian cultural tension, its duration, and the meanings of paṭisotagāmi discussed above.

While Talal Asad conveys a message of being self-reflective, academics’ perspectives on the relationship between converting, freedom, and enlightenment are also reflections of “the secular,” and therefore, ultimately, no different than how Gotama Buddha interpreted the contemporary world in which he lived. That is, Asad also explains that the public sphere is a space full of various meanings in terms of the debates had within it, because the “memories and aspirations, fears and hopes” of those speaking and listening constitute it.146 Moreover, Gotama Buddha’s cultural upbringing supports both how nonreligious morals in sociopolitics preceded this “religious” movement, and that the definition of converting must not prioritize one identification over the other, such as “religious” adherence to a set of principles over “secular” or nonreligious morality. As will be discussed in the following chapter, both of these points are precisely the reasons

145 See, Gombrich, How Buddhism Began; Cone and Gombrich, The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara, xxiv; Thapar, Early India, 149-150.
146 Asad, Formations of the Secular, 184.
for which the Vipassanā meditation movement reflects the contextual lineage of early Theravāda.
Chapter 3

The U.S. Vipassanā Meditation Movement: A Contextual Theravāda Lineage

Explaining how Theravāda Buddhism is not a fixed entity, transferrable from one geographic location to another in three Southeast Asian Buddhist communities, Anne Blackburn makes the point that there is an “illusion of continuity” that forms a “successful localization of an imported lineage.”\(^1\) To demonstrate this illusion, she elucidates how motivated monastic leadership, political and lay supporters, and textual selection contribute to the appearance of continuity. Moreover, Blackburn describes Theravāda textual and ritual practices, respectively, as a monastic lineage’s actions to “protect particular genres through curriculum” and provide the “prescription and proscription of specific ritual forms.”\(^2\) However, in the case of the U.S. Vipassanā (Insight) meditation movement’s\(^3\) relationship with Theravāda, there is an illusion of discontinuity formed through missionary activity.

Academic studies have focused largely on the Vipassanā meditation movement’s conspicuous differences by comparing it to features of Theravāda.\(^4\) By emphasizing the absence of specific religious features in the former, the contextual similarities that produced both movements’ originations and expansions become less significant. Furthermore, whereas early Theravāda is often discussed as a movement resulting from opposition to Hinduism, studies on the Vipassanā meditation movement depict its

\(^1\) Blackburn, “Localizing Lineage,” 131-149, esp., 134 and 143.
\(^2\) Ibid., 139-140.
\(^3\) Where both “Vipassanā” and “Insight” are used to describe this movement, this study is situated in the United States. Therefore, “U.S.,” in association with this meditation movement, is implied in all places hereon.
beginnings in and expansion across the United States as resulting primarily from opposition to Theravāda, rather than Christianity. There are studies, however, that briefly acknowledge how vipassanā practitioners compare elements of Theravāda, such as ritual, monasticism, and doctrine, with Christian dogma. Although this connection is mostly overshadowed by the Insight meditation movement’s differences with Theravāda, the following examples are worth mentioning.

B. Allan Wallace states that many American vipassanā practitioners associate rebirth in the hell realms of Buddhism with “sinful behavior.” Additionally, they find that this belief is “too compatible with Christianity.” Doctrine, then, underlies both this association and compatibility, because it is a central source from where dogmatic articulations originate. More explicitly, Kenneth K. Tanaka comments that these practitioners are “seeking personal experience over doctrinal belief” and that their undertaking of vipassanā meditation could be due to the “religions of their childhood,” such as “Christianity.” These examples of the relationship between the Vipassanā meditation movement and Christianity also imply an interconnection that binds Theravāda and Christianity. However, religious features are deemphasized or expunged from this meditation movement. Examples such as these seem to continually support the Vipassanā movement’s more “secular” nature, disconnecting it further from Theravāda Buddhism. Moreover, the former’s lack of monasticism and ritual-practices are also emphasized, and thereby elicit such posited distinctness.

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6 Wallace, “The Spectrum of Buddhist Practice in the West,” 46.
8 See page 4, fn. 11.
For example, Allan B. Wallace remarks, “In the lay-oriented vipassanā centers throughout the West, meditation is taught in a way that is largely divorced from the monastic and lay elements of the Theravāda tradition, together with its vocabulary, history, and literature.” Additionally, Richard Hughes Seager suggests that the Vipassanā meditation movement “stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from immigrant Theravada Buddhism.” Gil Fronsdal, for example, remarks that this U.S. movement’s identity “retained only a minimal identification with its Theravāda origins.” However, when considering these studies collectively and in concert with Blackburn’s point, there seems to be a misunderstanding about what constitutes an imported Theravāda lineage—a contextual misunderstanding that ultimately misrepresents the Vipassanā meditation movement’s relationship with Theravāda. In other words, if a completely intact importation of a Theravāda lineage is illusory, the Vipassanā meditation movement’s said distinctness from Theravāda seems consistent with other imported lineages. Therefore, the current academic emphasis perhaps misinforms the Vipassanā meditation movement’s features as tenuous apropos its Theravāda lineage.

As elucidated in the last chapter, studies on early Theravāda Buddhism usually provide little focus on how the gana-sanghas and Indo-Aryans’ differing sociopolitical and ethical systems intersected and influenced its appearance. Without consideration of

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10 Seager, Buddhism in America, 146.
12 Moreover, remember that Buddhism as a “religion” in Burma was not conceptualized until Ledi Sayadaw in the late 1800’s.
13 “In discussing the Western teachings, it must be kept in mind that the vipassanā meditation movement, even in its ‘mainstream’ manifestation, is not a coherent movement with an established and collectively agreed-upon teaching.” Fronsdal, “Insight Meditation in the United States,” 171. However, considering the “illusion of continuity,” just because it appears disconnected in the manner that has been studied in the past does not mean that it is so.
this historical tension, the larger focus on early Theravāda’s emergence is depicted specifically as a contestation with Hinduism. Due to the fact that a religious intersection is certainly evident but less of a reason for early Theravāda’s development, it seems appropriate to include the more relevant influence of Christianity as a reason for the “secular” countercultural religious appearance of the Vipassanā meditation movement, instead of Theravāda.

Moreover, given the period in which the Vipassanā meditation movement was established in the United States, the larger national and global secular context becomes most significant. As such, the more comprehensive meaning of *paṭisotagāmi* in early Theravāda, discussed in the previous chapter as a phrase that indicates a social and ethical countercultural movement rather than simply religious freedom, is both reflected in and representative of the Vipassanā meditation movement. Therefore, this U.S. movement’s emergence and establishment mirror the intentions behind and the ways in which missionary activity was conducted in early and post-canonical Theravāda. In contextually connecting this U.S. movement to the larger scope of the Theravāda lineage through the establishment of meditation centers, I argue that the U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement’s co-founders are Theravāda Buddhist missionaries. This is because the secular Vipassanā meditation movement was founded by and is continuing to spread in the United States under similar socio-political and ethical tensions as those Gotama Buddha and early Theravāda Buddhist missionaries experienced in ancient India.

Another way to consider this argument is that if the Vipassanā meditation movement’s co-founders and organizations in the United States are not Theravāda Buddhist missionaries, built upon and established through a similar context from and in the

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14 See previous chapter.
which early Theravāda developed, then early Theravādins were not religious missionaries. In other words, by situating this meditation movement’s origin into a more comprehensive historical and cultural context, both movements are either religious or secular entities; that is, they are not categorically distinct from each other. In fact, they are overwhelmingly similar in terms of both how and why they arose and spread within their respective contexts. The Vipassanā meditation movement has not only retained and maintained the two secular features from early Theravāda’s system discussed above, but is consequently a contemporary representation of this ancient movement.

Further reasoning for positing this shift in focus is that Theravāda Buddhism was overwhelmingly unrepresented and unknown across America prior to and during this movement’s establishment in the 1970s. More precisely, the larger group of practitioners of insight meditation had no orientation from which to reject “traditional” Theravāda in American society. Sharon Salzberg, a co-founder of the U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement, who was partly responsible for the establishment of this country’s first center, the Insight Meditation Society, commented that vipassanā practitioners stated that they are “part of the vipassana tradition.” Explaining why this tradition is not distinct from Theravāda, she posits that “what has happened is that vipassana as a mind training has been separated from its base in a tradition… and transmitted to the West as a thing in itself, as though it had a separate existence apart from these roots, which I actually don’t think is true.” It seems that any dismissal of ritual, monasticism, and doctrine in this meditation movement is in all likelihood rooted in U.S. intersections

15 Even when considering that the 1970s’ series Kung Fu was the grounds from which Americans were informed about Buddhism.
16 The three co-founders of both the U.S. meditation movement and Insight Meditation Society are Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, and Jack Kornfield.
17 Cadge, Heartwood, 24.
18 Ibid.
between socio-politics and ethical treatments due to a longstanding cultural history tied to Christianity.

Therefore, I discuss the Vipassanā meditation movement’s manifestation within the political and religious landscape of the 1960s and 1970s to illustrate how this movement’s lineage is contextually tied to early Theravāda’s development in ancient India. Moreover, precipitated by modern Theravāda monastic leadership, a direct connection to this meditation movement’s appearance is presented. This connection further aligns the Vipassanā meditation movement with Theravāda lineage and the latter’s missionary activity. Then, upon identifying similar modes of language-use, I demonstrate how a similar type of socio-mobility and ethos is being preserved through opposition toward their respective and predominant political and religious systems. Lastly, the said absence of ritualistic, monastic, and doctrinal features in the Vipassanā meditation movement, by which this movement is distinguished from early and modern Theravāda, are reconsidered. The preceding and contemporary social, political, religious, and ethical cultural dimensions forming the contexts in which both movements arose dictated how they both initially appeared and continued to exist. Therefore, the presence and absence of such features are important aspects that underpin their abilities to emerge and spread as countercultural movements. Thus, the similar manner in which missionary activity has been conducted is represented in both movements.

The U.S. Vipassanā Meditation Movement’s Origination: Monastic Leadership

Due to the fact that Theravāda has traveled and been repackaged in various geographic locations, the U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement carries both early and
modern Theravāda features. The sociopolitical and ethical dimensions of the 1960s and 1970s reveal not only a contextual lineage between the Vipassanā meditation movement and both early and post-canonical Theravāda, but also a direct lineage tied to Burmese monasticism. While the Insight meditation movement was imported and began expanding across American soil during the early 1970s, its longer historical development is more simply traced, for the purposes of this paper, to the 1960s—a complex and intense decade involving equal rights and treatments for diverse peoples in both foreign countries and the United States.

Representations of Buddhism’s global presence and challenges were given greater attention during this decade and in the decades thereafter. For example, Mao Zedong and the People’s Liberation Army murdered eighty thousand Tibetans in 1959 to “liberate” Tibet and this country’s larger population of Vajrāyāna Buddhists. Also, in 1962, Burmese General Ne Win and his military regime took oppressive control of Theravāda Burma in a coup d’état. Similar to the Chinese occupation of Tibet, this subjugation would ensconce this country in human atrocities that continue to this day. Additionally, in 1955, when South Vietnam’s inaugural presidency and newly-established government was, respectively, filled and declared by Catholic Ngô Đình Diệm, the slow historical development toward the persecution of Mahāyāna Buddhists lasted into 1963. In the

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19 The Ledi Sayadaw and perhaps others before this should also be included in this description of the Vipassanā meditation movement’s origination. However, in this timeframe, Salzberg, Kornfield, and Goldstein were given instructions on vipassanā meditation by a government-endorsed and globally-promoted Burmese monastic, the Mahāsi Sayadaw. Mahāsi Sayadaw, a meditation master, had been guiding monastics and laity in their practice of vipassanā meditation and was a central influence for these U.S. founders. From their student-teacher relationship and upon returning to the United States, vipassanā meditation was introduced into American culture.

