The unbearable impermanence of things

Reflections on Buddhism, cultural memory and heritage conservation

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All is impermanent. And what is the all that is impermanent? The eye is impermanent, visible objects (…) visual consciousness (…) whatever is experienced as pleasant or neither unpleasant nor pleasant, born of eye-contact, is impermanent.

(Samyutta Nikaya 35.43, IV: 28)

(…) they went to search for old broken statues of the Buddha to worship (…) At some place they found a neck or body, at some places they found the hair or an arm or the breast, at some places they found a head which had fallen far away (…) They brought them there to piece together and repair with mortar, to make them beautiful and fine in form and appearances (…) to mend and restore into large, fresh-looking and exceedingly beautiful statues of the Buddha.

(Sukhothai Inscription no. 2, mid-fourteenth century, in Prasert and Griswold [1992: 393])

(…) deterioration and disappearance of any item of the cultural or natural heritage constitutes a harmful impoverishment of all the nations of the world.

(UNESCO World Heritage Convention, ICOMOS 1972)

Introduction

Critiques of Eurocentric notions of cultural heritage and historic conservation have been voiced in recent years by both scholars and practitioners in the field (Kreps 2003). Their general thrust is that conservation can no longer be premised upon seemingly universal – though in fact Western – ideas of aesthetic and historic value, but must reflect in the first place the cultural values and religious beliefs of the community for whom heritage is preserved. Focusing on Asia's Buddhist heritage, this chapter offers neither a critique of 'archaeological discourse' (Byrne 1995) nor recommendations based on archaeological fieldwork (Karlström 2005[1]), but rather a meditation on the various dimensions of Buddhism's material legacy. Buddhism originated in

northern India in the sixth century BCE and by the second half of the first millennium CE had spread to East and Southeast Asia and diversified into various sects (Theravada, Mahayana, Tantric, Chan/Zen). In the course of its millennial history, Buddhism has shaped in fundamental ways both the religious and cultural heritage of most of Asia, from Afghanistan to Japan. One of the most visible manifestations of this common Asian heritage is 'Buddhist art', including painted and sculpted images, reliquaries and monasteries.[2] Prominent cultural properties of the countries where they are located, Buddhist works of art and architecture are notable at the international level as well: as of 2009, eighteen Buddhist sites situated in ten different countries had been inscribed on the World Heritage List, to which can be added six more sites where there is a significant presence of Buddhist monuments.[3]

Buddhism has moulded not only Asia's religiosity and its attendant visual and material cultures, but also the social memory of local, regional and transnational communities of faith. The concept of social or collective memory, as outlined by Halbwachs (1980; 1992) in the early 1940s and elaborated more recently by Nora (1989) and Connerton (1989) among others, has in the notion of place not a mere trope but a crucial element. Physical sites that are the foci of customary practices or 'traditions', associated in turn with the memory of events (both real and mythical), anchor a community's identity in space and make possible its perpetuation across time. Mnemonic sites, as well as commemorative objects and rituals, constitute thus the literal basis of social memory, which historians tend to see, however, less as a product of people's spontaneous remembrance than a conscious manufacturing by the ruling elites (Gillis 1994). Egyptologist Jan Assmann (2006: 10–11) has put forth the notion of cultural memory as comprising '[m]ajor elements of cultural life, more particularly everything that is associated with religion'. Drawing on Halbwachs's formulation but rejecting his distinction between lived (or experiential) memory (*mémoire vécue*) and tradition, Assmann argues that tradition 'can be understood as a system of memory sites, a system of markers that enable the individual who lives in this tradition to belong, that is, to realize his potential as the member of a society in the sense of a community where it is possible to learn, remember, and to share in a culture' (ibid.: 9). In this case, cultural memory encompasses every aspect of tradition − language, customs, rituals, monuments and written texts (what can also be labelled as tangible and intangible heritage) − and even 'unconscious aspects of transmission and transfer across the generations' (ibid.: 26).

Written texts were critical to the diffusion of Buddhism as a world religion and to the formation of communities of faith across Asia. The vast amount of Buddhist texts is usually classified into the two broad categories of canonical scriptures − the 'Three Baskets' of sermons, monastic rules and analytical texts, first written down in the first century BCE − and extra-canonical texts, including commentaries to the Theravada Canon in Pali, Mahayana doctrinal and exegetical treatises in Sanskrit, and devotional and liturgical texts in the vernacular languages of East and Southeast Asia. The memorisation and recitation of the scriptures, still commonly practiced by monks today, demonstrate the perpetuation of Buddhism as a religious tradition based upon the oral and textual transmission of the word of the teacher and his disciples.[4] Given that this chapter's focus is not on texts but on devotional objects and sites, cultural practices to be discussed here include the construction, consecration, circulation, appropriation, restoration and destruction of religious images and monuments. These practices, which are documented as early as the fourth century BCE when monastic chapters (*sangha*) first formed, appear to cluster and intersect around seemingly antithetical concepts. The following discussion shall be informed by three sets of conceptual polarities: between the canonical doctrine of impermanence and the materiality of memory in the Buddhist tradition; between the authenticity of the icons and reliquaries in which relics are enshrined, and their serial replication as tools for spreading the faith; and, coming full circle, between conservation and the

impermanence of objects. By examining the operation of these polarities across time and space, this chapter seeks to illuminate the overlooked tensions and convergences in the meanings and functions with which Buddhism's material legacy is imbued.

