

Buddhism illuminated

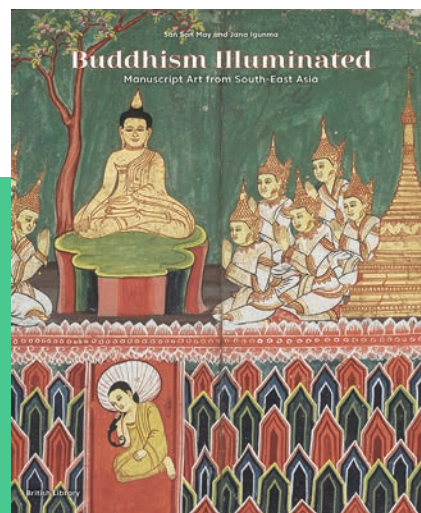
Donald M. Seekins

Reviewed title

Buddhism Illuminated: Manuscript Art from Southeast Asia

San San May and Jana Igunma. 2018.

London: The British Library
ISBN 9780712352062



Like the Abrahamic religions of the West (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), Buddhism has employed art in many forms to convey its message to people. In the Theravada Buddhist countries of mainland Southeast Asia (Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos), the most well-known and visually arresting expressions of Buddhist teachings have been monumental or finely-crafted structures (e.g. pagodas, temples, and monasteries) that have over the centuries functioned as places of study, meditation and pilgrimage for devotees. These include the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon/Yangon, Burma, the temples and pagodas of Pagan/Bagan in central Burma, the Phra Pathom Chedi (pagoda) outside of Bangkok, Thailand, Wat Doi Suthep on a mountain outside of Chiang Mai, Thailand, and the Phra That Luang Chedi in Vientiane, Laos. Also playing a role in the propagation of Buddhist teachings have been famed Buddha images such as the Maha Myat Muni image in Mandalay, Burma, and the Emerald Buddha located in the royal temple-palace complex in Bangkok, as well as colossal reclining Buddha figures of which the most famous are found in Pegu (Bago), Burma, and the palace in Bangkok. Many of these sacred places have been elaborately decorated with frescoes and paintings illustrating the life of Gotama Buddha or the Jataka Tales, which tell of his previous lives before becoming the Enlightened One, as well as representations of elephants, nagas (dragons/snakes), demons, and other real or fantastic creatures from Hindu and Buddhist mythology.

In 21st century Burma, where Buddhist values remain exceptionally strong, the prominence of Buddhist art is one of the things that impresses the visitor the most, as military governments in recent years have striven to add to the country's inventory of Buddhist sites (for example, the White Stone Buddha image in Rangoon and the Uppatasanti Pagoda in Naypyidaw, Burma's new capital). The goal of the country's military rulers has been not only to earn Buddhist merit for themselves (Burmese: *kutho*) as pagoda-builders or restorers, but to assert their political legitimacy in Buddhist terms. The old saying, 'to be Burmese is to be Buddhist,' is still valid for 90 per cent of the country's population who identify as followers of Buddha's teachings.

Although such large and splendid Buddhist structures and imagery are difficult for the visitor to miss, the Theravada countries of Southeast Asia also possess a much less known art form that is very similar to the illuminated manuscripts of medieval Europe. Like their western counterparts, they present intimate and condensed visual religious 'lessons' in bright and appealing colors, highly stylized (there is little room for innovation) and directed toward helping the viewer to make his or her own progress on the road to nibbana (nirvana). Usually combining miniature pictures with sacred text or at least an explanation, they encompass depictions of the Cosmos in Hindu-Buddhist terms, the Birth Tales, the lives of Gotama Buddha and his disciples and scenes of Buddhist festivals and ceremonies, especially those sponsored by the royal family. As in the European illuminated manuscripts, rarely, if ever, is effort made to place these scenes in their original (Indian) context; instead, episodes of sacred history, including their human participants and physical surroundings, are placed in Burmese or Thai settings and often give us a vivid picture of what life was like – at least on elite levels – in pre-colonial mainland Southeast Asia.