20 This particular mass genocide officially began in 1949 with China’s broadcasted declaration.

21 Captured in the tragedy and beauty of Thích Quảng Đức’s self-immolation and letter, “The Letter of Heart Blood,” is not only a call for equality, but also the protection or preservation of Buddhism. Đức’s letter, translated by Thích Nguyen Tang, states: “Before closing my eyes and moving towards the vision of the Buddha, I respectfully plead to President Ngo Dinh Diem to take a mind of compassion towards the
United States, however, Buddhists were not targeted. Instead, leaders and supporters of marginalized groups, such as African Americans and women, were being murdered and oppressed. In such inhumane treatments of diverse groups, the commonality between these countries’ peoples was their advocating for equal rights. The expressions made toward regaining or gaining these rights or freedoms were not only voicing a lack of equality mirrored by sociopolitical and ethical injustices around the world, but in the United States included the practice of mixing politics and religion or “prophetic language.”

In terms of the larger Western ideology, Asad states that this particular religious language is an “important language in the United States that overlaps in varying measure with rights language.”\(^{22}\) For instance, it draws on the Old Testament’s “vocabulary and imagery” because it is “deeply rooted in narratives of the founding of a particular nation (the American).”\(^{23}\) Martin Luther King Jr.’s effectiveness to motivate and organize supporters, for example, was due to his ability to infuse this language into political speeches. An illustration of such usage is found in his statement that, “One day the South will know that when these dis-inherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage.”\(^{24}\) This type of language both spoke to the injustices of limited socio-mobility and was instrumental for U.S. minority groups, because it aligned

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22 Asad, *The Formations of the Secular*, 144.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 145.
diverse groups with the larger contemporary U.S. political (republic) and religious (Christian) foundations.

The use of prophetic language was also part of the Vipassanā meditation movement’s origination. However, this was not because the movement attempted to advantage itself by using such language, but instead by resisting it with a countercultural religious language. For example, Jack Kornfield, in personal communication with Fronsdal, stated: “We wanted to offer the powerful practices of insight meditation, as many of our teachers did, as simply as possible without the complications of rituals, robes, chanting and the whole religious tradition.”\textsuperscript{25} The Vipassanā meditation movement appears then to be founded on the lack of such religious features. This design, however, was neither original nor unique to Theravāda. Rather, it was motivated or “championed” earlier by a Burmese monastic, the Mahāsi Sayadaw.\textsuperscript{26}

Mahāsi “deemphasized” these more universal features of Theravāda, such as “[r]ituals, chanting, devotional and merit-making activities, and doctrinal studies.”\textsuperscript{27} In fact, the meditation institutions “founded or inspired” by Mahāsi are “virtually absent” of such features.\textsuperscript{28} Furthermore, Mahāsi and those trained by him “greatly contributed” to the dismantling of the “almost exclusive monopoly the monastic order had on such practice.”\textsuperscript{29} Therefore, Salzberg, Kornfield, and Goldstein more easily discarded Theravāda features, such as monasticism.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{25} Fronsdal, “Insight Meditation in the United States,” 167.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 166.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
These notions have led to such comments as, the vipassanā “school” is “shifting away from monasticism, traditional beliefs, and customs.”31 Moreover, in contrast with “full religious traditions” of Buddhism in the United States, this movement is “significantly different since it involved the importation of a few particular spiritual practices and soteriological goals largely independent of the wider Theravāda teaching and its Southeast Asian cultural expressions.”32 However, that a monastic leader had previously made and implemented these changes demonstrates that this movement or imported lineage is both intact and appropriately Theravāda, if one considers Blackburn’s “illusion of continuity.” Thus, the illusion of discontinuity is founded through this particular monastic leadership. One significant factor that fostered this illusion was the countercultural usage of prophetic language. More specifically, to be discussed in the next section, the contextual significance of freedom is addressed and ultimately aligns this modern movement with that of early Theravāda in ancient India through the “public space of debates” or “public sphere.”

**“Spirituality” and “Freedom” in the Public Space of Debates: Gaining Supporters**

The way in which the Vipassanā meditation movement entered the public space of debates included the incorporation of words, such as “truths” and “true,” “universal,” and, perhaps most importantly, “spiritual” and “spirituality.” A distinct type of freedom or liberation is articulated due to a particular conceptualization of their meanings. For instance, Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein, co-founders of both the U.S. Insight meditation movement and Insight Meditation Society, often portray this meditation

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31 Here, the word “is” replaces “both are.” Wallace, “The Spectrum of Buddhist Practice in the West,” 41-42.
practice as something apart from religion or Theravāda and Christianity. Respectively, they comment that there are “universal truths of spiritual life” and, “In true spiritual undertakings there is no compulsion.” The meaning of “spiritual” or “spirituality” seems to conceptually accommodate a place between the more general views of what is religious and what is not. What then has given this movement access to people of different faiths and secular institutions is how these words, in such phrasings, carry neither strictly secular nor strictly religious underpinnings. Therefore, it is important to recognize how the Vipassanā meditation movement has missionized in the United States.

This movement has been able to elicit both non-religious and religious individuals, communities, and institutions’ interest partly through the usage of such words, but, more specifically, these words’ rather tenebrous meanings. Furthermore, the obscure meanings within this language have contextually preserved a system that has appealed to diverse peoples for millennia. While the language employed was in accord with and appealed to the more fluid beliefs and practices of non-religious individuals, it has also made it acceptable or permissible for secular institutions to have an interest in, learn about, and practice vipassanā meditation. For example, the Vipassanā meditation movement has spread into secular institutions, such as hospitals, psychotherapies, corporate businesses, and research institutes, among other workplaces. And given

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35. See below, footnote 36.
Christianity’s predominance in U.S. society, Christians presumably constitute the majority of staff employed within these secular entities. Therefore, through vague articulations, this movement has appealed to a variety of religious adherents. Formed upon advocating for greater socio-mobility and a more egalitarian ethos through a countercultural movement, the Insight meditation movement is congruent with and promotes a similar system to that of the early Theravādins, who borrowed or transmuted the *gana-sanghas*’ system. With the understanding that this movement is imported from Burma, formed upon Theravāda monastic leadership, and thereby has established a “successful localization” of “Theravāda” lineage in both religious and secular dimensions in the United States, how is the Vipassanā meditation movement’s linguistic “activity” similar to the articulations that permitted early Theravāda’s establishment? In other words, how has such diverse lay and political support been gained?

Gotama Buddha and the early Theravāda movement, for example, entered the public space of debates with an appeal through the usage and avoidance of certain words, phrases, and responses in the public space of debates. More particularly, early Theravāda’s successful expansion was partly through both how it was and was not articulated, such as Gotama Buddha’s interpretation of and articulation on enlightenment through his refrainment from answering the ten Unanswered Questions. A similar presentation of and representations in the former movement has facilitated such expansion for the Vipassanā meditation movement.

—and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School”; and Joan Marques and Satinder Dhiman, “Vipassana Meditation as a Path toward Improved Management Practices,” *Journal of Global Business Issues* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2009), 77-84. Also worth mentioning is that, Satya Narayan Goenka taught vipassanā meditation to prisoners in New Delhi, India during the 1970s and then in 1994. http://www.prison.dhamma.org/northamerica/?page_id=43.
As a reminder, upon entering the public space of debate in ancient India, Gotama Buddha’s employing a lack of responses to the ten stereotypical questions helped preserve the *gana-sanghas*’ socio-mobility and ethos. His lack of engagement was indicative of and predominantly formed by both his cultural upbringing in a *gana-sangha* and this clan’s secular system in conflict with that of the Indo-Aryans. That is, the ideas associated with any responses would have positioned Gotama Buddha and early Theravāda within the larger Indo-Aryan brahminic caste system and opposed the *gana-sanghas*’ values of tolerating diverse views and greater sense of egalitarianism. By articulating enlightenment in this manner, he was less of a threat to the caste system. More particularly, Gotama Buddha was successful in expanding early Theravāda linguistically. As is well known, he appealed to both those aligned with and opposed to the Indo-Aryan, brahminic caste system.

Therefore, the early Theravāda movement’s underlying secular features were linguistically obscured in its religious missionizing and lack of explications on enlightenment.\(^{37}\) The Vipassanā meditation movement resembles this approach in that, in its missionizing, it deemphasizes religious elements. More generally, where the early Theravāda movement is articulated as and understood to be a religion, this understanding conceals its secular development and foundation. And where the Vipassanā meditation movement is articulated as a movement devoid of religious features, this representation screens its broader religious development from and foundation in early Theravāda. Given this conundrum, what ultimately aligns and unites these movements is how they were and are articulated, the past and contemporary cultural histories intersecting in the public space of debates, and their emergences, conceptually, from “the secular.”

\(^{37}\) For reference, see pages, 14-16 and 26-28.
The Vipassanā meditation movement continues to expand due to its unwillingness to engage in prophetic language and by instead using words, such as “spiritual” and “spirituality.” For instance, Wallace remarks, “Rather than a religion, vipassanā is presented as the cultivation of mindfulness as a means of psychological healing and spiritual awakening.”\(^{38}\) However, represented in this remark is Salzberg’s notion that this meditative practice has been conceptually reduced by cutting it off from its religious origins. While presented as a countercultural movement through non-religiosity, this movement is identified as not representing an earlier religious tradition. This depiction has served the movement well in its expansion across the United States. Said to be dissociated from what is generally conceived of as religion, or more specifically Theravāda, the Vipassanā meditation movement ultimately reflects the “illusion of continuity” found in Theravāda’s “successful localization of an imported lineage.” Furthermore, where this movement is promoted as “spiritual” in nature, it advocates for the American ideology of equal socio-mobility or “liberty and justice for all.”

On May 14, 2015, Kornfield was among “120 Buddhist leaders of every color and tradition joined together” at the White House to meet with both its staff and the State Department for the first U.S. Buddhist Leadership Conference.\(^{39}\) The reason for this meeting was to find “Buddhist allies to work on issues of climate change, racial justice, and peace building.”\(^{40}\) In attendance was a “remarkably diverse group of women and men [who] were meeting to shape a common understanding of how to bring our various

\(^{38}\) Wallace, “The Spectrum of Buddhist Practice in the West,” 38.
Buddhist practices into a troubled world." In that this U.S. movement’s co-founder was present to discuss “racial justice” and “peace building” at a local and global Buddhist conference, there are certainly underlying similarities with Gotama Buddha’s entrance into the public space of debates in ancient India.42

There is also a similarity with Gotama Buddha’s tolerance of others’ sociopolitical and religious views in terms of the high regard for and prioritized placement of “peace building” in the Vipassanā meditation movement. Moreover, “racial justice” is an equally important and similar secular feature. As Gotama Buddha was preserving greater socio-mobility or freedom and a more egalitarian ethos through the public space of debates, the same civic commitment or duty and thereby citizenship is represented by the Vipassanā meditation movement through discussions on racial justice. The Vipassanā meditation movement’s emergence is therefore reflective of both the similar secular intersections that preceded early Theravāda’s manifestation and the endeavors to preserve a cultural system. More specifically, that “all” should be granted such “liberty and justice” does not reflect a Christian voice, but rather that of the majority Deistic voice of the U.S. Founding Fathers43 and the gana-sangha system. As explained in the previous chapter, the gana-sanghas likely evolved from hunter-gatherers in ancient

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41 Ibid. The interconnection of Buddhism and the Insight meditation movement with local and global political topics are apparent throughout the global vipassanā meditation movement. Donald Rothberg remarks with respect to socially engaged Buddhism that, “Some, such as the English vipassanā teacher Christopher Titmuss, who has run as Green Party candidate for Parliament, have entered the political process.” Donald Rothberg, “Responding to the Cries of the World: Socially Engaged Buddhism In North America,” in Faces of Buddhism, eds. Charles Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, 266-286 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 269-270. In a 2009 blog, Titmuss explains how he “stood for Parliament” in 1986 and 1992, but also that he plans to “interview Rob Hopkins for the Dharma eNews in the near future” in order to explore setting up a sustainable network in Totnes to live without oil dependency. (https://www.christophertitmussblog.org/a-transition-in-totnes.) In this blog, he also shares how his yearly travels to four continents to teach vipassanā meditation have been reduced to three continents.

