Defining Modern Buddhism: Mr. and Mrs. Rhys Davids and the Pāli Text Society

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Early Western Buddhist scholarship was archetypically “orientalist” both in the various senses implied by Edward Said’s work on the West’s colonization of knowledge of the Orient and in the proud lineage of the dedicated and immaculate translation and interpretation of Asian-language primary sources. In this article I examine the work of Thomas William Rhys Davids (1843–1922) and Caroline Augusta Foley Rhys Davids (1857–1942), his wife and colleague in scholarship. T. W. Rhys Davids founded the Pāli Text Society in 1881 and served as its chairman until his death in 1922. Caroline, whom he married in 1894, then continued in the position. Together they dominated Pāli studies for sixty years. Their contribution includes the almost complete publication of the Pāli canon, a Pāli dictionary, numerous expository works, and the training of a large number of colleagues and students to perpetuate their influence. More than just pioneers in the field, they have provided the standard interpretation of Pāli Buddhism. They are, to extend Charles Hallisey’s observation, the “inaugural heroes” of academic studies of Buddhism. While unquestionably an orientalist construct, the features of Buddhism they documented and validated through their meticulous and dedicated study of Pāli texts remain the basis not only of Western understanding of Buddhism but of many modern Buddhist movements in Asia. They established the parameters of the rational humanist schools of Buddhism that are characteristic of what Donald Lopez has usefully referred to as modern Buddhism.

Lopez’s premise is that there are forms of Buddhism found around the contemporary world—in the West and in Asia—that share sufficient key beliefs and practices to be seen as a new school, a Buddhist sect of the global era. While it is in no way monolithic, its various manifestations have arisen over the past century as a result of Western imperialism and its scholarship, of encounters of traditional Buddhist societies with modernity, and, more recently, of political upheavals that have caused migrations of Buddhist populations to the West. Lopez offers a lineage for the new “sect,” tracing it from Ceylonese Buddhist resistance to missionaries in 1876, through writings of early Theosophists, a selection of familiar West-


2. Donald S. Lopez, A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West (Boston: Beacon, 2002).
ern and Asian practitioners and popularizers, culminating in the culturally hybrid teachings of Chogyam Trungpa, founder of the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. D. T. Suzuki and other major figures in Western writing are awarded a place in the lineage. Oddly, however, the Rhys Davids are not. Their absence is underlined by Lopez’s description of modern Buddhism, which encapsulates the interpretation they propagated precisely: “It is ancient Buddhism, and especially the enlightenment of the Buddha 2,500 years ago, that is seen as most modern, as most compatible with the ideals of the European enlightenment that occurred so many centuries later. . . . Indeed, for modern Buddhists, the Buddha knew long ago what Europe would only discover much later.” Modern Buddhism is thoroughly humanist. The Buddha is a historical hero who taught “a complete philosophical and psychological system, based on reason and restraint, as opposed to ritual, superstition and sacerdotalism, demonstrating how the individual could live a moral life without the trappings of institutional religion.” Its practice is egalitarian, lay centered, and socially committed, imbued with modernity’s ideals of reason, empiricism, science, universalism, tolerance, and the rejection of religious orthodoxy. It is an understanding of Buddhism that depends on a human founder as a model of the path to personal development.

While no Buddhist questions the historical existence of the Buddha Sakyamuni, until the emergence of modern Buddhism in the mid-nineteenth century he was not seen as the founder of the religion, or as the only Buddha, but as one of a series of Buddhas born into the world to teach the eternal dharma. This is made abundantly clear in the archaeology of Indian Buddhism—the bas-reliefs of Bharhut and ornate gateways of the Sanchi stupas represent previous Buddhas—in its earliest texts and in any number of schools of Buddhism persisting through to the present. T. W. Rhys Davids himself speaks of the tedious repetition of the lives of previous Buddhas that differ only in the details of names and places and the type of tree under which the Buddha attained awakening. As he explained, of each parallel incident mentioned the text repeats, “This, in such a case, is the rule.” His explanation of the meaning of “Tathāgata,” one of the most commonly used titles of the Buddha, also makes this point: “Tathāgata is an epithet of the Buddha. It is interpreted by Buddhaghosa . . . to mean that he came to earth for the same purposes, after having passed through the same training in former births, as all the supposed former Buddhas; and that, when he had so come, all his actions corresponded with theirs.” The shift in focus to the humanity of the Buddha as Founder of the religion is a defining feature of modern Buddhism, a mark of modernity, the necessary rupture with the past that marks the modern, but it is not one that was necessarily supported by the evidence on which the nineteenth-century scholars in this study based their conclusions.

In this article I revisit the work of T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids to elucidate the social and historical contingencies and discursive practices that gave shape to this humanist Buddhism, to demonstrate the function of the technologies of knowledge and the dynamics of discourse in its formation and dissemination. Their work is

3. Ibid., 244. Chogyam Trungpa’s system of teachings combines Buddhist teachings with other forms of Asian culture, especially the traditional arts of Japan.

4. I do not mean to imply that this is an oversight. There is simply a limit to what can be included in an anthology, and Lopez has chosen to highlight the less familiar connections. Ibid., xl.

5. Ibid., xiv. Lopez is referring to Henry Steele Olcott’s understanding of Buddhism. It could describe T. W. Rhys Davids’s position equally well, perhaps better, since Rhys Davids did not share Olcott’s interest in the less than scientific aspects of spiritualism.

6. Ibid., xiv. Lopez is referring to Henry Steele Olcott’s understanding of Buddhism. It could describe T. W. Rhys Davids’s position equally well, perhaps better, since Rhys Davids did not share Olcott’s interest in the less than scientific aspects of spiritualism.

7. He emphasized the point with a comparative table. T. W. Rhys Davids, “Introduction to the Mahāpadana Suttanta,” in Dialogues of the Buddha, translations from the Dīgha Nikāya, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (London: Oxford University Press, 1910), 3:1; tables appear on 6–7. John S. Strong, in The Buddha: A Short Biography (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 10–14, describes the process of repetition as creating a pattern of actions on how to be a Buddha, “a biographical paradigm, a Buddha-life blueprint, which they, and all buddhas, follow” (12). The repetition, the message that this Buddha, Sakyamuni, was not unique, but that he followed the pattern of many others, was precisely the point. This was also the point of auspicious signs on the body of the Buddha, noted at his birth.

useful in this endeavor precisely because their unquestionable dedication, impeccable scholarship, and immense contribution to Buddhist studies and the ongoing esteem in which they are held directs one away from simplistic notions of orientalism as error or colonial denigration of subject cultures. Extending the focus to the Pāli Text Society enables a consideration of Asian agency and participation in the process. It also offers an alternative lineage for modern Buddhism, one equally enmeshed in the East-West encounters of colonialism and modernity but that recognizes the complicity of academic philology and the institutional practices of scholarship in the process.

