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To cite this article: Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenkeno & Matthew D. Milligan (2021) The wheel-turning king and the lucky lottery: perspectives new and old on wealth and merriment within Buddhism, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 36:2, 265-286, DOI: [10.1080/13537903.2021.1954762](https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2021.1954762)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2021.1954762>



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Published online: 08 Sep 2021.



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The wheel-turning king and the lucky lottery: perspectives new and old on wealth and merriment within Buddhism

Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko  and Matthew D. Milligan 

ABSTRACT

By placing a contemporary pilgrimage of Myanmar Buddhists to Bodh Gaya in India in conversation with early Buddhist doctrine and practice, this article argues that wealth, its redistribution and celebration, have provided, and continue to provide, non-peripheral avenues for advancement within Buddhist societies. Through lavish gift-giving and merry-making, the group of pilgrims that we encountered, led by a *weikza-lam* practitioner or wizard, bolstered their esteem in relation to authoritative institutions and individuals. Money—and the plentiful conviviality that it enabled—was crucial to the successful outcome of the pilgrimage. This article contextualises the donations and merriment of the group within the multi-layered context of a Vihār (resting place for pilgrims) in Bodh Gaya, with its religious hierarchies, local material inequalities, and historical context. By looking at the multiple directions in which money and merit were transferred, this article argues that demonstrations of wealth and revelry during pilgrimage can facilitate, rather than be a hindrance to, advancement within Buddhist praxis.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 10 January 2018
Accepted 1 September 2019

KEYWORDS

Buddhism; Bodh Gaya; pilgrimage; *weikza*; money; Myanmar

Introduction

In 2013, as the winter drew progressively closer, waves of pilgrims began to flow through the Buddhist pilgrimage town of Bodh Gaya in Bihar, one of India's poorest states. They came to worship at the site where the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. First came the Hindu pilgrims, as the holiness of Gaya and Bodh Gaya are salient in Hinduism, from the time predating the Buddha's enlightenment until today (Sayers 2013, 107). The Hindu pilgrims conducted *pūjās*, visited Buddhist temples, and made donations, while the young men danced behind speakers blasting out Bollywood remixes through the night in the hot and dusty town. Then the Theravāda pilgrims arrived, banded together in groups from their home countries. Most only stayed for a short time, aided by the opening of the new Gaya airport with direct flights to Bangkok and Yangon. During pilgrimage, they performed rituals and gave offerings

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to the holiest sites associated with the Buddha's enlightenment. Occasionally, saffron and orange gave way to fuchsia and grey, as more sporadic groups of lay and monastic Mahāyāna Buddhists from Korea and Taiwan wafted through. As winter began, the final wave of Tibetan pilgrims and their global following arrived. They carried out prostrations and elaborate tantric ceremonies and attended teachings before the waves of pilgrims subsided in trepidation of the intense summer heat that makes the Gangetic plains too hot for most visitors to bear.

We arrived in Bodh Gaya just before the first wave of Hindu pilgrims in the still nearly unbearable heat of September 2013. The holiest site in Bodh Gaya, the Mahabodhi Temple, had recently been enclosed by a wall, guarded by security and metal detectors, following the then unsolved bombing in the quiet summer period that had injured five people, including two monks. We stayed for four months, teaching on an American exchange programme in a Theravāda Vihār whose primary purpose was to house pilgrims from Myanmar.¹

Many Theravāda pilgrims came to make offerings of flowers and robes, meditated under the sacred Bodhi tree, chanted, circumambulated the temple, then left. Most visited the international temples that represented all the major traditions. Some went to the nearby Mahākāla cave, where the Buddha was said to have meditated in the time before becoming enlightened. The more organised crowded into tour buses to see many of the other holy sites in the vicinity, such as Sarnath, near Varanasi, where the Buddha is said to have given his first teachings, and the site of ruined Nālandā, a famous Buddhist university that was a major centre of Buddhism from the fifth century CE until approximately the thirteenth century.

Generally, Theravāda pilgrims stayed encapsulated in their pilgrimage groups between three days and a week, cooking food from their home countries, speaking their own languages, and consulting religious specialists from their own traditions. They looked towards each other and occasionally upwards, to make contact with sacred sites, limiting contact with local people and the poverty and corruption that characterise the state of Bihar. The local restaurants made their money not from the pilgrimage groups but from backpackers and Western and Japanese pilgrims who travelled to the holy site as individuals or in small groups.

Some of the Theravāda pilgrims stayed longer. In the Vihār where we lived, there was a group of 180 pilgrims from Myanmar, led by a *weikza* practitioner, who stayed for over a month, cooking, eating, listening to sermons, dancing, singing, and chanting every day from 6:00 until 22:00. They were there to support the annual *Tipiṭaka* festival, a month of chanting hosted for the second consecutive year by donations from Myanmar. Many high-ranking monks and their retinues attended the service, sitting and

chanting inside the central temple's walls, and holding formal events in the Kālacakra grounds.

The *weikza* pilgrim group from Myanmar spent most of their pilgrimage not in devout observation of the lengthy litany, but in each other's company at the Vihār. As a collective they spent most of their time in various states of exuberance, accompanied by a ten-piece band playing amplified instruments, both modern and traditional to Myanmar. They had a charismatic leader who ran events, encouraged the singing and dancing, and led the chanting. He had written many of the songs which frequently contained praise of donations and the worship of Buddhism. Sometimes they switched to Bollywood dance routines and other times to well-known songs from Myanmar, often spurring the residential monks to sing nostalgic songs from their hometowns and villages. In the context of the over-saturated auditory landscape that characterised Bodh Gaya,² they were so noisy that the local villagers, who, a month before, had been blasting Bollywood techno remixes at 4:00 from mobile speaker stacks, complained to the local authorities.

