

RELIQS OF THE BUDDHA



JOHN S. STRONG

RELICS OF THE BUDDHA

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RELICS OF THE
BUDDHA



John S. Strong

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For Anna and Aaron and Isaac

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PREFACE

SOMETIME in the middle of the fifth century, the Chinese pilgrim Daorong set out for India on foot. When he and his companions arrived in what is now Afghanistan, they proceeded to visit various sites of pilgrimage, places that were, in one way or another, associated with the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. In Nagarahāra, they found “a piece of bone from the top of the Buddha’s skull . . . , four inches long and beige in color” (Wang 1984: 243–44; text in *T.* 2092, 51:1021c). A bit further on, they visited a monastery, where the Buddha’s staff was enshrined, and, in the city itself, they stopped at another sanctuary, where some teeth and hair of the Buddha were kept in a jeweled reliquary. Outside of town, they went to a famous cave, where they saw the “shadow” of the Buddha, an image he was said to have projected on a wall of the grotto.¹ Near the cave, they venerated a set of Buddha footprints imprinted on a rock, and, a bit further away, a spot where the Buddha had washed his robe. Beyond that was a large stūpa, said to have been built by the Tathāgata himself, which was gradually sinking into the ground; its final disappearance would mark the end of the Buddha’s teaching. By the side of the stūpa was an inscription in Sanskrit reportedly written in the Buddha’s own hand (*T.* 2092, 51:1021c–22a = Eng. trans., Wang 1984: 243–45; see also Chavannes 1903: 427–29).

Throughout the Buddhist world, pilgrims have long visited and venerated a great number and variety of buddha relics. Indeed, from Kandy to Kyoto, there was hardly a Buddhist site that did not enshrine some physical remains of the Buddha, some object that once belonged to him, some trace of his presence enlivened by association with his body, his teaching (dharma), or his community of followers (saṃgha). Simply put, buddha relics, broadly defined, were “everywhere.” For hundreds of years, pilgrims to India commonly came across stūpas believed to have been built by the third-century B.C.E. emperor Aśoka, who was reputed to have enshrined relics of the Buddha in 84,000 places throughout his

¹ This “shadow cave” and its relic-like image were visited by many pilgrims besides Daorong. See *T.* 2087, 51:879a = Eng. trans., Li 1996: 67–68; *T.* 2085, 51:859a = Eng. trans., Li 2002: 173; and Petech 1966–74, 1:179–80. For legends about the cave and the nāga who dwelt there, see *T.* 643, 15:679b–81b = Fr. trans., Przyluski 1914: 565–68; *Avk.*, 2:338–40; and Soper 1949–50: 273–83. On the popularity of the Buddha’s shadow in Chinese tradition and its reproduction on Mount Lu, see Shinohara 1999: 945–47; and Tsukamoto 1985, 2:885–89.

realm.² Shrines for hair relics (often associated with fingernail-clipping relics) were likewise numerous; a Southeast Asian tradition, for instance, asserts that, after the Buddha's parinirvāṇa, the gods distributed his 800,000 body hairs and 900,000 head hairs "throughout this universe of ours" (Halliday 1923: 46). In the seventh century, the pilgrim Xuanzang reported that, at the site in India where the Buddha was cremated, one could find any number of relics simply by praying earnestly (*T.* 2087, 51:904b = Eng. trans., Li 1996:190). In China, by the Tang dynasty, the proliferation of relics was so great that one scholar has spoken of it as a "hemorrhage of the sacred" (Faure 1996: 163). The same could be said of early medieval Japan, where relics were avidly collected by monks and aristocrats alike (see Ruppert 1997: appendix). Along with such proliferations went the assumption that relics were able to reproduce themselves, to grow, multiply, or appear miraculously (see Faure 1991: 138–39; Barrett 2001: 41; and Martin 1992). An eleventh-century Chinese author, for example, reports how once, when he was examining a buddha's tooth in a monastery, it suddenly started producing small relic pellets: "They wafted away in countless numbers, some flying up into the air and others falling to the ground. . . . They sparkled brightly, filling the eyes with light. When I arrived back at the capital they circulated among ranking officials there who passed them among themselves" (Kieschnick 2003: 51). Similar phenomena may be seen even in modern times. In 1970, for instance, buddha relics began to grow spontaneously out of the east side of the stūpa of Svayambhūnātha in Kathmandu. "There were thousands of them all over the ground," reported one observer, "and all the monastery, including the highest lama, who almost never left his room, were outside picking them up" (Allione 1984: 203–4; see also Martin 1994: 283).