Colonial Beginnings
T. W. Rhys Davids’s interest in Pāli began while he was serving in the Ceylon Civil Service (1864–72). His association with Buddhism at this time was incidental—to learn Pāli he had to study with a bhikkhu. His first translation, typical of the historical bias of his time, was in numismatics and epigraphy, an outcome of his posting to the archaeologically rich area of Anuradhapura, and led in 1877 to his Ancient Coins and Measures of Ceylon, which contained the first attempt to date the death of the Buddha. He did not write on Buddhism until after his return to Britain, and a modest comment on how little he knew about Buddhism at that time, which is quoted by Ananda Wickremaratne, suggests that he was invited to do so because of popular interest in Buddhism. His first book, the highly influential Buddhism: A Sketch of the Life and Teachings of Gautama, the Buddha (1878), was compiled from the material then available in translation. This book established his reputation as a Buddhist scholar. It was followed by his translations Buddhist Birth Stories and Buddhist Suttas, both published in 1880. During the influential Hibbert Lectures of 1881, he announced the founding of the Pāli Text Society, confidently predicting the publication of the whole of the texts of the Sutta and Abhidhamma Pitakas in “no very distant period.” The inaugural committee of management included, among others willing to undertake translation, the Pāli scholars Victor Fausboll, Hermann Oldenberg, and Emile Senart. There was clearly a growing interest and activity in Pāli translation by this time. The formation of the Pāli Text Society institutionalized the study of Buddhism and the interpretation of it, which had begun much earlier. It is necessary therefore to look briefly at the earlier period.

Gotama: The Buddha of Robert Spence Hardy
Beginnings are always problematic, but a key date in this narrative is 1854, the year in which eminent Sanskrit scholar H. H. Wilson, then director of the Royal Asiatic Society, declared the start of Buddhist studies. There was now, he believed, sufficient material from diverse sources to provide “the means of forming correct opinions of Buddhism, as to its doctrines and practices.” The occasion was the publication of three books, two books by the Reverend Robert Spence Hardy, Eastern Monachism (1850) and Manual of Buddhism (1853), and the posthumous publication of Eugene Burnouf’s Le lotus de la bonne loi, which appeared about the same time. Hardy’s work offered the first systematic account of Theravada Buddhist beliefs and practices and so provided a framework to structure the

10. Wickremaratne, Genesis, 145.
11. T. W. Rhys Davids, Buddhism: A Sketch of the Life and Teachings of Gautama, the Buddha (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1881); C. A. F. Rhys Davids, “The Passing of the Founder,” Journal of the Pāli Text Society (1923): 5. His first translation would appear soon after this, and subsequent editions re-place references to previous work with those of his own. The name “Gautama” is alternatively spelled “Gotama.” There is no consistency in the texts. I have chosen to use “Gautama” throughout, except where I am quoting the work of others.
fragmentary knowledge collected to that date, the work of Alexander Csoma, Brian Houghton Hodgson, George Turnour, and others who were pioneers in the field. Though Hardy’s book was compiled from Singhalese sources rather than from the older and therefore more authoritative Pāli texts, in the absence of these, they were the uncontested authority on the “Buddhism of the South,” and when juxtaposed with Burnouf’s translations of the Sanskrit texts of Northern Buddhism they provided the basis for the cross-cultural comparisons that would reveal the essence of Buddhism, the “reality” concealed under the various local elaborations.16 Buddhist studies, as distinct from Sanskrit and Pāli translations or the missionary study of local practices, could now begin.

A most important feature of Hardy’s work was that it offered the first thorough narrative of the life of the Buddha, a “biography” pieced together by Hardy from various sources, covering his previous births through to his death, cremation, and the distribution of his relics.17 As the designation “Buddhism” suggests, Westerners had assumed, ordering the world through a Christian gaze, that the Buddha, whose image was so prevalent in Buddhist cultures, was the founder of the religion. The search for a life of the Buddha was therefore central to early studies, the logical prerequisite of the scholarly paradigms of the time—the pattern of contemporary Biblical scholarship—that sought to retrieve the very words of the Founder from the sacred texts.18 The search had been frustrated by the fact that the Buddhist texts had been composed for a different purpose. While they recount numerous episodes in the Buddha’s life, they nowhere offered the kind of life narrative Westerners sought in a biography.19

Hardy’s books now seem an unlikely basis for a field of study. He was a Wesleyan missionary to Ceylon from 1825 to 1847 and had studied Singhalese to more efficiently know the religion he aimed to supplant. He was quite explicit about his antipathy to his subject. In 1839 he had published the pamphlet The British Government and Idolatry in Ceylon, a savage attack on Buddhism aimed at undermining the British government’s patronage of “the religion of the country” stipulated in the Kandyan Convention of 1815 that had ceded control of the country to Britain.20 In the preface to Eastern Monachism he wrote: “I ask no higher reward than to be an humble instrument in assisting the ministers of the cross in their combats with this master error of the world, and in preventing the spread of the same delusion, under another guise, in regions nearer home.”21 The “master error” as he saw it was atheism; its “other guise” was materialist philosophy, which in a climate of crisis in the clash between traditional Christian teaching and new developments in science was gathering interest in Europe. This Western crisis would also inform the work of T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids and was a key factor in creating a public interest, an audience for knowledge of Buddhism in the West.

Eastern Monachism opened with an unequivocal statement of the historical humanity of Gautama. “About two thousand years before the thunders of Wycliffe were rolled against the mendicant orders of the west, Gotama Budha [sic] commenced his career as a mendicant in the east, and established a religious system that has exercised a mightier influence upon the world than the doctrines of any other uninspired teacher.”22 By opening with a reference to the fourteenth-century reformer John Wycliffe, Hardy immediately introduced two now familiar

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16. The terms Northern Buddhism and Southern Buddhism were used in early scholarship as equivalents of Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, respectively. While they reflected the observed geographical presence of these schools of Buddhism at the time, they are problematic, not least because they conceal the widespread presence of Mahayana Buddhism throughout South and Southeast Asia in earlier history.


18. Hallisey, “Roads Taken and Not Taken,” 36, describes the positivist histories of the time and the logic of seeking knowledge of the man to enable the rescue of his words from the sacred texts.

19. See the introduction to Strong, Buddha, for a concise overview of the problems of the biography in Buddhism, what is available in the various texts, and the functions of the various retellings.


21. Hardy, preface to Eastern Monachism, ix (emphasis added).

22. Ibid.
features of Western interpretation: the origin of Buddhism as a reaction against the priestcraft and ritual of institutionalized religion, and the role of the Buddha as a social reformer. The body of the work, as the title suggested, compared the Ceylonese sangha (clerical community) to the Roman Catholic clergy and implied that the modern Buddhist teachings are as far removed from the teachings of the Founder, as in his Wesleyan view, the Church of Rome is from the teachings of Jesus. Buddhism, as it is practiced in Ceylon, he wrote, is a degeneration from and ritual elaboration of the Buddha’s original teaching.