The group's leader followed the *weikza-lam* path, or the "Path of Esoteric Knowledge" (Pranke 2010, 454), a growing movement of esoteric religious practices mostly located at the periphery of Buddhism in Myanmar (Schober 2012, 285). He gave significant sums of money to both his followers and the monastic establishment, performing and framing his activities within Buddhist interpretations of *dāna* (charity/generosity). In all the activities in which we participated, giving *dāna* was mobilised by and situated in the group. Making donations in this setting carried symbolism within the holy town of Bodh Gaya and in a Buddhist Vihār with its own religious hierarchies, in which the group was contained and supported.

By relating this pilgrimage, with its emphasis on donations and celebrations, to historical evidence from textual and epigraphic sources, we will discuss how demonstrations of wealth and exuberance frame the group's activities within historical Buddhist practices, while showing how this modern celebration is in concordance with early Buddhist activities connected with money. Besides emphasising detachment, withdrawal, and meditation, early doctrinal sources encourage expressions of generosity, wealth, and merriment. Epigraphic sources, both past and present, demonstrate the importance of Buddhist donations and their associations with conviviality. By investigating an ethnographic example in the light of historical sources we contribute to contemporary research that investigates Buddhist and non-Buddhist practices of *dāna* (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2015; Bowie 1998; Brac de la Perrière 2015; Caple 2015; Cook 2010; Gravers 2012; Fisher 2008; Laidlaw 2000; Parry 1986; Samuels 2007; Smyer Yü 2012). The activities in which we participated, by centralising donation and plenty at Buddhism's most important pilgrimage site, represent an attempt to

mobilise the centripetal forces of the holy town to gain higher status for the donors within Buddhist hierarchies.

Reform movements, *dāna*, and the *weikza-lam* path

Prior to the eighteenth century, it was believed in Myanmar that attaining enlightenment was impossible due to the length of time that had passed since the life of Gautama Buddha (Pranke 2010, 455). Rather than attempting what was thought to be futile, both the monastic population and the laity focused on making merit and facilitating its accrual so that they could be reborn in a good position to hear the teachings of the future Buddha, Metteyya, many millions of years ahead (ibid). This attitude began to change in the eighteenth century when a new movement coalesced from the teachings of key charismatic monks who encouraged the practice of Vipassanā (insight) meditation. They taught that becoming an *arahant* (title used in the Theravāda tradition to refer to a person who has attained enlightenment) was possible if one followed the correct moral discipline and Vipassanā meditation. This movement continued to grow from its inception to the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was mainly followed by the educated middle classes, to expansive popularity among all classes and in urban and rural areas (Jordt 2007, 24; Pranke 2010, 465).

The Myanmar Vihār, where the pilgrims and we were staying, was an important site for Vipassanā's journey to the rest of the world. As David Geary writes, during political changes in the early 1960s, Burma was cut off from Western pilgrims and many Burmese monks were sent back to Burma (Geary 2014, 655). However, some important teachers, including Anagarika Munindra, remained in Bodh Gaya and taught many Western students, some of whom became well-known Vipassanā teachers, such as Joseph Goldstein. These teachings were given in the Vihār where we found ourselves almost 50 years later (Geary 2014, 656–657). Although the *weikza-lam* pilgrims spent most of their time in celebration, they, like the Vipassanā teachers and students who had stayed at the Vihār before them, incorporated meditation in some of their early morning routines.

Just as the Vihār was an important site for the developing global popularity of Vipassanā, Bodh Gaya's prominence as a sacred location for international pilgrims has been an important site of contestation for global re-imaginings of Buddhism. Neglected by Buddhist pilgrims until the late nineteenth century, when the King of Burma initiated repairs at the site in 1877 (Singh 2010, 204), Bodh Gaya's temple is now referred to by many pilgrims as the 'navel at the centre of the earth' (Geary 2014). In the late nineteenth century, the Sri Lankan-born Dharmapāla, a charismatic figurehead of a Buddhist reform movement subsequently labelled as

'Protestant Buddhism' (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988), took an active interest in the reinvigoration of Bodh Gaya as a Buddhist pilgrimage site (Geary 2014, 679–680; Singh 2010, 200). He encouraged a style of Buddhism characterised by active lay participation in both the learning of religious texts and contemplative practices such as meditation (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 202–240). Since the nineteenth century, over 40 different Buddhist institutions have built temples, guest houses and/ or monasteries (Geary 2014, 646) and Bodh Gaya continues to grow in importance as direct flights from Myanmar and Thailand enable easy access for Buddhist pilgrims from Southeast Asia. The town now attracts around 500,000 international tourists a year (Geary 2016, 63).