Impermanence/materiality

The devotional function of Buddhist icons and monuments, as contrasted to aesthetic appreciation by the secular/Western gaze, has of late attracted considerable interest (Faure 1988; Germano and Trainor 2004; Sharf 1999; Sharf and Sharf 2001; Trainor 1997). This recent scholarship marks a shift away from the dominant academic view of Buddhism as a rationalist philosophy or a humanism of sort, by focusing on the seemingly irrational aspects of popular piety. Yet, this literature has little to say about the apparent contradiction between the veneration of objects and sites associated with the Buddha and the principle of impermanence (Pali: *anicca*; Sanskrit: *anitya*), which represents one of the three marks of existence, or 'Seals of the Dharma', along with suffering (P: *dukkha*; S: *duhkha*) and non-existence of self (P: *anatta*; S: *anatman*). According to Buddhism's Four Noble Truths, attachment to impermanent physical and mental objects (e.g., ideas, sensations) as well as living beings is the main cause of suffering, which can be terminated by extinguishing desire, thus achieving a pacified state of mind (P: *nibbana*; S: *nirvana*). In order to comprehend the reality of impermanence, some methods of Buddhist meditation require the contemplation (or, nowadays, visualisation) of decomposing corpses and human remains.

Despite these doctrinal tenets, the memory of the historical Buddha, Prince Siddhartha of the Sakya clan (Sakyamuni), was perpetuated through material objects since his cremation at Kusinagari, in approximately 480 BCE.[5] According to the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, the text that narrates the Buddha's death and its aftermath, his bodily remains were gathered by Kusinagari's ruling house, the Mallas, and placed inside a large building in their capital. However, since seven other northern Indian rulers also lay claims to the remains, a 'war of the relics' threatened to erupt. Thanks to a Brahmin's arbitration, the relics were divided into equal shares among the eight rulers and enshrined in eight reliquaries (*stupa*) that were built in their respective kingdoms. Two additional stupas enshrined the urn used to measure the relics and the embers of the cremation fire, which were assigned respectively to the Brahmin who had arbitrated the dispute and to another Brahmin who had shown up at the distribution (Strong 2004: 116–19). In the third century BCE, the Mauryan emperor and Buddhism's patron, Asoka, disinterred the relics from the eight stupas and redistributed them in 84,000 stupas he allegedly erected in his realm. According to this legend, Asoka also acceded to the request by Sri Lanka's ruler for a share of the relics and a branch of the bodhi tree in Bodhgaya, under which Buddha had achieved enlightenment, thus initiating the propagation of Buddhism outside of India (ibid.: 136–44; 152–57).[6]

With regard to these developments, Robert Sharf (1999: 77) has proposed that

> Rather than envisaging the spread of Buddhism through Asia as the propagation of a sacred creed or faith, the movement of Buddhism might be better understood in terms of the diffusion of sacred objects, most notably icons and relics, along with the esoteric technical knowledge required to manipulate them.

A threefold classification of such sacred objects into bodily relics (including reliquaries), relics of use (things belonging to or associated with the Buddha, e.g. robes, bowls, bodhi tree) and commemorative relics (symbols, images and stupas) was already established in Sri Lanka by the fifth century CE (Trainor 1997: 89). The Pali word for 'relic' in the compounded terms for the three classes of objects is *cetiya*,[7] whose etymology derives from the verbal root *ci*, 'to heap

up/construct' and the related root *cit*, 'to perceive/remind' (Griswold 1973). *Cetiya* is thus the equivalent of the Latin word *monumentum* (from *monere*, 'to remember'), both terms designating a material aide to memory, a physical reminder. Yet, while from an orthodox (and rationalist) viewpoint relics and memorial objects serve the purpose of reminding devotees of the Buddha's life and teaching (Griswold 1960), in social usage these objects tend to exceed the commemorative function and are regarded not as just representing but actually embodying the Buddha, not as symbols but as 'presences pure and simple' (Sharf 1999: 77–78).

