Justin Thomas McDaniel’s *Gathering Leaves & Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand*

Book Review

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Justin McDaniel has recalibrated the scale of writing Theravada Buddhist history in this impressive study. Challenging assumptions about the centrality of classical forms of the religious tradition, McDaniel focuses on three genres of pedagogical manuscripts, which together embody a particular mode of religious instruction known as “lifting words.” Operative both in the contexts of monastic education and lay instruction, lifting words is the pedagogical technique whereby “Pali [Buddhist scriptural language] words are lifted from texts, both canonical and noncanonical, and then creatively engaged with and explained by teachers based on their own experiences” (7). For McDaniel, these texts constitute “particular moments in a history of articulations of Buddhism... [which] evince the ways local agents were reaching back and reaching toward Buddhism” (120). *Gathering Leaves & Lifting Words* is concerned with discrete historical articulations of Buddhist understanding, which are “reflective of a pervasive episteme and intellectual and aesthetic attitude toward the translocal, externally validated sources of knowledge” (165).

The three manuscript genres that McDaniel interprets—namely *nissaya*, *vohuara*, and *naamasadada*—are best understood as local instantiations of Theravada Buddhism, which might be seen as a translocal database of ethical and soteriological forms of knowledge. If Theravada Buddhism, with its cosmopolitan language (Pali) and well-defined canon, is a bridge connecting parts of the religious worlds of South and Southeast Asia, then these three kinds of pedagogical texts are its supports, the discrete spaces where it touches solid ground amidst the changing tides of social life. And while the bridge itself hovers above the waters of historical change—at least in standard academic treatments of Theravada Buddhism—its supports stand firm as anchors testifying to continuity and change in local epistemic and social contexts. Along with McDaniel’s emphasis on the local articulations of Theravada Buddhism, comes a new lexicon for thinking about the supports rather than the bridge itself. Instead of the standard litany of analytic tools for studying religion, McDaniel offers new sites of interpretation: curricula in place of canon, interpretive
communities instead of institutions, and the local episteme rather than classical texts or doctrine.

Part I (Chapters 1-3) of McDaniel’s study offers a conventional history of monastic education in the region, including the institutional changes and reforms that punctuate the religious history of Thailand and Laos. What is novel however, is McDaniel’s insistence on the continuities linking modern and premodern monastic education and his contention that the most highly acclaimed moments of reform—especially the 1902 Thai Sangha Act—were largely ideological and ineffectual in practice (108). In Part II (Chapters 4-6), McDaniel reveals his methodological groundwork: an examination of the curricula of monastic education as it was practiced on the ground and articulated through the air of temple pavilions by individual monks. It is here that McDaniel hits his stride, approaching each manuscript as an epistemological puzzle and recreating individual religious subjectivities by identifying the disparate textual threads running through the manuscript. In a display of his incredible command of the textual repertoire of the Northern Thai or Lao Buddhist monk, McDaniel catalogues the individual texts—both canonical and not—that helped constitute the nissaya composer’s religious understanding. What emerges is strong evidence for continuity between ‘premodern’ and ‘modern’ monastic education through the deep grammar of pedagogical modes of thought and practice. In Part III (Chapters 7-8), McDaniel presents case studies in the application of his methodology, as well as evidence that aspects of the ‘premodern’ modes of pedagogical thought and interaction with authoritative Pali texts persist to this day under the guise of modern pedagogical technologies and media.

Gathering Leaves & Lifting Words is constructed as a challenge to historians—unnamed by McDaniel—who postulate a radical breach between the social and intellectual worlds of the premodern and modern eras. This explains McDaniel’s willful denial of the efficacy and import of state-initiated religious reforms as the defining markers of modernity. Yet the very force of McDaniel’s argument against the significance of the ‘ideological’ reforms initiated by the political elite could obscure productive avenues of inquiry into the workings of state power during the colonial era. Even if state-sponsored reforms had little discernable impact on social life beyond the capital (Bangkok) as McDaniel contends, they might still retain analytic value for the historian. Not all instances of intellectual change need be mapped at the micro-scale of the individual. Even when it remains sequestered in elite social climes, intellectual history can still provide insight into the engagements of knowledge and power, both in terms of how an indigenous elite sought to effect cultural homogeneity at home, and how such projects were informed by the logic of colonial rule. In short, demographics should not be the only determining factor in assessing intellectual change; even the most demographically-shallow instances of intellectual change might still be relevant sources for charting the
cultural and epistemological landmarks at the confluence of colonial forms of knowledge and power.

McDaniel’s study has much to offer those in the field of Buddhist studies, both in terms of primary source analysis and methodological apparatus. Philologists and historians of ideas in other fields will likewise benefit from his careful attention to the context of the propagation of tradition, as well as the processes of reception and localization of classical forms of knowledge.