In addition to Southeast Asian institutions and practices, two other Buddhist groupings influence contemporary politics and economics in Bodh Gaya. The first is the Dalit Buddhist movement that was initiated by B. R. Ambedkar. It is made up of lower-caste Indians who converted to Buddhism *en masse* as a means of escaping caste inequalities (Singh 2010, 195–197). This movement has battled for power and prominence in Bodh Gaya, especially in the 1990s when members attempted to wrest control of the management of the Mahabodhi Temple from upper-caste Hindus (Geary 2014, 686). While Dalit Buddhists are still vocal in Bodh Gaya, Geary suggests that their voices have become 'muted' by the growing presence of international Buddhist institutions (Geary 2014, 688). The second grouping consists of Tibetans in diaspora. The presence of high-ranking Tibetan pilgrims in Bodh Gaya during the winter months transforms what is, during the summer, a small town with poorly functioning electricity into a place thronging with tourists, professional beggars, and large numbers of monastics and international followers.

Unlike the Southeast Asian and Tibetan diasporic Buddhist movements that have been globally exported, the *weikza-lam* path is not generally known among Buddhists outside Myanmar. This style of Buddhist practice has been growing in popularity within Myanmar and its heterogeneous configurations share broad similarities regarding its soteriology and practices. The soteriological goal of *weikza* practitioners is to obtain near-immortality so that they can be present at the coming of the Metteyya, to hear the future Buddha's teachings, and thereby to attain enlightenment (Pranke 2010, 455). Besides practising meditation and following the five basic Buddhist precepts, they specialize in at least one of the esoteric arts, including magical incantations, alchemy, and traditional medicine (ibid, 470).

While the goal of Vipassanā meditation is to strive for enlightenment in this life, the *weikza* attempt to obtain a state of near-immortality. Rather than making merit in forthcoming lifetimes and therefore potentially enduring unknown states in countless rebirths, the *weikza* carry out

practices to extend their lives so that they are guaranteed to assume a form that will enable them to reach enlightenment in the time of Metteyya (Pranke 2010, 474–475). By becoming highly adept at esoteric practices, the *weikza* are also believed to be able to act as powerful protectors of Buddhism against negative forces (Foxeus 2014, 90–105). Being in a position to protect Buddhism is thought to earn the *weikza* vast stores of merit, which ensures that they can hear the future Buddha's teachings. While aspects of the *weikza-lam*'s esoteric practices may be considered to fall outside orthodox Buddhism, the core principles and soteriology of the practice accord with many aspects of Buddhist philosophy, ideas about merit-making, and the protection of the Buddhist teachings.

Juliane Schober has argued that, in Myanmar, *weikza* practitioners remain at the fringe of Buddhist power structures partly because they do not participate in merit-making ceremonies:

They tend to be set apart from communal merit-making rituals that structure hegemonic power in traditional Burmese social networks. Practitioners identify with lineages that remain mostly outside of the sangha and with paths to harness power on the margins of a larger field of merit where they hope to achieve ultimate transcendence. In such locations, practitioners of *weikza* knowledge can embody a potential challenge to those at the centre of the field. At the same time, the cults of production of *weikza* arts also contain charismatic capital that Buddhist institutions at the centre often struggle to appropriate. (Schober 2012, 286)

However, the *weikza* practitioner and his followers in Bodh Gaya were very much contextualised within Buddhist power structures of merit-making and pilgrimage. While the *weikza-lam* did not personally receive donations, by making generous donations and facilitating merriment, he charismatically positioned himself at the centre of communal gift-giving as the highest and most generous donor. His donations were memorialised on plaques in prominent positions at the Vihār, reflecting earlier and more recent epigraphs. By giving generously to the sangha and his followers, he positioned himself centrally as a donor, giving to those of higher and lesser prestige at Buddhism's most holy pilgrimage site.

The activities and ideas surrounding *dāna* have different expressions and entanglements, depending on the context in which the offerings are made. In many Buddhist societies, gift-giving with selfless intentions is believed to generate merit, ensuring a better rebirth (Heim 2004, 40). Ideally, in many Theravāda Buddhist societies, such as in Myanmar, the activity of giving *dāna* to monastics enables monks to renounce worldly interests and pursue enlightenment (Spiro 1982, 103–111). In return, after gaining merit, lay people will be reborn as monks so that they, too, can devote themselves to the pursuit of enlightenment (ibid). In order for a donation to generate merit, the donor must make it without the expectation of reciprocation (Brac de la Perrière 2015, 389–391; Cook 2010, 135–150; see Laidlaw 2000

regarding *dan* in Jain societies). If the monastic community is perceived to be unworthy of donations, lay people may withdraw their support (Samuels 2007). In Myanmar, making merit through gift-giving is such an important part of ritual life that it was mobilised as a means of protest when monastics turned their bowls upside down and refused to receive donations from the ruling military Junta during the Saffron Revolution (Gravers 2012).³

In Bodh Gaya, making donations is seen as an important part of pilgrimage practices for both Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims. During the Hindu season, pilgrims donate small amounts of money seemingly indiscriminately to Buddhist temples of all kinds where they briefly visit and pray. The first wave of pilgrims is not large enough to attract professional beggars whose numbers build during the course of the Buddhist pilgrimage season. As the heat begins to subside, Theravāda pilgrims arrive and make symbolic donations, such as robes, at the Mahabodhi temple. They pay for chanting services, support the monks (and sometimes female renunciates) from their countries' temples, and listen to sermons at the holy site. Some commission the construction of new buildings and make large donations to individual monks.

