

On the Allure of Buddhist Relics, by Robert H. Sharf

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FOR ALMOST A HUNDRED YEARS CULTURAL anthropologists have been carrying on a lively and oftentimes rancorous debate over the issue of “how natives think.” Do “primitives,” to resort to the early but now unfashionable term, apprehend and reflect upon the world in a fundamentally different way than do we moderns? Does it make sense to talk of “primitive mentality” or, less contentiously, of “divergent rationalities”?

In an attempt to characterize the thinking of so-called primitive peoples as recorded in the ethnographic literature available at the time, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl posited a prelogical kind of thinking that does not abide by the law of noncontradiction.¹ According to Lévy-Bruhl, primitive mentality does not clearly distinguish between subject and object, such that primitives perceive themselves in “mystic participation” with the world. To the primitive, the world is not composed of lifeless natural objects; rather, “since everything that exists possesses mystic properties, and these properties, from their very nature, are much more important than the attributes of which our senses inform us, the difference between animate and inanimate things is not of the same interest to primitive mentality as it is to our own.”²

Lévy-Bruhl’s thesis was subjected to considerable criticism soon after it appeared, and to this day his work tends to be summarily dismissed for its supposed ethnocentrism. Lévy-Bruhl himself went to great lengths to clarify and qualify his thesis in his later writings. He insisted, for example, that what he called primitive rationality is not characteristic of primitives alone, but is rather a universal mode of thought that can and does coexist with logical thinking. Indeed, the charge of ethnocentrism is largely misleading; Lévy-Bruhl was, if anything, an early champion of cultural relativism in the social sciences.³

No matter what one’s opinion of Lévy-Bruhl’s thesis, the issues he raised could not be ignored. It would no longer be possible to simply assume, as did Edward Tylor, James Frazer, and other early comparativists, that primitives are essentially no different from ourselves—that the gap between primitive and modern societies is merely the product of the relative gap in factual knowledge and scientific know-how. Lévy-Bruhl raised the possibility that different peoples conceptualize in different ways: “Primitives see with eyes like ours, but they do not perceive with the same minds.”⁴

Ironically, later generations of anthropologists, many of whom held Lévy-

Bruhl's theories in contempt, found themselves retracing his footsteps. For Lévy-Bruhl's notion of the "collective representations" or "collective mentality" of a people presaged the emphasis on "culture" in modern anthropology, and the insistence that a given culture be understood "in its own terms."⁵ Indeed, many of the issues raised by Lévy-Bruhl are still very much with us: To what extent is the world of human experience itself a social or cultural product? Do modern scientific modalities yield a more objective view of the world than do premodern systems of thought? Are different "conceptual schemes" ultimately incommensurable? Such hermeneutic quandaries cannot be ignored, for they decide whether, in the final analysis, we privilege etic analysis over emic description, or vice versa. (Indeed, the more fundamental issue is whether the distinction between emic and etic is conceptually viable in the first place.) There is still no resolution in sight, as attested by the recent and somewhat vitriolic exchange between Gananath Obeyesekere and Marshall Sahlins.⁶

Despite the obvious significance of these issues for the study of comparative religion, such debates have had little impact on the study of Buddhism. Earlier generations of Buddhologists seemed confident in the belief that whatever the final verdict might be with regard to primitives, Buddhists were not to be numbered among them. Asian apologists and Western scholars alike felt confident in treating Buddhism as a critical and essentially rational tradition that has more in common with Occidental philosophy and ethics than with religion per se. Standard treatments of the topic assured the reader that Buddhism was and remains an atheistic creed that categorically rejects superstition, magic, ritualism, and idolatry. If Buddhists occasionally act otherwise it merely attests to the degree to which they have lost touch with the roots of their own tradition.⁷

In the last few decades this notion of "pure" or "essential" Buddhism has come under considerable scrutiny. There is a newfound enthusiasm for supplementing the study of canonical texts with a variety of extracanonical sources, including archaeological, epigraphic, and art-historical materials. Inspired in part by the work of social and cultural historians of medieval Christianity—Philippe Ariès, Peter Brown, Caroline Bynum, Patrick Geary, and Jacques Le Goff, to name but a few—many Buddhologists are beginning to focus on reconstructing the institutional, social, and economic context of the elite clerical tradition.

At the same time, not a few scholars are combining their study of Buddhist canonical languages with extended periods of fieldwork in Asia, experiencing Buddhist culture firsthand. Fieldwork has proven to be a potent corrective to earlier idealized notions of pure Buddhism construed on the basis of scriptural representations alone. Scholars of Theravāda are now able to consult the rich ethnographies compiled by Melford Spiro, Stanley Tambiah, Gananath Obeyesekere, and others, while scholars of Tibet, China, and Japan pay increasing attention to indigenous regional traditions, including Bon, Confucianism, Taoism, shamanism, and various forms of "popular" religion. The earlier reconstruction of an essential Buddhist

teaching on the basis of canonical sources—sources that were often compiled and edited in the West—is beginning to appear as little more than a Western fiction, and some scholars now prefer to speak not of Buddhism, but rather of multiple regional Buddhisms.

In the reappraisal of Buddhism “on the ground,” perhaps the most fruitful development has been the discovery of the seminal role that images and relics have played in Buddhist culture throughout its history. 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. Gregory Schopen, a pivotal player in the revaluation of early Indian Mahayana, has argued that the scriptures themselves were actually regarded as a kind of relic, valued not so much for what they say as for their inherent charismatic or apotropaic powers.⁸

For many scholars who found themselves disenchanted with the romanticized and/or rationalized versions of Buddhism that once dominated the field, the discovery of relic and image worship was the smoking gun that provided irrefutable evidence that Buddhists are not bourgeois rationalists after all.⁹ The worship of relics exemplified the newfound otherness of Buddhism, for it would seem to involve the sanctification of that which is utterly profane and loathsome—the corporal remains of the dead.¹⁰ But despite their enthusiasm for the subject, to date Buddhologists have done little more than document the phenomenon. While they readily attest to the extent and popularity of relic veneration, they have yet to say much with regard to the question “why?” Why have Buddhists been so obsessed with bits of desiccated or otherwise transmogrified remains of the dead? Why, for that matter, would anyone attribute apotropaic or salvific power to scraps of dead organic matter, much less a contact relic surrogate (that is, an object such as a piece of clothing whose sacred status is derived from its having been in physical contact with a saint or holy man)? On this issue scholars have had little to say. And when they do offer something by way of explanation they tend to conflate relics proper with virtually every other object of Buddhist ritual devotion, including sculpted and painted images, *stūpas*, so-called aniconic symbols, and even scriptures and incantations. All of these, we are told, denote the presence of the Buddha in his very absence. The relics, images, and words of the Buddha or his enlightened disciples are deemed worthy objects of veneration insofar as all serve as manifestations or instantiations of the formless dharma itself.

This rubric of presence in absence has proved particularly, and I think understandably, alluring. For one thing it renders the worship of relics and images consonant with Buddhist doctrine. The relic is a potent vestige of the death of an enlightened being, a memento of his or her abiding liberation. The same holds true for the image of the Buddha and his *stūpa*—they all signify the unfathomable freedom of nirvana. By instantiating a numinous absence, relics, images, and their kin func-

tion as a physical locus for the saint's enduring charisma, apotropaic power, and grace.¹¹ This argument has been made by a number of Buddhologists, including David Eckel, John Strong, and myself on several occasions.¹²

The notion that relics denote the Buddha's enduring presence in his very absence has proved an effective bulwark against the marginalization of this popular form of Buddhist piety. It is no longer acceptable to dismiss casually the worship of relics and images as aberrant or un-Buddhist, as a sop to the plebeian needs of the unlettered masses. Scholars now appreciate that, with few exceptions, the clerical elite found nothing objectionable in the worship of relics, but enthusiastically engaged in and promoted such activities themselves. There is thus little reason to believe that the display of relics contravenes either the letter or the spirit of Buddhist teachings; why is a relic any less appropriate a signifier for nirvana than the word *nirvana* itself?