In the Theravāda world, according to Buddhaghosa (fifth century), possession of a relic was one of the definitional criteria for what constituted a proper monastery (*AA.*, 4:186), and still today, relics of the Buddha are found in virtually every community, sometimes in very large numbers.³ Richard Gombrich (1971: 106) remarks that, in all of his time in Sri Lanka, he "came across only one temple that did not claim to possess a relic," and he goes on to remind us of the routine nature of the phenomenon:

Though they are of course handled with the greatest veneration, in a wider sense these relics are casually dealt with: I invariably asked after the origin

² For Aśoka stūpas visited by Chinese pilgrims in India, see Watters 1904: index, s.v. "Aśoka topes." On the legend of the 84,000 stūpas, see chapter 5 in this book.

³ For instance, Wat Côm Ping in Northern Thailand claims to enshrine over 50,000 buddha relics. See Rhum 1994: 178.

of a relic, but never got any reply more interesting than that it was inherited from the monk's teacher. . . . These village relics are indeed not very impressive objects: as a special favour I was shown those in Mīgala, precious casket removed to reveal precious casket, until the last tiny stūpa contained a couple of minute white balls of what I presume was bone. (106–7)

This is not to say that there are not famous relics of the Buddha, with impressive pedigrees and a full complement of myths attached to them. Indeed, in this book, I will primarily be considering traditions about such relics, but, in doing so, it is important to remember from the outset that these represent only the most visible and renowned parts of a heritage of relic veneration that was always, to some extent, extraordinary, but often routine and including common, generic objects of devotion.

I first became interested in Buddhist relics while working on a book on the legends of King Aśoka (Strong 1983). That interest then broadened into more general endeavors in the comparative study of relics (Strong 1987, 1995, and forthcoming) before narrowing once again to a “focus” on bodily relics of the Buddha. In the chapters that follow, I will be concerned primarily with South and Southeast Asian legendary and cultic traditions about relics of the Buddha's physical body, although I shall also pay some attention to “secondary” relics such as his footprints, his bowl, his robe, and his bodhi tree. Though not totally oblivious to questions of dating and historicity, I will not hesitate to mix together sources from the beginnings of the Buddhist record almost right up to the present, and representing a whole gamut of genres. Here, the stuff of legends, the stances of doctrine, the records of inscriptions, the makings of myth, the reports of pilgrims, even the comments of modern travelers, will all be combined in a “method” that I have called elsewhere “exegetical exploration” (Strong 1992: xii). In this approach, particular texts or particular issues are taken as focal points for presenting and discussing the problematics of a given tradition, and the effort to understand these texts and issues is further developed by the perspectives of different contexts and co-texts.

Since relics tell stories, much attention will be given to telling the stories of relics, and seeking to understand their significances and connotations. To a large extent, then, I shall proceed anecdotally, presenting and discussing a succession of stories about Buddhist relics, admitting that many of these texts are only partially representative of an overall tradition whose full complexity undermines generalizations. Nonetheless, it is my hope that, as Wendy Doniger ([O'Flaherty] 1988: 2) once put it, “stories reveal things that are not easily gleaned from the harder disciplines,” especially if we can remember that “stories are not designed as arguments, nor should they be taken as arguments.”

Throughout, I will try to make no judgments about the truth value of the traditions being explored. Some claims, made in some texts, may strike some readers as preposterous or absurd; others, as profound expressions of religious devotion or experience. In either case, it is important to remember that the Buddhist authors of many of the texts we will be considering sometimes experienced these same ambiguities themselves.⁴

Finally, it should be said that the Sanskrit and Pali words that are most commonly translated as “relic” have rather different connotations than their English counterpart (see Collins 1998: 277–78; Schopen 1998: 256). The Latin word for “relic,” stemming from the verb *relinquere*, has the root meaning of “something left over or remaining behind.” The Sanskrit *dhātu* (Pali: idem), however, means “constituent element of essential ingredient” (Monier-Williams 1899: 513). In this context, Buddhist relics may be seen not as the leftover but as the essence that is extracted from the dead, cremated body (Schopen 1998: 257; Gombrich 1971: 106), or, as we shall see, from the living person. The other relevant Sanskrit word, *śarīra* (Pali: *sarīra*) means “body,” although, as Gregory Schopen (1998: 257) has pointed out, when it implies something like our notion of relic, it is usually used in the plural. In South Asian Buddhist sources, then, relics arise from a process of multiplication or addition rather than subtraction. They are products or sum totals of the body rather than remainders. How seriously all these diverging etymological connotations should be taken is another matter. It is important to note them, yet, as Schopen (1998: 257) further points out, though the meanings of the various terms may differ, the treatment of relics in both Christian and Buddhist traditions—“what is done for or to them, what is said about them, and what they themselves do”—is very often similar.⁵