Images and reliquaries have, as 'correlative signs of the Buddha's presence' (Swearer 2004: 35), historically enjoyed equal importance as foci of veneration. The legend of the 'first' icon,[8] said to have been carved on King Udayana's order by thirty-two artisans (one for each of the Buddha's special body marks) while the Buddha was in heaven and to have risen to greet him upon his return (Carter 1990), makes it a double rather than a portrait, and thus encourages image worship.[9] Incidentally, several scholars now dispute the thesis that anthropomorphism in Buddhist art followed an earlier aniconic phase, when only symbols (e.g., the footprint and the Wheel of the Law) were supposedly employed to represent the Buddha. Sharf's (1999: 78) claim that 'the mobility of relics (…) facilitated and legitimized the Buddhist appropriation of indigenous religious centers throughout Asia, transforming the landscape into a sacred Buddhist domain' must be taken to encompass immovable icons, too. The stupa, which instead is immovable, was modelled on the burial earth mounds of Indian royalty; its formalisation into a standard building type comprised of a hemispherical dome resting on a square base and capped by a conical spire made use of architectural elements whose symbolism drew from the earlier Vedic tradition (Snodgrass 1985). The spatial diffusion of the stupa across Asia, and its regional stylistic adaptations, mirrored Buddhism's propagation and diversification into sects. Next to the circulation of relics and images, the erection of stupas marked the landscape as having been brought into the Buddhist domain at the same time that it memorialised such an accomplishment.

To summarise: scriptures, relics and reminders formed a synergy for the transmission of Buddhism as a religious tradition inscribed in sacred places that were at once pilgrimage destinations and the sites, to paraphrase Halbwachs (1941), of a 'legendary topography' which bore the traces of the Buddha Sakyamuni, his earlier avatars, the future Buddhas (*bodhisattva*) and Buddhist saints as well. Construction and upkeep of memorial artefacts and sites were, and still are, considered major meritorious acts – though secondary, according to the *Lotus Sutra*, to the transmission of the Buddha's words (Abé 2005: 304). It was also an act mostly associated with figures of authority: 'from the beginning of the Buddhist tradition', writes Swearer (2004: 16), 'kingship was uniquely connected with material signs of the Buddha'. In a mutually beneficial partnership, which in the Theravada polities of Southeast Asia was institutionalised, royal patronage provided support for the prosperity and propagation of the faith and the monastic community, while Buddhist rituals, texts and artefacts legitimated and even sanctified power holders, whose titles of 'universal monarch' (*chakravartin*) and 'righteous king' (*dharmaraja*) openly alluded to Buddhist hagiography (Reynolds 2005). Certain images acquired thus a wider meaning as embodiments of the polity, their integrity standing synecdochically for dynastic stability, their forcible removal or destruction representing inauspicious omens of political upheaval and dynastic collapse. The materiality of sacred objects was thus the key to perpetuating not only cultural memory of Buddhism but also the worldly power of rulers whose authority stemmed from such a memory.

Authenticity/replication

There is a certain irony in the fact that the authenticity of relics, which accounts for their cultic status, never hindered their truly miraculous ability to multiply. The veneration of relics that

reportedly started at the Buddha's cremation developed into a pan-Asian cult with considerable parallels to the cult of Christian relics in medieval Europe. Patrick Geary's illuminating essay on this subject is worth quoting at length:

> When a relic moved from one community to another, whether by gift, purchase or theft, it was impossible to transfer simultaneously or reliably the function or meaning it enjoyed in its old location. It had to undergo some sort of transformation so that it could acquire status and meaning within its new context. The mere circulation of a relic was not enough – a newly acquired relic had to prove itself. Its authenticity, which the very fact that it had been transferred cast in doubt, had to be demonstrated. (…) however, 'authenticity' meant less identity with a particular saint's body than efficacy in terms of communal needs.
>
> *(Geary 1986: 181)*

If relics (Christian and Buddhist alike) multiplied miraculously, images and stupas were on the other hand replicated by human agents who relied on mental prototypes – a '*memory-picture*' as Griswold (1960: 32; original emphasis) calls it – to reproduce the basic iconography while the stylistic features depended on the artisan's skills: 'the copy had to *be* like the original, not necessarily to *look* like it' (ibid.: 37; original emphasis). Enabled by memory, replication was, as the typical image-making mode in Buddhist visual culture, itself a means of perpetuating social memory of Buddhism by reproducing familiar mnemonic figures into new objects and locations. When Bangkok's Wat Benchamabophit, also known as the Marble Temple, was built in the early 1900s, a copy of the highly venerated Buddha Chinarat image, the pride of the town of Phitsanulok, was cast and installed in the monastery's ordination hall. Fifty more images – both authentic and copies of images in various styles – were assembled in the monastery's cloisters 'for public worship and as models for people to copy when making new images' in the words of Prince Damrong Rajanubhap, who had selected them (Peleggi 2004: 140–41).