The problem, however, is that with few exceptions Buddhist sources do not speak of relics in terms of absent presences or present absences.¹³ On the contrary, the materials at our disposal suggest that relics were treated as presences pure and simple. That is to say, a relic did not *represent*, *symbolize*, or *denote* a transcendent presence, numinous absence, or anything in between, any more than the person of the Buddha represented or symbolized the Buddha. (We do not typically think of President Clinton as *representing* the President—he simply *is* the President.) The source of the muddle is due in part to the tendency to conflate images, *stūpas*, relics, and other signifiers of Buddhahood, all of which were undeniably objects of veneration. I shall return to this issue further on.

There are, of course, other strategies available with which to deal with the “why” question, strategies that do not rest on an appeal to quasi-theological notions such as absent presences. Those predisposed to more down-to-earth explanations can avail themselves of a number of functionalist accounts. For example, it is clear that relics, unlike sacred sites, are eminently portable, and thus they aid and abet the decentralization and propagation of the cult. While there was only one “historical buddha,” his relics, not to mention the relics of his enlightened disciples, can be multiplied virtually ad infinitum. There is, in fact, considerable evidence that the mobility of relics contributed to the success of Buddhism as a missionary religion; relics facilitated and legitimized the Buddhist appropriation of indigenous religious centers throughout Asia, transforming the landscape into a sacred Buddhist domain.¹⁴ At the same time, the popularity of relics was easily exploited by the ecclesiastic, institutional, and secular authorities who oversaw their dissemination.¹⁵ There are obvious parallels with the well-documented manipulation and exploitation of relics by the clergy in medieval Christendom.¹⁶

Such functionalist accounts have their utility, but as answers to the “why” question they remain incomplete since they tend to presume, rather than explain, the widespread and almost visceral fascination shown toward relics in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist cultures. They do not, in and of themselves, explain why

masses of people throughout history were willing, if not eager, to impute supernatural power to the remains of the special dead.

At this point scholars tend to fall back, implicitly rather than explicitly, upon some version of animism, sympathetic magic, or even primitive mentality. While few would publicly invoke the names of Tylor, Frazer, or Lévy-Bruhl in their analyses of Buddhist relic veneration, we are still left with the fact that Buddhists appear to ascribe intentionality to what we view as inanimate objects. And this was, of course, precisely the issue with which Tylor, Frazer, and Lévy-Bruhl were struggling.

One way to break the impasse might be to pause for a moment and reflect on the nature of the current scholarly fascination with relics. As mentioned earlier, the intellectual interests of contemporary scholars are determined in part by historical circumstances and developments within the discipline, just as was true of those who preceded them. Earlier generations of Buddhologists focused on putatively philosophical scriptures and treatises for laudable reasons: they were battling the deeply entrenched Eurocentrism that characterized the Western academic establishment. They sought to legitimize the study of Buddhism by establishing its credentials as a “high religion” complete with its own sophisticated philosophical and ethical teachings. These scholars realized considerable success in rendering Buddhism a species of rational humanism worthy of our attention and respect. Indeed, some scholars would now judge them too successful, and they want to set the record straight. In their attempt to redress the domesticated image of Buddhism bequeathed by their elders they have turned their attention to phenomena that resist rational appropriation. The more bizarre the phenomenon the better.

Of course, the bizarre is not altogether unfamiliar. Buddhism may no longer resemble European humanism, mysticism (the “perennial philosophy”), or enlightened rationalism, but it has come to bear an uncanny resemblance to medieval Christianity: both were preoccupied, at some level, with saints, relics, and miraculous images. This has been a significant discovery, and has allowed Buddhologists to establish a new set of conversation partners in the academy. But parallels with medieval Europe in and of themselves do not provide a theoretical foundation that renders the alterity of the phenomena, whether Buddhist or Christian, intelligible.

Does the current interest in relics emerge from the call of scholarly duty alone? Are scholars merely trying to enlarge and ameliorate our collective understanding of Buddhism, or does it spring from something deeper?

The fascination with relics is clearly overdetermined. For one thing, the discovery of the significant role played by relics in Buddhism raises the intellectual stakes. It is one thing to argue the provenance of the *Madhyamakakārikā*, to decipher the logic of Dharmakīrti, or to wax sublime over the ethical and environmental implications of codependent origination. It is another thing altogether to come to terms with belief in miracles, magic, and the supernatural power of bits of human flesh and bone. Thus some may be drawn to the study of relics in part by the intellectual

challenge of offering a rational interpretation of a phenomenon that appears, at least at first glance, decidedly irrational. At the same time, scholars may take comfort in the realization that certain phenomena steadfastly resist all efforts at explanation. As professional intellectuals we tend to be acutely aware of the limitations of our craft. We may suspect that our discursive hold over reality is ephemeral at best, and that our scholarly endeavors are ultimately of little or no significance. Some of us may find the thought that we don't have sole purchase on reality—that critical analysis is merely one of several ways of engaging the world—oddly reassuring. (This is, of course, in keeping with the current zeitgeist in the humanities, in which undermining our confidence in the foundations of our own knowledge is construed as the only *authentic* game in town.)

But this may be making too much of the otherness of relics. Our attraction is not, I suspect, of a purely intellectual nature; relics evoke a more visceral response. Our interest in a sacred finger bone, a skull, a desiccated tongue, or a lacquered mummy does not seem to be of the same order as our interest in a stone *stūpa* or icon. While the *stūpa* or icon may possess considerable aesthetic appeal, the allure of a relic lies elsewhere. I sense that there is something almost voyeuristic or prurient in our fascination with relics. Is it possible that we are drawn to the Buddhist obsession with relics because it resonates with something close to home? (I clearly recall my own childhood fascination with the macabre Egyptian mummy—partially unwrapped, decayed toes, contorted face, and wisps of hair clearly visible—on permanent display in the Royal Ontario Museum.)

But here we must be cautious. The corporeal remains of the dead may elicit a powerful response in the living, but in and of itself this may not reveal much about Asian Buddhist beliefs or attitudes; it may be little more than yet another projection of contemporary needs and concerns onto the complex inkblot that is Buddhism. Except that this time, instead of projecting our own rationality as did a previous generation of scholars, we now project our irrationality.

On the other hand, should we ignore our personal response altogether we may be forfeiting a singular opportunity to illuminate the enigma of relic veneration. It might thus be useful to reflect upon our own response to the corporeal remains of the dead. While this may well land us in a hermeneutic muddle—how can I be sure that my own “visceral” response has anything to tell us about the response of a medieval Buddhist?—my hope is that the muddle will ultimately prove a fruitful one.

The Semiotic Logic of Images, Icons, and Relics

My first task, however, will be to delineate the meaning of the term *relic*. As mentioned earlier, images, *stūpas*, and even scriptures have typically been conflated, insofar as they all denote or signify the Buddha. This conflation has

served a purpose, in that it underscores the pietistic and devotional aspects of Buddhist praxis. Scholars now appreciate the wide range of objects that were deemed bearers of supernatural power, that served as the focus of veneration, and that were thought to literally embody the essence of buddhahood.

Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the features that distinguish relics proper from objects such as buddha images and *stūpas* that are unambiguously representational. In many respects the differences could not be more obvious: whereas corporeal relics are procured or “discovered,” images and *stūpas* are manufactured—modeled by human hands after established prototypes.¹⁷ A buddha image or *stūpa* is, with few exceptions, clearly recognizable as such, even when removed from its original religious setting or ritual context. A relic, on the other hand, requires a “frame” in space and time that explicitly signals its status as sacred object. Removed from their gilded and jewel-studded reliquaries most relics resemble so much dirt.

While the term *image* can refer to a wide range of material objects, here I am concerned primarily with representations of humans and deities in sculpted or painted form. We can then further distinguish images in general from 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.¹⁸ In other words, an icon does not merely bear the likeness of the divine, but shares in its very nature. This rubric is, of course, Western in origin; it developed out of certain Judeo-Christian issues entailed in rendering a likeness of God. Clearly, it was difficult to authorize an image of the divine on the basis of the veracity of the portrayal itself. The notion of shared substance allowed the church to circumvent the problem of likeness by focusing on a rather rarefied conception of “substance” or “essential nature.”¹⁹

Despite its Western pedigree, this technical understanding of icon can be used to illuminate the structural relationship between images, icons, and relics across religious traditions. Note that any representation of the divine, the holy, the absolute must grapple with the ontological problem of reference. That is to say, whether the divine or absolute is construed in transcendent or immanent terms, in either case it must remain essentially noncontingent and nonrelational, and thus cannot properly be the ostensive referent or signified of a word, symbol, or image. Denotation is always mediation, since the noncontingent object of reference is kept one step removed from the sign through which it is made known. Thus any attempt to manifest the divine through contingent forms is both theologically and existentially problematic.