Over the years, many individuals and institutions have helped me in the writing of this book, and I would like to express my gratitude to them here. First, I would like to thank participants in the American Academy of Religion Seminar on Buddhist Relic Veneration, which ran from 1994 to 1998. These include, in particular, David Germano and Kevin Trainor, who organized the seminar, and Yael Bentor, Bernard Faure, Charles Halisey, Thomas Head, Jacob Kinnard, Suzanne Mrozic, Juliane Schober,

⁴ See, for example, the story of Xuanzang’s doubts about certain relics of extraordinary size that he saw in Bodhgaya in *T.* 2053, 50:244b = Eng. trans., Li 1995: 128–29. Alternatively, see the Tibetan story, recounted in Patrul 1994: 173–74, of the woman who had so much devotion that a fake relic (a dog’s tooth) given to her by her son actually began to perform miracles.

⁵ This is not to deny that there are also many real differences in the two traditions’ treatment of relics. See Strong, forthcoming.

Gregory Schopen, Robert Sharf, and Donald Swearer, who, whether or not they realized it, helped me focus my thoughts as this project was getting started. In addition, I am grateful to the faculty and students of various institutions who gave me an opportunity to carry out research and to teach, over the years, a number of seminars on relics that also helped me develop my thoughts: as Numata Visiting Professor of Buddhist Studies at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago (Spring 1995), as Stewart Professor in the Department of Religion and the Council of the Humanities at Princeton University (Fall 1997), as Numata Visiting Professor of Buddhist Studies at Harvard University (Spring 2002), and as Visiting Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Stanford University (Spring 2003).

Abbreviated versions of chapters one, two, and four were given as lectures: at the XIIth Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies in Lausanne (August 1999), at a symposium on relics entitled “Absence Made Tangible” at the University of California at Los Angeles (January 2001), and at a conference on “Death and Dying in Buddhism” held at Princeton University (May 2002). I would like to thank colleagues present on those occasions for their feedback, especially Richard Gombrich; James Benn, Robert Buswell, Jinhua Chen, Bryan Ruppert; and Phyllis Granoff.

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NOTE AND ABBREVIATIONS

IN CITING Sanskrit and Pali sources, I have sought to provide references both to original language editions as well as to English, French, or German translations when available. In dealing with Chinese canonical works, I have been guided by existing translations in Western languages, but, for the convenience of scholars, I have also included references to the standard *Taishō* (*T.*) edition of the texts in question, even when those translations were based on originals found not in *T.* but in other earlier editions. In all cases, editions are cited by abbreviated title (as given below), and translations, marked off by an equals sign (=) and by the name of the translator plus the date (as listed in the bibliography). When I am directly quoting from someone else's translation, however, I cite the name of the translator first and indicate the original language source of the text second.

In discussions of texts and in references to names, I have generally used Sanskrit forms in preference to Pali ones, except in places where the context makes such a practice seem absurd. Thus, I speak of "nirvāṇa," "Gautama," and "Aśoka" (Sanskrit) rather than of "nibbāna," "Gotama," and "Asoka" (Pali). In references to Chinese Buddhist texts, I have used reconstructed Sanskrit titles when these are more or less reliable. In this, I have generally followed Lancaster 1979.

ABBREVIATIONS

(Full bibliographic information is given in the bibliography.)

A. = *Anguttara Nikāya*

AA. = *Manorathapūraṇī* [Commentary on A.]

AMMK. = *Ārya-Maṇjuśrīmūlakalpa*. See edited text in Jayaswal 1934.

Ap. = *Apadāna*

ApA. = *Visuddhajanavilāsinī* [Commentary on Ap.]

Aśokāv. = *Aśokāvadāna*

Aṣṭa = *Aṣṭasāhasrikāpraññāramitā sūtra*

Avk. = *Avadānakalpalatā*

Avś. = *Avadānaśataka*

Bcar. = *Buddhacarita*

Brapaṃsukūla. = *Brapaṃsukūlāṇisaṃsam*. See edited text in Martini 1973.

Buv. = *Buddhavaṃsa*

BuvA. = *Madhuratthavilāsinī* [Commentary on *Buv.*]

Catuṣ. = *Catuspariṣatsūtra*. See edited text in Waldschmidt 1962.

Chak. = *Chakesadhātuvaṃsa*

Cūl. = *Cūlavaṃsa*

D. = *Dīgha Nikāya*

DA. = *Sumangalavilāsinī* [Commentary on *D.*]

Dasab. = *Dasabodhisattuppattikathā*. See edited text in Saddhatissa 1975.