As the Tibetan pilgrimage season begins, and the smog of northern India settles, the town becomes full of Vajrayāna pilgrims, touts from outside town, and professional beggars. The Tibetan diaspora's extensive global following funds the largest public donations to both the sangha and the local Indian population. As Kory Goldberg has shown (2013), while charitable donations from wealthy Buddhist pilgrims are important to buoy the town's poor infrastructure, they can also engender divisions and contestation among the local population. During our stay, one of the Tibetan Rinpoches made his yearly donation to the local community in the form of rice and other non-perishable foods. This straightforward donation quickly became fraught in the context of the widespread poverty of Bihar. The small temple where the gifts were to be distributed suddenly filled with people, with security guards fending them off by hitting them with sticks. To stop a riot from occurring, the distribution was postponed and tokens were handed out to the locals at the front of the crowd. In spite of the consternation this activity had generated, the Rinpoche stated during a sermon that the merit gained from this gift was amplified, as it was given in Bodh Gaya, a sacred location. In this instance, as with many donations made by pilgrims to the town, the long-term effects of charity were secondary to the merit made through the practice of giving.⁴

Following Kristina Jonutyte (2021, 95–96), we argue that the economic exchanges in which the *weikza*'s pilgrimage group at the Vihār participated are best understood by looking at the context of the donations, rather than focusing on the two-way merit-for-*dāna* transfers that are frequently emphasised in discussions of Buddhist economic entanglements. As

Jonutyte writes regarding her field site in Buryatia, a Mongolian cultural region in Russia, Buddhist economics can “be seen as a social field with a variety of flows rather than as static relations between two clearly separated groups of the sangha and the laity” (Jonutyte 2019, 222). In this case, Buryat Buddhists make economic gifts and exchanges for a variety of reasons: together they can be seen to work towards re-establishing Buryat Buddhism in post-Soviet Russia. In the case of the *weikza-lam*, his donations during the pilgrimage flowed in two directions: upwards to the monastic establishment and downwards to his followers. Through these gifts he demonstrated his respect and virtue within existing Buddhist hierarchies and his capacity to generate affluence and joy among the laity. As we will demonstrate, these donations located the *weikza-lam* within Buddhist hierarchies, advancing his social and spiritual status from the periphery towards the centre.

Money matters: *dāna* and wealth in the Pāli Canon

The attitudes towards money expressed through the ritual practices of pilgrims from Myanmar in Bodh Gaya accord with the picture of Buddhist sociality found in early Buddhist scriptures and represent a continuity of old Buddhist practices in a modern context. The Theravāda scriptures allow for some flexible navigation within the world of money. In much of the literature, as Ellison Findly has suggested, wealth itself is not problematic, but it is the “clinging to or casting off of” wealth or money that presents difficulties (Findly 2003, 11). Having money enables one to spend money on the sangha, which has long been characterised as one of the primary ways in which lay people are able to accumulate merit. Having and spending money is therefore entangled with good works and *karma* in a cosmic economy.⁵

The fundamental rule that denies monastics the right to use money directly is in the *Nissaggiya Pācittiya* section of the *Pātimokkha* contained in the *Cīvaravagga* of the *Mahāvibhaṅga*, a key section of the monastic law for Theravādin monks. As instructed by the Buddha in rule number 18, monks are forbidden to accept or cause another person to accept gold and silver. If a monk should take gold and silver or get another to take it (for him) or should consent to its being kept in deposit (for him), there is an offence of expiation involving forfeiture (Vin III 237⁶). The commentary in the text provided for the rule uses the word *kahāpaṇa* (coin), meaning ‘coined money’.⁷ Because of the reference to coins, the rule meant that a monastic could potentially avoid breaking it by accepting non-coined money or credit. While some Theravāda monastics refer to this rule as a reason to avoid touching money (Cook 2010, 135–150), the emphasis on

coins is cited by contemporary monastics who receive donations in notes or by using credit cards.⁸

The Pāli *Sutta-Piṭaka*, one of the earliest collections of narratives considered canonical in the Theravāda tradition, reveals some generalised sentiments about wealth for the Buddhist laity. According to the monastic redactors who compiled the *Sutta-Piṭaka*, the Buddha hardly ever prohibited wealth for the laity and instead promoted wealth as a source of happiness, prosperity, and utility. Wealth is discussed as a boon, earned rightfully from previous births, and seen as a necessity for sustaining generosity towards the Buddhist renunciants (Milligan 2016, 316–328). Poverty, on the other hand, is maligned because it leads to a host of problems, both for individuals and society. This does not mean that the early scriptures advocated unthinking acquisition of wealth, as it was considered problematic, given the human propensity for greed and attachment to material things. However, in order for individuals, kingdoms, and religious institutions to prosper, much *Pāli Sutta* literature directed towards an expanded audience, including the laity, counsels that economic prosperity should be pursued, albeit cautiously and mindfully.

In the well-known advice given to the laity in the Pāli Canon's *Sīgālovāda-sutta* (DN III 180) of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the Buddha instructs the householder Sigālaka regarding finances. Two verses hint at the Buddha's recommended approach for lay people seeking to achieve equanimity and prosperity for their families:

The wise endowed with virtue
Shine as if a burning fire,
Accumulating wealth like bees gather honey
And heaping it up like an ant-hill.
Once wealth is collected,
Prosperous family life may soon follow.

Dividing wealth in four ways,
True friendships are fastened together;
One part should be enjoyed;
Two parts invested in business;
And a fourth deposited
To protect against misfortunes.

Here, the Buddha indicates that wealth is a necessity for families and should be actively accumulated. Although the *sutta* is not primarily concerned with money or wealth, it contains advice that supports wealth accumulation as a central duty for non-renunciants.

