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Wayward Distractions: Ornament, Emotion, Zombies and the Study of Buddhism in Thailand

JUSTIN THOMAS McDANIEL

Singapore: NUS Press in association with Kyoto University Press, 2021.

The book *Wayward Distractions* by Justin McDaniel comprises nine articles on Thai Buddhism, along with an introduction. This work is the result of the life experience of a Buddhist scholar from the Western world who has been acquainted with Thai society and Thai people for thirty years. The author delves deeply and broadly into various phenomena, revealing the complex and diverse nature of Thai Buddhism, society, and culture, which includes literature, rituals, amulets, Hinduism, the status of nuns, mural painting, and contemporary art.

I have been a student, friend, and colleague of Justin's for over twenty years. Justin has shared with me many of the stories and topics discussed in this book. He has taken me to see things,

pointed out things for me to notice, challenged and encouraged me to think, asked me to grow my curiosity, and provided explanations to help me understand.

Twenty years ago, when I was a twenty-year-old student, I barely knew Bangkok. The only parts of the city I was familiar with were Siam Square, Sukhumvit, and Chidlom. Justin was the first person to give me a tour of Bangkok. He took me on a boat ride along Saen Saep Canal, walked me across the Memorial Bridge, had me try Indian food in Phahurat. We walked and ate noodles at Wang Lang Market, we went to the Kudi Chin and the Golden Mount, and he invited me to visit the Immaculate Conception Church and Sathira Dhammasathan Nunnery. Each of these places has its own history, culture, and unique stories that formulate what we call “Thai society” and “Thai Buddhism.” Many times I did not realize that while we were walking and talking with people, Justin was actually gathering field data for his research.

I still remember well the first time he took me on a boat ride through Khlong Saen Saep from Hua Chang Bridge to the Golden Mount Temple. On the way from Phan Fa Pier, he led me into a narrow alley and then into a small shop, whose owner was of Indian origin (evident from her face and attire). The shop sold pictures from Buddha’s biography and other prayer books that are usually seen in Thai temples. Right after leaving the shop, Justin asked me many questions, such as “What is the heart of Buddhism?” “What is the canon of Buddhism?” and “What is the Buddhism in Thailand like?”

Naturally, I gave the answers I had learned in school: The heart of Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths. The Tipitaka is the canon of Buddhism. Buddhism in Thailand is Theravada Buddhism. When I gave those answers, Justin shook his head and said that was not it. He said we have to ask each person what teachings they hold. We have to see what books or images they use. Maybe they are like those from this shop. Thai Buddhism is Thai Buddhism. It has its own unique characteristics, which may not necessarily be “Theravada.”

This was the first time someone ever told me this. This new perspective challenged my previous understanding of Buddhism as a black-and-white, right-or-wrong set of principles learned solely from textbooks. It showed me that true Thai Buddhism is more than just words on a page or a rigid institution. Rather, it is a matter of society, culture, thought, ways of life. And to truly understand Thai Buddhism, we must engage in fieldwork, talk to people, and, most important, not blindly believe without asking questions.

Reading various articles with explanations in the introduction of *Wayward Distractions*, compiled from various sources, reminded me of my learning experience with Justin. It made clear that even though there were many incidents that raised doubts and caused continuous distractions, Justin’s perspective and learning methods were never distracted. He always took us away from what was considered the mainstream—with its traditional standards, regulations, and conventions—and instead focused on overlooked realities.

This book presents complex topics and methods of analysis, but it does so in a storytelling

style that makes it accessible to a broad range of readers—from the general reader who seeks knowledge and enjoyment and is prompted to observe or question familiar things around them, to scholars and students of Thai Buddhism, Thai literature, Thai culture, and ethnography and folklore. They will not only gain new perspectives and explanations on Thai literature and Buddhist culture but also observe the methods of study, questioning, analysis, and synthesis that come from literature review, field data collection, comparison with other cultures, leading to new interpretations and critical thinking skills.

Justin’s method of analyzing and interpreting data encompasses both an “insider” and an “outsider” perspective. He has a good understanding of various cultural aspects, even better than many Thais. At the same time, his perspectives and critiques come from an “outsider” viewpoint, allowing him to see meaning in things that might seem mundane. What his critiques focus on is not only phenomena in Thai Buddhist society but, more important, explanations and discourses that derive from the far past, which are mainstream in Thai society and widely accepted as the only truth.

The author shows that the issues he explores need to be revisited and reinterpreted to reveal the true nature of Thai Buddhism. He reconsiders the concept of the mandala and the founding of Bangkok by questioning the significance of ethnic diversity and localization and the roles of people (article 3). He also reconsiders the significance of a local Jātaka like the Sujawanna Wua Luang (article 2) and of the love between husband and wife in the Vessantara Jātaka, which relates to the real world (article 4). His explanation of mural paintings and modern art points out the complexity and diversity of cultural influences that affect Buddhist art, both old and new (articles 5 and 7). His view on the importance of amulets and his explanation of the importance of zombies or corpses, from the perspective of material culture, also challenges the traditional view that these are not Buddhist teachings and that they are commercial (articles 6 and 9). In one article, he critiques the influence of Hinduism by examining the roles of Brahmins and hermits (*ṛṣi*) and by analyzing how Hindu teachings are present in contemporary Thai society (article 8). And one analysis poses questions about the status and ordination of bhikkhūṇīs by pointing out the prominent role and status of Thai nuns (*mae chi*) in the present day (article 10).

Although I may not entirely agree with the author on some topics, many issues and perspectives on data and various research studies that existed before are interesting and beneficial to the study of Thai Buddhism. The book’s perspectives and thought-provoking questions offer the potential for new discoveries, explanations, and insights in the field of Thai Buddhism.

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