Dāṭh. = *Dāṭhāvaṃsa*

DhA. = *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*. In bibliography, see under *Commentary on the Dhammapada*.

Div. = *Divyāvadāna*

Dpv. = *Dīpavaṃsa*. See edited text in Oldenberg 1982.

ExtMhv. = *Extended Mahāvaṃsa*

GilgMss. = *Gilgit Manuscripts*

Hman-Nan-Y. = *Hman-Nan-Yazawindawgyi*

Itv. = *Itivuttaka*

JA. = *Jātakatṭhakathā*. In bibliography, see under *Jātaka Together with Its Commentary*.

Jin. = *Jinakālamālīpakaraṇam*.

Jinab. = *Jinabodhāvalī*. See edited text in Liyanaratne 1983.

Jināl. = *Jinālaṅkāra*. See edited text in Gray 1894.

JM. = *Jātakamālā*

Khpa. = *Paramatthajotikā I* [Commentary on *Khuddaka-Pāṭha*]. In bibliography, see under *Khuddaka-Pāṭha Together with Its Commentary*.

Lal. = *Lalitavistara*

LP = *Lokaṇṇatti*. See edited text in Denis 1977.

M. = *Majjhima Nikāya*

MA = *Papañcasūdanī* [Commentary on *M.*]

Mhv. = *Mahāvaṃsa*

Mil. = *Milindapañha*. In bibliography, see under *Milindapañho*.

MPS. = *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*. See edited text in Waldschmidt 1950–51.

Mtu. = *Mahāvastu*

Paññāsa-j = *Paññāsa-jātaka*

S. = *Samyutta Nikāya*

SA. = *Sāratthappakāsinī* [Commentary on *S.*]

Sanghbhv. = *Sanghabhedavastu*. See edited text in Gnoli 1978.

Sās. = *Sāsanavaṃsa*

Śayanās. = *Śayanāsanavastu*. See edited text in Gnoli 1978a.

Sdmp. = *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*

Skv. = *Samantakūṭavaṇṇanā*

Sn. = *Suttanipāta*

Suv. = *Suvarṇaprabhāsa sūtra*

T. = *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*. Citations refer to text number, volume and page number, and register (a, b, or c).

- T. 1 *Dīrghāgama*
- T. 5 *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* (translated by Bo Fazu)
- T. 6 *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* (anonymous translation)
- T. 7 *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* (translated by Faxian)
- T. 99 *Samyuktāgama*
- T. 152 *Liu du ji jing*
- T. 190 *Abhiniṣkramaṇa sūtra*
- T. 192 *Buddhacarita*
- T. 202 *Damamūkanidāna sūtra*
- T. 203 *Za bao zang jing*
- T. 262 *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka sūtra*
- T. 384 *Pu sa chu tai jing*
- T. 386 *Lian hua mian jing*
- T. 392 *Fo mie du hou guan lian zang song jing*
- T. 455 *Maitreyavyākaraṇa sūtra*
- T. 456 *Mi le da cheng fo jing*
- T. 643 *Buddhānusmṛtisamādhi sūtra*
- T. 699 *Zao ta gong de jing*
- T. 1421 *Mahīśāsaka vinaya*
- T. 1425 *Mahāsāṃghika vinaya*
- T. 1428 *Dharmaguptaka vinaya*
- T. 1435 *Sarvāstivāda vinaya*
- T. 1448 [*Mūlasarvāstivāda*] *Vinayavastu*
- T. 1451 [*Mūlasarvāstivāda*] *Vinayakṣudrakavastu*
- T. 1464 *Bi nai ye*
- T. 1509 *Mahāprajñāpāramitā śāstra*
- T. 1545 *Mahāvibhāṣa*
- T. 2030 *Nandimītrāvadāna*
- T. 2042 *Aśokarājāvadāna*
- T. 2043 *Aśokarāja sūtra*
- T. 2046 *Ma ming pu sa zhuan*
- T. 2053 *Da ci en si san zang fa shi zhuan* [of Huili]
- T. 2059 *Gao seng zhuan* [of Huijiao]
- T. 2066 *Da tang xi yu qiu fa gao seng zhuan* [of Yijing]
- T. 2085 *Gao seng fa xian zhuan* [of Faxian]
- T. 2087 *Da tang xi yu ji* [of Xuanzang]

T. 2092 *Luo yang qie lan ji* [of Yang Xuanzhi]

T. 2122 *Fa yuan zhu lin* [of Daoshi]

T. 2125 *Nan hai ji gui nei fa zhuan* [of Yijing]

Thag. = *Thera and Therī-gāthā*

ThagA. = *Paramatṭha-dīpanī* [Commentary on *Thag.*]

Thūp. = *Thūpavamsa*. See edited text in Jayawickrama 1971.