Construction of images and stupas requires the master-to-apprentice transmission of a knowledge that is not mere technical know-how, but a form of spiritual teaching. Following construction is consecration, which entails the ritual insertion of a bodily or textual relic (and, in the Sinhalese tradition, the painting of the image's eyes) whereby the inert object becomes 'animated' or charged with power (Bareau 1962; Gombrich 1966). It is the relic's presence inside an image or stupa that endows it with those miraculous powers that were widely celebrated in the vernacular literatures of Asia (Pruess 1976). The power of an image can be propitiated by veneration, but also appropriated from outside the worshipping community by expropriation and, more radically, extinguished by destruction. Reputedly powerful images were often looted in Southeast Asia, as shown by the story of the Emerald Buddha (a statuette of jadeite) – from its historical epiphany in Chiang Rai, in present-day Thailand, from underneath a plaster image around 1434 to its peregrinations across the Lanna and Lao kingdoms and its final removal in 1778 from Vientiane to Bangkok, where it was installed in the royal monastery, Wat Phrakaeo, as Thailand's palladium (Notton 1933). Expropriation and relocation of images by enemy rulers were commonplace in medieval South Asia, too. Colonial plunder can thus be considered a variation of the longstanding practice of seizing images and other sacred objects as a political act that articulated claims of dominance and subjugation (Davis 1997: 54–62).

A UNESCO World Heritage site since 1989, the Buddhist monumental complex of Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh, India) was built in the third century BCE along a major pilgrimage route and highly prized relics were enshrined there. These relics were the protagonists of what has been termed a 'parable of postcolonial return' (Mathur 2007: Chapter 5). Deserted since the thirteenth

century, the ruined monuments of Sanchi were noticed by British officials-scholars. In 1851, two of them, Alexander Cunningham and F.C. Maisey, undertook the topographical reconnaissance and excavation of the site, as a result of which several caskets containing alleged relics of saints were exhumed. Most of the excavated caskets were sent to Britain and divided between the British Museum and the India Museum (later the Victoria and Albert Museum). In the 1930s, the Maha Bodhi Society, an international Buddhist organisation, successfully campaigned with the two museums to allow veneration of the relics on the saints' anniversary, although a further request to install a permanent seat for meditating was rejected. In 1947, the relics, placed in casket reproductions, were sent back to newly independent India via Sri Lanka, but the Indian government objected to the inauthentic caskets demanding the return of the originals. Finally, in November 1952, the relics were re-enshrined in their authentic caskets in an appositely built new reliquary at Sanchi – a symbolic gesture that linked the restitution of the purloined relics by the former colonial master to the birth of an independent Indian nation-state, which was ethnically, culturally and religiously plural (ibid.: 139–59).

The vicissitudes of the Sanchi relics are arguably paradigmatic of the epistemic repositioning of sacred objects from the cultic to the aesthetic realm following their physical removal from devotional sites and installation in metropolitan and colonial museums under the pedagogical auspices of empire. Yet, refuting this argument as 'somewhat misguided', Sharf (1999: 97) states: 'If the museum acts to curtail or restrain the power of sacred icons, so to does the temple'. Likewise, Faure (1988: 807) invites to distinguish 'between those icons that are multiplied and offered to the gaze of worshippers and those (…) that remain sequestered in the temple's inner sanctum', and stresses that even before colonial appropriations, 'the icon was always already reinscribed or disseminated' (ibid.: 811). The argument that the museum disenchants the icon by subjecting it to an epistemic regime that conceives authenticity in terms of material quality rather than performative ability (i.e., the effecting of miracles) can also be contested by observing that, in fact, the museum restates the icon's status as an object of devotion in line with the ritualistic approach to art as 'the cult of beauty' and to the museum itself as 'the temple of art'. Here one is reminded of Walter Benjamin's seminal essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), where he argues that the archaic aura of the religious artwork, which gave the latter its 'cult value', has been replaced as a result of secularisation by authenticity, the source of the modern artwork's 'exhibition value' (Benjamin 1969: 224, 244).

Two sets of considerations are in order here. The first concerns the relevance of Benjamin's distinction of authenticity and aura with regard to the social life of icons. While, as Gumbrecht and Marrinan (2003: 83) suggest, the theological term 'aureole' might have better denoted the 'unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be' Benjamin famously ascribed to aura (a medical term for a bodily breeze), he also failed to recognise that by establishing that distance from the quotidian which is the mark of its sacrality, the religious artwork (or object) intensifies our desire for proximity (ibid.: 85). Faure (1988: 799–801) notes in a parallel argument that the reputed efficacy of Buddhist icons derives, somewhat ambivalently, from enshrining *authentic* relics as well as *replicating* the mythical prototype, the Udhayana icon, whose *de visu* portrait of the Buddha later images are assumed to reproduce despite obvious stylistic variations. In Benjamin's aesthetics and Buddhist devotion alike, authenticity and aura thus share a tension that stems from the tangible presence here-and-now of the art/sacred object on the one hand, and the distance that separates its 'presentness' from the time and place of its origin on the other hand (Gumbrecht and Marrinan 2003: 125). In Buddhist devotion, however, this tension is diffused by the replication of images. Aura is thus a feature of both the *authentic* – that which was part of, or in contact with, the Buddha's body (including the Udhayana icon), and the *replica* – copies of that first icon that are 'enlivened', or endowed with aura, through

consecration (the Sanskrit term for which, *prañapratistha*, literally 'installation of the breaths', accords fully with the literal meaning of aura).