42 See previous chapter.

India. With a growing external and internal tension within the clan around the time of Gotama Buddha, the preservation of an earlier tradition was articulated through the Buddhist origin of the state as early Theravāda manifested. Similarly, as Christianity has come to predominate in the United States, its roots were in an earlier tradition prescribed largely by Deists. In this way, the Insight meditation movement represents an earlier tradition or system of the United States, but also an ancient clan’s system.

Deists “opposed barriers to moral improvement and to social justice” while standing “for rational inquiry, for skepticism about dogma and mystery, and for religious toleration.” Therefore, it seems more apparent that just as early Theravāda preserved the *gana-sanghas'* culture (a culture that was likely to have been premised on political and moral obligations as found in a social contract, but certainly tolerant of “diverse views” and based on “rational” thought), the Vipassanā meditation movement has been preserving a similar system created and advocated by Deists. This was a result of the growing visibility and escalating oppression of peoples from both local or “internal” and or global or “external” locations during the 1960s and 1970s.

Furthermore, just as early Theravāda was based on the *gana-sanghas’* system and carried more freedom through fewer “inclusion and exclusion factors,” the Vipassanā meditation movement’s language conveys similar notions regarding its preservation of this past culture through said delimitations. For instance, Fronsdal remarks that, “While traditional Theravāda teachings make some references to freedom (vimutti), freedom is

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44 Ibid.
45 Thapar, *Early India*, 149-150.
46 Ibid.
47 For reference, see page 76.
central to the teachings of the American *vipassanā*.” If the word “freedom” is taken here to mean only seeing or knowing ignorance, as is most commonly interpreted within studies on early Theravāda, then this point either provides a poor comparison or neglects the word’s other contextual meanings. While the former point does not require an explanation, the latter does.

If freedom is intended to have a similar meaning within both movements’ contextual histories, then there is likely a misunderstanding about why there are only “some references” to it in the Pāli canon. Two words, in the Pāli form, comprise “vimutti.” Where “vi” is defined as “asunder,” ⁴⁹ “muccaṭi”—both the passive form of “muṇcaṭi” and from which “mutti” derives—is defined as “to release, deliver… set free,” as well as “to send off, let loose, drop, [and] give.” ⁵⁰ Therefore, “vimutti” is better defined as the split or separation from the caste system that “give[s]” or “set[s] free” the individual.

Where references are made to freedom in the Pāli canon, a reason for *vimutti* appearing infrequently is that this word would have “threatened” the progress that had been made in missionizing greater socio-mobility for all. For instance, in the contextual relationship between these movements’ emergences, their less apparent similarity, namely to “protect particular genres through curriculum,” is located in the usage of “vimutti” or “freedom,” as related to contemporary socio-politics and ethical behavior or treatment. More specifically, academics most often gloss over both movements’ preceding and predominating secular tensions and influences. There is, then, the loss of particular secular curriculums or political views that underlie their developments.

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⁵⁰ Ibid., 535.
Therefore, the hidden or underlying aspect of early Theravāda—to preserve a secular system, largely established on more freedom or greater socio-mobility—is simply more pronounced, regarded, and accepted in the United States today than it was in the ancient Indian caste system. Moreover, this point strengthens the notion of a contextual Theravāda lineage. For, in both movements, the implication of using vimutti or freedom more or less often in a secular context simply denotes its importance: to threaten less the larger predominating system.

Both the early Theravāda and Vipassanā meditation movements had to incorporate, reject, and articulate relevant contemporary cultural facets that were formed through complex intersections between diverse views on sociopolitics, religions, and ethics. As other marginalized groups advocated for equal rights through prophetic language, for example, the Insight meditation movement’s appearance and articulation was orientated to and impelled by the more influential secular underpinnings. Adding further to both the meaning in a more comprehensive contextualization and understanding of the Vipassanā meditation movement’s presence, linguistics have concealed the secular histories of religious movements, whether intentional or not.

There are, for instance, the political nature of the gana-sanghas’ ethical norms and secular-flexible stratification, the gana-sanghas’ tolerance of differing views, and their lack of emphasis in religiosity, with more focus on rational thought. However, these features were being undermined both before and at the time of Gotama Buddha by the larger Indo-Aryan system. At face value, these aspects were created through early Theravāda’s opposition to Hinduism. In a more developed history, however, early

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51 While not addressed here, these “secular” intersections are presumably reasons for the Mahāsi Sayadaw’s articulations of “Theravāda” as well.
Theravāda arose from a desire to protect or preserve the Sākya clan’s system from that of the Indo-Aryans’ caste system\textsuperscript{52} and Gotama Buddha’s civic duty or the sense of citizenship to the \textit{gana-sanghas}. Therefore, one can speak of early Theravāda’s secular and then religious countercultural origination.\textsuperscript{53}

In the same vein, those of the Vipassanā meditation movement, or of "spiritual" orientations in the 1960s and 1970s, viewed religion—rituals, monasticism, and doctrine—as oppressive, unlike the minority groups. For the latter attempted to both interconnect and accord with the predominating religion, Christianity, in the United States through various articulations. Therefore, through “spirituality,” the significance of socio-mobility, freedom or \textit{vimutti}, and universal or egalitarian ethical laws as part of today’s cultural parlance do not represent a distinction between early Theravāda and the Vipassanā meditation movement, but instead a difference in the implications of or consequences from using such words in a specific cultural context.

What ties these movements together is not only their sharing of countercultural expressions, but also how they entered the “political debate \textit{on its own terms}” without having to “threaten the authority of existing assumptions.”\textsuperscript{54} The threat against each movement’s predominant religious and political institution was mitigated by how the founders and movements’ practitioners negotiated their contexts upon entering the public space of debates linguistically. More simply, these founders’ permission to enter the broader, more influential sociopolitical debate, as well as appeal to others who held similar views and beliefs, were both built upon “the secular” and established through how they linguistically presented their respective movements while preserving a cultural

\textsuperscript{52} See previous chapter.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Asad, \textit{Formations of the Secular}, 185.
history. Additionally, the Founding Fathers and *gana-sanghas* shared in advocating greater socio-mobility and a more egalitarian ethos. Therefore, in this more comprehensive contextualization, early Theravāda and Theravāda thereafter both were and are still being preserved today by the Vipassanā meditation movement.

This analysis reveals that the Vipassanā meditation movement is more reflective of early Theravāda’s manifestation than previously considered and well represented through its ties with the meaning of “*paṭisotagāmi*.”55 Thus, “the secular” explains the foundations of both religious movements, because they are articulated or presented through the secular or political doctrines or curriculums that preceded their manifestations. To further demonstrate how the Insight meditation movement further mirrors early Theravāda, the following section comprises a description of how ritual, monasticism, and doctrine are present in the Vipassanā meditation movement’s “missionary activity.”

**Contextualizing Ritual, Monasticism, and Doctrine**

The Vipassanā meditation movement and early and post-canonical Theravāda share a contextual lineage through ritual-practices, monasticism, and doctrine. More specifically, because the Insight meditation movement was both an importation of Theravāda lineage and formed upon similar political “doctrinal” histories, it is worth addressing its “prescriptions” and “proscriptions” of specific ritual-practices, monasticism, and doctrine. The ritual-practices discussed include lay individuals reciting precepts, practicing vipassanā meditation, teachers’ *dhamma* talks, and daily retreat

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55 As a reminder, this Pāli phrase indicates a social and ethical countercultural movement rather than simply “religious” freedom, which reflects and is represented in the Vipassanā meditation movement’s emergence.
schedules. In order to describe how monasticism and doctrine are shared features, monastic ordination and both the “Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta” and Abhidhamma Piṭaka are included.

In terms of the Vipassanā meditation movement preserving an ancient religious ethos, the five early Theravāda lay precepts are maintained at insight meditation centers today. Fronsdal comments that in “virtually all residential vipassanā retreats” these precepts have an “important role.”56 Most often, retreats’ open with an introduction and brief explanation about the precepts, but also the expectation that all “commit themselves to adhere to the five precepts” throughout retreats.57 Repeating and committing oneself to these precepts, or “taking” them, is then reflective of early Theravāda, because these precepts are contained within and likely one of the earliest writings in the Pāli canon.58 Additionally, this ritual-practice is perhaps indicative of the “earlier tradition” or gana-sanghas’ social contract, in that one’s agreement to uphold such behaviors to the exclusion of others behaviors previously afforded, ultimately indicates the relinquishing of certain rights, such as consuming alcoholic beverages, to an authority.

Furthermore, in common with the monastics of South and Southeast Asian vipassanā retreats, the lay teachers at these centers provide daily Dhamma talks59 to inspire, guide, and remind practitioners of ethical conduct. Because Westerners are

56 Fronsdal continues by stating: “However, because of the intensive meditation schedule and the almost complete absence of speech on these retreats, for most people it is the retreat format itself, and not the precepts, that delimits their behavior.” Fronsdal, “Virtues without Rules,” 292. However, as a monastic living in Burma and participating in a retreat at Panditārāma Shwe Taung Gon Sasana Yeiktha in Burma, on my last day there I came to learn about other reasons for both foreigners and Burmese leaving retreats. For example, warnings were given to practitioners, one of whom was asked to leave, some had left earlier than planned for their own personal reasons, such as malaises, and the Burmese monastic, who lived in the kuti (hut) next to me, decided to leave the grounds due to an inability to remain quiet for so long. He was one of the individuals who had been reprimanded.
58 Vinaya Piṭaka.
59 Daily Dhamma talks are found at both the Insight Meditation Center and Spirit Rock, for example.
typically focused first on attaining levels of insight, morality is said to be a product of
wisdom and concentration. Kornfield describes this progression in contrast to the East’s
approach. He writes,

In the East, it is taught that one successively develops morality, concentration,
and finally wisdom.... In the West in some ways it has been the reverse.... Some
wisdom has arisen first. They’ve often gone from that taste of wisdom to learn
concentration, to explore various ways of stilling and directing the mind. Finally
people are realizing, both in relation to themselves and society, that it is essential
to also develop a way of being that is not harmful or injurious to those around
them. So in the West we find this reverse development—first of wisdom, then of
concentration, then of morality.60

While the Western progression of learning may be the “reverse” of the East’s, taking the
lay precepts first, and daily, in these U.S. meditation centers perhaps negates such a
position. Nonetheless, Dhamma talks are an importation of and a ritual prescription in the
U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement, as well as across both South and Southeast Asian
countries.

Just as reciting the precepts is a prescribed ritual, the daily retreat schedules at
both the Insight Meditation Society and Spirit Rock, An Insight Meditation Center have
been imported and prescribed.61 However, as imported Theravāda lineages give the
“illusion of continuity,” both centers maintain and deviate from the schedules in
Theravāda countries, such as the Mahāsi Sāsana Yeiktha and Panditārāma Shwe Taung
Gon Sasana Yeiktha in Burma. Along with the incorporation of both reciting the precepts
in U.S. and Burmese meditation centers and daily Dhamma talks, there is the daily
schedule for meditation practice. In both geographic locations, for instance, there are
similar prescribed lengths of time for alternating walking and sitting meditations, the

60 Fronsdal, “Virtues without Rules,” 300.
61 Insight Meditation Society, “FAQ about Retreats,” https://www.dharma.org/meditation-retreats/faq/;
Spirit Rock: An Insight Meditation Center, “Residential Retreats at Spirit Rock,”
continued practice of meditation during meals, and interview times with vipassanā meditation teachers. Therefore, the Vipassanā meditation movement is prescribing, maintaining, and preserving Theravāda ritual-practice or ritual forms. However, there is also the “proscription” of ritual in the Theravāda lineage’s importation.

Monastic ordination in the Vipassanā meditation movement is one such imported proscription, given the de-emphasis of this ritual by the Mahāsi Sayadaw. As discussed earlier, this ostensibly proscribed ritual in the Vipassanā meditation movement’s countercultural appearance to Christianity is, in fact, another feature that is shared by this movement and early Theravāda. That is, the apparent lack of monasticism in the Vipassanā meditation movement is contextually produced, as was its appearance in early Theravāda. Elicited from similar cultural intersections, the presence of monasticism in the latter and lack thereof in the former is produced through intersections between political and religious views in the public sphere. In other words, the manner in which each movement is/was established and afforded the opportunity to spread is/was based on how well each incorporated, concealed, and disposed of the most relevant features that threatened the predominating culture.