Hardy wrote on Buddhism to show its errors, and the greatest error from his perspective was that the Buddha was just a man, a great man, as was Wycliffe, but nothing more than a man. Buddhism, his teaching, was therefore “uninspired,” and left man “unaided.” “Without the . . . lightening of the Divine Eye, the thunder of the Divine Voice . . . the principle of good in man will soon be overwhelmed. . . . With these radical defects”, he concluded, “it is unnecessary to dwell on the lesser.”

Despite Hardy’s conviction, the humanity of the Buddha was far from decided in the mid-nineteenth century. Wilson, working with the same materials, concluded that even “laying aside the miraculous portions” of the sacred texts, it was, “very problematical whether any such person as Sakya Muni ever lived.” He lists numerous problems such as the discrepancies in dating his life and the lack, at that time, of any archaeological evidence of Kapilavastu, the site of the Buddha’s early life. What concerned him most was that the names of people and places in the narrative strongly suggested allegorical signification. It was for him “all very much in the style of Pilgrim’s Progress” (247–48). “It seems possible, after all,” he concluded, “that Sakya Muni is an unreal being, and that all that is related of him is as much fiction as is that of his preceding migration, and the miracles that attended his birth, his life, and his departure” (247–48). Wilson was content to leave the question open, concluding that “although we may discredit the actuality of the teacher, we cannot dispute the introduction of the doctrine” (248).

In 1854 the historical existence of the Buddha might have been generally assumed but was by no means academically established. This would be the work of the Rhys Davids.

T. W. Rhys Davids: Gautama and the Texts of Buddhism

T. W. Rhys Davids began his Pāli studies almost thirty years later with an unquestioning assumption of the historical reality of the Buddha. His sources were numismatics and epigraphy; gleanings from Turnour’s translation of the chronicle of the transmission of Buddhism to Ceylon, the Mahavamsa; and, significantly, the works of Hardy. Basic to Rhys Davids’s analytical approach to the Pāli texts was the knowledge that, even at the most generous estimate, they had been written at least a century or more after the passing of the Buddha. They were the work of his followers from a much later date, shaped by their desire to express their reverence for him. They were necessarily of a much later invention, since it was, in his opinion “difficult to believe that even his immediate disciples would have spoken of him in the exaggerated forms in which occasionally he is described.”

Starting from a conviction of the Founder’s historical reality, he simply dismissed the various names of the Buddha that caused Wilson’s doubt as “honorific epithets” inspired by hero worship. The particular problem for him was that “their constant use among the Buddhists tended . . . to veil the personality of Gautama.”

25. See C. A. F. Rhys Davids, “Passing of the Founder.” His first attempt to date the death of the Buddha appeared in 1877 in T. W. Rhys Davids, Ancient Coins and Measures. His entry “Buddhism” in the Encyclopaedia Britannica appeared in 1876. He would continue the pursuit in his Buddhist India (London: Unwin, 1903) and Early Buddhism (London: Constable, 1908). (His work remains authoritative; Hallisey, “Roads Taken and Not Taken,” 55 n. 25.)
26. For his own description of his method, see T. W. Rhys Davids, Buddhism, 16–17.
28. T. W. Rhys Davids, Buddhism, 28 (emphasis added).
necessarily external to texts, and the texts were necessarily elaborated.

Rhys Davids’s concern here articulates the difference between traditional Theravada Buddhist focus on the Buddha as teacher of the eternal dharma and model of the path to awakening and the assumptions of the modern humanist scholarship he represents. Like Hardy, he chose to refer to the Buddha as “Gautama.” He rejected the personal name Siddhartha (literally “He who has accomplished his aim”), said to have been given to the Buddha as a child, and the commonly used Sakyamuni, “Sage of the Sakyas,” as obviously later marks of respect. Gautama, by contrast, was a simple family name, and as he explained in a footnote, one that had historical credibility. It was still used in a region that the archaeologist Alexander Cunningham had, by this time, identified with Kapilavastu.29

This historical displacement between the life of the Buddha and the texts of Buddhism was crucial for T. W. Rhys Davids. The great value of Buddhism to him was that the vast collection of its extant sacred texts preserved a record of the evolution of its religious thought from its development out of Brahmanism in the fifth century BCE right through to the present. He first presented this theme, one that would inform his life’s work, in a public lecture in 1877 titled “What Has Buddhism Derived from Christianity?” which Mrs. Rhys Davids chose to publish in the memorial volume of the Journal of the Pāli Text Society following her husband’s death in 1922.30

After explaining in detail the extraordinary similarities between the two great religions, he established that, not only did Buddhism derive nothing from Christianity, there could have been very little influence in either direction. The similarities therefore were the result of the working out of a universal principle, “the same laws acting under similar conditions” (53). His lesson was that the transformation of Gautama into the Buddha that could be so clearly traced through the texts allowed Christians to see more clearly how Jesus had been transformed into the Christ (52–53). In particular, the Buddhist texts showed how a charismatic human being, a great humanist philosopher who had risen up against the ritual, priestcraft, and institutional religion of his time, had over time been deified by his followers. The extraordinary similarities in their lives, the parallel events, strengthened his case. Buddhism was a “religion whose development runs entirely parallel with that of Christianity, every episode, every line of whose history seems almost as if it might have been created for the very purpose of throwing the clearest light on the most difficult and disputed questions of the origins of the European faith” (52).

This was not only the theme of the first lecture, Mrs. Rhys Davids relays, but a passion he retained throughout his life. She recalls that only weeks before his death he encouraged three Japanese students who visited him to follow the path: “Can you trace in the history of your Buddhism,” he asked, “at what time its votaries began to ascribe divine attributes and status to the Buddha? This is worth your investigating.”31 It was the basis of the Hibbert Lectures and recurs throughout his work. Both Rhys Davids use the name Gautama (alternately Gotama) very pointedly to emphasize that the hero was a man. The title “Buddha” was for them evidence of precisely the deification process they worked to expose, the process whereby “Jesus, who recalled man from formalism to the worship of God, His Father and Their Father, became the Christ, the only begotten son of God Most High, while Gotama, the Apostle of Self-Control and Wisdom and Love, became the Buddha, the Per-
fectly Enlightened, Omniscient one, the Saviour of the World.”32 Buddhism was, to use T. W. Rhys Davids’s expression, “a mirror which allowed Christians to see themselves more clearly.”33 As a foreign religion its very “otherness” provided the emotional distance, the unfamiliarity, and the lack of attachment necessary for people to be able to see how the process of the deification of a great man and the manufacture of sacred texts operated. The principle could then be applied to reveal how the words of Jesus, his humanist morality, had similarly become obscured and sacralized through the well-intentioned, and thoroughly natural, elaborations of his disciples. It was a call for reform within his own society and offered a solution to the question of the time: what does Christianity mean in an age of science that calls into question “its divine origin and supernatural growth”?34 His consistent refrain was that Christianity, like any other religion, should be able to stand scientific scrutiny.35 In the Hibbert Lectures delivered in the series Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion in 1881, he specifically compared the Buddha to the philosophers of the European Enlightenment.36 In the preface to his translation of the Dhamma Kakka Pāvattana Sutta (1880), he wrote:

