

## Book Review



### *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China*

Edited by Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig.  
Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012,  
296 + xiv pages, ISBN 978-1-107-00388-0  
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Paul Williams' and Patrice Ladwig's collection of essays on *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China* provides a valuable addition to the (unfortunately) limited scholarly literature on contemporary Buddhist ritual practice. Moreover, the focus on death rites in particular is sorely lacking in such contemporary anthropological literature as exists.

This edited collection has been produced by an international panel of authors working in a number of areas, both geographical and topical, which are sadly neglected in the available scholarly material. It consists of an Introduction plus eleven chapters covering practices in Sri Lanka (Langer, chapter two), Cambodia (Davis, chapter three), Thailand (Chirapravati, chapter four), Laos (Bouté and Ladwig, chapters five and six, respectively), Burma (De Mersan and Robinne, chapters seven and eight, respectively) and China (Formoso, Heise, and Tam and Chen, chapters nine to eleven, respectively). Heise's chapter on the transformation of the Ghost Festival into a Dharma Assembly in southeast China is primarily historical, but the majority of chapters deal with ritual practices (chapters two, five, six, seven, eight, nine, and eleven) and/or material objects associated with mortuary rites (chapters three, four, six, eleven, and twelve).

As Professor Williams writes in his Introduction to the volume, since Buddhism's early days there has been a perception that it provides a system of techniques for dealing with death, laying down clear guidelines for achieving a 'good' death—which contributes to the possibility of a 'good' rebirth—and for navigating the after-death transition to a new life. This system is inseparably linked to how a person lives their life up to the moment of death. This clarity on what happens before, during and after death, and how to deal with it, "was a major factor in the successful transmission of Buddhism from its original Indian cultural context" (1).

The studies in this volume also reflect the close interrelationship between the laity and the community of religious professionals in dealing with death. This is an important

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factor, too often omitted in Western scholarship on Buddhism. In addition to the element of social cohesion resulting from this interrelationship, there are economic considerations which are largely overlooked: for example, that the performance of rituals, and particularly of the sometimes very lengthy and elaborate death rituals, provides a significant source of income for religious communities.

Of particular interest is the focus on 'bad' deaths in three chapters, discussing how such unfortunate deaths are dealt with in Laos, Burma and China (chapters five, seven, and nine). Two of these (Bouté, chapter five, and De Mersan, chapter seven) deal with cultural settings where Buddhism is practised by an ethnic minority. These are the more valuable because Bouté's study group, the Phunoy in Laos, seem to be completely uninterested in reincarnation. Their emphasis is on the importance of ancestor cults, since these provide protection to the village and to its potential for fertility, both of the land and of the people. In the case of a 'bad death', where the purity of the village is threatened by the ghostly manifestation of the deceased, the funeral rituals transform the 'bad' dead into 'good' dead, that is, into ancestors who will ensure the purity and integrity of the village.

The issue of materiality also arises in some of the essays and is particularly well-illustrated by three contributions (chapters two to four) all of which address the *pamsukūla*, a monk's robe originally made out of cloth taken from a charnel ground, which symbolises the monk's conquest of death through his Buddhist training. The evolution of this robe in ritual use, and its representation in religious art, provide valuable insights into the development of Buddhism in the subject areas. Another example of the interplay of the spiritual and the material is found in Ladwig's chapter on feeding the dead in Laos. This is an important ritual for generating merit which can then be dedicated to the benefit of the deceased. It is found in Buddhist practice throughout East, North and Southeast Asia.

The volume's descriptions of funerary rituals are based on recent fieldwork and thus are valuable indicators of current practice in the subject areas. Also important are the insights into how the practice of Buddhism has been affected in cultures where it has been under threat from political upheavals within the past fifty years or so. Thus, for example, Robinne (chapter eight) describes how the performance of theatrical plays at a monk's funeral in Burma provides an opportunity for indirect subversive political commentary even as it appears to dutifully integrate the requirements of government propaganda. The chapters by Bouté and Ladwig in Laos, and Heise in China, all provide evidence of the effect of socialist revolutions on the ritual practice of Buddhism.

The research for these essays formed part of the AHRC-funded project entitled *Buddhist Death Rituals in Southeast Asia and China* at the Centre for Buddhist Studies of the University of Bristol (2007–2010). A very valuable supplement to the edited volume are the photographs and films which also resulted from this project, and which can be found at the Centre for Buddhist Studies' website under 'The Understanding Buddhist Death Project'.<sup>1</sup> This material can be downloaded for free, as can the extensive bibliographies

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/religion/buddhist-centre/projects/bdr> accessed April 3, 2014.

also found on the project website.

The contemporary information provided by this volume and its supporting material is useful in reminding scholars in the West of the rich materiality of Asian Buddhism and the profound importance of afterlife beliefs in shaping not only the performance of funeral rites, but also many aspects of daily life. The studies in this volume also reveal the complex interplay of Buddhist teaching with local pre- and non-Buddhist cosmologies, resulting in the local transformation of both. Of particular note are the multitude of concepts of what constitutes a 'person', and how that multiplicity influences ideas of how the 'person' may be preserved—or not—through the practice of funeral rites.

This is an important scholarly resource for those engaged in Buddhist studies, but also for anyone with a more general interest in death studies or ritual studies, as well as in the cultures of contemporary Southeast Asia and China.