VibhA. = *Sammohavinodanī* [Commentary on the *Vibhanga*]. In bibliography, see under Ñāṇamoli 1996.

Vin. = *Vinaya piṭakam*

VinA. = *Samantapāsādikā* [Commentary on *Vin.*]. See also Jayawickrama 1962.

Vsm. = *Visuddhimagga*

RELICS OF THE BUDDHA

Introduction

RELICS OF THE BUDDHA

IN 1561, an interesting ceremony took place in the Portuguese enclave of Gõa, in Southwestern India. During a military operation in Sri Lanka, Portuguese troops had captured what “local idolaters” (i.e., Buddhists) claimed was the tooth of the Buddha, and had delivered it as a prize to their viceroy, Don Constantino da Bragança. The viceroy had hoped to hold it for ransom, but now the archbishop of Gõa, Don Gaspar, was insisting that it be destroyed. On a porch overlooking the river, in the presence of a great crowd of Christians and “pagans,” he called for the tooth and “placed it in a mortar, and with his own hand reduced it to powder, and cast the pieces into a brazier which stood ready for the purpose; after which the ashes and the charcoal together were cast into the river, in sight of all those who were crowding the verandahs and windows which looked upon the water” (Tennent 1859, 2:215. See also chapter 7 in this book).

As benighted as such an action may seem to us today, it can at least be said that the Portuguese archbishop appreciated the nature of relics. Conscious of the power of holy objects from his own tradition, he felt that the tooth had to be utterly and permanently eradicated. In his mind, this was not just a piece of bone that he was destroying but a “relic of the devil” (*reliquia do demonio*) something alive that had to be killed (Tennent 1859, 2:214; text in De Couto 1783, 17:429).¹

Rather different were the attitudes of some of Don Gaspar’s Protestant contemporaries in Europe. John Calvin, to my knowledge, never said anything about Buddhist relics, but in 1543 he wrote a whole treatise on Roman Catholic ones (Calvin 1970). And although he too, given the chance, would probably have crushed the Buddha’s tooth to bits, he would have done so for different reasons. For him, relics embodied no sacred or even demonic presence, and it was wrong and exploitative to pretend that they did. Relics were nothing but material things, as he pointed out when he got rid of what had been two of Geneva’s prized relics—the arm of Saint Anthony and the brain of Saint Peter; the one, he proclaimed, was but the bone of a stag, and the other a piece of pumice (Calvin 1970: 53).²

¹ A similar view of this relic as possessed may be found in De Queyroz 1930, 1:365.

² Calvin’s views were in line with those of earlier humanist and Reformation figures such

This is not the place to examine the varying influences of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism on the comparative study of material objects of devotion. Suffice it to say that Western scholarship on relics is heir to two rather different sets of prejudices, the one affirming the ongoing *presence* and power of the supernatural in objects, the other maintaining its ontological *absence* and seeing such objects as no more than material symbols or signifiers of a “divine” being or power whose locus is elsewhere or who died long ago.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, at least in certain circles, the second, or “Protestant,” perspective came to predominate in the study of Buddhism. Championing the claim that the Buddha, after his final nirvāṇa, was totally removed from any relationship to this world, scholars tended to see Buddhist objects of devotion such as images and relics not as embodying the impossible presence of a deceased Master, but as mere mnemonic devices for recalling his teaching and his example. The Buddha was to be found primarily in his doctrine; to think of him as present elsewhere, in statues or relics, for instance, was an aberration to be condemned—as one missionary-scholar put it—as “mere material worship,” akin to the Roman Catholic cults of “the [seamless] Garment of our Lord,” of “the skulls of the Three Wise Men” in Cologne, and of the “exceedingly numerous” portions of the True Cross, all of which were “examples of a dark age” (Wylie [1897] 1966: 79–80).³

“True Buddhism,” understood as the original teachings of the Buddha, was thought to have nothing to do with such things as relics. Thus, the American Monist Paul Carus, whose book, *The Gospel of Buddha*, achieved considerable popularity around the turn of the century, turned down the offer of a Buddha relic from a Sri Lankan monk, telling him, “The worship of relics, be they bones, hair, teeth, or any other substance of the body of a saint, is a mistake. . . . The soul of Buddha is not in his bones, but in his words, and I regard relic-worship as an incomplete development in which devotees have not as yet attained to full philosophical clearness” (Carus 1897: 123).⁴ Along these lines, it was often assumed that those who had reached “full philosophical clearness” were the cultured monastic elite, while those who had not and worshiped relics and images were

as Erasmus, for whom “there could never be anything more disgusting than the cult of relics,” and Martin Bucer, who declared that “bones are bones and not gods” (Eire 1986: 40, 91). See also Bentley 1985: 169–94.