Broadly speaking, one can contend with this problem in one of two ways. First, one can simply prohibit the direct signification of the divine; the numerous Jewish and Muslim prohibitions against uttering the name of God or rendering his image come immediately to mind. Second, one can eliminate, by fiat if necessary, the distance between signifier and signified, such that pure substance—that which is devoid of all representational or contingent qualities—is held to be immanent

within the sign itself. This is the road taken by certain Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Buddhist traditions.

Buddhists employ a variety of means to eliminate the distance between manifest form and divine essence. As is well known, Buddhist images are consecrated through elaborate eye-opening ceremonies believed to transform a mere likeness into a divine presence.²⁰ The initial consecration is reiterated through regular invocation rituals that compel the deity's presence within the image. (Buddhist *piñā* or "rites of offering" typically include an invocation sequence, however brief, prior to the offerings proper.) The rites of offering can include feedings, ritual baths, and entertainments, all of which imaginatively reinforce the identity of image and god. But perhaps the most striking example of the effort to collapse form and substance is the installation of charismatic objects in general, and relics in particular, within the body of the image itself.

Buddhist relics are construed as the distilled essence of human corporeality; they are what remains after the human form has been destroyed and the material substrate purified by the funeral pyre. Note that one of the two common terms for relics, *dhātu*, is also used to refer to the fundamental or constituent element(s) of the universe itself. Insofar as relics are devoid of discernible representational qualities they were well situated to serve as instances of purified essence or vital substance, and as such they came to play a significant role in the transformation of a mere image into a living icon. Incorporated relics literally vitalize a sacred likeness.

Buddhists could incorporate a relic into an image in a variety of ways. The most common was simply to wrap the relic in cloth or ensconce it in a small reliquary and insert it in an opening in the base or back of the image. In East Asia relics were sometimes mixed together with clay and the clay then used to fashion an image creating an "ash icon" thoroughly infused with relics.²¹ But the most striking example of the incorporation of a relic into an image is mummification, in which the entire corpse of an eminent master was desiccated, wrapped in layers of lacquer-impregnated cloth, fitted with robes and other adornments, and installed on an altar in the same manner as any other icon.²² In some cases the resulting image so closely resembled a dry-lacquer sculpture that it was difficult to tell the difference.²³ In the case of a Buddhist mummy the identity of relic and image—substance and form—has been fully realized.

Mummies aside, Buddhists do make a terminological distinction between images and relics. In China, for example, a relic or *she-li* (Sanskrit: *śāriṛa*, Japanese: *shari*) would not be confused with a *hsiang* (image, symbol, and so on) and vice versa. The same is true of the other terms used for Buddhist images and portraits, including *chen* and *ting-hsiang*; each is used to denote a visual representation or likeness, and thus is not applicable to a relic proper.²⁴ But what about the formal distinction I am suggesting between image and icon? At first glance one might assume that the distinction does not hold in medieval China, since the rendering

of an individual's likeness was always a potentially "magical" act. One thinks of the celebrated portraitist Ku K'ai-chih (c. 345–406) who sought to animate portraits of secular subjects by dotting the eyes,²⁵ or the widespread use of portraits in ancestral rites as resting places for the soul of the deceased (*ling, shen*).²⁶

Nevertheless, East Asian Buddhists do have a term that corresponds rather well to *icon* in the restricted sense stipulated earlier, namely, in Japanese pronunciation, *honzon* (Chinese: *pen-tsun*) or "fundamental deity," the principal object of worship in a Buddhist ritual setting.²⁷ The *honzon* is not some unseen transcendent deity, much less an abstract conception of buddhahood, but rather the sculpted or painted image enshrined on an altar in a place of worship. Which is to say that the vast majority of Buddhist practitioners in East Asia, like their counterparts in India, do not make a distinction between the consecrated visible image of the deity and the deity itself. Thus multiple icons of one and the same buddha or bodhisattva are regarded in some sense as separate individuals with unique identities. Take, for example, the particular manifestation of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva known as Amoghapaśa Avalokiteśvara, or, as he is known in Japan, Fukūkenjaku-kannon. There are a number of images of Fukūkenjaku situated throughout Japan, each bearing roughly the same iconographic attributes. But each is embedded within a specific historical/mythical narrative, often tied to a particular temple or locale, that gives it its "personality." The image of Fukūkenjaku-kannon enshrined in the Nan'endō at Kōfukuji in Nara, for example, is considered the "fundamental ground" (*honji*) of Kasuga Myōjin, the main deity of the Kasuga Shrine complex. In other words, the native Japanese god Kasuga is regarded as an avatar or incarnation (*suijaku*) of the Fukūkenjaku enshrined in the Nan'endō.²⁸ Other Fukūkenjakus do not enjoy this relationship with Kasuga, but they too may be tied to their own local traditions and religious narratives. This individuation extends to the powers associated with specific icons; each may have its own area of competence. One image of Yakushi may be renowned for its power to cure emphysema, for example, while another might be known for success in treating arthritis or heart disease.²⁹

There are also cases in which an icon effectively reproduces, giving rise to multiple replicas that partake in the "spirit" of the original. One classic example is the cult of the Seiryōji Shaka, a Chinese sandalwood image of Śākyamuni brought to Japan by the pilgrim Chōnen (938–1016) in 986, and now enshrined at Seiryōji in Kyoto. According to local tradition this magnificent sculpture is the original "Udayana image" of Śākyamuni, so called because it is believed to have been produced at the behest of King Udayana during the Buddha's lifetime.³⁰ As the center of a major cult in Japan it has served as the prototype for over a hundred replicas, replicas that are viewed not so much as images of the historical buddha, but rather as offspring or doppelgängers (even though they are rarely exact copies) of the deity enshrined at Seiryōji. The same is true of the Zenkōji Amida triad, as documented in Donald McCallum's recent study of the subject.³¹ The Zenkōji

triad, which is kept hidden from public view, is explicitly regarded as a “living buddha” (*shōjin no hotoke*), and as such has been the center of an influential cult since the Heian period. The cult proliferated throughout Japan via the medium of over two hundred reproductions, each of which was believed to partake in the vitality of the original. Like the Seiryōji Shaka, the focus of the Zenkōji Amida cult is not so much an august Amida abiding in his distant Pure Land, but rather the specific deity enshrined at Zenkōji.

The term *honzon* is thus a functional approximation of the English *icon*—it is not merely a representation of a god, but the god itself. This exalted status is reaffirmed through the use of various artistic and architectural conventions, some of which manifest cross-culturally. For example, icons are typically constructed and displayed so as to engage the viewer directly. To quote Wu Hung, “[The icon’s] significance relies on the presence of a viewer or worshiper outside it. In fact, the openness of the composition is based on the assumption that there is a worshiper who is engaged in direct relationship with the icon. It is based on this assumption that the iconic composition has become universal in various religious art traditions around the world.”³²

In East Asia the status of the *honzon* is also marked by its altar setting, which includes a small table placed in front of the image upon which are arrayed various ritual paraphernalia and offerings such as candles, food, incense, and flowers. A raised seat for the ritual officiant is set in front of the offering table, and additional implements are often arrayed to either side. This setting is part of the icon’s frame—it is present even when never used—and signals not only the presence of a supernatural being but also the authority and technical mastery of the institutionally sanctioned priests who are able to muster and direct the divine forces.³³

Insofar as an icon is a living presence, I would propose a further terminological distinction between icon and *sacralized sign*. I would reserve the latter term for objects that are sometimes called icons, but only in a metaphorical sense. Thus some might call the American flag an icon on the basis of the rituals that surround its use and the powerful emotions that the flag elicits. Some Americans go so far as to regard the intentional desecration of the flag as a sacrilege. But to speak of the flag as an icon is to speak metaphorically; the flag is surely only a symbol of the nation, albeit a powerful one. Insofar as flag burning is a profanation, the transgression lies in the ritual and symbolic significance of the act, rather than in the loss of the material object itself.³⁴ This is not the case with an icon, however, the destruction of which is a far more serious concern. Each icon is in a certain sense unique and irreplaceable, much like an individual person.