Likewise, the Buddha's advice for kings may be found in the Pāli Canon's *Cakkavatti-sutta* (DN III 58), a text describing the proper behaviour of a wheel-turning king. Here, the Buddha counsels monarchs to maintain awareness of poverty levels within their kingdoms. Poverty, as

the Buddha and the *Nikāya* redactors put it, leads to innumerable ills of society, including thievery and loss of civility and order. It falls upon the king to ensure that his subjects are taken care of, both financially and ethically, to protect the symbiotic relationship between the king and his religion. An impoverished kingdom is unable to support a functioning sangha. Here, the Buddha tells the story of a *cakkavatti* (Skt. *cakravartin*, wheel-turning king) named Daḷhanemi and his eight successors. Historically and according to legend, Daḷhanemi's character is affectionately modelled after King Aśoka of the Mauryan dynasty of the third century BCE—the famous and premier example of such a sovereign and ideal patron (Milligan 2019a). Using these kings as examples, the Buddha describes the linkage between kingly virtue and the subjects' life within the kingdom. Daḷhanemi as an exemplar of virtue retires to become a renouncer king. As the generations progress, social order declines, so much so that the eighth king no longer governs according to the *ariya cakkavattivatta* (the “Noble Conduct of the Wheel-Turning King”) but rather by his own haphazard code. After receiving advice to assist his subjects, he decides to give money to the poor through welfare programmes. However, after so many years of neglect, corruption plagues every rank of society. He institutes extreme forms of punishment to attempt to curb the ensuing social mayhem, but the people of the kingdom riot. Here, the message of the story becomes clear: if left unresolved, poverty will destroy society. Wealth acts as a barometer for measuring prosperity and contentment within society. Only the ideal king, who is a *cakkavatti*, is able to realise this connection and take action to alleviate poverty before it becomes systemic.

Wealth and celebration in early Buddhist history

Early epigraphic representations indicate that sacred sites in early Buddhism may have witnessed events not entirely unlike the pilgrims' celebrations at the Vihār nearly 2,000 years later. The attitudes towards wealth, prosperity, and celebration for lay people found inscribed in stone at Sanchi, situated in modern Madhya Pradesh, India, are congruent with the activities in Bodh Gaya, perhaps speaking to a continuity of ideas and practices, albeit in a very different context.

Due to its location, Sanchi has functioned as a transregional hub for over 2,200 years and contains hundreds of donative records inscribed in stone, many of which gifted by monks and nuns.⁹ The original site was likely created by King Aśoka and, for almost a thousand years after his death, Sanchi continued to expand and be re-imagined with new monuments (Shaw 2007, 39–40; Milligan 2016, 75–95). Central to the expansions was the patronage of common people, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. Today,

Sanchi, like the temple at Bodh Gaya, is a UNESCO World Heritage site and a pilgrimage destination for Buddhists travelling from all over the world.

Sanchi contains the single largest repository of donative epigraphy on the sub-continent.¹⁰ The hundreds of private donations found there have been uniquely preserved, including dates, names, sociological or demographic details, and personal accomplishments (Milligan 2019b, 4–6). During the earliest period (ca. first century BCE) with extant evidence, donation records were short and pithy. Like the contemporary inscriptions describing the donors of new buildings at the Vihār, they contain brief information, such as the donor's name, home village or city, occupation, and/or their lineage.¹¹ For example:

Sanchi Inscription 281¹²

L1 *dhamarakhitāya madhuvanikāye dānam*

“A gift of Dhamarakhitā, [a woman] from Madhuvana.”

Sanchi Inscription 288

L1 *pusasa cahatiyasa bhuchuno dānam*

“A gift of the monk Pusa [from] Cahāṭa.”

A brief consultation of the catalogue of inscriptions reveals that nearly half of all donors came from other areas, indicating that they travelled to Sanchi to worship and probably to listen to the teachings of the monks who lived there (Milligan 2019b, 15-18). In exchange, many pilgrims were likely to have donated money or material items needed by the sangha. Although not every exchange was recorded in stone, many from the first century were preserved, especially those that reflect a monastic perspective on the practice of *dāna*.

One contemporary representative donative inscription from the Mahabodhi temple complex in Bodh Gaya situates the old-style patronage seen at Sanchi within current transnational pilgrimage and devotion. The text describes the endowment of technical equipment used for a large cistern just south of the Mahabodhi temple. In the middle of the tank is a statue representing the serpent Mucalinda who shielded the meditating Gautama from the rain. The inscription, with original capitalisation and misspellings, reads as follows:

L1 NAMOBUDDHAYA

L2 U DHAMMAPIYA, DAW MOLINI, DHAMMAVIJAYA AND BURMESE GROUP

L3 OF U.S.A. AND MS. DAW WIN (and group) YANGOON, MYANMAR[.] FOLLOWERS

L4 OF BHADANTA GNYANE SHWER MAHATHERA AGGAMAHAPANDITA

L5 (KUSHINAGAR U.P.) MEMBER OF B.T.M.C. BUDDHAGAYA

L6 DONATED

L7 THIS WATER PUMP SET AND PUMP HOUSE TO THE MAHABODHI
TEMPLE

L8 INAGURATED

L9 THIS DAY 05TH OF APRIL 2000 BY SHRI AMRIT LAL MEENA IAS

L10 DISTRICT MAGISTRATE, GAYA (BIHAR) CUM-CHAIRMAN B.T.M.C.