62 Some differences with the schedules, however, are the waking and sleep times and the length of meditation periods. At the Insight Meditation Society, for example, the individual rises two and half hours later than at Panditārāma. Also, the Insight Meditation Society’s alternating meditation periods are 45 minutes and include daily interviews in comparison with Panditārāma’s one-hour intervals, with interviews held for 10 minutes every other day. A more significant distinction between the two is the insertion of “work-as-practice meditation” at the Society. Moreover, dāna (generosity) in the monetary form is also a ritual-practice. People donate to teachers in the United States just as in South and Southeast Asian countries. As a monastic at a Maryland Burmese temple, I offered all monetary donations given to me by lay donors to the monastery after a 35-day intensive retreat in solitude. However, I was asked not to donate all by my teacher, Sayadaw Asabhacara, but only a portion in order to take care of myself upon my return from a subsequent three-month retreat in Burma that followed shortly thereafter. While donating to monastic or lay teachers continues the Buddhist tradition, it ultimately keeps alive a tradition established much earlier.

63 Blackburn, “Localizing Lineage,” 139-140.
For example, Gotama Buddha presented himself as a monastic in order to preserve the *gana-sanghas’ system*. Resulting from his clan’s inevitable collapse under long-endured pressure from the Indo-Aryans’ external subordination and internal dissent forming within the clan, he preserved a past and contemporary cultural system through religiosity. Similarly, the Vipassanā meditation movement would not have succeeded in spreading across the United States with the sort of rigidity that appears in monasticism, especially given the culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, if this movement had been articulated or presented as a religious practice that threatened Christianity, it would have been suppressed and eventually extinguished in American culture upon its engagement in the public sphere. It seems then that the only way to mitigate opposition and more easily import and spread Theravāda Buddhism into both religious and secular U.S. society was through an appearance reflective of the largest religious group—lay Christians. Moreover, Christians form the majority of the religious and secular worlds in the United States; and politicians are, perhaps, the most important professional figures.

In the morally-defining relationship between citizenship and being religious, a movement without theistic belief but presented as religious in nature would have ultimately threatened the “authority of existing assumptions.” Kornfield, for example, promotes meditation over all other Theravāda features. He states that, “The essence of Buddhism is its meditation practices.” Similarly, Fronsdal remarks: “The early *vipassanā* teachers primarily taught meditation, consciously choosing to leave out many

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64 For reference, see pages 62-63.
65 Characteristically, it should be added—a nation immersed in a predominating and supposed “Christian” history.
66 Also, there is the point that, typically, Christian ministers or preachers do not wear robes unless providing a service or ritual-practice in the United States.
67 For reference, see pages, 82-83.
of the doctrines, practices, rituals, and other elements of traditional Theravāda Buddhism.⁶⁹ Therefore, upon the point that being moral is connected to Christianity, a religion with a theistic belief system, in the Vipassanā meditation movement the importance of morality is hidden within its appearance as an outcome of meditating.

Moreover, vipassanā meditation is viewed as far less threatening to the larger relationship between citizenship, religion, and morality in the United States, precisely due to the supposed lack of religiosity. Thus, the perception that the absence of monasticism distinguishes the Vipassanā meditation movement from early Theravāda is in fact only a difference at face value. That is, this feature does not largely define either this movement’s identity, and nor are both movements established through this feature.⁷⁰ Where Gotama Buddha was impelled to take on this specific appearance, dictated by preceding conflicting secular intersections, the U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement’s founders were similarly influenced. Therefore, in the manifestations of the two movements, monasticism in the one and the absence thereof in the other is not indicative of a disconnect; but rather both reflect the original relationship within “the secular” and its purpose to preserve an “activity” aimed at resolving diverse cultural socio-political

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⁷⁰ Worth mentioning, here, is how other early Theravāda elements are found in the Vipassanā meditation movement, such as councils, democracy, feminism, and individualism. Fronsdal, “Insight Meditation in the United States,” 168. Similar to the early Theravādins’ councils, vipassanā meditation teachers have conducted annual meetings to “discuss teaching and the growth of the vipassana movement” since the mid-1970s. Ibid. Moreover, these meetings are attended by “mainstream teachers” to help “nurture an interactive teacher community and created the most coherent representative body for the movement.” Ibid. Regarding “democracy,” a misrepresentation by name in that it should be termed a “republic” in the United States, the gana-sanghas also operated in this particular form, and therefore so did and do each of these movements. Equality may also be associated with the gana-sanghas and early Theravāda as they kept with “egalitarian traditions.” Thapar, Early India, 147. “Feminism” may be seen in the allowance of nuns into the Sangha and is reflected in the Vipassanā meditation movement by the higher number of women attending retreats and equal number of female teachers. Fronsdal, “Insight Meditation in the United States,” 178. Lastly, “individualism” is reflected in the fact that individuals of any caste were accepted into the Sangha, just as vipassanā meditation practitioners do not have to disbelieve or believe in a God(s), among many other aspects of acceptance or tolerance of diversity.
and ethical tensions. In their missionizing of equality through a less threatening appearance, both movements’ founders are contextually bounded in this way. Thus, the intention or “thought behind” monasticism’s presence unifies and unequivocally explains not only who these founders had become and wanted “to continue to be,” but also the Mahāsi Sayadaw and those before him.

Lastly, as the Vipassanā meditation movement’s development and manifestation contextually reflects that of early Theravāda, doctrine is another central feature connecting the Vipassanā meditation movement with early Theravāda and post-canonical Theravāda lineage. More specifically, the manner in which missionary activity was conducted in both movements has ultimately preserved doctrine. While Theravāda explicates a doctrine, the Abhidhamma, which guides individuals ethically toward an interpretation of the nature of reality, it also preserves the socio-mobility or freedom that had been previously established in the gana-sanghas’ culture. However, the Vipassanā meditation movement “consciously” or intentionally removes its presence linguistically.

For instance, Fronsdal comments, “In defining freedom in terms relevant to anyone’s life, the American teachers make virtually no reference to Buddhist doctrines that would be foreign and perhaps unacceptable to most Americans.”\(^{71}\) While this may be due to the co-founders’ lack of study of Theravāda’s “vocabulary, history, and literature” at the time,\(^{72}\) the Pāli canon provides a guide to vipassanā meditation. More specifically,

\(^{71}\) Fronsdal, “Insight Meditation in the United States,” 171.
\(^{72}\) I posit this notion with consideration of Allan B. Wallace’s discussion on how the Insight meditation movement does not contain these aspects in order to elucidate, perhaps a more obvious reason for such said omissions. Wallace’s complete remark is: “In the lay-oriented vipassanā centers throughout the West, meditation is taught in a way that is largely divorced from the monastic and lay elements of the Theravāda tradition, together with its vocabulary, history, and literature.” Wallace, “The Spectrum of Buddhist Practice in the West,” 37.
the method is contained within the Sutta Piṭaka’s “Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta” and explicated further in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka.

Furthermore, not referencing a “foreign” or “unacceptable” doctrine to shroud its presence is another example of obfuscating a “real” understanding of the Vipassanā meditation movement’s relationship with early Theravāda. On the one hand, doctrine is presumed to be “virtually” unspoken in the Vipassanā meditation movement, but “freedom” is more pronounced. On the other hand, doctrine in early Theravāda was pronounced, but “vimutti” is virtually unspoken. Therefore, where the former movement discounts the presence of doctrine and the latter promotes it, there is both a protected curriculum within words and one that expands beyond such writings.

On the latter, for example, doctrine is specifically identifiable in the Vipassanā meditation movement through an understanding of Burmese Theravāda Buddhism. This imported feature may be found within the Burmese’s regard for the Abhidhamma and vipassanā meditation. Sitagu Sayadaw, a revered Burmese Buddhist monastic, remarks on the relationship between this practice and doctrinal system. He states:

Since Vipassana meditation takes the Abhidhamma as its sole object of contemplation, Vipassana and Abhidhamma cannot be separated. And while it may not be said that one can practice Vipassana only after one has mastered the Abhidhamma, Vipassana meditation and the study of Abhidhamma remain one and the same thing. Because mind, mental factors and matter are forever bound up with this fathom-long body, the study and learning of this subject, and the concentrated observation of the nature of mind, mental factors and matter are tasks which cannot be distinguished.74

73 Crosby, Theravāda Buddhism, 2.
74 A similar comment was made while I was conducting an interview with a Burmese Theravāda monastic in the United States. The Sitagu Sayadaw also stated, “Another method which achieves the same end; that is, the seeking out and penetration of reality, relies on an ascent through the seven purifications. In both instances, Vipassana and Abhidhamma are identical… Since at the very least one would have to say that there can be no Vipassana without an understanding of mind and matter, surely then it is not possible to separate Abhidhamma and Vipassana…. Only by grasping these abhidhammic truths will one possess the knowledge which comprehends conditional relations (paccayapariggahanana), and achieve the purification of mind necessary for overcoming doubt.” Sitagu Sayadaw, “Abhidhamma and Vipassanā,” Facebook,
In other words, both vipassanā meditation and the Abhidhamma are studies of and explain mind and matter. Therefore, when one practices vipassanā, one is studying and learning the Abhidhamma. Then, it may also be stated that one is also studying the “Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta,” because the Abhidhamma explicates this Sutta. Moreover, although this movement is said not to promote doctrine, its inconspicuousness is highlighted in this statement on vipassanā meditation. Furthermore, it would be unequivocally incorrect to assume that the Mahāsi Sayadaw did not have such knowledge and understanding of this conceptual connection to doctrine when guiding individuals interested in vipassanā meditation.

Additionally, Dhamma talks are given in both vipassanā meditation centers and in Theravāda monasteries, and these talks consist of stories about ethical behavior, mindfulness, and concentration. The latitude to discuss religious doctrine in order to inspire and guide practitioners toward attaining insight and remind them of their moral obligations or conduct seems to be a curriculum in and of itself. That is, there is an “illusion of continuity”; and such a said disconnect in the Insight meditation movement is, again, representative of the larger Theravāda lineage. In this understanding of how the Vipassanā meditation movement and both early Theravāda and Theravāda are contextually bounded through tracings to its earliest secular form, Kate Crosby is most certainly correct—that a category, such as Theravāda, “make[s] us blind to the fluidity, complexity, diversity, and richness of any actual manifestation of Buddhism in real people and communities.”


75 Crosby, Theravāda Buddhism, 2.
preserved or missionized is through these once considered paucities in the Vipassanā meditation movement. Thus, when early Theravāda, Theravāda, and the Vipassanā meditation movement conceal, maintain, or intentionally omit various integral features from geographic location to location in different periods, is not the “true” and “universal” context of “the secular” the distinctive concept or facet of Theravāda lineage, whereby “spirituality” is represented by, for example, the refrainment from answering stereotypical religious questions while promoting a system of greater equality for diverse peoples on the premise of a particular interpretation of freedom or enlightenment?

Conclusion

With respect to how the Vipassanā meditation movement is part of the Theravāda lineage, the preservation of Theravāda does not arrive solely in the form of a religion to be maintained in the United States. Instead, the preservation of the injustices experienced within specific contexts is reflective of both the larger socio-political, ethical, and religious environments of ancient Indian and American histories. The manner in which monastic leadership, as well as lay and political support, influence religious movements’ presence or lack thereof in ritual forms, monasticism, and articulations of doctrine is then a matter of complex cultural intersections. By elucidating the contextual secular elements that underlie and which produced each of these movement’s appearances, how a religious movement originates, originated, and is represented by its said features, misrepresents the Insight meditation movement’s identity or lineage.

Furthermore, the use of the word “spirituality” in the public space of debates facilitates the easy spread of the Vipassanā meditation movement, because it misleads
one into assuming that it is neither religious nor secular, although it is most often framed within the latter. However, the Vipassanā meditation movement, as presented, is a missionized religion, and, more precisely, Theravāda Buddhism. If not, then early Theravāda and Theravāda are also not religious, but instead spiritual, because both movements relate to and are founded upon the same ethos of freedom, socio-mobility, and egalitarian rights or treatments of diverse peoples. For where the Vipassanā meditation movement’s practitioners “do not identify themselves as members of an institution,” monastics did not insert themselves into the caste hierarchy.

