A central aspect of Buddhism and a key factor in its successful diffusion is its facility to interact with preexisting religious traditions. In general, Buddhism did not attempt to supplant preexisting cults but to create a specific cultural space for itself by interacting with native cults in several ways. This resulted not only in the development of forms of religious syncretism (cults, doctrines, festivals, calendrical rites, etc.), but also and especially of specific and original intellectual systems and ritual procedures that would characterize Buddhism and differentiate it from other traditions. Recent studies have begun to show that interaction with local cults was an essential aspect of Buddhist beliefs and practices from the very beginning. Buddhist canonical sources provide us with a detailed picture of early Buddhist interest in and attention to local cults in India (DeCaroli 2004). Archaeological evidence reveals that early Buddhist temples were built on the sites of prehistoric megalithic formations or in nearby areas, indicating an earnest interest in interacting with local cults, including those dedicated to the dead (Schopen 2004, 360–81).

In other words, Buddhism is a complex cultural system that since its early stages of development in India included “local deities,” i.e., Brahmanical deities and local gods such as yakṣas and nāgas, as well as spirits of the dead. This became the general paradigm for the structure of local cults elsewhere. As Buddhism spread, it carried its peculiar patterns of interactions with other traditions, including elements mediated from Brahmanism and from local, non-Aryan cultures in India.

**Buddhism and “Local” Deities**

Arriving at a definition of “local deities” (and local cults in general) in a Buddhist context is not an easy task. In fact, “local deities” is an umbrella term that covers a number of different phenomena and entities. We should note that Buddhism and Indian religions in general have developed a detailed vocabulary to designate “supernatural” beings, and this terminology cannot be adequately rendered in English.
words such as “deity,” “god,” “spirit,” “ghost,” and “ogre.” (Moreover, such beings cannot even properly be considered “supernatural,” since they exist and operate within the same natural realm of human beings.) An attempt to give a unified classification to various forms of such beings is represented by the Sino-Japanese term hachibushū 八部衆 (or tenryū hachibushū 天竜八部衆). Systematized and popularized by esoteric Buddhism, this multifarious category includes devas (Jpn. ten 天), nāgas (ryū 竜), yakṣas (yasha 夜叉), gandharvas (kendatsuba 乾闼婆), asuras (ashura 阿修羅), garudās (karura 迦楼羅), kimnara (kinnara 篪那羅), and mahoragas (magoraga 摩睱羅迦); in addition, we find rākṣasas, piśacas, and various kinds of ghosts and demonic entities.

However, not all local deities were, strictly speaking, “local.” While some controlled a very limited territory (for example, the area covered by the shade of the deity’s tree or the lake in which the deity resided), others, such as the Vedic and Brahmanic gods, extended their influence over many world systems and were the objects of widespread cults; and some were originally regional gods, most notably, Kṛṣṇa and Gaṇeśa, that spread to various parts of the Indian subcontinent. At times, certain local spirit-deities, due to their interactions with Buddhism, came to acquire a “translocal” (transnational) character, as in the case of Indian deities that are worshiped from Southeast Asia to Japan. I propose to define “local deities” (“deities” understood here in the broadest possible sense) as essentially comprising three kinds of non-human entities: spirits/deities that were 1) not originally Buddhist (or, outside of India, not originally Indian); 2) brought elsewhere by Buddhism as part of a larger process of acculturation and which became the objects of local cults; and 3) produced by the interactions between Buddhism and local traditions.

Such local cults are not just part of folk religion or simply ways to cope with popular superstition and ignorance. In addition to their role in the ordering of society (social and cosmic hierarchies, definitions of righteous behavior) and control over territory (kingship), they are also related to other ideas of cultural identity and definitions of subjectivity (souls, spirits, various forms of existence); as such, they enabled Buddhism, originally a translocal religion, to set its roots in foreign localities.