



**Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung
Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology**

CALL FOR PAPERS

Workshop

Sangha Economies:

Temple Organisation and Exchanges in Contemporary Buddhism

21 – 22 September 2017

Organisers: Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko, Christoph Brumann, Beata Świtek
(Research Group “Buddhist Temple Economies in Urban Asia”)

Venue: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany

No other “world religion” has given monasticism such a central role as Buddhism in which the *sangha* – the community of monks and, where recognised, nuns – is one of the “three jewels” (together with the Buddha and his teachings). While the first monks were itinerant mendicants, their successors settled down, eventually establishing prosperous and often very long-lived institutions. When these houses housed hundreds or even thousands of monks or nuns, it is only natural that economic and management concerns arise. But these are no less pressing when, as in Japan, most temples are sustained by just a single priest and his family.

Questions pertaining to the economic organisation of Buddhist monasteries and temples have been neglected for a long time, reflecting the otherworldly orientation of Buddhist doctrine that sees the attachment to worldly riches as a hindrance for salvation and enlightenment. In recent years, however, there is a perceptible turn towards “managing monks” (Jonathan Silk), with several historical studies showing how economic pursuits were part and parcel of Buddhist monasticism from early on. Contemporary Buddhism is increasingly being scrutinised for its economic entanglements, both in theological attempts to construct a Buddhist economic ethics and in empirical investigations.

In this international workshop, we wish to focus on the *sangha*, its institutions, and its interactions with the laity. We apply an empirical perspective: doctrinal reasoning is important in real-life situations but does not suffice to explain the actual flow of goods and services within, towards, and away from Buddhist temples. We seek rich ethnographic studies of such flows, how they are socially and politically embedded, and how clergy and laity justify and evaluate them. We are particularly interested in economic transactions that involve monks, priests and nuns

within the classic Buddhist traditions of Theravada and Mahayana (Buddhist lay movements and lay practices that bypass the clergy are outside our focus).

Crucial aspects include the conceptualisation of exchanges with the *sangha*. Can there be such a thing as a “free” and pure-hearted gift, devoid of the self-interest that, in orthodox formulations, would subvert the intended merit-making of the layperson? Payments for ritual services can be interpreted as donations but also as fees and reimbursements, with symbolic distinction being symbolically marked. How do gifts to the *sangha* affect the status and credibility of giver and recipient, and what happens when family and kin ties influence the flow of resources?

Equally important is the economics of the institutions that build on such clergy-laity exchanges. Can one speak of a unified temple economy at all when sub-units such as colleges, households within temple precincts, and/or individual monks and nuns transact autonomously on the basis of separate property and funds? What is considered acceptable in terms of commercial activities, investments, and paid visits? State law and institutions, expectations of charity and social welfare contributions, and the nature of the setting (with cities having more volatile social relations) also have an influence. Finally, we are interested in the self-reflection of Buddhist practitioners and believers, particularly when socialist ideologies or Buddhist modernism have branded traditional modes of temple support as questionable or even parasitic. Is there a discourse of crisis or is regeneration also a possibility?

We expect participants to pre-circulate their papers and, after the workshop, to revise them for an edited volume or special journal issue by 15 January 2018.

Abstracts of proposals (500 words maximum) should reach all three convenors **by 1 March 2017** (abrahms@eth.mpg.de, brumann@eth.mpg.de, switek@eth.mpg.de). Please send inquiries to all of us. The Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology will cover travel and accommodation costs for accepted speakers.