Moreover, in both the previous and current chapter, evidence of moral and political influences has been presented to align the appearances of both movements through an association between morals, religion, and citizenship. Not once has there been a remark on the Vipassanā meditation movement proselytizing and converting others, although this movement stems from and carries within it Theravāda lineage. As a result, features of monasticism and doctrine are no longer presented as differences between each movement, but instead unifying aspects that support the practitioners of the Vipassanā meditation movement as Buddhist “missionaries.”

Furthermore, the material presented in this chapter indicates that the distinction between early Theravāda’s emergence as politically motivated by and against the politico-stratification of Indo-Aryan culture with its associated religious features, and the beginnings of the secular Vipassanā meditation movement’s politico-opposition within the United States, with its predominating Christian rituals and beliefs, is conceptually flawed. The centrality of such features in both movements indicates the “richness” of

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76 Fronsdal, “Insight Meditation in the United States,” 179.
77 For reference, see pages 60-72.
Buddhism independently of perceived categories and demonstrates the *illusion of discontinuity*. Therefore, in this nuanced understanding of how missionary activity is driven by the secular world, who will access the necessary sociopolitical clout to missionize Theravāda? It seems this is becoming more apparent in a “spiritual” world.

In the following chapter, an ethnographic study on Burmese Theravāda monastics living in the United States is presented. The focus is on these individuals’ knowledge, understanding, and applied ethics of a Theravāda doctrinal system, the Abhidhamma, as related to missionary activity. This system’s significance for Theravāda in Burma is explained to better understand how this doctrine is not simply theoretical, but rather both a largely concealed application in their missionary activity and tied to the *gana-sanghas*’ system.
Chapter 4

The Abhidhamma: An Applied Ethics Shaping the Daily Lives of Burmese Theravāda Buddhist Monastics

While Ashin Pannavata, a Burmese Theravāda Buddhist monastic, walked through a Home Depot, he was stopped by a woman who asked him, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” Recalling his experience to me, Pannavata responded in a saturnine voice: “Yes, I know.” Although he was in a hurry that day, he remained there listening. He commented that she spoke about “the religion too much,” explaining, “Who God is,” and “What the Bible says.” She concluded, and Pannavata requested and received her permission to leave.

When I asked why he refrained from discussing Buddhism when Christians approached him, Pannavata answered, “Here [in the United States], I understand that most people are Christian. They don’t like to listen to the religion other than their religion…. If I force them to listen to Buddhism, they will be sad. They will not be happy.” In fact, Pannavata stated that he had experienced this type of encounter “many times” under the premise, “I’m Christian; you listen.” His refrainment from parleying religious belief and doctrine was empathically driven, largely due to his first encounter with Christians in California, where he had felt saddened by a similar experience. He further explained that an individual’s concluding remark to him was, “I take pity on you.”

Having been part of Burmese communities through attending festivals, meditation retreats, living as a monastic, and taking monks to various destinations since 2000, I was

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1 Quotations provided from the interviews with each of the monastics have been grammatically corrected with insertions and deletions to provide contextual clarity as needed.

2 Although they appear as inquiries, Pannavata was explaining what was being described to him. Therefore, I have restructured Pannavata’s spoken comments: “What is the God. What is the Bible.”
not too surprised by his encounter. However, as I continued this ethnographic research, I unexpectedly realized the unfamiliar terrain I was entering: the role of the Abhidhamma, a Buddhist doctrinal system, in the lives of Burmese Theravāda Buddhist monastics and the meaning of this relationship within the context of Theravāda as a missionary religion. Initiated by three Burmese Theravāda monastics (Ashin Pannavata, Ashin Narāda, and Ashin Mohnyin), this chapter examines the value they place on the Abhidhamma. More specifically, as an applied ethical system with regards to missionizing, this research investigates the utility of the Abhidhamma in ethically shaping Burmese monastics’ personal approaches to daily living within the local and global populace, is investigated. Informed by interactions with Christians and Burmese Buddhists, the Abhidhamma both guides and ethicizes their mental, verbal, and physical actions. As one Burmese monk stated, “The Abhidhamma is not just theory.”

A modern world religion said to consist of missionaries must take into account the role a primary religious source contributes to their work. In relation to these monastics’ application of the Abhidhamma method, the contributions of this study are not only related to whether or not missionary activity is performed and how, but also to what is being transmitted to others. As the Abhidhamma is believed to be the “deep” analytical nature of reality espoused by the Buddha, it logically serves as a way to understand how the roles and responsibilities of Theravāda monastics are maintained abroad. Thus, I argue that the Abhidhamma serves as a system of applied ethics shaping both their personal daily living and interactions with others. Additionally, constructed typological

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3 Explicated in the third division of the Pāli canon with commentaries, the Abhidhamma is a system in Buddhist metaphysics.
4 “Ashin” is an honorific religious title. Moving forward, the title will no longer be included in front of these three monastics’ names. All the participants’ names have been changed for confidentiality purposes.
missionary boundaries are challenged by addressing proselytizing and converting, as well as the latter features place in Burmese Theravāda Buddhism.

Therefore, I begin by addressing what the *Abhidhamma* is and why it is significant to both Burmese Buddhist monastics and the concept of missionary religion. Following this explanation, examples are provided and an understanding is presented of how Burmese Theravāda monastics apply what is referred to as the *Abhidhamma* “method” in their lives, as they engage with both Burmese Buddhists and non-Buddhists. As an applied ethic, the Abhidhamma is transmitted to the Burmese laity in a specific manner that explains how this doctrinal system is distinguished within the scope of missionary activity. In other words, an ethicizing process is applied in such interactions. As a result of providing such examples, the Abhidhamma is understood as more than a theory. A final discussion follows on how the concept of missionary religion is problematic by situating missionary typologies into the context of globalization. Therefore, the *missionary spectrum* is explained and suggested as a way to negotiate the lived experiences of feeling “forced” to convert and “preserving” a religion.

A Relationship Between the Abhidhamma, Burmese Monks, and “Missionizing”

*If you don’t know the Abhidhamma, you cannot control your mind whether good or bad. However, if you learn the Abhidhamma, you can control everything. You can understand when you have good deeds or bad deeds, or you shouldn’t think or should think something; it is very useful…. You can practice in meditation to purify your mind, but if you learn the Abhidhamma, you know what kind of mind you have at the present moment. You know whether this is a good mind or a bad mind or how many kinds of aggregates and how to purify your mind, how to get out the thing, like attachment, anger, and so on—it is very useful this one…. This is very useful, you have to apply it to your daily life. It is very good.*

*Ashin Narāda, Burmese Theravada Buddhist Monastic, 2015*
The Abhidhamma Piṭaka is the third “basket” or collection of teachings in the Theravāda Buddhist Pāli canon, comprised of seven texts, along with commentaries, sub-commentaries, and manuals.\(^5\) Translated as the “Higher Teachings,”\(^6\) the Abhidhamma is a complex explication on the nature of reality integrating psychological, philosophical, and ethical components into a system or method for attaining enlightenment. Albeit textually examined and agreed upon by scholars as to its theoretical nature, few, if any, have investigated the role the Abhidhamma plays in the lives of contemporary Burmese monastic missionaries. There are at least two reasons for this lag in exploration: the larger Western notion of what doctrine is, and that an exorbitant amount of time is required to both study and practice the Abhidhamma, which is the only way one can truly understand and know it.

First, where the contemplative aspect of the Abhidhamma offers an interpretation on perceived reality, is ontological, and thereby theoretical, in contrast to Western thought on doctrine, an understanding of the Abhidhamma is merely associative or presupposed. That is, doctrine is explicitly assumed to be implicitly understood in the Western mind.\(^7\) Unlike the Bible and other religious works, the Abhidhamma—written in the Pāli form—does not include expositions on the existence of a divine being, a simple moral code, homilies, nor even pronouns. Moreover, this compendium is additionally distinct for reasons other than its mavens, such as Sri Lankan monastic Nārada Maha Thera\(^8\) and Ashin Pannavat\(^9\) respectively remarking that the Abhidhamma is as “dry as

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\(^5\) Additionally, due to the complexity and breadth of this collection, more concise, shorter works called “finger manuals” were composed to explain various sections and content.

\(^6\) “Abhi” is translated as “higher,” and “Dhamma” is translated as “Teachings.”

\(^7\) In relation to Collins’s comments, where he considers Wittgenstein’s “language games,” doctrine is doctrine and therefore familiar. Collins, *Selfless Persons*, 3.

\(^8\) The late Nārada Maha Thera was a globally revered monastic, who both taught the Abhidhamma and published numerous books on and translations of its contents.
dust,” and, “The laity find the Abhidhamma boring.” The Abhidhamma is unsurpassed in terms of its concision and complexity, but once understood it is applicable to everyday living.

The Abhidhamma method posits that mental and physical suffering are fundamentally due to the lack of discerning what greed, hatred, and delusion are in relation to general, perceived experiences or results. Central to the employment of this system is both the individual’s knowing of and understanding in the difference between ontological entities called “dhammas” (a multiplicity of elementary constituents) and entities that are conceptually constructed but misconstrued as absolute or definitive reality. To grasp first the theoretical component within this system and then this method as an applied ethic, a general description of only three components within this system are provided: cittas (consciousness), cetasikas (mental formations), and dhammas (the fundamental components of actuality).

The first book of the Abhidhamma, the Dhammasangani, begins with a mātikā (matrix) or schema, in which this entire collection is grounded. Within this framework, and in the Abhidhamma more broadly, this collection anatomizes the notion of a stream of consciousness. The Abhidhamma, then, dissects the “nature of experience” or “conscious reality.” It does so by distinguishing between what are called “cittas” or types of “consciousness” that are distinct, successively appearing and disappearing

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9 Pannavata taught the Abhidhamma for a few years at a Theravāda Buddhist university in Burma.
11 In other words, I am providing only specific content from the Abhidhamma due to its significance to this study. Moreover, given the intricacies of this system, a more involved description would not only fill more pages than I have at my disposal, but also because the reader would be left with too many questions, thus detracting from this chapter. For an in-depth understanding, see: Bodhi, Abhidhammattha Sangaha.
12 Bodhi, Abhidhammattha Sangaha, 7.
13 Ibid., 4.
components that form cognition.\textsuperscript{14} One of three types of “rooted” \textit{cittas} that creates suffering is “hatred.”\textsuperscript{15} As different types of \textit{cittas} are classified into two major groups—the Mundane (81 \textit{cittas}) and the Supramundane (8 or 40 \textit{cittas}), the focus on \textit{cetasikas}, or more simply mental formations or factors, may be understood as the next step in understanding reality, consciousness, or \textit{cittas}, as presented in the Abhidhamma.

Where there are 52 \textit{cetasikas} compiled into eight groups, and these factors arise with \textit{cittas}. For example, “envy” or jealousy is one \textit{cetasika} found within the “Unwholesome” grouping. However, these mental formations are distinguishable, for although they arise at the same time as \textit{cittas}, not all disappear concomitantly. Regarding the classification of these mental factors in relation to \textit{cittas}, the eight groups of \textit{cetasikas} correspond with \textit{cittas} within this matrix.\textsuperscript{16} Therefore, in describing the relationship between \textit{cittas} and \textit{cetasikas} by using the given examples, where “hatred” (\textit{citta}) may arise, “envy” (\textit{cetasika}) is one associated, distinguishable factor that may arise with the former.