While these terminological distinctions may strike the reader as unnecessarily abstract or scholastic, they do serve to draw attention to a class of sacred objects that are not regarded as mere signs or signifiers, but rather as vital forces or animate entities. This point has been made repeatedly before, most forcefully, perhaps, by

David Freedberg in his tome *The Power of Images*.³⁵ Freedberg documents the tendency to impute intentionality to images, sacred and otherwise, and in the process exposes the impotence of many of the theories proffered to explain the phenomena. He notes that virtually all such theories, from Frazer's laws of similarity and contagion to more contemporary notions of sympathy, identification, symbolic linkage, association of ideas, evocative resonance of symbols, or what have you, assume the disjunction between the symbol and the symbolized—between representation and reality. But this is precisely what is *not* given at the level of our emotional and cognitive response to images. “We will only come to understand response if we acknowledge more fully the ways in which the disjunction [between the reality of the art object and reality itself] lapses when we stand in the presence of images.”³⁶ Any account of *envoûtement* or “image magic” that presumes the disjunction between representation and reality is already at a level of abstraction so removed from the phenomena it seeks to explain that it is unable to find its way back.

Freedberg's point is well taken, but while he wants to distance himself from the traditional aesthetic concerns that preoccupy art historians, he cannot escape the issue of representation, or more precisely, figuration. Freedberg documents a seemingly innate human tendency to search all variety of images for the human form, and in the process to “reconstitute the material object as living.”³⁷ While this may tell us something about the mystique of Buddhist images, it does not get us very far with Buddhist relics, which are, for all intents and purposes, formless. It is not primarily what relics look like that we find arresting, at least not initially, nor is it what they represent or signify. Rather, it is what they are. It is their unabashed yet impenetrable corporeality that evokes such a powerful response.

Primitive Mentality or Existential Befuddlement?

The veneration of corporeal relics and manufactured icons would seem to violate the “law of non-contradiction” (as Lévy-Bruhl would put it), as it entails a host of conceptual conundrums. If the deity is indistinguishable from the image, what is the relationship between different images of the same deity? When the corporeal remains of a saint are transformed into relics and disseminated, what happens to the integrity of the saint's spirit? How, in other words, can a single being be in several places at one and the same time? And more basically, how could anyone seriously believe that an image fashioned by human hands of wood, stone, or clay is alive?

Such problems are not the concern of modern rationalists alone. Scholastic theories of multiple *buddhakāya* or “bodies of the buddha” appear to be addressing similar issues of identity and particularity. According to *buddhakāya* doctrine, a

single buddha or bodhisattva can have multiple *nirmāṇakāya*—transformation or manifest bodies—each of which is the local instantiation of a more rarefied prototype. In China these localized avatars were called “response bodies” (*ying-shen*) or “transformation bodies” (*pien-shen, hua-shen*), in part because they were believed to appear and function purely in response to the needs of those who invoked them. The response body was thus somewhat autonomous from the relatively immutable “true body” (*chen-shen*) or “buddha body” (*fo-shen*), a fact that would have allowed multiple incarnations of the same “proto-deity” to assume their own unique identities. Such doctrines evolved, in China at least, in connection with reflections on invocation rites, which suggests that medieval commentators were grappling with some of the same issues that perplex us today.³⁸

Nevertheless, it is doubtful that such scholastic formulations ever had much purchase on the ground. Nor did they need to. There is little indication in either the textual or ethnographic record that the vast majority of practitioners were cognizant of a problem at all. Individual icons and relics were powerful forces to be approached not conceptually or philosophically, but rather through the medium of worship and ritual. But before we rush to the conclusion that these forms of Buddhist piety bespeak a prereflective, uncritical, or primitive relationship to sacred objects, it would be prudent to consider our own understanding of the relationship between manifest form or embodiment on the one hand, and animating life force on the other.

And it takes but a moment’s reflection to realize that there is, in fact, no single coherent, “rational,” or “scientific” perspective on the issue. Most of us would allow, I suspect, that we are our bodies, and at the same time that we are something more. This is, at least, the way many in the West learn to conceptualize death: something is there one moment and gone the next, leaving behind a lifeless cadaver. Occidentals tend to think of this “something” in immaterial terms, as the mind, consciousness, ego, soul, and so on. Whatever it may be, it is not something that reveals itself to the probing of a surgeon.

The notion that we are composed in part of an immaterial, or at least a highly rarefied animating constituent has a long heritage in the West, going back to Greek views of the psyche. The notion of an independent psyche or soul continued to play an important role in medieval Christian thought, although, as Caroline Bynum has shown, the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, and the need to maintain social and gender distinctions in the afterlife, led some theologians to reject theories of a fully disembodied soul.³⁹ And despite developments in behavioral psychology, molecular biology, genetics, and neuroscience, many North Americans today continue to resist scientific or philosophical theories that reduce the individual to “mere” physical, biological, or electrochemical processes.

At the same time, we have made little progress in our understanding of how a nonphysical process could interact with physical ones. The mind-body problem is as intractable as ever, as seen in the recent interdisciplinary debates over the nature

of consciousness. There are, of course, many who insist that the mind-body problem is the result of a conceptual muddle, and that we are on the verge of a comprehensive physicalist account of consciousness.⁴⁰ But for every committed materialist there is a diehard dualist who insists that, try as we might, consciousness will never yield itself to a strictly biochemical account.⁴¹

It would appear that several thousand years of reflection have not brought about anything approaching a consensus on the seminal issue of whether our “essential nature” is material, immaterial, or something in-between.⁴² One thing, however, is certain: the concept of an immaterial soul, psyche, or mind has occasioned a panoply of ontological and ethical problems. The abortion issue is a case in point. Both the pro-lifers and pro-choicers tacitly accept the notion that life must begin at some point at or following conception; the issue is when. Yet at the same time we know full well that life must be present before conception for conception to take place. (Both sperm and egg must be living for anything resembling a person to emerge.) Thus, as many ethicists have duly noted, the issue is not so much the point at which life begins, but rather the point at which we emerge as persons. While the notion of a person may provide a toehold for medical ethicists, social scientists, or legal theorists, it yields little in the way of clarity on the fundamental ontological issue. We are still not sure to what exactly we refer when we use the first person pronoun *I*.

While we may concede our confusion as to the precise moment at which the “self” or “soul” or even “person” comes into existence, we might think ourselves on firmer ground when we contemplate its end. In the West the moment of death, however defined by the medical or legal communities, is generally understood as the point when the person is no longer present in the body. Whether or not one holds that the self continues to exist, the physical remains are viewed as an inanimate or lifeless lump of organic matter to be disposed of posthaste, albeit in a suitably decorous manner. Most Americans thus attribute little significance to the metamorphosis of the body *after* death. This view of death is, of course, culturally determined, and it is by no means the norm in other societies. What we view as the decomposition of a lifeless cadaver is viewed by many others as the final stage in the evolution of a still vital being. In other words, in many cultures death is not a moment, but a process that stretches out over a considerable period of time, continuing until the physical transformation of the body has resulted in a state of changelessness. This terminal point in the life cycle is marked by the “secondary treatment” of the corpse, in which the dried bones or fully desiccated corpse are moved to their final resting place.⁴³ The fact that North Americans pay relatively little heed to the transformation of the corpse after death bespeaks the enduring influence of the notion of a soul—our sense that the once living person is no longer present in his or her physical remains.

Yet our cultural attitudes in this area are surely not so simple. Witness the crash of the TWA flight 800 off the coast of Long Island on 17 July 1996. The loss of the

plane in over a hundred feet of murky ocean posed considerable problems for the recovery team. Despite the technical difficulties, compounded by bad weather, the authorities in charge repeatedly assured the public that every effort would be made to recover the remains, that no expense would be spared, and that the search would take precedence over the investigation into the cause of the crash. Why this emphasis on the recovery of the bodies, even at the risk of the safety of the divers? Is it merely to provide the remains with a proper burial? Or do we feel that there are still “people” down there?