³ For Wylie, relics were “the surest symptom of decay” of a religion. For other examples of Protestant condemnations of Buddhist relics by comparing them to Roman Catholic ones, see Hardy 1850: 249; Smith 1918: 661; and Pratt 1928: 133n.

⁴ For a fuller presentation of Carus’s correspondence on relics with the monk Alutgama Sīlakkhandha, see Trainor 1997: 18–23.

the laity. The existence of relics in the Buddhist tradition, when it was recognized at all, was thus seen as a concession to the superstitious and devotional needs of the lay populace. Espoused by prominent scholars such as Hermann Oldenberg (1928: 377), this “two-tiered” view lingered well into the twentieth century and may, indeed, still be found.⁵

In more recent times, however, a pendulum swing away from such opinions has taken place in the study of Buddhism. Already in 1973, David Snellgrove declared that, although “there were certainly pure philosophical doctrines propounded during the early history of Buddhism, just as there have been ever since, . . . there is no such thing as pure Buddhism *per se* except perhaps the cult of Śākyamuni as a supramundane being and the cult of the relic *stūpa* (1973: 411). In more recent times, inspired by the emergence of sophisticated studies of Christian relics (e.g., Brown 1981, Geary 1978), religious images (Freedberg 1989), notions of the body (Bynum 1995, Dissanayake 1993) and death practices (Ariès 1982, Danforth 1982, Bloch and Parry 1982), buddhologists have developed a new seriousness about material culture in general and relics in particular. Thus today, as Robert Sharf (1999: 78) has pointed out,

“[I]t is no longer acceptable to dismiss casually the worship of relics and images as aberrant or un-Buddhist, as a sop to the plebeian needs of the unlettered masses. Scholars now appreciate that, with few exceptions, the clerical elite found nothing objectionable in the worship of relics, but enthusiastically engaged in and promoted such activities themselves. There is thus little reason to believe that the display of relics contravenes either the letter or the spirit of Buddhist teachings.”⁶

In questioning Protestant presuppositions in the field, buddhologists, in fact, have developed new perspectives of the tradition they study.⁷ As Sharf (1999: 79), again, has commented, “Buddhism may no longer resemble European humanism, mysticism (the ‘perennial philosophy’), or enlightened rationalism, but it has come to bear an uncanny resemblance to medieval Christianity . . . [with] its saints, relics, and miraculous images.” In this process, certain views that attribute power and life and “presence” to the relics have reemerged. For instance, Gregory Schopen, who has eloquently critiqued Protestant prejudices in the study of Buddhism, has also explored the many ways in which the Buddha was thought to be

⁵ See Baret 1962: 269 and 1974b: 285; and Ling 1973: 167–74. For a discussion of Brown’s (1981) “two-tiered” thesis in the study of Buddhism, see Ray 1994: 15–23.

⁶ On the centrality of relics in the beliefs of both monastics and laypersons, see also Snellgrove 1973: 410; and Schopen 1997.

⁷ On Protestant (and Orientalist) biases in the study of Buddhism, see Almond 1988; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 202–240; Lopez 1995; Schopen 1991.

“alive” in his relics: he / they had rights as a legal “person,” or could own property; and destroying a stūpa containing relics was viewed as a capital offense, in other words, as the murder of a living person (Schopen 1997: 125ff. and 258ff., 1995, and 1996a). Alternatively, relics were seen as “saturated / invigorated / enlivened by morality, concentration, wisdom, emancipation, knowledge and vision,” that is, “exactly the same spiritual forces and faculties that characterize, . . . constitute and animate the living Buddha” (Schopen 1997: 154). Elsewhere, Schopen declares that “there is no distinction between a living Buddha and a collection of relics—both make the sacred person equally present as an object of worship, and the presence of either makes available the same opportunity to make merit” (1997: 132).

As a number of scholars have pointed out, this comes very close to attributing to Buddhists a kind of Lévy-Bruhl’s “prelogical mentality” that senses a “mystical participation” (Lévy-Bruhl 1926: 76–7) between the Buddha and his relics,⁸ or a Robertson Smith-like view of objects being “instinct with divine life” or “embodiments of the presence of the deity” (Smith 1972: 173, 204).⁹ I shall have more to say about Schopen’s views of relics later. For now, suffice it to point out that, in the final analysis, he appears to shy away from an *ontological equation* of the Buddha and his relics and to assert rather their ritual and *functional equivalence*. The relics are alive, own property, perform miracles, inspire devotees, are filled with various buddha qualities, in exactly the same way that the Buddha is. This does not mean that they *are* the Buddha, that they make *him* present. Rather they are themselves present in the same way that he is, they can act like him, they are a substitute for him in his absence.

