

Book review

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Tibetan Rituals of Death: Buddhist funerary practices.

By Margaret Gouin. London: Routledge, 2010, 208 pages,
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B o o k R e v i e w

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Tibetan *Rituals of Death: Buddhist funerary practices* by Margaret Gouin represents the culmination of doctoral research undertaken at the University of Bristol and based primarily upon literature such as academic studies and historical travel accounts. In discussing Tibetan funerary rites, she utilises the term “Tibet” to refer to a geographical region that could be designated as such pre-1949. She focuses on people viewed as linked to this region historically by cultural features, prime amongst them being language, describing them as culturally Tibetan. She aims to contribute to the field of Buddhist Studies and, in doing so, to pose research challenges both to those in the field and to those working in the related areas of anthropology and Tibetan Studies.

The book gives a clearly structured description of Tibetan Buddhist death rituals, situating them in the wider context of Buddhist death rituals as derived from textual accounts. In doing so it discusses two categories of rites: those intended to benefit the deceased, either in the intermediate state between this life and the next and/or in achieving a desired rebirth, and those aiming to protect the living from possible spirit harm, especially in the wake of violent or accidental deaths. The study compares textual accounts of Tibetan Buddhist mortuary practices to those evidenced in textual records describing other forms of Buddhism. It argues convincingly that, although common elements can be found both cross traditionally and within descriptions of Tibetan mortuary rites, there is no standard form of Tibetan Buddhist funeral. This underpins the main finding of Gouin’s research, which is that textually evidenced antecedents predating the transfer of Buddhism to Tibet can be found for rites superficially appearing unique to Tibetan Buddhism.

Each chapter of the book is divided into subsections, to give a succinct, precise and comprehensive account of the literature it describes. After introducing the work (chapter one) and giving a clear review of literary sources (chapter two), Gouin proceeds in a linear fashion to describe Tibetan Buddhist funerary practices taking place immediately before death (chapter three), immediately afterwards (chapter four), during the disposal of the body (chapters five and six), post disposal (chapter seven) and memorial rites (chapter eight), ending with a concluding analysis of the descriptive material (chapter nine) which establishes Tibetan Buddhist death rites as “firmly based in Buddhist principles and teachings found throughout Indian and Asian Buddhist traditions” (137).

The study is a very thorough exposition and literature review of material pertaining to death and dying in Tibetan Buddhist traditions, which acknowledges its own limitations in being a descriptive exposition based primarily on secondary literature that is necessarily deficient as a full account of death rites, due to the lack of verification through fieldwork (for example, see p. 55). In this regard, Gouin highlights the tendency in Buddhist scholarship to take textual descriptions of rites as infallible records of how they are enacted; "to take the word for the deed" (135). As she points out, this overlooks the importance of the performative element of ritual practices as accessible through fieldwork. Particular strengths of this monograph are that Gouin is careful throughout not to make any unsubstantiated claims and that she draws attention to lack of evidence or the speculative nature of her analyses whenever appropriate.

Tibetan Rituals of Death makes a valuable contribution to academic scholarship by addressing an area accorded scant attention by scholars and, in doing so, provides a frame for future research and proposes intelligent avenues it might take. Although I would suggest that Western scholarship has little if any bearing or influence on the lives of the vast majority of Tibetans, since they lack the practical or linguistic ability to access it, it seems reasonable to assume research such as that presented by Gouin could influence the integration of Tibetan Buddhist teachings and practices within the lives of interested Westerners. Therefore, this study is arguably not only of relevance for academic scholarship, but for contemporary Westerners interested in or actively participating in forms of Tibetan Buddhist practice. Although in Buddhist monastic ordination rites one finds prescribed formulas that Westerners are able to follow or adapt, those wanting to mark other significant life events, such as birth, marriage or death, in a manner reflecting their affiliation with Buddhism, have scant resources to call upon. Additionally, as Gouin points out, those resources relating to Tibetan Buddhist death rites published in Western languages tend to focus almost exclusively on translations of sections of one text, the Bardo Thödröl (135), and without much consideration being accorded "the context of its actual use" (6). This book provides an informative framework within which such Western Buddhist practitioners of Tibetan traditions could situate their understandings and practices around death. Hence, the study has merit and importance both as a scholastic work providing a basis and proposing avenues for future academic research, and as a potential foundation upon which contemporary Buddhist practitioners might develop their understandings and practices.