Caroline Bynum has pondered similar issues in the context of her extensive work on the Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection.⁴⁴ Bynum demonstrates that, despite the continued belief in some form of body-soul dualism, by the early fifth century Christian thinkers had come to view the self in decidedly materialistic terms. The self was by definition an embodied self, such that individual salvation and life in the hereafter necessitated the physical resurrection, and reassembly, if necessary, of the corpse. The doctrine of the resurrection of the whole body, which quickly became church orthodoxy, gave rise to a number of conceptual puzzles that were to task the best minds of medieval Christendom: What age and sex is the resurrected body? Are foreskins, umbilical cords, fingernail and hair clippings resurrected as well? Are aborted fetuses resurrected? What about cannibalism: if one person eats another, in which resurrected body would the shared matter reside? Bynum argues that while these topics may strike us as outré or jejune, we too resort to the fantastic and bizarre as we contemplate the nature of personal identity and selfhood. American analytic philosophers hone their positions on the nature of mind, consciousness, and personal identity through thought experiments on artificial intelligence, brain transplants, and even teletransportation (“beam me up Scotty”). Like the medieval Christian scholastics, we too ponder the meaning of “self” through reflecting on the nature and constraints of our physical embodiment; we too resort to delimiting and oftentimes bizarre scenarios as we probe the enigma of our own corporeality.

Have we made progress in our search for the nature of consciousness, of the self, of the referent for the pronoun *I*? Is progress indeed possible? Or does the fact that “embodiment precedes essence,” to take liberties with the existentialist credo, doom any and all attempts to conceptualize the corporeal self? We seem to have returned to the problem of reference: signification entails mediation, a fact that continually frustrates our attempts to adequately denote or ostend the immediacy, not of having, but of *being* a body. The body that constitutes the epistemological object of medical science, of biology, of genetics, or of neuroscience, is never quite that immanent body that is *me*. Thus our discursive ruminations seem destined to remain forever a step removed from the existential and psychological weight of our physicality. And yet I suspect that the clue to the singular allure of relics lies precisely here, in the confusions and anxieties that attend our somatic identity.

Relics and the Hermeneutic Conundrum

We began with Lévy-Bruhl's notion of primitive mentality, a distinguishing feature of which was the inability to distinguish between the animate and the inanimate, between conscious beings and mere things. We have seen that, once freed from the rationalizing gloss of earlier apologetic accounts, the Buddhist treatment of icons and relics indicates that such objects were treated as animate entities capable of intentional acts. If we failed to appreciate this fully before, it was due to our tendency to think of icons and relics as mere signs or representations—whether of a divine presence, a divine absence, a transcendent truth, or what have you. Yet the ethnographic record suggests that icons and relics were not regarded as representations of the divine or ultimate, any more than a person's body is regarded as a representation of that person.

But we should be wary of concluding that medieval Buddhists were any more primitive in their thinking than are we. We too are far from clear as to the distinguishing marks of consciousness, of intentionality, of the self. We too are not quite sure what, if anything, animates us, what it is that constitutes our personhood, our subjectivity. We too are perplexed as to whether consciousness and matter are ultimately one thing or two, and if two, what their interrelationship might be.

To acknowledge the limits of our understanding is to provide grounds for a reconsideration of the Buddhist case. While there is considerable evidence suggesting that Buddhists regard relics and icons as presences, it is equally evident that Buddhists are able to distinguish between bones or images on the one hand, and walking, talking human beings on the other. The fact that “inert” objects are regarded not merely as animate entities, but as charismatic objects of ritual veneration, is tacit acknowledgment of difference in kind. That is, if bits of bone, images of wood or stone, are alive, they are alive in a rather special way.

I have suggested that the allure of relics lies in what they are—their corporeal essence—rather than in their representational or iconic qualities. At the same time it is clear that, unlike sentient beings, relics are what they are by virtue of how they are physically and ritually framed. In other words, if it is true that the recognition of a relic as an instance of unmitigated corporeality is actually abetted by the relic's absence of representational features, then the lion's share of the denotative work must be borne by the frame. And such framing suggests a more complex attitude toward charismatic objects than that evoked by notions such as animism, sympathetic magic, or mystical participation.

Gregory Bateson introduced the notion of framing in his analysis of primate communication, which, he argued, entails the ability to distinguish “map” from “territory.” This follows from the simple recognition that “a message, of whatever kind, does not consist of those objects which it denotes (‘the word “cat” cannot scratch us’).”⁴⁵ While an explicit or implicit frame of some sort is necessary to

discriminate signified from signifier, or figure from ground, the status of the frame itself remains couched in logical ambiguity, if not paradox. This is because the frame must (1) straddle both realms—map and territory—yet belong to neither; and (2) draw attention to itself, and yet remain hidden at the same time. (While spoken words must be heard to be understood, understanding becomes difficult if we attend too closely to their phonetic or acoustic qualities.) As Bateson notes, many forms of religious art, ritual, and discourse exploit this very ambiguity: “In the dim region where art, magic, and religion meet and overlap, human beings have evolved the ‘metaphor that is meant,’ the flag which men will die to save, and the sacrament that is felt to be more than ‘an outward and visible sign, given unto us.’ Here we can recognize an attempt to deny the difference between map and territory, and to get back to the absolute innocence of communication by means of pure mood-signs.”⁴⁶

There may be no more ambiguous an object in this regard than the human body. Anthropologists, sociologists, linguists, and literary theorists all attest to the manner in which the body is implacably inscribed with a host of significations and values. Somatic metaphors and images structure our conceptions of everything from the natural world, to the political, social, psychological, and religious domains, and those conceptions are in turn reflected back upon the body. To put it simply, the body, as modern cultural theorists are so fond of pointing out, is a cultural construct.

And yet the immanence or raw physicality of the body, my body, *me*, is more than a shifting field of significations. My immanent and primordial somatic being antecedes and frustrates all attempts at discursive appropriation. This, I would suggest, is one of the reasons that corpses, mummies, and relics seem so compelling: they confront us in the starkest possible way with our irreducible “thingness,” and at the same time with the puzzle of life itself. This point has been made most eloquently by Georges Bataille:

The spirit is so closely linked to the body as a thing that the body never ceases to be haunted, is never a thing except virtually, so much so that if death reduces it to the condition of a thing, the spirit is more present than ever: the body that has betrayed it reveals it more clearly than when it served it. In a sense the corpse is the most complete affirmation of the spirit. What death’s definitive impotence and absence reveals is the very essence of the spirit, just as the scream of the one that is killed is the supreme affirmation of life.⁴⁷

The relic is framed as a singular specimen of pure corporeality unencumbered by discernible form—the logical terminus in the reduction of the person to his or her material essence. Relics are the delimiting instance of our somatic existence stripped of all signification, that final and insensible scream that is the “supreme affirmation of life.”

In the so-called virgin birth debate of the 1960s, anthropologists returned to a long-standing controversy about “whether certain primitive peoples, notably the

Australian aborigines and the Trobrianders, were or were not ‘ignorant of the facts of physiological paternity’ when first encountered by early ethnographers,” as James Frazer, Bronislaw Malinowski, Ashley Montagu, and others had claimed.⁴⁸ E. R. Leach, waving the banner of positivism, argued that it was “highly improbable on common-sense grounds” that anyone should be ignorant of the male role in conception; native claims to the contrary must be understood as a species of religious dogma.⁴⁹ Leach went on to accuse anthropologists who believed otherwise of crude ethnocentrism. Melford Spiro disagreed. Leach’s assumption that what is obvious to us must be obvious to the Trobrianders constitutes, according to Spiro, the more pernicious form of ethnocentrism, since it equates difference with irrationality. To Spiro, anthropologists have an obligation to take the Trobrianders at their word, and, besides, the issue is not one of ignorance versus rationality, but ignorance versus knowledge. There is nothing irrational in the Trobrianders’ apparent ignorance of certain biological facts.⁵⁰

The methodological issues that animated the virgin birth debate are recapitulated in the more recent exchange between Obeyesekere and Sahlins.⁵¹ This time the debate concerns the Hawaiians, and whether they did in fact mistake Captain Cook for a god, as historians and anthropologists have claimed, or whether this is merely a seductive but historically untenable Western myth. While the players have changed, the underlying theoretical issue remains the same: given the fact that we must begin somewhere, and that where we begin may well determine where we end up, should we begin by presuming cross-cultural similarity or difference? Should we assume that the Hawaiians, the Trobriand Islanders, or medieval Chinese Buddhists for that matter, so resemble ourselves that we may aver to our own experience in deciphering theirs? Or is the intellectually and ethically prudent course to presume difference—to historicize and contextualize rigorously, and thereby avoid emasculating the other’s otherness, even at the risk of incomprehension? Spiro and Sahlins (like Lévy-Bruhl before them), believe that the principle of charity demands that we take the natives “at their word.” Leach and Obeyesekere, on the other hand, fear that such an approach infantilizes the native. For them, the principle of charity requires us to grant the native the same rationality we grant to ourselves. This anthropological struggle with the hermeneutic circle shows no immediate sign of abating.