When after many centuries of thought a pantheistic or monotheistic unity has been evolved out of the chaos of polytheism . . . there has always arisen at last a school to whom theological discussions have lost their interest, and who have sought a new solution to the questions to which the theologies have given inconsistent answers, in a new system in which man was to work out here, on earth, his own salvation. It is their place in the progress of thought that helps us to understand how it is that there is so much in common between the Agnostic philosopher of India, the Stoics of Greece and Rome, and some of the newest schools in France and Germany and among ourselves.37

This same quotation is reproduced in the memorial volume forty-two years later. In this scheme the Buddha plays various roles. First he is equated with Jesus as a humanist teacher and founder of a religion, rising up against Brahmanism just as Jesus rejected Judaism. The Buddha, Jesus, and the Enlightenment thinkers all reacted against the ritual and institutional trappings of religion. Developing this scheme, Rhys Davids likens Mahayana Buddhism, a later development, to the Church of Rome. The quotation above associates the Buddha and Jesus with the philosophers and Stoics as agnostics, people “for whom theological discussions have lost their interest,” at a time when “theologies have given inconsistent answers”—such as Rhys Davids believed they were in nineteenth-century Christendom—people who “seek a solution in [a] secular system of self-reliance.”38 They were examples of people seeking a solution in a secular system of self-reliance. T. W. Rhys Davids used the history of Buddhism to establish the idea of a universal pattern of evolution, something that must inevitably unfold. By presenting original Buddhism, Gautama’s humanist philosophy, as the pinnacle of religious thought in India and demonstrating its affinity with nineteenth-century speculation, Rhys Davids proposed that post-Enlightenment secularized Protestant Christianity was the culmination of religious evolution in the West. That is, the new developments in European philosophy, far from being a threat to orthodox religion, the “master error” as Hardy and his colleagues saw them, were the pinnacle of its evolution. Hardy humanized Gautama to demonstrate the inadequacy of an ethical system that did not depend on God, and though his books fell into obscurity after those of Rhys Davids appeared, his position continued to be argued by fellow Christian defenders such as Barthelemy Saint-Hilaire. As the first line of his book The

33. T. W. Rhys Davids, Hibbert Lectures.
36. Ibid. In 1878, Max Muller had addressed the theme from the point of view of Sanskrit texts, which he studied seeking the mutually dependent evolution of language and religion.
Buddha and His Religion declared, “In publishing this book I have but one purpose in view: that of bringing out in striking contrast the beneficial truths and greatness of our spiritualistic beliefs.”39 He, like Hardy, was alarmed by the growing interest in atheistic and agnostic ideas and used Buddhism to demonstrate the inadequacies of a Godless system. However, the positions of the advocates of free thought and of its enemies both insisted on and depended on the Buddha’s being nothing more than a man. “In the whole of Buddhism there is not a race of God. Man, completely isolated, is thrown upon his own resources,” wrote Saint-Hilaire.40 “Agnostic atheism was the characteristic of the Buddha’s system of philosophy,” wrote Rhys Davids.41 The difference was that Saint-Hilaire’s statement was a condemnation; Rhys Davids’s was one of approval. Their contest over the future of Christianity in an age of science reinforced the humanity of Gautama. Though their aims are diametrically opposed, their contest confirmed, contrary to Asian traditions and the evidence of the texts, that the Buddha was nothing more than a man.42

Consuming Knowledge:
The Popular and the Academic

Mrs. Rhys Davids chose to publish the 1877 lecture as a memorial to Thomas not only because it encapsulated the theme he developed throughout his life’s work but because, as she put it, “scanty justice” had been done to his contribution as a popularizer. The lecture had been presented at St. George’s Hall in London. As Mrs. Rhys Davids comments, “He lectured much and in many places, in single lectures and in series, and for the most part to audiences of a more popular stamp than those who attended the Hibbert lectures. Very often he spoke to working men, and loved doing so, for he found them among his keenest listeners.”43 He gave a large number of public lectures, as she explained, partly because of “an incorrigible missionary spirit” (35), but also out of economic necessity. His position as professor of Pāli in University College, London, between 1882 and 1904, was paid on a casual basis. Though he held a number of positions of respect and responsibility, he did not hold a salaried academic position until his appointment to the chair of comparative religion in the Victoria University, Manchester, in 1904.44

In giving him his due as an “inaugural hero,” a foundational figure in the field of Buddhist studies, creator of a tradition of Pāli scholarship that he certainly deserves, one overlooks the fact that, as Mrs. Rhys Davids put it, “most of his books were more popular than academical” and that his work as a popularizer had a wide impact.45 Many of his books were written for a general audience, beginning with the classic Buddhism, which was published in 1878 under the auspices of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in its series Non-Christian Religious Systems. It went through many editions and sold well. The 1882 edition, just four years after the first, is inscribed “Tenth Thousand.” The Hibbert Lectures came out in 1881 in the series On the Origin and Growth of Religion; Buddhism: Its History and Its Literature appeared in 1896 in the History of Religions series; Buddhist India, a survey of the social and political conditions in which Buddhism arose, was published in 1903 in the Story of the Nations series (this was written after his first visit to India in 1899–1900.

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41. T. W. Rhys Davids, Buddhism, 207.
42. In Snodgrass, “Alterity: Buddhism as the Other of Christianity,” in Presenting Japanese Buddhism, I discuss at greater length how this discursive engagement shaped Western knowledge of Buddhism.
44. This was the first university post created in Britain for that purpose. His teaching covered all religions except those of Greece and Rome, which were covered by the teachers of classics. Ibid., 15–16. He held numerous positions: secretary and librarian of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1885–1904; president of the Manchester Oriental Society; and president of the India Society, 1910. Among his awards are doctor of laws, University of Edinburgh; doctor of letters, Manchester University; and doctor of science from Copenhagen and Sheffield. For details of his financial position, see Wickremaratne, Genesis, chap. 10. His main source of income before 1904 was his position as secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society.
and reinforced his early research into historical background of the Buddha); and Early Buddhism (1908) was part of Constable’s series Religions, Ancient and Modern. He also wrote entries on “Buddha” and “Buddhism” for the Encyclopaedia Britannica. These works reached a much wider audience than did the limited editions of the books and journals of the Pāli Text Society.