Relatively little attention has been paid to these illuminated manuscripts in the West. In her *Arts of Southeast Asia*, Fiona Kerlogue makes brief mention of Burmese illuminated manuscripts (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004, 124–125). In 1992, a specialist at the British Library, Patricia Herbert, published a volume, *The Life of the Buddha* (London: the British Library: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1993), using two Burmese manuscripts in the library's collection and contributed a chapter on this genre to Alexandra Green and Richard Blurton's *Burma: Art and Archeology* (Burmese cosmological manuscripts, in Alexandra Green and T. Richard Blurton (eds) *Burma: Art and Archeology*, London: British Museum Press, 2002, 77–98).

The work under review here, San San May and Jana Igunma's *Buddhism Illuminated: Manuscript Art from Southeast Asia*, represents

a major development in the study of Buddhist illuminated manuscripts not only because it includes a much larger selection of this genre, but also since it includes works from central and northern Thailand and the Tai-speaking Shan States as well as central Burma. Its great merit lies in the fact that the editors have not only created a beautifully illustrated volume in the coffee table book mode (given its size and heaviness, this is hardly the book one would choose as travel reading), but also have presented it in a form in which the illuminations are grouped together to depict and explain (Theravada) Buddhism's basic doctrines: lavishly illustrated chapters are devoted to the Buddha, his teachings (Dhamma), the Buddhist monkhood (the sangha), cause and effect (*kamma*, more widely known as karma), and the supremely important work of making merit in daily life through donations to Buddhist monks and holy places and the performance of good deeds (*punna*). For western readers interested in Buddhism, *Buddhism Illuminated* provides a compelling combination of pleasing-to-view pictures and clearly-written text that that is necessarily missing from prose-only books – with perhaps only a few illustrations of pagodas or Buddha images – that attempt to explain the religion in abstract terms.

For example, on page 11, the authors provide a 19th century Burmese illumination of the legend of Taphussa and Bhallika, two Mon merchants who meet the Buddha just after his Enlightenment, giving him offerings and hearing his first sermon. Gotama Buddha bestows on them eight hairs from the top of his head, which after many adventures they take back to their native country in Lower (southern) Burma and enshrine in the Shwedagon Pagoda, recognized by Burmese Buddhists as the single most important sacred place in their country. This illumination is far more arresting visually than the 15th century stone inscriptions donated by King Dhammazedi to the platform of the Shwedagon which first relates the legend

of the two merchants (who in earlier legends were Indian) and connects them to Burma.

Many of the Thai (or Tai) manuscripts deal with the legend of Phra Malai, a monk endowed with immense merit who travels to the Buddhist heavens and hells in a manner broadly similar to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, learning of the future decline of Buddhism as well as its revival by the Metteyya or Future Buddha.

In the Introduction, the physical characteristics of the manuscripts and their bindings are described in great detail: one type, known as *parabaik* in Burmese, were painted on strips of paper which were folded tightly together, bound with cords and protected with often intricately decorated wooden covers or binding-boards. Other manuscripts were inscribed on palm-leaves, usually lacquered or gilded around the edges, which were also stacked together to make separate volumes. Usually, the *parabaik* volumes were comprised of mulberry paper, which is still used today in Burmese crafts. The *Tipitaka*, the Buddhist scriptures, were inscribed on palm leaves, often using a special script of Burmese letters known as tamarind seed (or 'square') script, because of their special shape. Given the heat and humidity of mainland Southeast Asia, the manuscripts were traditionally wrapped in silk, tied up with special and often beautifully decorated ribbon-bindings and stored in wooden chests – usually made of teak – which themselves were often attractively decorated. These chests had to be made capable of tight closing, lest rats or insects enter and devour the manuscripts.