In this analysis I may seem to be guilty of projecting a set of specifically North American cultural assumptions onto Asian Buddhists in an attempt to render intelligible the phenomenon of relic veneration. Insofar as I suggest that medieval Buddhists may have experienced similar confusions and anxieties as ourselves concerning matters of life, death, and corporeal embodiment, I might be seen to be siding with Leach and Obeyesekere. But it should be clear that I have no intention of turning Buddhists into bourgeois rationalists. If my own analysis is agenda driven, the agenda is not to render the other like us, but rather to render us more like the other—to expose the discursive fissures, the ignorance, the existential con-

fusions and anxieties, indeed the “irrationality,” that marks our own “collective representations.”⁵²

I am certainly not the first to try to split the difference between presuming commonality and presuming radical difference. As mentioned above, Lévy-Bruhl insisted that primitive mentality is not the mark of others alone, but is rather a universal mode of relating to the world that exists alongside the rational superstructure characteristic of modern Western culture. In a different context Paul Veyne talks of the phenomenon of “mental balkanization” as a way to explain the Greek ability to maintain several disparate and even irreconcilable views of the world at one and the same time.⁵³ And in his meditation on religion, Georges Bataille invokes an earlier state in which we did not imagine ourselves as objects in the world, in which we did not distinguish between subject and object. Bataille’s vision of a primordial state of intimacy and immanence, in which we are in the world “like water in water,”⁵⁴ is all too reminiscent of Lévy-Bruhl’s notions of primitive mentality and mystical participation in the world. (In this regard we might also mention Freud and his theories of primary process thinking and the id.)

But of course, finding myself in good company may simply exacerbate the hermeneutic muddle. The recurring theme that connects Lévy-Bruhl to Bataille—the tendency to emphasize a primordial or primitive mode of existence in which the distinction between self and world is blurred or nonexistent, a “mentality” less beholden to rationality or internal conceptual coherence—may ultimately tell us more about our own romantic yearnings than it tells us about anyone else. There may be no room for compromise when it comes to the question of cultural incommensurability, no way to render others intelligible without at once domesticating or emasculating them, no way to split the difference. But the immediate lesson vis-à-vis ourselves still holds. For just as there may be areas in which the otherness of peoples culturally and temporally removed from ourselves may remain forever beyond our reach, utterly irreconcilable with our modes of rational comprehension, there are aspects of our own world, our own personal and cultural experience, that are equally ungraspable (Sanskrit: *anupalabdhi*, Chinese: *pu k’o te*). The puzzle of selfhood and our corporeal embodiment, which is precisely the enigma that confronts us as we ponder the veneration of relics, may be such an area.

Notes

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1. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, trans. Lilian A. Clare (1926; reprint, Princeton, N.J., 1985).
2. *Ibid.*, 40.
3. See, for example, the following passage from Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*: “[W]e are allowed to think that Tylor’s dictum that ‘spirits are personified causes’ does not suffice to account for the place held by spirits in the collective representations of primitives. To us however, interested first of all in analysing these representations without any preconceived ideas about the mental processes upon which they depend, it may possibly be the ‘spirits,’ on the contrary, which will help us to understand what certain ‘causes’ are. Perhaps we shall find that the effect of the efficient cause—*vexata questio* to the philosophers—is a sort of abstract precipitate of the mystic power attributed to spirits” (26).
4. *Ibid.*, 44.
5. On the intellectual legacy of Lévy-Bruhl see Scott C. Littleton, “Introduction: Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and the Concept of Cognitive Relativity,” in Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, v–lviii. For a succinct study of the evolution of the category “culture” see Tomoko Masuzawa, “Culture,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago, 1998).
6. See Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of James Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton, N.J., 1992); and Marshall David Sahlins, *How “Natives” Think: About Captain Cook, for Example* (Chicago, 1995). Note that Sahlins has borrowed the English title of Lévy-Bruhl’s original work (*How Natives Think*) for his own recent study.
7. This presentation of Buddhism, with its attempt to distance Buddhism from “primitive religion,” is aptly captured in Henry Olcott’s *The Buddhist Catechism*, 44th ed. (Adyar, Madras, 1947), 43–45; see, for example, the discussion of relics and images:

Q Did the Buddha hold to idol-worship?

A. He did not; he opposed it. The worship of gods, demons, trees, etc., was condemned by the Buddha. External worship is a fetter that one has to break if he is to advance higher.

Q But do not Buddhists make reverence before the statue to the Buddha, his relics, and the monuments enshrining them?

A. Yes, but not with the sentiment of the idolator.

Q What is the difference?

A. Our Pagan Brother not only takes his images as visible representations of his unseen God or gods, but the refined idolator, in worshipping, considers that the idol contains in its substance a portion of the all-pervading divinity.

Q What does the Buddhist think?

A. The Buddhist reverences the Buddha’s statue and the other things you have mentioned, only as mementos of the greatest, wisest, most benevolent and compassionate man in this world-period (Kalpa). . . .

Q Are charms, incantations, the observance of lucky hours, and devil-dancing a part of Buddhism?

A. They are positively repugnant to its fundamental principles. They are the surviving relics of fetishism and pantheistic and other foreign religions.

On the historical development of the field of Buddhist Studies see Guy Richard Welbon, *The Buddhist Nirvana and Its Western Interpreters* (Chicago, 1968); J. W. de Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America*, 2d. ed. (Delhi, 1987); Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge, 1988); Donald S. Lopez Jr., ed., *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism* (Chicago, 1995).

8. Gregory Schopen, “The Phrase ‘sa prthivīpradesas caityabhūto bhavet’ in the *Vaj-*

- racchedikā*: Notes on the Cult of the Book in the Mahāyāna,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17, no. 3–4 (1975): 147–81. Schopen has been responsible for much of the attention paid to the role of relics in medieval Indian Buddhism; see Gregory Schopen, “Burial ‘Ad Sanctos’ and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism: A Study in the Archeology of Religions,” *Religion* 17 (July 1987): 193–225; Gregory Schopen, “On the Buddha and His Bones: The Conception of a Relic in the Inscriptions of Nāgārjunikonda,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 108, no. 4 (1988): 527–37; Gregory Schopen, “Monks and the Relic Cult in the Mahāparinibbānasutta: An Old Misunderstanding in Regard to Monastic Buddhism,” in *From Benares to Beijing: Essays on Buddhism and Chinese Religions in Honour of Prof. Jan Yün-hua*, ed. Gregory Schopen and Koichi Shinohara (Oakville, Ontario, 1991), 187–201; Gregory Schopen, “The Monastic Ownership of Servants or Slaves: Local and Legal Factors in the Redactional History of Two Vinayas,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 17, no. 2 (1994): 145–73; Gregory Schopen, “The Suppression of Nuns and the Ritual Murder of Their Special Dead in Two Buddhist Monastic Texts,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 24, no. 6 (1996): 563–92.
9. The fascination with relics reached a watershed with the American Academy of Religion Seminar on Buddhist Relic Veneration, which met annually over a four-year period (1994–1997). The participants, who were working with a wide variety of materials representing diverse historical periods and geographical spheres, unanimously attested to the importance of relics at every level of the social and clerical hierarchy since the dawn of Buddhism. The papers will appear in a volume being edited by Kevin Trainor and David Germano.
 10. The notion that relics are somehow ill suited as objects of veneration is not merely a contemporary Western conceit; the story of Trapuṣa and Bhallika suggests that the early Buddhists had to overcome a considerable degree of resistance to the cult of relics in India as well. (The two merchants are initially shocked at the Buddha’s suggestion that they venerate specimens of his hair and nail clippings; the Buddha has to talk them into it! See André Bareau, *Recherches sur la biographie du buddha dans les sūtrapitaka et les vinayapitaka anciens: De la quête de l’éveil à la conversion de Śāriputra et de Maudgalyāyana* [Paris, 1963], 109; and John S. Strong, “Buddhist Relics in Comparative Perspective: Beyond the Parallels” [paper presented at the American Academy of Religion, Chicago, Ill., 19 November 1994], 18).
 11. I am using *grace* as an approximate equivalent for Sanskrit: *adhīsthāna* (Chinese: *chia-ch’ih*, Japanese: *kaji*).
 12. David Eckel, “The Power of the Buddha’s Absence: On the Foundations of Mahāyāna Buddhist Ritual,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 4, no. 2 (1990): 61–95; John S. Strong, “Images,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, 16 vols. (New York, 1987), 5:97–104; Strong, “Buddhist Relics in Comparative Perspective”; Robert H. Sharf, “The Idolization of Enlightenment: On the Mummification of Ch’an Masters in Medieval China,” *History of Religions* 32, no. 1 (1992): 26–47; T. Griffith Foulk and Robert H. Sharf, “On the Ritual Use of Ch’an Portraiture in Medieval China,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 7 (1993/94): 204.
 13. The one exception of which I am aware might be the sophisticated commentary on image worship found in the recorded sayings of Ch’an masters, in which they attempt to “deconstruct” the practice in the very act of engaging in it. However, such an attitude was not directed to images and relics alone, but rather to every aspect of Buddhist monastic life, including the study of scripture, the practice of meditation, and the aspiration toward enlightenment; see Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cul-*