The mission of the popular work is not easily separated from the academic publications. It shines through in his prefaces, introductory essays, and footnotes to his translations of Pāli texts, as examples already quoted indicate. The association between Gautama and the philosophers, for instance, is quite explicitly made by a footnote to a brief account of Gautama’s life. Rhys Davids mentions that, after preaching his first sermon, the Buddha retired for some time to a quiet life in Migadaya Wood. The note appended to this apparently innocuous comment informs the reader that many modern leaders of metaphysical thought, notably Spinoza, Descartes, Berkeley, Hobbes, Locke, Comte, Mill, and Spencer, have similarly been private, non-professorial men and that Leibnitz, Hume, and Schopenhauer are striking exceptions. The commentary sits outside the body of the text, but nevertheless reflects the reading of it, as does the association of the Buddha and the philosophers in the introduction to the translation.

The humanist project also impacted on the translation. Although T. W. Rhys Davids advised against translating Buddhist technical terms such as nirvana, aware that any word borrowed from the vocabulary of Christianity would inevitably carry Christian connotations, it was he who first translated the equally difficult term bodhi with the English word “Enlightenment,” its capitalization denoting its association with the European philosophers. This remains standard usage. R. C. Childers’s Pāli-English dictionary (1872–75), the only one available at the time, explicitly defined bodhi in distinction from the deductive knowledge and learned knowledge of the European Enlightenment. In another example, Rhys Davids spoke of the attainment of Buddhahood as “the crisis under the Bo-tree,” and interpreted it as a psychological experience rather than a religious one. In his Pāli dictionary he writes: “Nibbana is purely and solely an ethical state to be reached in this birth by ethical practices, contemplation and insight. It is therefore not transcendental.”

Asian Buddhists and the Pāli Text Society

The Pāli Text Society nevertheless had the strong support of Asian Buddhist elites from its inauguration. The king of Siam was its patron, extending his duty as dhammaraja to this foreign venture, and fully 50 percent of individual subscribers were Ceylonese bhikkhus. Two Japanese monks, Kenjū Kasawara Nanjō Bun’yū, who were at Oxford studying with Max Muller at the time, became life members. The first issue of the society’s journal reproduced a letter from more than seventy of the most prominent members of the sangha offering advice, manuscripts, and translation assistance. Letters of benediction from Ceylonese Theras show enthusiasm for the project, gratitude to the scholars who volunteered to do the work, but also a degree of apprehension. They warned against confusing the Pitaka texts with commentaries and noncanonical works, mentioned past blunders by Europeans, and strongly suggested they obtain the assistance of learned Theras of Ceylon. They provided a list of thirty suitable and willing bhikkhus. This strong Asian Buddhist support continued. A summary of the society’s financial records in 1922 shows that about half of its funds from its inauguration up to that time, both in general donations and donations to the separate dictionary support fund, came from Asian benefactors. Even though the translators worked for

46. T. W. Rhys Davids, Buddhism, 53.
47. Previous translations such as Hardy’s had simply referred to “attaining bodhi” or “achieving Buddhahood.”
51. The work of translation was done almost exclusively by Western scholars who volunteered their services. The accounts show some honorariums for translators, but the amounts are small.
the love of it, production costs were considerable. The society could not have carried out its work without them.52

Asian Buddhist patrons funded a number of the society’s publications.53 This was not only a gesture of support and a modern transformation of the traditional merit-making practice of sponsoring the propagation of the dharma. It was also a way of ensuring that texts they considered important were disseminated in the West. Asian patronage and endorsement did not guarantee prompt publication, however. When the prominent Ceylonese Buddhist reformer Anagarika Dharmapala passed through England on his way to Chicago in 1893, he presented Rhys Davids with a manuscript of Yogāvacara’s Manual. When it eventually appeared thirteen years later, retranslated by Mrs. Rhys Davids, she explained that it had been published even then only because “it was incumbent upon us to meet the wishes of one who had shown the Society so much generosity.”54 It was clearly not a priority from her point of view. She apologized that “the publication of a translation of it now, when so much important matter in the Pāli canon is still only accessible to Pāli readers, may seem untimely,” and further undermined its authority by criticizing the quality of the manuscript and the late date of its composition. She warned the reader that this was not original Buddhism; it was of historical interest but was of little value to those who seek the Founder’s true gospel. In spite of the importance it held for practicing Buddhists, the editor’s preface effectively excluded the work as a nonauthoritative copy of a nonoriginal text, on a subject of dubious relation to Buddhism. Even the translated title colored its reception. Mysticism was the antithesis of humanism.

My point is the difficulty Asian Buddhists had in being heard, even though they made considerable attempts to intervene in the discourse. Language was a problem: few local translators would have the specialist vocabulary. They had neither the established authority nor the connections needed for access to a reputable metropolitan publishing house and its systems of distribution. Other obstacles were the rules of the Western academic paradigm that determined which texts were relevant and authoritative representations of Buddhism. These were determined in relation to Western interest, not the recommendation of Asian Buddhists. Though enthusiastic partners in the project to publish the Pāli canon, the aims of the society and its Asian patrons diverged.

East-West Collaboration

The Abhidhammattha-sangaha was another work published only after determined Asian initiative. This time, however, there was strong Asian involvement in the production of the English text. The Ceylonese sangha had urged its publication in 1881, the year the Pāli Text Society was founded, as the best introduction to the study of Theravada Buddhist philosophy, the Abhidhamma. It was eventually published in 1910 after a Burmese group, the Buddhist Society of the Buddhāsāsana Samāgama, brought Mrs. Rhys Davids into contact with Burmese scholar Shwe Zan Aung (1871–1932).

There were several reasons for the delay in bringing this text to print, as Mrs. Rhys Davids explained.55 When she began work with the society after her marriage, she was unaware of the advice given by the Thera in 1881. She was interested in the Abhidhamma Pitakas, but in the pursuit of the original demanded by the discipline had “judged it better to get on with the Abhidhamma sources themselves.”56 Her translation of the first book of the Abhidhamma Pitaka was published in 1900 as A Buddhist Manual

52. T. W. Rhys Davids, “Report for 1882,” Journal of the Pāli Text Society (1922–23): 60–65. The one- or two-guinea annual subscriptions of many Westerners are dwarfed by the £500 of the king of Siam and the £500 each of the Japanese Baron Iwasaki and Kojiro Matsuoka. Most generous of all was Edward T. Sturdy, Esq., who donated £800.

53. Several volumes were published under the patronage of the king of Siam, others by the raja of Bhinga. The ranee of Bhinga made separate substantial donations.