The second set of considerations concerns the cogency of Benjamin's suspicion of the mechanical replication of images, since replication (now also digital) has clearly preserved and even magnified, not withered as he predicted, their aura. Pinney (2004), for example, has shown how the mass circulation in India of printed Hindu imagery since the 1870s mobilised social vision in the service of both anti-colonial nationalism and religious revivalism. While the nexus between colonialism and historic conservation shall be examined in the next section, it is fitting to mention here Ben Anderson's comment about the concurrence of colonial archaeology, which transformed the religious monuments of Southeast Asia into 'regalia for a *secular* colonial state', with the diffusion of print and photographic reproduction: 'It was precisely the infinite quotidian reproducibility of its regalia that revealed the real power of the state' (Anderson 1991: 181–82; italics in original). By arguing that whatever mystique the colonial state had, it resulted from the material appropriation and visual replication of monuments that originally symbolised the association of spiritual and political power in Buddhist polities, Anderson too seems to suggest that mechanical reproduction revived aura – albeit in the secularised form befitting colonial administrations whose authority stemmed, to put it in Weberian terms, from instrumental rationality rather than charismatic leadership.

The notion of authenticity was of course central to the objectives and methodologies of archaeology and the history of art, which rose to the status of academic disciplines in the latter half of the nineteenth century; and also to the subsequent elaboration of the philosophy and praxis of historic conservation, which, according to Choay (2001: 115), underwent no changes from 1860 to 1960. In the 1964 International Charter on the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites ICOMOS programmatic document (known in short as the Venice Charter), authenticity was assumed to be a recognisable and assailable quality of the material, design and setting of historic monuments and sites that restoration must not tamper with. Articles 11 and 12 of the Venice Charter state that:

> The valid contributions of all periods to the building of a monument must be respected, since unity of style is not the aim of a restoration. (…) Replacement of missing parts must integrate harmoniously with the whole, but at the same time must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence.
>
> *(ICOMOS 1972)*

Although the Venice Charter gained universal acceptance as the guideline for historic conservation, its empirical conceptualisation of authenticity grounded in European architectural history was not always compatible with the approach to historic monuments in societies whose social values, religious beliefs, climatic conditions and – last but not least – building techniques and materials differed from Europe's.

Lately, under the influence of the idea of cultural diversity championed by UNESCO, the principles underlying the Venice Charter have come under review: first in the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), which states that 'authenticity judgments may be linked to the worth of a great variety of sources of information (…) [such as] form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, spirit and feeling and other internal and external factors' (ICOMOS 1994); and then in the Yamato Declaration (2004), which has introduced the concept of integrity as the element that binds a historic building or site to its surrounding environment (Lü Zhou 2006). This more inclusive (or, depending on one's viewpoint, relativistic) conception of authenticity has been encapsulated in one of the

core principles of conservation in the Asia-Pacific region: 'Authenticity, the defining characteristic of heritage, is a culturally relative characteristic to be found in continuity, but not necessarily only in the continuity of material' (UNESCO 2007: 4). The recognition that replacement of the original building materials (as in the case of Japanese or Korean timber temples) does not necessarily compromise the authenticity of a historic edifice has prompted the simple yet evocative definitions of heritage as 'things that change' and of heritage conservation as 'dealing with change' (Inaba 2006: 134). These formulations resonate strongly with the Buddhist worldview, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, and bring us to its final section, where the polarity under consideration is that between conservation, which both as a devotional and a scientific practice aims to counter the decay of artefacts, and impermanence, which is both intrinsic to their nature and a core element of Buddhist doctrine.

Conservation/impermanence

In South and Southeast Asia dilapidated images and stupas were frequently left to ruin in accordance with both the belief in impermanence and the Brahmanical precept about physical integrity as necessary condition for the icon's effectiveness (Davis 1997: 252–53). Still, the fourteenth-century Thai inscription quoted at the beginning of the chapter attests to a sentiment of pietas for broken images that moved people to repair them. Restoration traditionally consisted of applying a coat of plaster over either image or stupa and then gilt lacquer on the former and whitewash on the latter, and was thus coterminous with reconstruction. In the 1850s, Thailand's King Mongkut restored the ruined Phra Pathom Chedi (Thai for *cetiya*), in Nakhom Pathom, by having it encased in a new, massive stupa; in its basement a miniature copy of the original stupa was then erected as an iconic memento (Byrne 1995: 274; Peleggi 2004: 138–39). Despite the acknowledgment of conservation as a meritorious act in the economy of devotion, royal patrons naturally favoured erecting new religious monuments to make merit and show publicly their piety over repairing old ones associated with their predecessors. As Byrne (1995: 272) notes, 'It might almost be said that merit making is a practice which ushers old stupas into a state of ruin. (…) The progression, though, from construction to ruin is by no means linear. (…) Even as a ruin, there is always the possibility of a stupa or temple being reactivated'. 'Reactivation' refers here to the sacred object's cultic value as a reminder/embodiment of the Buddha. But what about the object's historical or, to use Benjamin's terminology, exhibition value?