- tural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton, N.J., 1991), and Foulk and Sharf, “On the Ritual Use of Ch’an Portraiture.”
14. Note, for example, the manner in which configurations of Buddhist holy mountains, such as the *Ssu ta ming-shan*, came to dominate the sacred geography of China; see Chün-fang Yü, “P’u-t’o Shan: Pilgrimage and the Creation of the Chinese Potalaka,” in *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China*, ed. Susan Naquin and Chün-fang Yü (Berkeley, 1992), 190–245.
 15. See, for example, Bernard Faure, “Relics and Flesh Bodies: The Creation of Ch’an Pilgrimage Sites,” in Naquin and Yü, eds., *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China*, 150–89, where Faure documents the use of relics in the Buddhist “conquest” of Sung Shan and the establishment of Ts’ao-ch’i as a major pilgrimage site.
 16. See esp. Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981); and Patrick J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J., 1978).
 17. There are, of course, marginal cases, such as lacquered mummies, which are both relic and image. I will discuss the attempt to fuse relic and image later in the essay.
 18. On the term *icon* see esp. Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York, 1992), 6–8; and Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago, 1994).
 19. Barasch, *Icon*, 6–7.
 20. On Buddhist image consecration ceremonies see Yael Bentor, *Consecration of Images and Stūpas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism* (Leiden, 1996); Richard F. Gombrich, “The Consecration of a Buddhist Image,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 26, no. 1 (1966): 23–36; and Donald K. Swearer, “Hypostasizing the Buddha: Buddha Image Consecration in Northern Thailand,” *History of Religions* 34, no. 3 (1995): 263–80.
 21. See Kosugi Kazuo, “Nikushinzō oyobi yuikaizō no kenkyū,” *Tōyō gakuho* 24, no. 3 (1937): 405–36; and Faure, *Rhetoric of Immediacy*, 159.
 22. On Chinese mummies see Kosugi, “Nikushinzō”; Paul Demiéville, “Momies d’Extrême-Orient,” *Journal des Savants*, Troisième centenaire (Paris, 1965), 144–70; Doris Croissant, “Der Unsterbliche Leib: Ahneneffigies und Reliquienporträt in der Porträtplastik Chinas und Japans,” in *Das Bildnis in der Kunst des Orients*, ed. Martin Kraatz, Jürg Meyer Zur Capellen, and Dietrich Seckel (Stuttgart, 1990), 236–50; Faure, *Rhetoric of Immediacy*, 150–56; Faure, “Relics and Flesh Bodies;” and Sharf, “Idolization of Enlightenment.”
 23. In John Blofeld’s autobiographical account of his visit to Hui-neng’s mummy he notes his uncertainty as to whether the image he saw was a mummy or a skillfully executed fake; John Blofeld, *The Wheel of Life: The Autobiography of a Western Buddhist*, 2d ed. (London, 1972), 90–91.
 24. On the significance of the terms *hsiang*, *chen*, and *ting-hsiang* in China see Foulk and Sharf, “On the Ritual Use of Ch’an Portraiture,” 158–63.
 25. Ku K’ai-chih described his task as one of “transmitting the spirit” (*ch’uan shen*) or “using form to depict the spirit” (*i hsiang hsieh shen*). He is said to have placed particular emphasis on “dotting the eyes,” sometimes refraining from doing so for several years. Audrey Spiro argues that for Ku K’ai-chih, “dotting the eyes transmits the spirit and pours forth [*hsieh*] the shining [*chao*]. It permits the spirit to take up its abode in the image. . . . Which is to say that dotting the eyes *animates* the image, literally infusing it with life”; Audrey Spiro, “New Light on Gu Kaizhi,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 16 (Fall 1988): 12–13. See also Chen Shih-hsiang, *Biography of Ku K’ai-chih* (Berkeley, 1961), 14–15; Richard B. Mather, trans., *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World*, by Liu

- I-ch'ing with Commentary by Liu Chün* (Minneapolis, 1976), 368; Susan Bush and Hsioyen Shih, eds., *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 14; and Foulk and Sharf, "On the Ritual Use of Ch'an Portraiture," 160 n. 14.
26. Foulk and Sharf, "On the Ritual Use of Ch'an Portraiture."
 27. The term is apparently derived from translations of Tantric scriptures, and modern lexical works cite the *Mahavairocana sūtra* as the locus classicus (see esp. the section entitled *Pen-tsun san-mei*, T.848: 18.44a–b). The term seems to have lost its explicitly Tantric overtones rather quickly and is now used by all sects, especially in Japan; see Mikkyō Jiten Hensankai, ed., *Mikkyō daijiten*, rev. ed. (1970; reprint, Kyoto, 1983), 5:2068b–c (where the reconstructed Sanskrit is given as *Sayadhivevatah*); Mochizuki Shinkō, *Mochizuki bukkyō daijiten*, 3d ed. (Tokyo, 1958–63), 5:4697b–4698a; Ting Fupao, *Fo-hsiieh ta-tz'u-tien* (1919; reprint, Beijing, 1984), 427a; Komazawa Daigakunai Zengaku Daijiten Hensanjo, ed., *Zengaku daijiten* (1978; reprint, Tokyo, 1985), 1166a–b; and Roger Goepfer, "Some Thoughts on the Icon in Esoteric Buddhism of East Asia," in *Studia Sino-Mongolica, Festschrift für Herbert Franke* (Wiesbaden, 1979), 245–54.
 28. More specifically, this image was associated with Takemikatsuchi-no-mikoto of the Kasuga First Sanctuary, but the various Kasuga deities are commonly approached as a single entity under the rubric of Kasuga Myōjin. To make matters more complex, there was also a tradition within some Fujiwara circles that the *honji* of Kasuga was actually Shaka Nyorai (Śākyamuni) enshrined in both Kōfukuji's Central Golden Hall (Chūkondō) and Western Golden Hall (Nishikondō); see Susan Tyler, *The Cult of Kasuga Seen Through Its Art* (Ann Arbor, 1992), 137–44; Royall Tyler, *The Miracles of the Kasuga Deity* (New York, 1990), 86–87; and Allan G. Grapard, *The Protocol of the Gods: A Study of the Kasuga Cult in Japanese History* (Berkeley, 1992), 82–83.
 29. Needless to say, this sort of individuation would have been fostered in part by the economic interests of the local temple.
 30. When the image was opened for the first time in 1954 it was found to contain manufactured relics—a miniature set of internal organs fashioned out of silk—in addition to various valuable coins, crystals, scriptures, and historical documents relating to the history of the image; see Gregory Henderson and Leon Hurvitz, "The Buddha of Seiryōji: New Finds and New Theory," *Artibus Asiae* 19, no. 1 (1956): 5–55. On the legends of the Udayana image see esp. Martha L. Carter, *The Mystery of the Udayana Buddha* (Naples, 1990), and Alexander Soper, *Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China* (Ascona, Switzerland, 1959).
 31. Donald F. McCallum, *Zenkōji and Its Icon: A Study in Medieval Japanese Religious Art* (Princeton, N.J., 1994).
 32. Wu Hung, "What is Bianxiang?—On the Relationship between Dunhuang Art and Dunhuang Literature," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 52, no. 1 (1992): 130. According to Wu Hung, this compositional feature allows us to distinguish images of deities in narrative paintings from icons proper, even when the latter are set within a landscape. In a narrative scene the attention of the deity will be focused within the landscape itself, whereas the gaze of the icon extends out beyond the painted scenery to encompass the viewer. A classic example of a landscape painting exhibiting such "iconic" characteristics is the three-panel frontal depiction of the descent of Amida (*Amida raigō*) dating to the Kamakura period and now housed at Konkaikōmyō-ji. Such paintings of Amida rising over an earthly landscape were placed by the bed of the dying. The expiring worshiper would grasp strands of thread that were affixed directly to the hands of Amida, and then gaze at a reassuring scene of Amida and company