54. C. A. F. Rhys Davids, “Preface,” in Manual of a Mystic (Yogāvacara’s Manual), trans. L. Woodward (London: Pāli Text Society by H. Milford, 1916), vii. The raja of Bhinga not only had subsidized the printing but also had arranged for a translation by a Ceylonese bhikkhu. This was apparently discarded.


56. Ibid., xi.
of Psychological Ethics from the Pāli of the Dhamma-sangani.” Aung sent her his manuscript in 1905, “offered most generously to defray the expenses of printing, and waited three years—till the autumn of 1908” while she translated the work herself. The final version was a collaborative effort, “the first attempt to treat of Buddhist philosophy by East and West working hand in hand.” Aung is credited with the translation of the published work, Mrs. Rhys Davids with revising and editing it.

Mrs. Rhys Davids comments favorably on both the knowledge of subject matter and the mastery of idiomatic English of her Burmese colleague, but an appendix to the book compiled from almost three hundred folio pages of Aung’s criticisms and her editorial responses to them testifies to the considerable negotiation between them. The editor included it because of its value in elucidating some of the terms and concepts that most puzzle inquirers. It stands as a testimony to the disagreements between them over points of interpretation—the limits of the philological method when viewed from within the tradition—but also to the ideal of academic objectivity and openness to critique that quality scholarship demanded. The appendix, in particular, is a monument to the generous attitude to constructive critique, to the willingness to acknowledge errors and accept advice that was part of the mission of the society from the start.

The degree of intense and constructive criticism is apparent from their respective introductory essays. Mrs. Rhys Davids scrutinized the texts used by Aung, their chronology and dating, indicating the problems she had with his disregard for such basics. He used sources from several different periods including those of his contemporary teacher, the reformer Ledi Sayādaw, whose innovations, she wrote, “have not yet met with any general acceptance among readers trained in the established commentarial traditions.” She nevertheless conceded the value of the work as “an expression of the living meaning” of Buddhist philosophical terms in contrast to the “etymological connotation” (her emphasis) of Western philological expertise. Aung complained of the inadequacy of the philological method: translations based on the literal rendering of terms too often “have for us no meaning whatever.” In a thoughtful reflection on the difficulties of translation, Mrs. Rhys Davids agrees that words “may be used in a sense that has very little direct relation to the etymological sense creating pitfalls for the unaided Westerner, and for this we need the living tradition to help us.” Much of the appendix is devoted to the discussion of the precise inflections of various terms available in English to render Buddhist concepts. An example of this, and evidence of Aung’s Western education, is when Aung questions the editor’s translation of vivesato as “intuitive knowledge”: “I am not clear in what sense you use ‘intuitive’ to express vivesato, which connotes superiority over other kinds of knowledge. Surely not in the Mansellian sense? Or are you restricting ‘intuitions’ to perceptions a priori? . . . Nor do I think you have used it in a Lockean sense since there is no immediate comparison between the two ideas; much less, therefore, is Spinoza’s usage compatible.”

58. C. A. F. Rhys Davids, preface to Compendium, xi.
59. Ibid., xii.
60. C. A. F. Rhys Davids and Shwe Zan Aung, appendix, Compendium, 221-85.
61. C. A. F. Rhys Davids, preface to Compendium, xii.
63. Also of interest is that the English translation of the title successfully positioned the book out of the exotic of Asian belief systems and into the mainstream of the Dewey system, filed as philosophy. Books on Buddhism sit around 294; Buddhist Birth Stories is in mythology, 398; Compendium is with philosophy at 181.4. Dhamma-sangani (Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics) is at 294-3, among Buddhist texts.
64. C. A. F. Rhys Davids, preface to Compendium, ix. Ledi Sayādaw (1846-1923), a modern reformer, revived the practice of vipassana meditation and wrote on Buddhism in the vernacular language to make it widely accessible. He is another patriarch of modern Buddhism.
65. Ibid., xiv.
69. Aung, appendix, Compendium, 225.
Competition Systems of Authority

The effort expended in the exercise of cotranslation indicates the care taken by both sides to preserve the integrity of their systems of validation. For the editor, this meant strict adherence to the rules of academic philology and care for the correct dating of texts, with deference given to the earliest; identifying authorship and authority; mapping changes; seeking the rational; dismissing the “elaborations” and the “metaphysical.” Mrs. Rhys Davids excluded the sections on meditational states, for example, on the grounds that they were evidence of contamination from Mahayana Buddhism. Her guiding principle was that “the culture that is distinctly Buddhist of the Theravādin sort is mainly comprised under the twin branches, philosophy of mind (psychology and logic) and philosophy of conduct and ethics.” Though this now resonates with popular Western understanding of Buddhism, the modern Burmese Buddhist Aung was aware of how limiting it was.

Aung worked between the two systems. He had graduated with a bachelor of arts from Rangoon College (1892), where he had begun his study of Pāli under Western scholars Emil Forchhammer and James Gray. He came to Pāli via philology and began studying Buddhist philosophy three years later under learned Buddhists U. Gandhamā and Ledi Sayādaw. As a spokesman for Burmese Buddhism, he was bound to preserve doctrinal integrity. The patriarchs of the lineage were for him not simply later voices, nor could he easily dismiss the work of his teacher. As he explained to the editor in response to her question on the authority of Buddhist belief: “I am only acting as a mouthpiece of my country’s teachers. I have no theories of my own, I am at best an interpreter of Burmese views based on Ceylon commentary and the works of Buddhaghosa.” He would later attempt to articulate the Buddhist rules of truth and the system of “strict critical comparison of different parts of the scripture”, Buddhists exegetists “have their own rules of criticism which they rigorously apply.”

Yet he happily turned to science, in this case hypnosis, when it seemed to offer validation for Buddhist teaching: “Those who have been accustomed to associate mind with brain, may scoff at the idea of the Arūpa-world. And yet modern hypnotism, in a small way, shows the likelihood of the existence of a world with thought, minus brain activity. How far these Buddhist beliefs are, or are not, borne out by modern science, it is for each scientific generation to declare.”

Aung’s responses to Mrs. Rhys Davids’s criticisms of the text in his introductory essay, and the critique of the appendix, is framed within Western philosophy, showing both his command of the field and its inadequacy to accommodate Buddhist concepts.

Aung was an outstanding example of the modern Western-educated Asian elite that formed in Asia in the late nineteenth century, both in countries under colonial rule and in Japan, which was not. As a class they were committed to science and modernity, aware of, and pursuing, intellectual movements in the West, but with a commitment to the intellectual achievements of their heritage. His essay in *Compendium of Philosophy* is a revised and expanded version of an article titled “The Processes of Thought,” which he had published in the Burmese English-language journal *Buddhism*. Though undated, it must predate his contact with Mrs. Rhys Davids.

