

## BUDDHIST GEOAESTHETICS

May 3–4, 2019  
Brown University

### Conference Description

Scholars in the humanities are increasingly invoking geomorphological constructs—explanations of the Earth’s topography as formed through the intersection of climactic, hydrologic, biologic, and geologic processes—to destabilize anthropocentric frameworks of analysis. But in order to undertake this reframing honestly, we must also reckon with the fact that modern geological science is itself a human construct. We recognize the earth as having agency over us, nourishing our crops and destroying us with natural disasters, but we also recognize that our responses to those forces are necessarily mediated by our understanding of the earth. As an emerging term of analysis, geoaesthetics foregrounds this tension between the being and knowing of the earth. Its geo-aspect recognizes the implacable presence of the earth, superseding all human systems of meaning, while its aesthetic dimension acknowledges that the earth, as an object of knowledge, is produced through human judgments.

In figuring the earth as a fundamentally human subject, geoaesthetics encourages us to look beyond the modern history of geological science to other histories of environmental thinking. At this moment in the humanities, the most useful of these alternatives would seem to be those that, like geomorphology, push us to think in terms of scale, but do so on the basis of assumptions and through categories of meaning that are distinct from those of modern science.

This brings us to Buddhism, which, like geological science, makes assertions about time and space that vastly exceed the scope of conventional human experience. Recent scholarship on Buddhist cave shrines and sacred mountains has already begun to deploy geological frameworks of analysis, examining such topics as the dynamic relationship between human and geological agency in the organization of ritual environments. The goal of this conference is to expand and critique the terms of these inquiries through a discussion of the earth and its forces across the wider field of Buddhist Studies.

Our essential questions are as follows: How did Buddhists understand the temporal and spatial scale of the earth? How are their understandings implicated in what they said and did with rocks, rivers, plants, and animals? How might we endeavor to reconstruct these understandings? What sources are available, and what questions should we ask of them? To what extent are the relevant understandings Buddhist at all? Our aim in asking these questions is not only to develop a more nuanced sense of the mediating epistemologies, but also to inquire into the ways in which geoaesthetics, as a conceptual rubric, might help us recognize heretofore unacknowledged dimensions of the history of Buddhism. How might the question of geoaesthetics and its meanings encourage new interpretations of familiar sources and well-known places?

By bringing together scholars engaged in the study of Buddhism from diverse disciplinary and regional perspectives and challenging them to think through the geoaesthetic implications of their subjects, we aim to reframe the being of the earth as an object of Buddhist knowledge. Our goal is not a coherent sense of a unifying Buddhist geoaesthetics, but a collective impression of the many ways in which discrete Buddhist engagements with the earth express distinctive aesthetic

visions. By giving voice to the plurality and complexity of these visions, we hope to stimulate new, productive responses to the epistemological challenges of the environmental humanities.