

# Theravada Buddhism

## *The View of the Elders*

BY ASANGA TILAKARATNE

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Reviewed by Todd Lewis

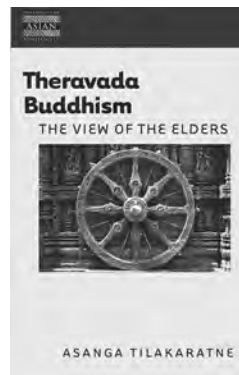
Asanga Tilakaratne's *Theravada Buddhism: The View of the Elders* offers an overview of "southern Buddhism" that is both traditional and innovative, yet also problematic. Educators will find a valuable resource in its chapters that analyze central doctrines and practices. These offer apt and refreshing perspectives on Buddhism as a lived tradition for the monks and householders adhering to the dominant lineage of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia today.

This book offers a corrective to the still widely held notion of Buddhism that has focused almost exclusively on monastics who have renounced the material world and seek the experience of *nirvana* through meditation. All others who live otherwise, this persisting stereotype goes, are not "true Buddhists." *Theravada Buddhism* also undermines any predilection to cast Buddhism as "just a philosophy," providing a sympathetic and well-informed description of the householders who constitute 95 percent or more of the population in every Buddhist society. The author cites the Pali texts that demolish other common misconceptions, for example, that Buddhists are atheistic or that there is no place for faith or ritual in this tradition.

Chapters four, five, and seven are devoted to showing how the belief in karma and making merit plays the central role in the daily life of Buddhists. Tilakaratne details how there is a role for faith in the Buddha for his having found the truth (*Dhamma*) and path (*marga*) to escape the world of suffering and rebirth (*samsara*). The observation that Buddhist householders from antiquity until now have more typically sought rebirth in a heaven than pursued *nirvana* (94) is a welcome one, and the author cites proof from texts that show the Buddha himself urging them to do precisely this. Making merit is central to reaching heaven or rising eventually to be reborn in a life that can be devoted to *nirvana*. Since earning good karma (merit) is what fills the minds and occupies the lives of householders, this book details how "a good Buddhist" makes offerings of food, clothing, and lodging to monastics; listens to sermons and learns the doctrine; does altruistic service; should be a moral employer, parent, child, teacher, or friend; or, most rarely, does meditation.

Tilakaratne's sociological approach in *Theravada Buddhism* shows that many young people become monastics not to seek *nirvana* but to make merit (for their parents, deceased relatives, themselves) and that even "career monks" are not typically intent on reaching *nirvana* in this lifetime (101). Showing how Buddhism resembles other world religions, he describes how the chanted words of the Buddha have been harnessed to provide worldly protection to persons and places. *Dhamma*, for most Buddhists, is harnessed as a power that can provide protection and healing for householders (29).

Is a rich Buddhist, as a recent *New York Times* article asserted, a contradiction in terms? Tilakaratne leads you to understand why the answer is "no." He explains the logic of karma teaching and—as the Buddha's own life shows—that the wealth one acquires is a reward for a former life's virtues. The Buddha applauded wealth and wealthy donors. In fact, rich patrons have built Buddhism since its beginning. Thus, a rich Buddhist can and should be a good Buddhist, someone capable of serving the world generously and compassionately.



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Having praised this book's virtues as a teaching resource, it is also necessary to be critical of its shortcomings. Because categories shape students' historical thought, teachers should not refer to Shakyamuni Buddha as "author" of the *Dhamma* (30) because the great sage wrote nothing and Theravada tradition affirms that what he articulated was the same as what dozens of earlier Buddhas had (re)discovered.

The misconception educators must resist from this book is the assumption that Theravada tradition is synonymous with Buddhism in its earliest history. While this assertion is accepted in the locally composed historical legends of the author's own Sri Lanka, most historians of early Buddhism reject it. In South Asia, the Theravada monastic ordination traditions were in practice only in Sri Lanka. From there, they spread to Southeast Asia after 1000 CE. Buddhists in mainland ancient and medieval South Asia were *not* governed by the Theravada monastic code (*Vinaya*) or culture. There is accordingly no basis to allege a "resurgence of Theravada Buddhism under Ashoka" or accept the account of missions to Sri Lanka led by Ashoka's children as established historical fact—except from the legends recorded many centuries later in Sri Lanka.

It is disconcerting that the author inserts his own raw opinion on the rise of political monks in the contemporary Theravada world. Professor Tilakaratne's view that monks in politics are "not all that bad" (121) is regrettable given the actions of militant, war-supporting men "in the robes" from recent Sri Lankan history and currently campaigns for violence against Muslims led by monks in Myanmar.

A final point on the difficulties of introducing Buddhism: When presenting a starting point, we must inevitably resort to (over)simplifications. Given the newness of scholarship on Buddhism, there is a need to resist perpetuating "the first draft of history" inherited from our teacher-scholar ancestors. Some conclusions are utterly incorrect (eg, identification of Theravada Buddhism with the earliest tradition), and it is certain that the near-exclusive reliance on texts in constructing history must be rethought with insights from archaeology and inscriptions. It is better to share with students a critical wariness about the ancient period and opt for, in our globalizing world, devoting more time to the beliefs and practices of modern Buddhists. By bringing the lives of householders down to earth in lovely detail, Asanga Tilakaratne's *Theravada Buddhism: The View of the Elders* makes a valuable contribution. ■

**TODD LEWIS** is Professor of World Religions at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. He is coauthor of *World Religions Today* (Fourth Edition, Oxford University Press, 2011) and most recently *Sugata Saurabha: A Poem on the Life of the Buddha by Chittadhar Hridaya of Nepal* (Oxford University Press, 2010). Professor Lewis conducts workshops for K-12 teachers across New England and directed four NEH Summer Institutes for K-12 teachers. He can be reached via email at [tlewis@holycross.edu](mailto:tlewis@holycross.edu).