Anne Blackburn received her Ph.D. in History of Religions in 1996 from the University of Chicago Divinity School. She was trained to study Buddhism as an historian of religions (in a program greatly influenced by approaches to historical sociology and hermeneutics) rather than as a philologist. She approaches Buddhist texts with attention to the contexts in which they were composed and used. It has also led her to substantial work in the history of devotional practices and intellectual history, topics first broached in undergraduate days at Swarthmore College. She approaches this work with the assumption that the history of Buddhist texts and practices should not be divorced from the history of other forms of life with which they are closely connected, and through which they have been constituted.

Moving across a spatial scale — from the city of Colombo (Lanka) to a wider regional Buddhist world including Lanka, India, and Southeast Asia — Anne Blackburn explores the 19th- and early 20th-century interaction between Buddhists and the Raj. In doing so, she focuses particularly on the crystallization of expressions of collective identification that developed thanks to intersecting forms of knowledge, new technologies, and colonial urban growth.