The idea and practice of historic conservation took shape in Europe during the latter half of the nineteenth century amidst strongly conflicting views. For every Ruskin in Britain who stigmatised restoration as the antithesis of conservation and 'the most total destruction a building can suffer', there was a Viollet-le-Duc in France, who saw no difference between the two and reconstructed Gothic cathedrals following his credo: 'To restore a building is to reestablish it in a completed state that may never have existed at any given moment' (Choay 2001: 102–5).[10] A synthesis was achieved at the turn of the century by the Italian Camillo Boito, who proposed three approaches to restoration (archaeological, picturesque and architectural) depending on the monument's nature as necessary complements to its conservation; and the Austrian Alois Riegl, who grounded conservation conceptually in the classification of a monument's value as either 'commemorative' (concerning the past) or of the 'present-day', each category in turn subsuming more specific types of value (ibid.: 109–14).[11]

Archaeology and conservation were imported into South and Southeast Asia under the aegis of colonial rule. Antiquarian research was first pursued by learned societies, such as the Batavian Society (est. 1778) and the Asiatic Society of Bengal (est. 1784). However, the turning point was the establishment of professional archaeological services in the late nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries – from the Archaeological Survey of India in 1861–71 to the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) in 1900 (whose brief, however, was limited neither to archaeology nor to France's colonies) and the Dutch East Indies Commission for Antiquities in 1901. Despite the fashionable charge against colonial archaeology of having relegated the cultural and artistic achievements of colonised people to a fecund past divorced from a desolate present (Díaz-Andreu 2007: 241–42), and notwithstanding the theft of cultural properties by colonial officials, it is doubtful whether popular piety alone would have saved Asia's monuments from decay – let alone uncovered their historical origins and elucidated their stylistic evolution. In a rare, and rarely acknowledged, instance of reverse cultural transfer from the colony to the métropole, the technique of anastylosis, developed in 1907–11 by Dutch conservators at Borobodur, a ninth-century Buddhist monumental complex in central Java (a World Heritage site since 1991), and refined by the EFEO at Angkor, was utilised in the restoration of the Parthenon in the 1920s.

Yet it was in Japan, where a rapid modernisation and technological exchange with the West had occurred since the start of the Meiji Era (1868–1912), that a Law for the Protection of Ancient Shrines and Temples was promulgated as early as 1897 (sixteen years before Britain's 1913 Ancient Monuments Act). By instituting a system for the designation and registration of historic buildings and artefacts, this law tried to remedy to the consequences of the 1872 imperial proclamation on the separation of Buddhism and Shinto, which had caused a panic wave among Buddhist monks and the desertion, destruction and selling off of many ancient monasteries and their cultural properties (Okada 2005: 15–16). One of the monasteries deserted during the Shinto scare was that of Horiu-ji (a World Heritage site since 1993), in the Nara prefecture, built in the early seventh century when Buddhism first flourished in Japan, and housing in its precinct a worship hall and a pagoda that are reputed to be two of the oldest timber buildings in the world. The 1897 Law for the Protection of Temples accorded with the Meiji Restoration's second phase, when imitation of Western industry and institutions gave way to the conscious creation of a 'Japanese' national identity. The art historical narrative, then outlined by Okakura Kakuzo and the American Ernst Fenollosa, aimed to reveal Japan's progress in the form of continuous artistic development as well as a timeless Japanese 'essence' (Tanaka 1994). In Thailand, also a sovereign state in the colonial era, the nation's art historical narrative was outlined in the 1920s by Prince Damrong Ratchanuphap (architect of the kingdom's administrative centralisation) and the French head of the Archaeological Department, Georges Cœdès (later the EFEO director), who reorganised the collection of the Bangkok national museum and drafted the first law regulating the export of antiquities (Peleggi 2004: 148–49).

While an examination of the politics of postcolonial art history is not in order here, its most able practitioners are fully aware of the complex entanglements of colonial and postcolonial narratives of cultural authenticity and artistic creativity (Guha-Thakurta 2004). The unproblematic transfer of the methods and principles of archaeology and conservation from the colonial to the postcolonial state is to be explained not by the historical and ideological contiguity of nationalism and colonialism, as argued by Díaz-Andreu (2007: 244); but, as Guha-Thakurta (2003: 243) writes, by the infiltration of collective memory by 'history and its pedagogical accoutrements', which can then be mobilised in support of mythico-religious imaginings in the context of the secular, postcolonial state. History and archaeology may thus unwittingly help validate communal claims to an exclusive heritage, as in the violent dispute between India's Hindus and Muslims over the site where a mosque had been built on god Rama's purported birthplace. Also worth closer scrutiny is Anderson's argument, mentioned above, that colonial archaeologists and their postcolonial disciples musealised Buddhist monuments by sanitising their sites, substituting nationalist for religious symbolism, and replacing devotees with tourists – or,