- coming to welcome him or her; Okazaki Jōji, *Pure Land Buddhist Painting*, trans. Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis (Tokyo, 1977), 140–42.
33. I would note as an aside that there has been much criticism of the “orientalist” penchant for removing holy images from their religious settings in Asian temples and sacred caves, and reinstalling them in museums. The dislocation, we are told, emasculates the power of the image, reducing it to a mere “object of art” to be appreciated for its aesthetic or exotic qualities alone. While I would not want to condone the pilfering of sacred images, I would note that the critique is somewhat misguided. If the museum acts to curtail or restrain the power of sacred icons, so too does the temple. The mistake lies in viewing the icon as a sublime representation of the divine, rather than as a powerful supernatural presence that must be assuaged lest it unleash its power in unforeseen ways.
 34. Should a warehouse holding hundreds of flags accidentally burn to the ground, few besides those with a financial interest in the enterprise would be troubled.
 35. David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, 1989).
 36. *Ibid.*, 436.
 37. Freedberg’s book is frustrating in part precisely because of the manner in which he elides the distinction between “lifelike” images (i.e., anthropomorphic or zoomorphic representations) as opposed to images and objects that lack physiognomic references: “Almost every image provides its beholders with clues to the organic presences registered upon it. When those clues are so abundant and exact that they combine to form what is regarded as an unusually lifelike image, then responses to it are predicated on a sense of its living reality. But when the clues are less exact and less abundant, we still seek to reconstitute the reality of the signified in the sign. Sign fuses with signified to become the only present reality. The smallest number of clues suffices to precipitate the search for more. Response to all images, and not only ones perceived as being more or less realistic, is predicated on the progressive reconstitution of material object as living”; *ibid.*, 245. In other words, Freedberg explains the power of images in terms of (1) our (natural?) tendency to impute intentionality to things that look, however obliquely, sentient or “lifelike.” But he immediately moves on to state that (2) we also imaginatively project sentience onto things that do not possess such qualities. He does not offer any evidence, however, for his claim that the second phenomenon is derivative of the first. Thus, it seems to me that the evidence he adduces to support proposition (2) can only compromise the *explanatory* value of proposition (1). For a similar critique see the review by E. H. Gombrich, “The Edge of Delusion,” *New York Review of Books* (14 February 1990): 6–9.
 38. On the Chinese adaptation of *buddhakāya* doctrine see Robert H. Sharf, “The *Treasure Store Treatise* (*Pao-tsang lun*) and the Sinification of Buddhism in Eighth-Century China” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1991), 190–203.
 39. See Caroline Walker Bynum, “Bodily Miracles and the Resurrection of the Body in the High Middle Ages,” in *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion*, ed. Thomas Kselman (Notre Dame, Ind., 1991), 68–106; Caroline Walker Bynum, “Material Continuity, Personal Survival, and the Resurrection of the Body: A Scholastic Discussion in Its Medieval and Modern Contexts,” in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 239–97; Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York, 1995).

40. Recent attempts to explain conscious awareness without appealing to immaterial forces often rely on computational models in general, and neural-network modeling in particular. For an overview of the neuropsychological research in the area see Stephen M. Kosslyn and O. Koenig, *Wet Mind: The New Cognitive Neuroscience* (New York, 1992). Many analytic philosophers influenced both by the neuropsychological evidence and by Wittgensteinian “deconstructions” of mind-body dualism have enthusiastically jumped on the physicalist bandwagon; see, for example, Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston, 1991). But not all physicalists subscribe to the computational approach. Roger Penrose, for example, argues that the mechanism for consciousness is located at the level of subatomic physics, in gravitational phenomena acting through microtubules in neurons; Roger Penrose, *Shadows of the Mind: A Search for the Missing Science of Consciousness* (New York, 1994). And the neurobiologists Francis Crick and Christof Koch have put forward an alternative theory that sees consciousness arising as the result of the synchronized firing of neurons in the cerebral cortex with rhythms in the range of 40 hertz; Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York, 1994); Christof Koch and Francis Crick, “Some Further Ideas Regarding the Neuronal Basis of Awareness,” in *Large-Scale Neuronal Theories of the Brain*, ed. Christof Koch and Joel L. Davis (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 93–109. For an overview of the diversity of work in this area see the papers in the series of special issues of *Journal of Consciousness Studies* entitled “Explaining Consciousness—The ‘Hard Problem,’” 2, no. 3 (1995), and 3, nos. 1, 3, and 4 (1996).
41. See, for example, the work of Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *Philosophical Review* 83 (October 1974): 435–50; and Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford, 1986), who insists on the irreducibility of the “subjective point of view”; or that of David J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford, 1996), who believes that consciousness is a “fundamental feature” of the universe irreducible to anything more basic.
42. One candidate for “something in-between” might be accounts of consciousness based on nonlinear dynamics and emergent properties; see, for example, Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991); and Alwyn Scott, *Stairway to the Mind: The Controversial New Science of Consciousness* (New York, 1995).
43. On secondary treatment see esp. Robert Hertz, *Death and The Right Hand*, trans. Rodney Needham and Claudia Needham (Aberdeen, 1960); Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* (Cambridge, 1979); and Loring M. Danforth, *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* (Princeton, N.J., 1982).
44. See note 39.
45. Gregory Bateson, “A Theory of Play and Fantasy,” in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York, 1972), 180; on the notion of framing see also Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston, 1986).
46. Bateson, “Theory of Play and Fantasy,” 183. See also the analysis of the *parergon* in Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago, 1987), 54 ff.
47. Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1992), 40.
48. E. R. Leach, “Virgin Birth (The Henry Myers Lecture),” *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropology Institute for 1966* (1966): 39. For the background to the debate see the references mentioned in “Virgin Birth” (46 n. 1). For the revived debate of the 1960s, in addition to “Virgin Birth” by Leach see Melford E. Spiro, “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. M. Banton

- (London, 1966); Melford E. Spiro, "Virgin Birth, Parthenogenesis, and Physiological Paternity: An Essay in Cultural Interpretation," *Man* 3, no. 2 (1968): 242–61; and the correspondence in the 1968 and 1969 volumes of *Man*.
49. Leach, "Virgin Birth," 41 and 45. On the latter page Leach states: "An alternative way of explaining a belief which is factually untrue is to say that it is a species of religious dogma; the truth which it expresses does not relate to the ordinary matter-of-fact world of everyday things but to metaphysics." Of course, everything hinges on who wields the authority to declare a belief "factually untrue."
 50. Spiro, "Virgin Birth, Parthenogenesis, and Physiological Paternity."
 51. See note 6.
 52. This is a well-established rhetorical strategy in American anthropology, for which Clifford Geertz has coined the term "self-nativising"; see the analysis in Clifford Geertz, "Us/Not-Us: Benedict's Travels," in *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, 1988), 107.
 53. Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths: An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago, 1988).
 54. Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 19 and 28.