70. C. A. F. Rhys Davids, preface to *Compendium*, xvii–xxi.
71. Ibid., xxii, xvii.
72. Ibid., xiii. Aung was in government service, appointed treasury officer and headquarter’s magistrate at Henzada.
73. Ibid., xiii.
75. Shwe Zan Aung, “Buddhism and Science,” *Journal of the Burma Research Society* (1911–77), web.ukonline.co.uk.theravada/nibbanacom/szaung04.htm (accessed 1 June 2006). The online version gives no date or page numbers. It is interesting to note that this English-language journal with Burmese distribution began shortly after the publication of the *Compendium*.
77. Ibid., 285. Mrs. Rhys Davids’s footnote commented that this is “on all fours” with Fechner in mind on plants.
78. Ibid., 85, 64.
in 1905. The existence of the journal, and this presentation of a rational scientific Buddhism written by a Western-educated Buddhist layman, is indicative of a local movement toward modern Buddhism at this time.

**Buddhism and Asian Modernity**

Aung shared with the Buddhist nationalists of Ceylon, Thailand, and Japan a desire to bring knowledge of Buddhism to the West, to demonstrate Buddhist intellectual priority. The Pāli Text Society provided a vehicle for this. A considerable proportion of the essays in the journal were written by Asian Buddhists. Aung dedicated the *Compendium of Philosophy* to “that small but devoted band of scholars, living and dead, whose self sacrificing labours have paved the way for the appreciation by Western Aryans of the teaching of the GREATEST OF THE ARYAS” (emphasis in original). The frontispiece quotes the Sanyutta-Nikāya (chap. iv, verse 194) of the Pāli canon, speaking of the messengers from the East passing the message of nibbana to the messengers from the West. The publication in 1910 is still celebrated in Burma, with a current Web site declaring it “an epoch in the history of modern Buddhist scholarship and study,” reminding us that Asian participation in the international was also a performance available for reinterpretation in the indigenous discourses of nationalism and Buddhist revival.

**On the Death of the Founder**

The Buddhism created by the text-centered study was rational, humanistic, validated by the apparatus of Western scholarship, and centered on the historical actuality of Gautama the man and was unabashedly different from Buddhist practice. As T. W. Rhys Davids himself wrote, “The Buddhism of the Pāli Pitakas is not only a quite different thing from Buddhism as hitherto commonly received, but antagonistic to it.” Nevertheless, when he died, letters from India, Ceylon, Burma, and Japan paid tribute to him, showing deep gratitude for his promotion of Buddhism in the West. He has been “able to place before the world the best we had ever acquired in our history,” he “had appeared at a time when missionary prejudice was misrepresenting Buddhism and undermining the [faith of our young people] and beckoned them back to the glories of Buddhism”; “he has done for us what no others have done or can do.” The tributes encapsulate the interconnected issues of emerging Asian modernity in a world where being modern was defined in Western terms and of the Pāli Text Society’s role in promoting, extending, and enabling indigenous Buddhists’ initiatives in the process. The interest Buddhism had aroused in the West as a religion of science, a philosophy comparable to that of the latest Western thought, and a religion for the modern world—precisely the features that attracted Rhys Davids—provided the opportunity for pride in local heritage and an indigenous basis for a modern national identity. It made Buddhism acceptable to the Western-educated Asian elites, and with their support, the religious reform already initiated within certain clerical circles was brought into a more general public arena.

Buddhist reform had begun in Ceylon much earlier in the nineteenth century, and though its origins predate the British rule there, the Christian missions undeniably played a part in its formation. In the early 1860s Mohottivatte Gunananda, who had apparently decided to fight Christianity on its own terms formed the Society for the Propagation of Buddhism, in obvious imitation of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. This was the start of “protestant Buddhism,” consciously modeled on Christian forms, Christian models of education, Sunday
schools, the publishing of pamphlets and tracts, and even down to adopting an oratorical style of the Evangelists. Mohottivatte argued in the Western manner, quoting from the Bible to disprove the omniscience and omnipotence of God. At the famous event at Panadure in 1873 where a group of fifty monks led by Mohottivatte successfully debated against missionaries—the start of Lopez’s lineage of modern Buddhism—he quoted passages from the Old Testament as evidence of devil worship and blood sacrifice in Christianity and countered the missionaries’ attacks on Buddhist cosmology with Biblical accounts of the sun moving around a stationary earth. This was a turning point in attracting public support from Buddhism. Mohottivatte published a Sinhalese version of The Questions of King Milinda in 1878.

The point is that the formation of the Pāli Text Society was preceded by at least two decades of active indigenous reform. During this time local Buddhist leaders attempted to defend Buddhism against Christian attacks, to show the comparative worth of Buddhism against Christianity, and to win the support of the local Western-educated elite on whom the future leadership of the society depended. Mohottivatte’s initiative in inviting Theosophists Henry Steele Olcott and Helena Blavatsky to Ceylon in 1879 shows how he had made the most of Western interest in Buddhism in this campaign. He organized the tour to start from the Buddhist strongholds of the south so that by the time they arrived in the capital Colombo, they were already famous as “The White Buddhists” from the press reports that preceded them. It is no surprise that Buddhist reform leaders would greet the formation of the Pāli Text Society two years later with enthusiastic support. The work of the Pāli Text Society continued the reform trajectory, but because of its status, its authority, and its institutionalization within Western publishing circles, it was able to lift the initiatives to another plane.

Gautama in Modern Asia

Buddhist modernity in Asia had also produced its own rationalized version of the life of the Buddha, often using historical and geographical detail to add a sense of modern scientific credibility to the accounts. They tended not to discard the miraculous in the way that Rhys Davids had done, but to interpret it symbolically, accepting the canon in its entirety, but giving it a meaning of contemporary relevance, a retelling for the times in the manner of the long tradition of sacred texts. In some cases the humanity of the Buddha was emphasized by adding personal details and incidents not found in the traditional narratives. The result was an equally earthbound Gautama, but the authority of the canon was not impeached. In a negotiation between the demands of modernity and the integrity of tradition, they offered a sacred biography rather than a scientific history. Since the historicity of the Buddha was always accepted, if not central, the Western construct was seen less as a challenge than as a partial representation.

There can be no doubt that Asian Buddhist leaders, such as Shwe Zan Aung and Mohottivatte, were well aware of the deficiencies of the Western construct of Buddhism as a representation of their religion, but the Buddhism it offered—the epitome of Enlightenment humanist values, a rational religion, one that could withstand scientific scrutiny—was immensely useful in their own projects of creating Asian Buddhist modernities. As the tribute from the Indian reform leader Mahashchandra Ghosh, a representative of the Hindu reform movement the Brahmo Samaj, suggested, the work of T. W. Rhys Davids and his colleagues had produced the Buddhist equivalent of the modern Hinduism that Rammohan Roy and the Brahmo Samaj sought to construct: the basis of an indigenous modernity that the nation’s educated elite could adopt with pride.