to employ Nora's (1989) distinction, that they transformed spontaneous 'environments of memory' (*milieux de mémoire*) into institutional 'sites of memory' (*lieux de mémoire*). In fact, as material expressions of royal piety, Pagan, Borobodur and Angkor had as political a function in their early days as that which they acquired later in the nineteenth century as 'regalia' of the colonial state – and, eventually, of the postcolonial state, too. As for tourism (at least so-called 'cultural tourism') representing a kind of secular pilgrimage in which ritual homage is paid to history's relics, there are both notable examples and a substantial academic literature in support of this thesis.

The most significant change colonial archaeology introduced in the social life of Buddhist monuments was the active deferral of their decay. This is not to say that conservation did not exist at all in pre-colonial times, as discussed above; new was the belief that conservation is the responsibility of the state rather than pious individuals, because the dissipation of a monument amounts to a collective loss of memory and identity – a belief UNESCO has broached internationally since the 1970s. In countries where Buddhism enjoys *de facto* status as state religion (Sri Lanka, Thailand) or government endorsement and patronage (Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos), conservation of religious sites is also a means to secure internal political consensus. In Thailand, the restoration of the royal Buddhist cities of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya and the lobbying for their inscription on the World Heritage List (achieved in 1991) partook of the nationalist campaign orchestrated in the wake of the turbulent politics of the mid-1970s (Peleggi 2002). In January 1998, during Sri Lanka's protracted civil conflict, the Temple of the Tooth Relic in the city of Kandy (inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1988) was bombed by the Tamil Tigers' separatist guerrillas; afterwards, 'restoration of the temple was declared a project of national importance (…) National leaders pledged that the Tooth Relic Temple would be brought back to its "pristine conditions"' (Weerasinghe 2006: 184). Lacking adequate financial resources, Laos' isolationist communist regime welcomed aid from France, the former colonial master, for the conservation of temples in the old royal capital of Luang Prabang (a World Heritage site since 1995).

Alas, the dynamiting by the Taliban in March 2001 of two Buddha images carved in a cliff in Afghanistan's Bamiyan Valley was a shocking reminder that monuments can be saved but also annihilated by human agency. Buddhist countries condemned the Taliban's act as both culturally and religiously sacrilegious (*The Straits Times* 2001).[12] Western reactions to it ranged from the rhetorical accusation by the French ex-minister of culture that the Taliban will forever have the statues' blood on their hands (Lang 2001), to the New York Metropolitan Art Museum director's pragmatic offer to, in his own words, 'take pieces that are obviously portable and preserve them in the Met' (Manseau 2001) – like relics in a reliquary! The Taliban's iconoclastic act, far from being aberrant, belonged in fact in an established tradition of dealing with sacred images common to Eastern and Western visual cultures (Barash 1992). If icons are about making the intangible tangible and the invisible visible, iconoclasm is literally about undoing that. But while openly aimed at obliterating the icon's power – miraculous or mnemonic, depending on one's viewpoint – through its partial or total destruction, iconoclasm may in fact unintentionally preserve such power by replacing a material presence with a visually conspicuous absence.

Iconoclasm, and the destruction of cultural objects more generally, can hence be likened to forgetting – not in the sense of oblivion (Gamboni 1997), however, but as 'the selective process through which memory achieves social and cultural definition' (Melion and Küchler 1991: 7). Like memories, relics and ruins are by definition but fragments, traces: an incomplete presence that, to paraphrase Derrida (1976), refers to an absent totality – the totality nineteenth-century conservators sought to recreate and the current conservation ethos considers instead irretrievable. Successive marks of intervention on a monument (alterations, breakages, repairs) now tend to

be regarded as integral to its historicity as its original matter. Like wrinkles and scars on a person's skin, such marks reveal the monument's existence in time within the society that created it. Also, in the course of its social life, a monument often acquires additional, possibly even discordant mnemonic meanings from the one originally intended. The now destroyed Bamiyan Buddha images are reminders of not just Buddhism's diffusion into West Asia, but also the cultural losses that conflict always entails along with the loss of lives. Moreover, by virtue of digital reproduction – footage of the blowing up of the two statues is available on YouTube – iconoclasm's act of erasure is indefinitely replicated as a memorial image. So, even though its materiality is obliterated, the icon's mnemonic function endures in disembodied form.