In between the poles of absence and presence, there is clearly a lot of room for positions that seek, in various ways, to combine the two views. Indeed, as more and more scholars have paid attention to Buddhist relics, a plethora of positions attempting to pin down this dialectical relationship have emerged. These cannot all be spelled out here. To put it succinctly, we now have open to us the possibility of viewing Buddhist relics as “indexical icons” (Tambiah 1984: 5, and 204, inspired by C. S. Peirce and Arthur Burks), “sedimentations of charisma” (Tambiah 1984: 335ff., developing Max Weber), products of the Buddhist “habitus” (Kinnard 1999: 9–11, 157–58, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu), “zero signifiers” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1994, inspired by Roman Jakobson and John Lotz, and Jacques Derrida), “chronotopes” (Eckel 1992: 62, inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin), “heterotopias” (Eckel 1992: 63, inspired by Michel Foucault),

⁸ On this theme see Sharf 1999: 79, and, for a more general discussion of the persistence of Lévy-Bruhlism, see Tambiah 1990: 84–110.

⁹ On this theme, see Kinnard 1999: 4–5.

and places “where an absence is present” (Eckel 1992: 65, inspired by Nāgārjuna and Bhāvaviveka). They can also be seen as the manifest presence of an essence that acts as a “visible representation of the immortal nirvāṇa state,” and that helps reconcile a contradiction between a “cognitive” understanding that the Buddha is dead, and a “psychological” or “affective” sense that he is living (Obeyesekere 1966: 8);¹⁰ as “memory sites” that are “the ultimate embodiment of a commemorative consciousness” (Hallisey 1996: 7, inspired by Pierre Nora); as manifestations of the postmortem force of a buddha’s resolutions (Trainor 1997: 136–88, inspired by Buddhaghosa); as “metamorphoses of the double” (Faure 1991: 132–47, inspired by Robert Hertz); as embodiments of “the sense of an ending” (Collins 1992: 233, inspired by Frank Kermode); as that “final and insensible scream that is the ‘supreme affirmation of life’” (Sharf 1999: 90, inspired by Georges Bataille); as “instruments of magical power [and] kernels of pure *imaginaire*” (Faure 1999: 15, after Jacques LeGoff); as instances of “euphemization” (Ruppert 2000: 96, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu); as “hierophanies” (Schober 2001, following Mircea Eliade); as particular forms of buddha-emanation bodies (Bentor 1996, based on Tibetan *nirmānakāya* [*sprul-sku*] doctrine); as “blazing absences” (Germano 1994, based on Tibetan Nying ma sources); and probably in many other ways.

RELICS AND THE BIOGRAPHICAL PROCESS

In this book, I would like to approach this whole question on a slightly different tack. I propose to view relics not as the embodiments of a transcendent or imminent or otherwise absent Buddha, nor just as functionally equivalent to the departed Master, but as *expressions and extensions of the Buddha’s biographical process*. The same point has been made by others, especially with regard to buddha images. Juliane Schober (1997: 260–68), for instance, has shown how the relic-like Mahāmuni image of the Buddha in Mandalay was thought of as a continuator of the life story of the Buddha, to the extent that it was even deemed to have to suffer some of the unworked-out negative karma dating from the Buddha’s previous lives. More generally, Donald Swearer (forthcoming) has demonstrated how image consecration ceremonies, at least in Northern Thailand, involve the ritual narrative infusion into the image of the whole life

¹⁰ The same view was applied to Buddha images in Gombrich 1971: 4–10, 142. There are significant parallels between this and the views of Paul Mus, for whom the Buddha in nirvāṇa was treated as a “new kind of absence” that could be overcome not ontologically but through a ritual and magical process focused on relics (as well as stūpas and images) and based on the model of Brahmanical sacrifice. See Mus 1935, 1:74, 89–90, 190; and 1937: 91.

of the Buddha, especially of the event of his enlightenment. As he puts it elsewhere, “[T]he sacred biography takes a concrete, visual form in the very image of the *Tathāgata*” (1995: 268).