At the Abhidhamma’s core, however, “\textit{dhammas}” are said to be the fundamental components of reality. Bhikkhu Bodhi states, “It is the \textit{dhammas} alone that possess ultimate reality: determinate existence ‘from their own side’ (\textit{sarūpato}) independent of the mind’s conceptual processing of the data.”\textsuperscript{17} In relation to \textit{dhammas} and the Abhidhamma’s complexity, \textit{dhammas} are distributed into 122 classification modes. That is, \textit{dhammas} are placed into \textit{tika} (triads) or three groups classifying 22 of these modes

\begin{flushleft}\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{15} The other two are “delusion” and “greed.” \\
\textsuperscript{16} While this is an extremely broad description, and even more so an incomplete description as related to the system as a whole, it pertains specifically to the contents that follow in this paper—thus, the reason for such general inclusions here. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Bodhi, \textit{Abhidhammattha Sangaha}, 3. \end{flushleft}

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and into *duka* (dyads) or two groups classifying the remaining 100. While this brief
explanation certainly falls short of the Abhidhamma’s intensely comprehensive
theoretical articulation on the nature of reality, how these components are applied will be
explained further later in this chapter. However, it is my hope that a better understanding
of its distinctness in comparison with other religious works may be appreciated.

Regarding the second point, scholars note the scant introductory\(^{18}\) and advanced
publications on the Abhidhamma because of the linguistic expertise and years of
specialized training required to accurately describe it to Westerners.\(^ {19}\) The Burmese
monastics interviewed for this research, for example, implied that competency in both the
Abhidhamma system and applied ethics required over a decade of ongoing study,
recitation, and practice. Thus, the Abhidhamma is unique. But why then is it historically
significant, if not central, to Burmese Theravāda monastics and the laity?

Precipitated by a trend to “write religious works in the vernacular,” Abhidhamma
scholarship flourished since the 17\(^{th}\) century in Burma.\(^ {20}\) Moreover, it is worthwhile to
note that the Abhidhamma’s place in the heart of Burmese culture gained more meaning
and influence in reaction to British occupation during the late 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\)
centuries,\(^ {21}\) when there was a fear of Christianity spreading and the disappearance of
Buddhism.\(^ {22}\) This has specific relevance to missionary activity. As a reminder, in this
sociopolitical and religio-cultural intersection, Burmese monastic Ledi Sayadaw made

\(^{19}\) Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism*, 175-176.
\(^{20}\) Comments shared by Dr. Patrick Pranke upon reviewing an AAR paper. Further noted is that there was a simultaneous rise in literacy.
\(^{21}\) Braun, *The Birth of Insight*.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., esp. 4-5, 73, 78-84, and 86-87; and, Gravers, “Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka,” 1-27.
this resource more accessible to the laity throughout the country by traveling far distances and giving numerous, associated public talks during this period.23

However, as George J. Tanabe insightfully notes with respect to missionary activity typologies, there is a “fundamental difference” between missionizing to convert individuals and to provide support for diaspora communities.24 This ethical difference that underpins missionizing seems to further dissociate Theravāda Buddhism from the standard academic definition.25 In other words, in the intersection between Ledi’s efforts to preserve Buddhism in the homeland, for instance, and the application of the system contained in the Abhidhamma, there is more simply a well-rooted, preserved ancient ethos upon which a doctrine and doctrinal system are founded.

As a reminder, the contestation between the Indo-Aryan “monarchy and its rigid-religious varna hierarchy”26 or caste system and the gana-sanghas’ “secular-flexible stratification”27 system—comprised of greater socio-mobility and a more egalitarian ethos— influenced the Sākya clan’s Gotama Buddha to preserve such a system through early Theravāda.28 While written centuries after the Buddha’s parinibbāna (death), the Abhidhamma seems to interpret and transmit this clan’s external perspective of equality among the diversity of human beings through an internal analysis of the human condition. For, as the Abhidhamma discriminately situates “states of mind principally on the basis

23 Ibid., 77-78.
27 Ibid.
28 The gana-sanghas’ were aware of being subsumed into the opposing caste system. See chapter three, esp. 83-86.
of ethical criteria: the wholesome and the unwholesome, it does so through a system of tolerating or accepting oneself, as it promotes underlying, inherent characteristics and conditions that render all humans equal. While both this history and system are less relevant in the United States, the Abhidhamma remains the most influential text for the monastics in Burmese Theravāda communities abroad. However, this localized lack of relevance is, in part, likely due to how the Abhidhamma’s presence seems to be concealed.

For instance, when asked about his missionary work, Ashin Pannavata responded, “If someone asks about Buddhism, I explain. If not, I do not talk about it…. A girl, in the University [I attended], asked, ‘What is your purpose here?’ She said, ‘Do you do mission work?’ I told her, ‘No. I never talk like this.’” While the common answer to why Theravāda monastics do not “missionize” is that, “A monk will usually wait for an invitation to speak on the Dhamma, so there is no question about him proselytizing,” there is a more complete response for Burmese Theravāda monastics. What underlies and motivates their behavior is better understood through the unstated significance placed on knowing and applying the Abhidhamma method in everyday living.

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29 Bodhi, Abhidhammattha Sangaha, 4.
30 Because this study is focused on Burmese monastics living in the United States, it is worth noting how important the Abhidhamma is in Burma. Along with the Burmese monastics’ expertise in the Abhidhamma in more day-to-day and informal interactions, formal instruction is given by monastics in classes throughout Burma so that the laity might learn this system. For example, researching the laity’s study of the Abhidhamma in Burma, Daw Yujanañāṇī states that one student remarked, “[The] Abhidhamma can guide us to the correct path; my sensitive and aggressive nature becomes calmer than before; followers of any faith should know [the] Abhidhamma.” She explained further that the Abhidhamma is studied as a “rational, comprehensible and applicable way of life” and that the “Abhidhamma guides them.” Presented at the first International Conference of All Theravāda Buddhist Universities held at both The International Theravāda Buddhist Missionary University, Yangon, Burma, and the Woodland Hotel, Popa Mountain Resort, Bagan, Burma. Daw Yujanañāṇī, “The Study of the Abhidhamma: Amongst the Laity in Myanmar,” March 9-12, 2007, Atbu.org/node/10.
31 Each of these monastics referred to “missionary activity” as “missionary work.”
32 Pannavata, Burmese Buddhist Monastic, interviewed 2015, U.S.
Mohnyin, for example, shared a story about two Christians who had recently visited his temple. I asked, “Why don’t you tell them about Buddhism unless they ask?” He replied, “If somebody is interested in ‘A,’ ‘B,’ ‘C,’ or ‘D,’ but I am interested in ‘E,’ and I told him about ‘E’: this is the difference.” Upon reflecting on past conversations with Burmese monastics, personal experiences of witnessing how they have spoken and acted in the same manner, and his comment, I questioned him further: “But is this something you are taught to do?” In a soft-spoken voice, he leaned toward me and responded, “This is really knowing and studying the Piṭaka—Abhidhamma. This is very important—you know, private type. How you do the process step by step. In Buddhism this is very important: in the Piṭaka is the Abhidhamma.” Therefore, the Abhidhamma is an applied self-reflective ethical system by way of the positive, negative, or neutral kamma or karma (volitional activity) associated with appropriately addressing an individual’s specific interest(s) in Buddhism, should they exist. In other words, negative kamma is future oriented, wherein broaching an unsolicited personal interest has the potential to bring mental, physical, or both types of harm to either one or both individuals.

Drawing on Clifford Geertz’s “thick description,” he states that “the ethnographer is in fact faced with… a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them

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34 These conversations and experiences with Burmese monastics have been over the past 15 years. Mohnyin was the first to explicitly state and share the significance of the Abhidhamma. In his description of opening the temple’s door to talk to both new and familiar Christian missionaries, he explained that one of the repeat visitors offered him a Bible, in Burmese. He specifically mentioned being approached by four different Christian missionaries, in which the focus in each conversation was on Jesus. To my surprise, he told one missionary, “I want to visit your church.” However, he added that, “He never invited me.” Mohnyin did not speculate as to why, not even after I inquired. After a few months of weekly visits and identifying similarities between their actions in encounters, such as these, I asked Mohnyin the question above, leading to this remark about the underlying component of Burmese Theravāda culture.

35 The former term is in Pāli and is consistent with Burmese Theravāda Buddhism. The latter is in Sanskrit; both may be defined as “volition.”
superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render.”

Upon asking Pannavata to state what aspect of Buddhism he would share first with a Christian, he responded with the familiar concept of *kamma*. However, he continued by remarking that, “According to the Buddha’s teaching, we should try to do good things and try not to do any bad things, and to purify our minds.” In fact, each monastic used *kamma*, additional familiar Pāli terms, and similar phrasings in English that were suggestive of this specific system as a reason for their mental, verbal, and physical responses.

The other words in Pāli form, such as *kusala*, *akusala*, and *kilesa*, were both articulated as and seemed to carry in them conceptual ideals. For example, these Pāli words and concepts were also expressed in English by the monks, respectively, as “wholesome” or “good mind” or “good deeds,” “unwholesome” or “bad deeds,” and “bad mind.” Moreover, each monastic incorporated variations of the phrase and concept of “purifying the mind” into conversations, such as, “We have to purify our minds”; and, “You have to purify your mind.” This phrase and its variations, however, were given special attention when spoken. These particular words were consistently enunciated more

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37 These Pāli terms’ meanings are: “wholesome,” “unwholesome,” and “mental defilements.”
38 Narāda and Mohnyin also used the term *abyakata* or “neutral kamma.” This term helped steer the project to include the Abhidhamma, due to its significance in completing the triad for *kusala*, *akusula*, and *abyakata* (wholesome, unwholesome, and neutral deeds) in the first book of the Abhidhamma, the Dhammasangani.
39 Other variations of the phrase included, “pure mind” and “mind is pure.” The phrase refers to the Vissudhimagga, as noted by Narāda. A manual on the Abhidhamma doctrine and meditation written during the 5th century C.E. by Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa in Sri Lanka. Additionally, this is similar to Jeffrey Samuels’s ethnography on Sri Lankan monastics’ relationship with their communities. Samuels continued to hear the Sinhalese expression, “*hita ādagani*” or “attracting the heart,” which underlies various aspects of Sinhalese Theravāda communities, such as “institution building and monastic vocation” and “role of emotional perception and expression.” Jeffrey Samuels, *Attracting the Heart: Social Relations and the Aesthetics of Emotion in Sri Lankan Monastic Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2010), xxv.
clearly, slower, and softer by each monastic. Therefore, these phrases seemed more esteemed. There was, in other words, perhaps an unstated reason for their similar responses including “a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures” that needed to be rendered. Upon researching further, the particular conceptual process to “purify the mind” is directly connected to the Abhidhamma.

More specifically, there is a relationship between the monastics’ similar replies, the Abhidhamma, missionary activity, and their use of specific words and phrases, such as “kamma”, “purify the mind,” and “force.” Both their in-depth theoretical knowledge of the Abhidhamma with its explications on Buddhist concepts, such as kamma, and the application of this treatise guiding them toward “purifying the mind” were evident in our discussions. Moreover, in such study and application, there is an ethical implication in how to or how not to conduct missionary activity. That is, daily enactments are morally based in this Buddhist doctrinal system, which involves both knowing this theory and applying it within the larger conceptual process of thinking, speaking, and physically acting.⁴⁰

Richard Gombrich explains that the Buddha’s focus to liberate oneself from suffering was process-oriented.⁴¹ He remarks that this goal stresses “how rather than what,” and that the Buddha’s “approach is pragmatic, not purely theoretical.”⁴² On the Burmese monastics’ relationship with the Abhidhamma and missionary activity, this understanding could not be more correct, because enlightenment necessitates personal responsibility in relation to how kamma conceptually encapsulates proper moral

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⁴⁰ However, as related to thoughts, speech, and action, refraining from the latter two are also volitional or kammic producing in varied ways. Perhaps more simply, refraining from speech and action is kammic producing because there is also a result of non-producing kamma.

⁴¹ Gombrich, How Buddhism Began, 16.

⁴² Ibid.
conduct. That is, personalizing responsibility through what is said to be moral, immoral, or neutral as good, bad, and neutral actions in thought, speech, and the physical, respectively perpetuates positive, negative, or neutral *kamma* both in specific relation to the monastics’ and in concert with others’ wants and needs. And although Mohnyin and Narāda discussed similarities in the relationship between Theravāda and Christian missionary activity and responsibility, each monastic differentiated between this relationship through an emphasis on how “responsibility” is interpreted.