L11 THANKS BY

L12 VEN. BHANTE PRAJNASHEEL

L13 CHIEF MONK-CUM-SECRETARY

L14 MAHABODHI TEMPLE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE,

L15 BUDDHAGAYA.

The inscription correlates with donative inscriptions found throughout South Asia. The first line and the first word of the inscription *namobuddhāya* ('for the sake of the Buddha') are reminiscent of the traditional method of beginning inscriptions, with the word *siddham* (meaning 'success!') used in the period after the Sanchi inscriptions. The placement of the donors and their titles at the beginning, followed by the description of the gift itself and technical details, such as date and managing body, is nearly identical with the formula found elsewhere in the ancient world. Thus it appears as a bridge between ancient patronage and modern transnational pilgrimage-patronage.

One piece of bas-relief art from the first century CE complements the epigraphic data found at Sanchi by appearing upon the same architectural gateway. The panel from Sanchi *stūpa* number 1's northern gateway displays a lively festival occurring at a *stūpa* (Figure 1).¹³ It appears vibrant, loud, and chaotic, with musicians dancing and others paying homage to the well-adorned *stūpa*. This depiction can be contrasted with the sombre image of worship, prayer, and contemplation seen in other nearby images at the same site. Given the (almost) matching depictions of *stūpa* festivals in Buddhist *Avadāna* narrative literature and the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*—each containing descriptive stories about aspects of Buddhist worship—it seems likely that the vibrant activity depicted in this scene reflects an idealised celebration. Art historians suggest that the *stūpa* in these images may represent the Buddha himself as an aniconic image (Karlsson 2000, 36–53; Dehejia 1991). The scene occurring in the Sanchi northern gateway relief may have depicted any number of festivals ranging from a celebration of the Buddha's life to the consecration of the Buddha's relics (Pagel 2007, 379–384). Although it is impossible to identify the exact festival depicted in the scene, it may be telling that the image appears alongside the hundreds of donative records inscribed around Sanchi's Great *Stūpa*.

The donative inscriptions provide evidence that the sangha was aware of the economic potential of festivals and invested in them to harness



Figure 1. A lively festival occurring at a *stūpa* depicted at Sanchi. (Source: Authors)

economic support. Festivals sponsored by kings happened during a time when all taxes, tolls, and transportation levies were waived to maximise participation (Schopen 2004, 306).¹⁴ During festivals in the *Avadāna* narratives about noteworthy individuals and events, donated items such as gold coins, jewels, and precious stones would be attached directly to the *stūpa*, with items of greater value being fastened higher up (Pagel 2007, 388). The *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya's Uttaragrantha*—the section addressing controversial issues within the legal tradition—suggests that the Buddhist sangha was unable to tend properly to the vast number of offerings from festivals and ended up selling them on the open market.

The donative inscriptional records show that some donors earned an increasing amount of spiritual merit and public distinction for their donations over a significant period of time. Meanwhile, the image of the *stūpa* festival from Sanchi's northern gateway illustrates how attendees and donors may have experienced a festival. While many of the pictures found at Sanchi demonstrate an atmosphere of quietude and reflection, it is clear that donations and festivals came together as important early Buddhist activities. As noted in the anthropological and sociological records, rather than being



Figure 2. The *weikza-lam* pilgrims dancing through Bodh Gaya on their way to the opening of the *Tipitaka* festival. (Source: Authors)

marked by austerity and quietude, pilgrimage often contains conspicuous wealth, exuberance, and excess (see also Feldman 2014, 145-150; Kosansky 2002, 375-390; Lochtefeld 2010, 131; Taylor 2004, 107-109).

The ‘lucky lottery’ and the Abbot’s birthday

Of the many events that we attended in Bodh Gaya, all—except collective breakfasts, occasional morning meditation sessions, lunches, and sermons—involved singing, dancing, and revelry (Figure 2). Two of the celebrations stood out as most aptly illustrating the upward and downward directions of the *weikza-lam*’s donations. The first was what his followers translated as being the ‘lucky lottery’ and the second was the large celebration that accompanied the head abbot’s ‘birthday’. During these events, the *weikza-lam* generously donated to his followers and the monastic establishment, aligning himself symbolically with the ideal of the *cakkavatti*, the divine king who provides for those under his care and gives generously to the Buddhist sangha.

Like most of the pilgrims' activities, both events were held in the dusty garden of the Vihār, on reclaimed swampland that had been home, only a few years before, to roaming water buffalos and countless mosquitos. So unstable was the land that one of the Vihār's newer buildings was steadily sliding into the swamp, shearing off slabs of concrete in the process. In spite of the building difficulties on the site, further donations for the prosperity of the Vihār continued to arrive and, during our stay, a new building was erected in the boggy land within the Vihār's grounds. The building works came to a halt as the 180 pilgrims sequestered the garden area for their tent, audience, kitchen, and band. In the days before the pilgrims arrived, the Vihār's resident monks hastily attached brand-new shiny inscriptions of donor names in prominent places next to where the new pilgrims were about to stay. Like the epigraphy found at Sanchi and the inscription accompanying the water pump, the donative inscriptions found at the Vihār and throughout Bodh Gaya are often short, simply containing the donor's lineage, name, and country and what the donation was used for. Within a day or so of the pilgrims' arrival, the site was transformed into a non-stop party venue, complete with decorations and costumes—a celebration of Buddhism that was to last for the next month.