Much the same thing may be found in the practice of enshrining relics in the midst of architectural or artistic reminders of the Buddha’s life story. I will examine a classic instance of this, in chapter 6, in the case of the relic chamber of King Duṭṭhagāmaṇī’s “Great Stūpa” in Sri Lanka (first century B.C.E.). For now, suffice it to cite an example from Southeast Asia. In 1912, an earthquake in Northern Burma crumbled the corners of the Hlèdauk Pagoda, laying bare two of its relic chambers. Inside were found not only a vessel containing relics of the Buddha, but “many small figures in bronze representing the most important scenes in the life of [the] Buddha” (Duroiselle 1911–12: 149). These included representations of the first jātaka, the story of Sumedha prostrating himself at the feet of the past buddha Dīpaṃkara; images of all the other twenty-eight previous buddhas venerated by the Buddha in his past lives; figurines depicting the Buddha’s mother, Mahāmāyā, giving birth to him; the seven steps he took immediately after he was born; the signs of the old man, sick man, dead man, and ascetic that prompted him to go forth on his “great departure”; scenes of him cutting off his hair with his sword and of Indra receiving that hair relic in heaven; statuettes showing his enlightenment and the events of each of the seven weeks following it; the first sermon he preached to his first five disciples; and various events from his teaching career, ending with the scene of his death and parinirvāṇa (Duroiselle 1911–12: 150–51).¹¹ Such “bioramas,” as they may be called, are not uncommon,¹² and they testify to the importance of the life story of the Buddha in defining the nature of a relic.

It should be remembered that in Buddhism, it is biography that makes a buddha and not the Buddha who makes his biography. In other words, all buddhas, even in the Theravāda tradition, follow a biographical blueprint that defines them and makes them who they are (see Strong 2001: 10–14). At the most fundamental level, this biographical blueprint is the story of someone who comes and goes in the same way that other buddhas have come and gone. Another way of putting this is that it is the story of someone who becomes *present* as a buddha—who works toward buddhahood through his past lives and his quest for enlightenment, and manifests that buddhahood in his teaching—and who then becomes *absent* as a buddha, through his death and his parinirvāṇa. The great lesson of Buddhism is not that of impermanence, if, by impermanence is

¹¹ On all of these episodes in the life of the Buddha, see Strong 2001.

¹² For another instance, see Taw Sein Ko 1903–04: 154–56, and plates 51 and 52.

simply meant “nothing lasts forever.” It is rather that of process—that things, beings, buddhas come into existence due to certain causes and go out of existence due to certain causes. Indeed, the one verse that best summarizes the whole teaching of the Buddha is the often-repeated and copied formula: “Ye dharmā hetuprabhavās teṣāṃ hetum Tathāgata uvāca / teṣāṃ ca yo nirodha evam vādī mahāśramaṇaḥ” (“The Tathāgata has explained the cause of those elements of reality (dharmas) that arise from a cause, and he, the Mahāśramaṇa [the “Great Recluse”], has also spoken of their cessation”).

It is worth considering the implications of this for our study of relics. It is my contention that the Buddha himself, in his life story, exhibits the truth of this formula, in that his biography tells the causes of his final life and buddhahood as well as their cessation. His relics, in so far as they are *expressions* of the Buddha’s biography, are thus also expressions of this process. In this regard, Buddhist relics (unlike Christian relics) do not make manifest some transcendent or immanent reality, but retell a tale; they sum up a biographical narrative; they embody the whole of the Buddha’s coming and going, his life-and-death story; they reiterate both his provenance and his impermanence.¹³ This is true, even when their immediate reference is only to one portion of that biography¹⁴ for, as Steven Collins (1992: 241) has pointed out, “when an enshrined relic is venerated, the whole story is implicitly present.” Though they are material objects, relics can thus help bring to mind and invite reflection on a whole narrative that is upheld and recognized by the community.

At the same time, however, relics are also *extensions* of the Buddha’s biography. It is perhaps possible to think of this as an assertion of the ongoing “presence” of the Buddha, but it is preferable to think of it as the further development of a powerful narrative. Simply put, though the life of the Buddha stops with his parinirvāṇa, his biography goes on. (Similarly, though his life starts with his birth in Lumbinī, his biography begins much earlier than that with his previous lives). The Buddha’s relics, as we shall see, do not just recall events from his life, but have adventures of their own. They travel to distant countries, to heavens and nāga worlds. They help legitimate empires here on earth and they further spread the dharma to places that the living Buddha never visited. Sometimes these adventures have been foretold, predestined, by the Buddha himself; at other times they have not. Sometimes they are aided and abetted by the actions of humans;

¹³ Steven Collins’s insight (1992: 232–35, and 1998: 242–49) that the life of the Buddha can be viewed either as non-repeatable or as repeatable, and that both nonrepetitive and repetitive time may be found in narrative (and ritual) contexts, is helpful in this regard.

¹⁴ As we shall see, not all relics of the Buddha stem from his death and cremation. Some refer to earlier parts of his life, to his enlightenment, even to his previous births.