86. On the Ceylonese Buddhist reform movements in the nineteenth century, see Malalgoda, Buddhism in Sinhalese Society.
88. For an account of the pamphlets and publications, see Malalgoda, Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 228.
Orientalism Redeployed

Perhaps the clearest demonstration of the value of Rhys Davids’s work is in the famous lecture delivered by the charismatic lay Buddhist reform leader from Ceylon, Anagarika Dharmapala, at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, 1893. The lecture consisted almost entirely of quotes from Western authorities. He repeated Rhys Davids’s scheme of religious development but gave it the twist of Asian priority. “It is a remarkable indication of the subtlety of Indian speculation that Gautama should have seen deeper than the greatest of modern idealists.” He accepted the rational image of Gautama but rejected the Western interpretation of the doctrine that it was created to support: Western scholars had but scratched the surface. Positivists find it a positivism, while materialists thought it a materialist system; agnostics see it as agnostic. The list goes on mentioning Schopenhauer’s pessimism, Fichte’s pantheism, monotheism, theism, and idealism. All are rejected. Buddhism may contain the wisdom of these Western systems of thought but cannot simply be equated with them. Gautama had the answers to questions the West was only now asking, and India had produced this man twenty-five hundred years ago.

I have written elsewhere on the importance of Buddhism at the World’s Parliament of Religions. Apart from the papers by Buddhist representatives from Ceylon, Siam, and Japan, each of whom presented an interpretation of their religion in negotiation with the existing assumptions of the Western discourse, it was the topic of a number of papers by missionaries and theologians, demonstrating the continuing centrality of Buddhism in the debates on the future of Christianity. The parliament was an extension of the lineage we have already seen. Dharmapala and the Japanese delegates had met before, and the brotherhood forged on the basis of shared agendas for promoting modern Buddhist Buddhism at the event would continue into the pan-Asian movements of the early twentieth century. The event also brings Paul Carus and D. T. Suzuki into the lineage. The shared heritage of the pilgrimage sites of the Buddha’s life in India championed by the Mahabodhi Society, formed by Dharmapala in 1890, created a platform for a pan-Asian Buddhist brotherhood of modern nationalist Buddhism, and inserts the Rhys Davids into the lineage proposed by Lopez.

Conclusion

Research on German orientalism has shown the need to extend the scope of orientalist analysis beyond the colonial context that Said insists on. The simplest way of achieving this is to recognize Said’s undeniably influential work as a case study of the much more general process of the way one society forms knowledge of another.

James Clifford made a similar observation in his review of Orientalism in 1980. Sheldon Pollack’s studies of naturalizing inequalities in Indian society, and of the impact of German Indology in the National Socialist state, alerted him to the possibility that orientalism might be “powerfully understood with reference to the national political culture in which it is practiced.” As he put it, “Orientalist constructions in the service of colonial domination may be only a specific historical instance of a larger, transhistorical, albeit locally inflected, interaction of knowledge and power.” Scholars of Japan have usefully applied an “orientalist critique” inspired by Orientalism to Western writings on Japan, though regularly prefaced by the observation that Japan was never a colony of the West. The point is that much of the valuable work inspired by Said’s book does not fit within the bounds of the colonial, and that which does, such as the
work of the Rhys Davids, cannot be accounted for with a one-dimensional, one-sided image of power as nothing more than domination.

I suggest that rather than stretch orientalism to encompass such situations, one return to the Foucauldian concepts from which Said worked. From this perspective Said’s orientalism offers a well-documented and potent example of the mutually generative power/knowledge nexus, of the technologies of discourse at play in the particular historical context of French colonial power in the Middle East. By repositioning the work within its Foucauldian inspiration, its colonial context becomes a particular example of a set of relations of power such as those that are also intrinsic to nationalism and imperialism, to situations of contest within a nation, or among contesting contributors to a field of discourse at any of its multiple levels. Colonialism is then no longer the determining or defining mode. The overarching binaries implied by the colonial model are disrupted and, as the processes shaping the definition of modern Buddhism show, create a space for local agency, local scholars, and vernacular scholarship, inviting complexity into the analysis. The hegemonic power of colonial domination gives way to a more subtle vision of the micropolitics of contest and negotiation.

The work of the Rhys Davids undeniably took place in a colonial context and exhibits many of the key characteristics of orientalism described by Said. Most obvious, it created an object that had much more to do with Western concerns of the time than with the lived reality of Asia; it denigrated this contemporary lived reality; it glorified a distant past against which the present was unfavorably measured; and it provided tools for maintaining Western domination in Asia. Yet the Pāli Text Society was strongly supported by Asians; the knowledge produced was appropriated by them and redeployed to indigenous advantage. In this example, returning to Said’s Foucauldian inspiration creates space to consider the importance of Asian agency in the formation of modern Buddhism. It also revives the importance of the technologies of discourse: the socially and historically determined processes that determine who might speak, on what topics, and with what authority and that control the publication and distribution of knowledge.

While the marginalization and silencing of Asian voices in Western discourse described by Said was very real, the process by which this occurred was not simply a colonial power of suppression. The story of modern Buddhism points to the more subtle operation of what Michel Foucault has referred to as “the regime of truth,” that is, the assembly of exclusionary rules within any society that control who might speak, with what authority, on what subjects, and from what perspectives, the rules that determine how scholarship must be carried out and that even extend to the processes of peer review, publication, distribution, and circulation of knowledge.

Western scholars who attempted to challenge the established truth similarly went unheard. The construct of Pāli Buddhism performed too important a function in the crucial discourses on the future of Christianity in the time of science to allow its modification, and the rules operated to preserve its integrity, to limit unauthorized speech. For Asian Buddhists to successfully intervene in the Western discourse, to have their voices heard, and to challenge existing Western knowledge, they needed to play the game on Western terms. In time this did happen, as seen to a limited extent with Shwe Zan Aung.

Western domination of these rules takes on a particular importance in the late-nineteenth-century context of social change in Asia and the increasing dissemination of knowledge through the popular press. Buddhist traditions of lineage defined by the direct transmission of teaching from master to disciple were replaced in modern Buddhism by transmission through the discur-


97. Emile Senart, e.g., who proposed in his Essai sur la legend du Buddha (Essay on the Legend of the Buddha) (Paris, 1875) that the Buddha was an allegorical figure, was dismissed for relying on later texts.
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sive modes of public lectures and publications, the networks of modern communications. It is therefore subject to the formative processes of reading, interpretation, appropriation, to the play of discursive fields. Foucault’s attention to discourse therefore seems a most appropriate tool for tracing its history.