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# Creating Transnational Buddhist Networks Through International Travel

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## SPECIAL SECTION

# CREATING TRANSNATIONAL BUDDHIST NETWORKS THROUGH INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

With globalization and the rise in appeal of meditation, pilgrimage, and cultural exchange, global Buddhist networks are increasingly being created through international travel. Buddhists and meditators travel to practise and learn with a specific teacher, visit a Buddhist holy site, study about the Buddhist way of life through cultural exchange programmes, or attend a meditation retreat. In this way Buddhist teachings and practices travel and create new diasporic and international communities along the way. This phenomenon has generated a rise in branches of Buddhist monasteries and meditation centres throughout the world, which have become especially significant since the 1950s with the proliferation of Mahasi Sayadaw meditation centres as well as Thai forest monasteries. Relationships through meditation practice, pilgrimage, connections with Buddhist teachers and Buddhist monastic life programmes demonstrate that global Buddhist networks are constantly being created and strengthened through international travel. This special section explores the routes and detours of this travel and details the sites where international communities of Buddhists meet, create new forms of practice, and global Buddhist networks. The articles in this special section both document these unique global occurrences as well as illuminate how these transnational networks transform and reimagine Buddhist practice and institutions.

Buddhism has always been an international religion, rooted in transnational networks. Historical journeys by Buddhists took place within diverse political, economic, religious, philosophical and linguistic environments. Buddhism continues to be an international religion, spreading globally through people, objects, art, film, books, and ideas. Through travel by Asian teachers to non-Buddhist locations and non-Buddhist travellers to Asian countries, Buddhism entered populations it had not previously ventured. As well, Buddhists travelling within Buddhist regions were introduced to new teachers and different Buddhist beliefs and practices. The focus of this special section is on relationships between individual actors who connect to and spread Buddhism through travel, resulting in new Buddhist communities and practices. Transnational Buddhist networks reveal the ways Buddhists envision themselves as part of broader communities and how they attempt to introduce their core values on a global scale.

Important venues for transnational networks include meditation, pilgrimage, tourism, socially engaged Buddhist projects, diasporic communities, and education. Pilgrimage to sacred Buddhist sites has been an important form of Buddhist travel since the earliest Buddhist communities. Travellers interested in meditation journey to learn from a particular teacher or attend a meditation retreat. Other travellers are fascinated by Buddhist aesthetics and seek to visit Buddhist lands in order to view famous temples and monuments in person. Monastics often travel outside of their home country to attend to diasporic communities or to obtain education in important institutions in India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Some travellers seek to volunteer with a socially engaged Buddhist project they find valuable. These avenues create connections to Buddhist places, people, and practices. Both historical and ethnographic projects within this special section highlight these avenues for creating Buddhist networks. We can also document the results of these networks, which include Buddhist temples and centres outside of Buddhist lands, adapted practices and institutions within Buddhist lands, and reimagined Buddhist practices.

In this special section Daniel Viedlinger discusses the features of Buddhism that appeal to travellers including universalism, interdependence, compassion to all, emphasis on personal experience, responsibility for one's actions, and the importance of individual agency. He identifies the importance of travel within the Buddha's life story and within the values he espoused. In addition, Viedlinger provides evidence that Buddhism continues to be linked with travel today through an investigation of social media. It is important to look at not just the Indian context of early Buddhism that would appeal to travellers but also how Buddhism spread within other geographic areas in order to characterize this affinity with travel. To this end, Viedlinger investigates the psychological effects of travel, associating this with the principles of Buddhist doctrines. Analysing specific cases of travellers and groups of travellers on the Silk Road who accepted Buddhism, Viedlinger argues that Buddhism is a religion that attracts travellers and appeals to their psychological makeup and experiences away from home.

Important connections between Buddhists and non-Buddhists were made through Buddhist travel at the beginning of the early modern period. John Harding focuses on this period of Buddhist travel and how it has shaped contemporary Buddhist networks. Focusing most significantly on Shaku Sōen, Harding argues that although modern Buddhism is an international phenomenon, a major centre of importance is still centred in Asia. A focus on travels, relationships, and publications highlights the inner workings and key nodes of early modern Buddhist networks that moved within and beyond Asia. Harding demonstrates the routes through which important Asian Buddhist leaders came to speak a similar language of modern Buddhism, which privileged, for example, the historical person of Siddhartha Gautama.

Katarina Plank, Elisabeth Raddock, and Peter Selander's article takes us into the role of diasporic communities in creating transnational Buddhist networks.

Through a case study of the construction of a Thai Buddhist Temple Mount in rural Frederika, Sweden, we learn that travel can result in increased nationalism and enclave culture as well as the ability to serve the local community. Transnational networks can also create dissonance, representing the sometimes fractured effects of translocal religious spaces. This study contextualizes the transnationalization of Thai Buddhism in Sweden, and offers a vivid ethnographic account of transnational networks within a rural Swedish town, but also draws our attention to larger themes. The authors argue that a translocal perspective applied to this case study reveals not only how Buddhist networks work but how other religious and non-religious networks are also intertwined.

Buddhists travel to non-Buddhist countries to establish new communities, but travel by English-speaking non-native Buddhists can also create transnational networks. Brooke Schedneck discusses this important phenomenon through international meditation lineages. Schedneck investigates three types of case studies where meditation teachers and their international students have created institutionalized transnational lineages and connections abroad. These case studies include international lay meditation teachers who continue their Thai teachers' lineage abroad, annual teaching tours by meditation teachers living in Thailand to communities of their international students, and the use of media and technology to maintain communities among former participants in diverse locations. The end of this article reflects on the meaning of conjunctures within transnational Thai Buddhist meditation networks, particularly focusing on Theravada Buddhist ideas of lineage and missionization.

This special section of *Contemporary Buddhism* began as a panel titled 'Creating Transnational Buddhist Networks through International Travel'. This was held at the 17th Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies (IABS) at the University of Vienna, Austria, on 20 August 2014. We would like to thank the panel audience for helpful feedback and dialogue on our individual papers and this topic. As well we thank the editors of *Contemporary Buddhism* for giving us a space to continue this conversation.

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