Mohnyin, for instance, stated, “In mission work, Christianity is only social welfare… Christians believe in God. That is the main difference. The Buddhist way is, ‘I do my work—the no-self theory.’ The responsibility is in me; there is no responsibility for God. What we believe is *kamma*. *Kamma* means action that affects you in life. This is very important.” Nancy J. Smith-Hefner’s research on Khmer Buddhist refugees converting to Christianity in the metropolitan Boston area supports this understanding. Sharing a specific comment on Buddhism, she quotes a Khmer Christian pastor as saying: “You are responsible for yourself [in Buddhism]. No one else can help you.” He explained further that in Christianity when “you place your trust in Him and ask His forgiveness, He will take care of all your needs and give you peace.”

Related to the Burmese monastic’s remarks on personal responsibility, *kamma*, and interactions with others, the conceptual and applicable process to purify the mind signifies both a larger and more moment-to-moment ethicizing process. There is first the study of the Abhidhamma; second, a particular cognitive development in which the monk

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43 For reference, see pages, 70-72.
45 Ibid.
is to embody this method; and, third, the application and manifestation of this system within daily living. The guidance in and manifestation of the Abhidhamma system helps one to develop an understanding of why proselytizing and converting are not valued practices for these monastics. In light of both the internalization of and evinced practices out of the complex interconnected concepts found in the Abhidhamma, such as *kamma* and its connection with *kilesa, kusala, akusala*, and purify the mind, the question arises of how Christian and Theravāda doctrines are understood. That is, to what extent is doctrine a contributing factor in distinguishing between this Theravāda Buddhist cohort’s and Christians’ missionary activities in America?

Speaking directly on the relationship between the Abhidhamma and Burmese monastics’ interactions with others, Pannavata stated that, “Sometimes I apply, ‘What is the Buddha’s course?’ and ‘What is the Buddha’s appointment?’ These kinds of ways; how to follow these kinds of ways.” When I asked, “Do you mean the *Puggala-Paññatti*?” Pannavata answered, “Yes.”

The application of the *Puggala-Paññatti*, the fourth book in the Abhidhamma, confirms the role the Abhidhamma has in these monastics’ particular responsibility related to “missionary activity.” Translated as the *Designation of Human Types*, the application of the *Puggala-Paññatti* is twofold. First, it is an applied matrix by a meditation teacher to guide a *yogi* (meditator). As such, it provides a way to diagnose and prescribe a course of action based on what the practitioner describes. However, as Pannavata explained, it also extends into other interactions. He remarked that this application is not limited to teaching others, but also to “not teaching” those who are “not ready” to listen, such as the Christians he encountered.
Upon confirming that these monks “use” or “apply” the Abhidhamma in their described engagements with Christians through the absence of contention or offering an explanation of Buddhism, the Abhidhamma is a significant reason for both their non-verbal response and willingness to listen. This process of identifying people as “ready” to discuss Buddhism is detailed in the *Puggala-Paññatti* and is complexly interconnected with wholesome actions as a type of positive or neutral kamma. That is, non-action is wholesome in this particular context. While the *Puggala-Paññatti*’s relevance is discussed further in the following section, Andrew Olendzki suggests that the *Abhidhammattha Sangaha (A Comprehensive Manual on Abhidhamma)* is less an intellectual doctrinal tool and more an applied ethic.

In his study of mindfulness, Olendzki compares the *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* and the *Abhidharmakosa* and points out that the terms “wholesome” or “unwholesome”—in the Pāli form: *kusala* or *akusala*, respectively—are better translated as “healthy” or “unhealthy.” With respect to the Abhidhamma method, these qualities have less to do with an ethos or “normative definition of right and wrong,” and instead, are more explicative of the inherent potential to abate one’s suffering through understanding “what factors contribute to or detract from the result of wellbeing.” In other words, *kusala* and *akusala* include elements of how to approach being well. The individual’s understanding in the relationship between qualities and *sīla* (morality) is of immense significance. In the larger historical context, I both disagree and agree with

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46 One of 50 different types of persons or “puggala,” for example, in is the *Puggala-Paññatti* is: “One incapable of arriving,” as a response to the question “What sort of person is incapable of arriving?” Law, Bimala Charan, trans., *Designation of Human Types: Puggala-Paññatti* (Bristol: Pali Text Society, 2011), 91.
48 Ibid., 56.
49 Ibid., 56-57.
Olendzki’s position on the importance of “ethos,” because he incorrectly, but understandably, isolates these terms’ meanings into a specific categorization. However, he also astutely remarks that the most egregious act is “not of an evil nature but of a lack of understanding.” Therefore, this doctrinal system is not intended as “an intellectual exercise of building doctrine,” but rather “a tool for effecting personal psychological transformation.” In Narāda’s words, for instance, the benefit of knowing and understanding the Abhidhamma is *in* the ability to “step over such problems.”

While helping explain and support these monastics’ internalization of or personal, applied ethicizing, Olendzki’s study does not address how this system is lived and applied into interactions with others. How then is this complex, actuated doctrine transmitted back to the Burmese laity who seek these monastics’ assistance? Before providing an answer by way of examples in the next section, what is imperative to recognize is that simply because the Abhidhamma is little understood by scholars, there is no reason for other religions’ doctrines to be indistinguishable as they relate to ethics, responsibility, and “missionary activity.” Therefore, these monastics do articulate how the Abhidhamma forms both an ethicized intrapersonal life and applied ethics in interpersonal communication.

Furthermore, without providing examples from the Bible here, what may be undoubtedly stated is that doctrine either distinguishes how these religions’ missionary activities are conducted or that the standard definition of this concept is simply and largely an inaccurate description when considering the Abhidhamma system and how these monastics’ applied ethics manifest. Thus, Max L. Stackhouse’s description of

50 Ibid., 57.
51 Ibid.
52 Each monastic in this study has been learning and applying the Abhidhamma for over a decade.
missionary activity is partly correct, where he states, “Both domestic and foreign missionary activity is marked by intense intellectual activity.”53 However, upon considering the Burmese monastics’ articulations on their missionary activity in relation to the Abhidhamma as an applied ethic, his ensuing remark—“for the whole of reality has to be reconsidered from the new perspective”54—seems to include the latitude for this nuance in such activity while also a contrast to his larger description of proselytizing and converting others.

Transmitting the Abhidhamma

“We need to code it.” These were the words Pannavata spoke when answering my question on how monastics convey the ethical underpinnings of the Abhidhamma to the Burmese laity. He continued by stating, “We need to relate the teaching. I never talk about it as the Abhidhamma.” Following his response, I asked, “When you are speaking with them, you’re thinking about the Abhidhamma?” He rapidly replied, “Right. Right. Right. Yes.” Both Narāda and Mohnyin expressed similar responses, with Mohnyin stating, “I’m talking about Dhamma [the general teachings of the Buddha.] They will know only Dhamma. But I am specifically talking about the Abhidhamma.” Mohnyin commented further that most of the laity know the Abhidhamma is being utilized and “coded” into simple terms due to the complexity of this teaching, or that this system is “very deep.” The general terms used by the monks, such as “wholesome” and “unwholesome,” help to convey a simplified understanding of the in-depth Abhidhamma method in an effort toward ethicizing their mental states. In particular, this process might

54 Ibid.
be understood through how they apply the *Puggala-Paññatti* in their interactions with Burmese laity.

Narāda, for example, explained the general way in which the *Puggala-Paññatti* is applied in conversations with members of the community. He commented that, “I listen to whatever you speak, family problems, about stress, work…. But when we talk about that problem, the *Puggala-Paññatti* is different types of personal environments or temperaments; then we just listen. Okay, such kind of action or problem is occurring, so then what is the best solution to calm down your mind?” In other words, Narāda and the monks listen to what temperament the mind has “attached” to it, and drawing from the *Puggala-Paññatti*, they offer a course of action to help individuals “calm down” or “get out” this specific mental state. In so doing, the monastics’ thoughts and speech are wholesome. In this complex integration between psychology, philosophy, and ethics is an applied guide aimed at symbiotically ethicizing the monastic through an attempt toward the same outcome for community members. That is, when a problem is presented to the monastic, his response is a “wholesome deed” and one that, if followed, will benefit the other individual, as related to *kamma*.

“Coding” the Abhidhamma while talking with a Burmese lay person experiencing “jealousy,” for example, Pannavata exhorted the person not to “bare the anger mood; if [you] bare the anger, then you will feel hurt. First, you will feel hurt. Then, later on your neighbor, your friends, your family will also feel hurt.” However, he remarked that this explanation drew upon personal experience as related to ethical practices and *kamma*. He shared that, “If I am angry, I can contemplate this anger is not good. It will harm me and others; that’s why I need to control my mind… I can focus my mind. Right now, my mind
is no good. My mind is angry, angry root. That is based on the Abhidhamma, learning Abhidhamma.”

While the experience was described as “jealousy,” Pannavata’s advice not to “bare the anger mood,” and personal shared experience in being angry might seem disconnected. However, the Cetasikasangaha (Mental Formation Compendium) groups four “factors”—“hatred, envy, avarice, and worry”—into the cittas associated with aversion.  

By taking “jealousy,” a cetasika or mental formation factor, and working through the system, his response to her was through a type of consciousness—anger. In sum, this applied ethics experientially shaped how she may understand her emotional state to help “calm down” her mind. By knowing when one has a “bad mind” through understanding the Abhidhamma, this applied ethics cultivates a wholesome mental state. And with the personal knowledge and understanding of this system, as well as its application in social interactions, there is the intention or “thought behind it” that begins to generate mental, verbal, and physical wellbeing for both individuals.

Describing another interaction, Narāda had calmed a crying Burmese mother and her refugee family who felt forced to convert to Christianity. He explained that upon Burmese refugees arriving in the United States, some families “convert” to Christianity. However, their conversion seems a matter of both contingency and necessity. A local church, for example, “donates” a $200 calling card to phone loved ones in Burma, second-hand clothing, and provides expedited job hiring in return for converting to Christianity. Although they attend church services, Narāda stated, “They do not delight in going. The church members make them by force. If you do not convert to Christianity,

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55 Bodhi, Abhidhammattha Sangaha, 96.
56 Cone and Gombrich, The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara, xxii.
believe in God, and the church, then they do not come to help you; they just cut off the hand. They say these things right through their mouths. So sometimes the Burmese people cry because they don’t want to change and convert.”

After sharing, he remarked, “Monks have to explain to the laity that their feeling is not bad.” In this last comment, he indicated how a highly simplified or coded version of the Abhidhamma was being utilized, because this method includes an understanding of how unwholesome and wholesome mental states “attach” to the mind. More specifically, in the Abhidhamma system, her feeling “bad” was misconstrued as the absolute or ultimate reality. What Narāda was explaining was that her experience is a conceptual mental construct. For in this applied system, this particular construct is not ultimately bad, because it is a reflection of a “lack of understanding,” in that fundamental reality is in the “dhammas alone.”

From studies and lived experiences of knowing and understanding this system, each of these described experiences supports how applying this ethicizing doctrinal system is intended to transmit wellbeing as part of their missionary activity. As this applied ethical system is complexly interwoven between monastics and both lay Burmese and Christian interactions, there is, at the very least, the presence of not using force or causing harm to others. Narāda, for instance, explained that, “Attachment to religion is rooted in ignorance,” and that, “We do not force. The Buddha explained to us to convert

57 He further explained to them, with respect to this process of interaction and ethical application, the connection of the Puggala-Paññatti text in the Abhidhamma to its application when helping the laity, “This kind of action or problem is not only you, but many people, and some are worse than you.” “Buddhist monks have difficulties, like speaking English, being tolerant in some situations, but we know what is the best solution to calm down the mind.” Continuing, he remarked that, “We have attachment. We have greed. We have suffering. And so the more attachment you have, the more suffering.” He stated that he prescribed “meditation” or “rest,” for instance, and sometimes invited them to eat and stay in the temple. He also offered his ability to help with both filling out forms in English, such as job applications and immigration documents, and talking directly with the church when necessary.
from an unwholesome mental state to wholesome mental state, not from one religion to
another.”