We have thus come full circle in this meditation over the creation and signification of Buddhist material culture over two and a half millennia. The conceptual polarities that have informed the preceding reflections form a dialectical relationship that has been in place since the beginning of Buddhism's history but intensified since the nineteenth century due to the localisation of Western epistemologies and scientific methods in Asia. Whereas scholars have stressed the tensions arising from this process in colonial and postcolonial contexts, the secular approach to Buddhist artefacts has neither erased their memorial meaning nor displaced their devotional function. In Theravada countries such as Thailand and Cambodia, images inside archaeological parks, which are pre-eminent mnemonic sites of the nation, are still presented with offerings and wrapped in monastic robes; while old temples in villages are dismantled and rebuilt anew to make merit. In laying a middle ground for culturally sensitive conservation, Karlström (2005: 352) puts forth the following analogy: 'In a Buddhist world, spirituality is experienced through materiality. In a non-Buddhist world, identity is preserved through materiality'. Materiality is, in fact, a vehicle of spirituality in most religions. The remarkable fact is that doctrinal insistence on impermanence did not lessen the importance of objects in the Buddhist tradition though de-emphasised authenticity, for the copy (if suitably validated) is as good as the original for devotional and memorial purposes. This approach may alleviate social anxiety about the possible loss of sacred objects but does not free them from temporality. By recurring infinitely, the condition Buddhism describes as samsara and Nietzsche on the contrary invokes as eternal return, human existence acquires weight – as do things. To this heavy condition Buddhism contrasts the bliss of nirvana; and novelist Milan Kundera, instead, the 'unbearable lightness of being', the unsettling thought that 'what happens but once might as well not have happened at all' (Kundera 1984: 223). Only if released from eternity and returned to its transitory nature could the image and the monument also achieve lightness. But would we be able to bear it?

Notes

1 Karlström's article was brought to my attention by Patrick Daly, whom I thank, during the revision of this chapter, and hence the article had no influence on the conceptualisation of my argument.

2 My qualification of the phrase 'Buddhist art' hints at the considerable scrutiny to which this art historical category has been subjected in recent years. See Abe (1995) and Lachman (2005).

3 The countries, and relative sites, are (in alphabetical order): Bangladesh (*vihara* at Paharpur); China (Mogao caves, Longmen and Yungang Grottoes); India (Ajanta caves, Ellora caves, Sanchi stupa, Bodhi Gaya monumental complex); Indonesia (Borobodur temple); Japan (temples in Horyuji; sites and pilgrimage routes in the Kii Mountain Range); Lao People's Democratic Republic (Vat Phou and associated settlements); Nepal (Lumbini Valley, the Buddha's birthplace); Pakistan (ruins of Takh-i-Bahi); Republic of Korea (Haeinsa temple); Sri Lanka (sacred cities of Anuradhapura and Kandy, Golden Temple of Dambulla). Major Buddhist monuments are also found in the following WHL-inscribed ancient cities: Angkor (Cambodia); Luang Prabang (Lao PDR); Polonnaruwa and Sigiriya (Sri Lanka); Sukhothai and Ayutthaya (Thailand). See http://whc.unesco.org/en/list (accessed 1 October 2010).

4 For more on this and other aspects of memory as a mental faculty presented in Buddhist texts and practice, see Gyatso (1992). However, none of the essays in this volume deal with either the collective memory or mnemonic sites of Buddhism.

5 The precise dates of the historical Buddha's existence are disputed. The most widely accepted chronology (the so-called corrected long chronology) places his death between 486 and 477 BCE.

6 Strong relies here on the Sanskrit-language *Asokavadana*, which he himself translated (Strong 1983). An alternative account, which mentions monasteries instead of stupas, is found in the Pali-language *Mahavamsa*, a Sri Lankan chronicle.

7 The three Pali terms are *dhatucetiya*, *paribhogacetiya* and *uddesikacetiya*. A fourth category is sometimes added, that of doctrinal relics (canonical texts and inscriptions) or *dhammacetiya*.

8 Sharf (1999: 81) draws this distinction between religious images in general and icons in particular: 'By *icon* I mean a specific sort of religious image that is believed to partake or participate in the substance of that which it represents.'

9 This argument can be extended to reliquaries as well, taking a cue from Chapter 10 of the *Lotus Sutra*, where the Buddha encourages his followers to worship stupas after his eventual departure (Abé 2005: 304).

10 Ruskin's quotes are from his book *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849); Viollet-le-Duc's from his *Dictionnarie raisoneé de l'architecture française* (1854–68), as translated in Choay (2001: 104).

11 Commemorative values include: memorial value; historical and art historical value; and age value. Present-day values include: art value, subcategorised into relative value and newness value; and value of use (Choay 2001: 214, n.108). Incidentally, Riegl's work, *Der moderne Denkmalkultus* ('The modern cult of monuments', 1903), foreshadowed Benjamin's reflections on the cult and exhibition values of artworks.

12 The Japanese government has been financing several initiatives at the Afghan site in partnership with UNESCO, which in 2003 inscribed the Bamiyan Valley on the red-flagged list of World Heritage in Danger. In 2008, the New York–based private organisation World Monuments Fund included the remains of the Bamiyan Buddha images on its World Monument Watch List of the 100 Most Endangered Sites.

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