

Author:	Trainor, Kevin
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Review: This work, by Kevin Trainor of Western Michigan University, USA, would appear to be the first widely ranging and yet detailed treatment of the cult of relics in the Buddhist tradition. Given the importance of relics in Buddhism it is astonishing that previous work on the subject has been mainly incidental and partial. Though the subject may seem abstruse to outsiders, is actually quite central to the understanding of Buddhist religiosity in the Theravada tradition. This work is based on an expert knowledge of the relevant sources in Pali Buddhism and is extremely well-worked from a philological point of view. The level of execution is extremely good throughout. The overall style is really excellent, the signposting of references and correlation with the wider literature is very helpfully done. In short, the work is a pleasure to read.

However it is by no means purely an exercise in textual exegesis. The author has benefited greatly from an extended stay in Sri Lanka, which sensitivised him to the nature of Theravada Buddhism as a living, or lived religion. He is therefore well aware of the religious motivations which play a role in Buddhism as a working system. This has informed his treatment of earlier periods in the development of relic veneration, without however prejudicing it in an anachronistic way.

The theoretical perspective is also excellent. The author is extremely well informed about recent reflections on the ways in which Buddhism has been studied, and to some extent even "invented" by western scholarship. As a result, his own study of the particular theme of relic veneration is extremely judicious, and is firmly aligned with the most recent trends in Buddhist studies. He is also very conscious of the way in which religious symbolism and ritual have been viewed in recent comparative studies, many of a very technical and theoretical nature. Again, without allowing these questions to dominate his presentation, his awareness of their import means that his account of the phenomena in question is completely up-to-date, and indeed extremely plausible.

In sum, this work seems to me to be a really excellent, well-balanced achievement which brings the best recent insights in Religious Studies to bear on the special theme of relic veneration in Buddhism. Of course Trainor himself does not claim to cover the whole of Buddhist tradition in this regard, which would be well-nigh impossible, and there are further questions to ask, as he points out towards the end. However this work will undoubtedly become a standard reference point in its field. It displays a breadth of perspective which is not always found in Buddhist Studies, and at the same

time an accurate attention to textual sources and to field observations which is not always found in "Religious Studies" or the study of religions.

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