Therefore, understanding how the Abhidhamma is an applied ethic in these
monastics’ communities includes coded words when the laity approached and are “ready”
to listen to the monks, but also both refraining from speaking on Buddhism and
remaining present in conversations on the Bible with Christians. Such an applied ethos,
representative of the *gana-sanghas*’ tolerance of unorthodox views and egalitarian
system, lends much to the relationship between the larger global perspective of Buddhists
as endearingly compassionate, along with other “wholesome” thoughts, speech, and
actions. Moreover, how this method is applied to individuals is likely a reason for the
broader perception of Buddhists wanting to “nurture a sense of global community in a
divided world.”

Thus, examining the lives of contemporary Buddhist monastics yields a
unique view into doctrine’s place as a reified agent toward generating wellbeing in
everyday life. How then does this research contribute to the larger concept of and
academic perspective on missionary activity?

**The Missionary Spectrum**

Over the course of this study, each of the monastics interlaced perspectives of
Christian missionizing and Western materiality. When asked about the differences
between Christian and Buddhist “mission work,” Pannavata, for example, commented on
Christians going “door-to-door” in the United States, and traveling to “poor” countries,
“talk[ing] with the children,” and “giving something” to become more appealing. Narāda

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explained that Christians “only believe in God…. They focus on the development of materials instead of mental development. They focus on property development, or like system improvement. So, in Buddhism, we just focus on beyond—to the mental development.” As another example, Mohnyin drew the comparison between Christianity and other religions in the United States by describing it as a “credit score.”

Mohnyin, more specifically, asserted that adherents of particular religions had lower representation, less rights, and thereby a lesser sense of citizenship in American culture. He remarked, “Everybody is a credit score. This credit score [Christianity] is better in the United States. This way is permission to human rights, the same thing, so not equality. That’s the reason why Buddhists, Hindus, [and] Muslims are not interested in the religious place here. Normally, it is not sensitive here.” In contrast to the belief in the separation of secular and religious worlds, Mohnyin was expressing his views and feelings that Christianity and the secular state are in reality interconnected. As he conveyed a broader, integrated conceptualization of these categories—that serves the advancement of the relationship between a sense of religious superiority, Western materialism, and identity or citizenship—, the underpinning features of the gana-sanghas’ system continue to be missionized as a way to negotiate cultural tensions through practices of tolerance and egalitarianism. For these Burmese monastics, this ancient system seems to have been preserved through the Abhidhamma method—a lived, applied ethics. Therefore, from both the content and examples provided in each of the chapters, as well as the theoretical construction of typologies, the concept of missionary activity is now reevaluated and reconceptualized.
Upon my initial examination of the concept of missionary activity, there was the assumption that two processes of missionizing underpinned the formation of typologies. One process was preserving—the adherents’ attempts or ability to maintain their religion abroad and/or in their homeland—and the other forcing—the adherents’ intentional pursuits to convert others with differing religious backgrounds. For example, the Abhidhamma’s relevance and use as applied ethics guiding monastics through daily living includes the intricate histories of multiple ethnicities resisting forces to preserve one religion, such as Christianity in Burma during the British occupation, by forcing varied means of preservation.

Although there may be a notion that Western forces colonizing foreign societies breeds diverse missionizing strategies, there would then also need to be the understanding that such a focus, interpretation, and articulation are only intentional or unintentional Western strategies to remove and replace potentially unique cultural features and historical elements, and thereby to perhaps erase such close-to-home histories. In other words, mental empathy might not be applicable or culturally shared without one’s own cultural history of experiencing such missionizing endeavors. Therefore, the concept of Theravāda as a missionary religion, and perhaps other religions as well, is likely to have always been a negotiation of force and preservation, both subtle and conspicuous. As histories are interconnected with processes of lived experiences, an understanding of the concepts and how research is categorized in order to identify the ways in which religion is operating around the world, is flawed. Therefore, I draw the conclusion that each act or process is instead a shade of the other within a subjective spectrum.
Stated and implied typologies or categorizations of Buddhism have included ethnicity, socioeconomics, proselytization, supporting diaspora communities, and reviving a religion in the homeland. However, these missionary typologies are each formed with respect to the processes of force and preservation. The histories of the geographic locations into which Buddhism has spread are far too complex to be slotted into these diverse, but specific distinctions. Moreover, while an associated verbal and physical force on a spectrum of missionary work is the underpinning of proselytizing, albeit varied by how this religious work is approached and recounted in differing religious missionary histories, proselytizing is not found only in this form or typology. In association with the previously provided examples of Burmese monastics, the resistance to “diaspora” Buddhist communities in predominantly Christian locations invokes necessary levels of force to be taken by such communities in order to preserve their religio-cultural features abroad. In other words, the “homogenizing forces” Berger mentions are acts to preserve homogeneity; however, varying methods of “resistance” to these forces are acts of forced preservation; otherwise Buddhist homeland models would appear virtually identical regardless of locations abroad or become nonexistent. Thus, forcing and preserving are unequivocally varying shades of the other, and Theravāda Buddhism as a missionary religion should be understood through the processes of ethical thought, speech, and physical behavior, and examined as shades of missionizing.

More precisely, to preserve religion necessitates a level of forceful action; and to force a religion into another culture necessitates a level of preservation. Therefore, the missionary spectrum, as both a linguistic and conceptual term, seems to aid in delimiting particular Western ideological boundaries, because refraining from attempting to define
or mandate that specific religious features be included, such as proselytization, allows for
textual, historical, and ethnographic research, for example, to approach the spread of a
religion with fewer biases. Moreover, there is the ability to include secular features in our
understandings of such activity.

In conjunction with Berger’s remarks on religious homogenization, the point
herein is that academic works continue to perpetuate or missionize a specific
understanding of missionary activity into religions, such as Theravāda. When
comparatively placed next to Stackhouse’s description of missionary activity, studies
describe this activity as either a cultural resistance to—preserving—or impinging
movement toward—forcing—narrowing the differences between and/or widening the
similarities among diverse religions. Therefore, a consideration of the missionary
spectrum as a sliding reference point, interpreted by and contingent upon the observer,
scholar, or experiencer, is required.

For ethnographic research in particular, a spectrum of such activity allows
adherents’ actions to be examined, considered, rendered, and described without limiting
the unique ways in which religions have traveled the globe. This is necessary because
they carry multifaceted secular and religious histories, ideals, and other features that help
explain “the kind of person one has become, and wants to continue to be.”59 Thus, their
reality is not strictly one that is constructed about religion within globalization. However,
if forcing and preserving are not reflections or representations of each other as described,
and such a spectrum should not shape studies on missionary activity, then Jonathan S.
Walters is assuredly correct—proselytization is the determinant for what constitutes a

59 Asad, Formations of the Secular, 184.
“missionary religion.” Thus, Theravāda Buddhism certainly lacks the most crucial components of this conceptual framework.

Conclusion

The significance of the Abhidhamma, as an applied ethic in the contemporary lives of Burmese Theravāda monastics, directly supports the reasoning in creating new missionizing typologies. For, where these monastics both convey the importance of their mission work and presumably reflect the larger scope of Burmese Theravāda activity, such activity is dissimilar to the standard features that constitute and explain how religion travels the globe. As this research demonstrates, the Western approach to expounding upon these conceptual features by delimiting such boundaries, exemplifies how language games obscure a more accurate understanding of Theravāda.

Additionally, this chapter demonstrates the negative connotations historically associated with this concept as expressed by the Burmese monastics. Subsuming their activity within the larger associated understanding of missionary religions, then, not only imposes an unwarranted identity, but also obscures the reality about actual Theravāda practices. Thus, where Stackhouse explains that missionary activity carries with it an “intense intellectual activity,” the “reality” of reconsidering this concept through the missionary spectrum is the suggested “new perspective.”

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60 See page 15.
61 Ibid.
Conclusion

This investigation into Theravāda Buddhism began with the question of how religious and secular categories influence our understanding of missionary activity. While current understandings of what proselytizing and converting include are not fully in accord with the practices of early Theravāda or Theravāda thereafter, these missionizing features are, to an extent, present in this religion within a strictly imposed Western framework. However, nuanced understandings of missionary activity have been introduced because of a more comprehensive and incisive examination was undertaken on the context in which early Theravāda emerged.

More specifically, in the first chapter I traced the word desetha back to the Buddha’s spoken language of Prākrit. While the Buddha is said to have sent out 60 arahants, the retranslation provided emphasizes moral conduct rather than articulating a doctrine, because “show” is demonstrated to be a more accurate translation than “preach.” This prioritization of behaviors, rather than belief and speech, is where a nuanced understanding of proselytizing and converting might be located. The Buddha sending these enlightened individuals out to “show” moral conduct reflects both the transmission of a secular system and an element of proselytizing. Thus, what was missionized was not simply a matter of religious opposition.

To fully understand early Theravāda’s origination, the secular aspects of the gana-sanghas’ contestation with the Indo-Aryans’ culture and system, both prior to early Theravāda’s manifestation and during its establishment, must be included. Namely, this clan’s egalitarian tradition of greater socio-mobility and more equal ethical treatment were features preserved by Gotama Buddha through a sense of civic duty. This
understanding demonstrates further how “knowledges, behaviors, and sensibilities” both integrate and are indicative of this particular region’s cultural tension within a specific period. The preservation of these features, revealed by a comprehensive contextualization of Theravāda, reflect the meaning of the phrase “paṭisotagāmi” as a secular countercultural movement. Thus, what may be said is that the freedom described in missionary activity—as it relates to the larger ancient Indian context, Gotama Buddha’s expositions of enlightenment, and the establishment of early Theravāda—is not simply religious.

Moreover, the phrasing “against the stream” is echoed in these discernable secular features in the U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement. Because this movement expands the understanding of Theravāda lineage, the co-founders are Theravāda Buddhist missionaries, regardless of the emphasized absence of monastic ordination, ritual-practice, and doctrinal espousals. Furthermore, where Burmese Theravāda monastics align with such traditional appearances and practices, how they conduct their “mission work” through an applied ethic not only reshapes an understanding of the significance of doctrine, but also the framework from which to study “missionary religions.”

The manner in which Theravāda is represented, through adherents’ showing a more egalitarian approach to daily living, had and has a widespread, consistent secular and religious nature, in contexts in which cultural tensions have existed in different geographic locations and historical periods. Furthermore, the ways in which these Theravāda forms represent a contextual lineage indicate the reason for which an academic debate rages over whether Theravāda is a philosophy or a religion. In part, the answer includes how the gana-sanghas’ system is encased in a particular philosophy of
governance and ethical treatment of diverse peoples. That the philosophical element of early Theravāda stems from a “secular” system, accounted for in different geographic locations and periods, and the religious element of after-death, accounted for through kamma and rebirth, points toward the plausible resolution that Theravāda is either both a religion and philosophy or a religion predicated on a secular movement. This position is supported further in the understandings that the afterdeath of a Tathāgata (enlightened being) is not described, the “divine” is seen as an irrelevant aspect of Theravāda, and both the transmuted and transmitted secular features having been impelled through cultural contestation. Thus, the preservation of an “activity” aimed at resolving secular and religious tensions manifests through the practices of tolerance of opposing ideologies and ethical equality for diverse peoples. However, areas in which this research could be furthered are in both ethnographic work in Burma and sociopolitical studies in the United States.

For example, absent from this thesis is how the Abhidhamma plays a role in the daily lives of both monastics and the laity abroad. More significant, perhaps, is the question, “How does the oppressive Burmese Theravāda movement fit into this study?” Furthermore, exploration into whether the global Vipassanā meditation movement is present in Burma should also be conducted. That is, how are Burmese monastics advocating for this movement’s development in Burma; and are the laity moving away from traditional Theravāda in response to such articulations?

Lastly, regarding the U.S. Vipassanā meditation movement’s relationship with Theravāda, there is the question of how Buddhism is sociopolitically represented. In other words, as this movement continues to develop, what role will it play in future local and
global politics? While each of these questions still needs to be addressed over time, what

can be said is that both the concept and definition of missionary activity superimposed

onto Theravāda has become an imposition. Such articulations seem to be not only

“against the stream” of broader Theravāda history but are also “suspect.”
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