The 'lucky lottery' was held every two or three nights during the pilgrims' celebrations. For this particular festivity, the *weikza-lam* acted as both MC and key donor. The band would play with great gusto, names would be picked from a container, and the winners would be expected, and often delighted, to dance their way to the stage to collect a prize. Interestingly, while most lotteries are based to some degree on luck, everyone present at the celebration, including foreign teachers, won a prize. The luck was, perhaps, in the kind of prizes one would win. These ranged from bags to saris and, occasionally, if the dancing participant demonstrated enough flair, also a wad of rupees. In addition to the *weikza-lam*'s donations of food, flights, accommodation, short trips, and other items, the celebratory style of gift-giving to his followers happened on many occasions, extending from the 'lucky lottery' to regular dance and music practice held in the garden. It was not uncommon to see him giving wads of rupees to people for dancing well or for singing with enthusiasm. These gifts always seemed to be given publicly, often with the recipient being called to the stage to receive the money directly.

Unlike the contested public donation from the Tibetan Rinpoche, the 'lucky lottery', as Jackie Feldman describes the monetary transfers from Christian pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land, "far from being a universal 'acid' that taints human relationships . . . create[s] and maintain[s] spiritual values" (Feldman 2014, 143). The *weikza-lam*'s donations, next to a site of considerable spiritual power, demonstrates that, within his purview, his followers are joyous and wealthy. He is able to provide vital support to the

laity, continuing the kinds of prosperous Buddhist societies that are lauded textually within the Buddhist *suttas*.

The second and more lavish of the celebrations was carried out to mark the abbot's 'birthday'. On the morning of the event, we noted that the pilgrims had been busy decorating the stage and seating area with balloons, glitter, and tinsel. When we arrived before sundown, we found a sizable gathering, including all of the pilgrim group, monks and female renunciates of the Vihār and elsewhere in the town, important guests (such as one of the central organisers of the *Tipitaka* festival), and Indian locals who had been asked to entertain the guests.

On arrival, the Abbot was greeted by the standing audience and seated on stage to receive presents and donations. The *weikza-lam* continued to be the master of ceremonies for the night, assisted by his daughter who had been another central figure in the festivities, often heard extolling her father's generous donations and the importance of giving in Buddhism more generally. Songs, written by the *weikza-lam* and translated for us, linked donations and generosity with merit-making. Donations within the songs assured the continuation of Buddhism and, therefore, its protection. The evening began with the monastics joining the Abbot on stage to read prayers next to a large cake that the pilgrims offered the Abbot. The cake was largely symbolic, incorporating transnational ideas of appropriate activities to celebrate birthdays, as most Theravāda monastics do not eat after noon (and certainly not in front of a large audience of pilgrims). After praising the monastic institution, the *weikza-lam* and his pilgrims offered the Abbot (who sat uncomfortably on stage) a large donation (US\$15,000), presented in the form of a 'money tree' (a common form of donation to monastics in Southeast Asia)—money glued to a cardboard cut-out tree. This was a striking display of wealth and generosity in front of a public audience, given the surrounding poverty.

This kind of public donation in the context of a Buddhist temple highlights the inequalities within the pilgrimage town and the emphasis on the gift rather than its effects, especially given the presence of teenagers from the local Indian community. Temples in Bodh Gaya, which are known to contain vast stores of wealth, were beset by robberies in the 1990s and early 2000s. In the light of the political instability of the region, characterised by banditry and murders of landed gentry by Maoist rebels, the large donations focused on the intention of making merit in the holy town (and its accompanying boost to personal status) without paying attention to the local context. The Vihār where we were staying had been robbed at gunpoint in the late 1990s; the Abbot was well aware of the potential for another heist and staff knew that he was hiding cash donations in different places throughout the monastic complex. During all of the activities within

the Vihār, the pilgrims seemed to be unaware of the stark contrast between their wealth and the persistent poverty within the town.

After the large donation, the monastics returned to the best seats in the audience to be entertained by the singing and dancing of the local villagers. Some teenagers danced to a Bollywood routine along with a drag performance by a local Indian tour guide. Both in some ways transgressed the local conservative attitudes of Bodh Gaya. Dancing young women and a cross-dressing young man were not ordinarily sights that one might see in the town. The pilgrims' leader was so satisfied with the celebration that he encouraged everyone to come on stage and the festivities and dancing continued into the night. Among this group of pilgrims, the sacralised landscape of Bodh Gaya mobilised spending and celebration. Within this framework, spending money on and gifting money to monastics or lay supporters was considered to be a great act of generosity rather than representing attachment to the material world. The *weikza-lam* demonstrated his beneficence by ensuring that the experience of his group of pilgrims in Bodh Gaya, and the monastics with whom they had contact, was characterised by joy and plenty.

Conclusion

The celebrations of the pilgrimage group that we witnessed at Bodh Gaya instantiate an outlook on affluence and merriment that concords with early Buddhist doctrine and practice. The pilgrims' attitudes towards wealth and exuberance can be fruitfully brought in dialogue with historical doctrinal and artistic records. Rather than weakening the *weikza-lam* practitioner's position within Buddhist frameworks, festivity and generosity strengthened his position. As the key donor (for both lay practitioners and monastics) and master of ceremonies, he aligned himself with the notion of the *cakkavatti* (wheel-turning king): a leader and provider for lay people and a supporter of the Buddhist teachings.