Buddhism Illuminated is comprised of over 100 illuminations in the British Library's collection, most of whom originated in Burma or Thailand. The authors comment that a large number of Burmese manuscripts were 'acquired' from a royal collection in Mandalay, the old royal capital, after the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885 (p.9). A more accurate term might be 'stolen' since the Mandalay Palace was thoroughly looted after the British victory by locals as well as British soldiers. But perhaps this is not the place to accuse the British Library of being a treasure house of looted artifacts, though is doubtful that the Burmese items – most of which date from the 19th century – were obtained fairly or peaceably.

The splendor of this volume does lead the reader to wonder whether treasures such as these, spirited off to the colonial Metropole during centuries of European expansion into Asia and Africa, shouldn't someday be returned to their countries of origin – at least when suitable facilities for housing them can be built so that local people can enjoy access to the glories of their past.

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Creating the universe

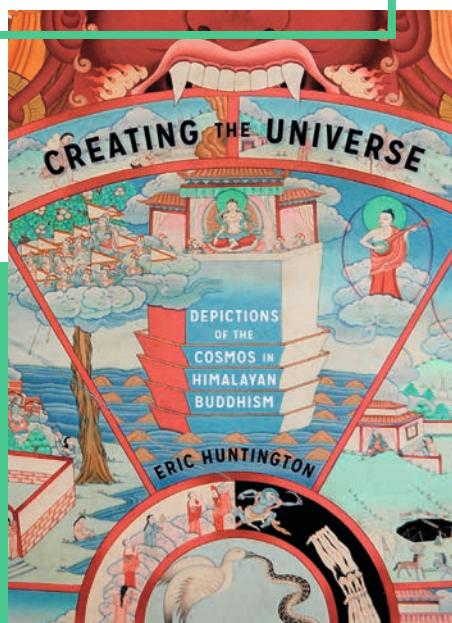
Simon Wickhamsmith

Reviewed title

Creating the Universe: Depictions of the Cosmos in Himalayan Buddhism

Eric Huntington. 2019.

Seattle: University of Washington Press
ISBN 9780295744063



When the 19th century Mongolian monk-poet Danzanravjaa named a small rectangular area of the Gobi Desert close to his monastery at Hamarin Hiid 'Shambhala', he was showing his students how Indo-Tibetan Buddhist cosmology could be translated into their own lived experience of the teaching in Mongolia. Right before them the Gobi was transformed into a Pure Land, and their world was forever changed at the point of the intersection of the guru's teaching with their practitioners' minds. Today, Shambhala remains a place of pilgrimage for Mongolians and foreigners alike, its reputation in spiritual power growing even as its appearance remains essentially the same.

Eric Huntington's lucid and beautifully-illustrated book deals with how, through image and through contemplative practice, the mundane world – such as the otherwise unremarkable part of the Gobi Desert that is Shambhala – is realized as a potent and transcendent space of spiritual transformation. The understanding of the cosmos as a dynamic aspect of the process of enlightenment reminds us that, in the

Vajrayāna practise of Himalayan Buddhism, the world and the mind are reflections of one another, and in the recognition of the cosmos as inherently enlightened, the practitioner likewise recognizes the inherent enlightened state of mind.

The book's four chapters explore this cosmological process of realization through four key ideas. The first offers an examination of the creation of the cosmos through text, one which reminds us, scholars and practitioners alike, that such a description (as with any text) is merely an approximation, bound in time and space, of the spiritual experience of an individual author, or set of authors. As Huntington says of Vasubhandhu's *Treasury of Abhidharma (Abhidharmakośakārikā)*, compiled in the 4th or 5th century, "Vasubhandhu's descriptions emphasize the features that fit his agenda, while his omissions make the unmediated use of his texts in other contexts problematic" (p.30). This acknowledgement of the slippery quality of spiritual texts is nothing new in scholarship, but for this book it bears repeating insofar as texts such as Vasubhandhu's are believed by practitioners, who rely upon such descriptions