The pilgrimage was located in Buddhism's most sacred site, within an historically significant Vihār (one of the key centres of Buddhism's global transmission), and framed within Buddhist discourses of donation. This event may reflect the increasing esteem of *weikza-lam* practitioners within Myanmar itself—particularly given the popularity of Bodh Gaya as a pilgrimage destination for the country's Buddhists—or a gambit to bring about a shift in status or, more likely, both. Given the acceptance of the donations by the monastic establishment and the esteem that this bestowed, the first interpretation seems to be strengthened.

Just as early Buddhist texts and monuments encouraged and valued wealth among the lay population, the pilgrims at Bodh Gaya, like the pictorial illustration at Sanchi, demonstrate the evident ease with which

money and celebration can appear in sacred Buddhist spaces. In early Buddhist history, lay people were encouraged to be conscientious with money. They were not counselled to see wealth and its acquisition as contrary to Buddhist doctrine. Instead, both the early Buddhist *suttas* and the depictions at Sanchi indicate that prosperity was highly valued and that spending one's wealth generously was a cause for celebration. Monastic institutions were positively correlated with a prosperous lay population (see Milligan 2019b, 20-22). Thus, the displays of wealth we witnessed at the Vihār demonstrate an aspect of the continuation of attitudes and practices from earlier times. Buddhist pilgrimage, rather than being characterised by austere quietude, can be a site for spending and celebration.

Notes

1. This is a resting place for either monastics or lay pilgrims. In this case the Vihār was a functioning monastery with residential monks, its own sacred relics, and temple and a popular place for pilgrims (mostly from Myanmar) to stay.
2. The prayers of the Hindu pilgrims, Bollywood dance parties, prayers and sermons in the local mosques, chanting by the Buddhists, and honking horns.
3. The Saffron Revolution refers to a series of political protests carried out in opposition to the ruling military government, which Buddhist monastics joined in August, September, and October 2007.
4. See Heim (2003) for a discussion of the importance of intentions within Buddhist morality.
5. See also Gombrich (1971), Rotman (2009), and Schopen (1996) for a discussion of the practice of merit transference.
6. This edition refers to that by the Pāli Text Society (PTS), translation from Horner and Bhikkhu Brahmalī (2014, 537). The well-known PTS editions were originally published in multiple volumes and have recently been re-presented on www.suttacentral.net as one document. All PTS translations are considered to be the standard translations of Pāli texts in English.
7. The word is *kārsāpaṇa* in Sanskrit (and Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit) but *kahāpaṇa* in Pāli. Each refers to a coin which is equal in weight to a *karṣa*, which may have been weighed in gold, silver, cowries or copper. Etymologically, the root is linked to $\sqrt{krṣ}$, meaning 'to plough', thus giving it a deep association with what is produced from labour (grain, things mined from the earth, etc.). Later, in classical South Asia, the word refers to money as currency. However, during the Early Historic period, prior to the turn of the Common Era, *kārsāpaṇa* is a unit of comparison or measurement only. Some Buddhist literature in Pāli hints at its value as alms offering (in the *Jātakas*) but other texts, e.g. legalistic Dharma literature such as *Vasiṣṭha*, state that it may be used to pay tolls. The *Arthaśāstra*—probably compiled in its final form by the second century CE (Olivelle 2013)—frequently uses the term *paṇa* to connote actual money as payments for fines and the like by violators of the law to the state.
8. Other rules from the *Pāṭimokkha* pertain to money. *Nissaggiya Pācittiya* 10 (Vin III 220) allows monks to use a *veyyāvaccakara*—a lay attendant who handles money instead of a monk—to assist in places like markets. *Nissaggiya Pācittiya* 19 (Vin III 241) forbids bartering and the exchange of goods.

9. Sanchi is not the only Buddhist pilgrimage site with donative inscriptions. Dozens of other sites from the Early Historic period (300 BCE–300 CE) onwards contain similar records. However, Sanchi presents the largest and most well-preserved corpus. While most other sites provide only a few dozen records or less, at Sanchi, there are over 600 relevant inscriptions, many of which are re-contextualised and analysed in a recent unpublished dissertation by Milligan (2016), based on extensive fieldwork to re-read the *brāhmī* inscriptions.
10. The *Kharoṣṭhī* graffiti, which are abundant in Pakistan, number in the thousands but mostly date to a later era and are scattered throughout a vast region (see Neelis 2011, 268). Substantial amounts of early epigraphic material may also be found in Sri Lanka at a number of sites. Senarat Paranavitana's *Inscriptions of Ceylon* (1970) lists most of the earliest inscriptions.
11. The following two records, originally written in the Mauryan *brāhmī* script in the Prakrit language, are representative of the majority of early records.
12. The inscription numbers refer to the edition listed in Tsukamoto (1996). All translations are by Milligan.
13. There are few academic studies of Buddhist festivals in early Indian art and literature. For further reading, see van Kooij (1995) and Pagel (2007).
14. Schopen translated the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya's Kṣudrakavastu Tha 246v5–247r1*. The *Kṣudrakavastu* is a small collection within the monastic legal textual corpus of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* school.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology for facilitating this collaboration as part of the research group “Buddhist Temple Economies in Urban Asia”. We are grateful to Christoph Brumann and Shultz Abrahms-Kavunenko for their advice during the editing process. We also thank Dana Maller, Kristina Jonutyte, Hannah Klepeis, and Beata Świtek. Many thanks go to staff and students at the “Buddhist Studies in India” programme in Bodh Gaya and to the wonderfully noisy and exuberant pilgrims from Myanmar who fed and befriended us and made us dance and sing.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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