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Edited by Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

*Introduction: Buddhist funeral cultures**Patrice Ladwig and Paul Williams*

DEATH AT THE CENTRE OF BUDDHIST CULTURE

The statement that ‘death is the origin and the center of culture’ (Assmann 2005: 1) might at first sight seem like a simple generalisation that misses out on many other aspects of culture. However, when the study of death is not simply reduced to a rite of passage, we believe that approaching Buddhist cultures through their ideas, imaginaries and practices related to death can help us to understand crucial facts that reach beyond the domain of death and dying. First, death offers a unique departure for understanding the relations between people, monks, ritual experts and other entities that are commonly labelled as ‘the dead’, but can in fact comprise a multitude of entities of various ontological statuses. Second, death reaches out into such diverse domains as agricultural fertility, human reproduction, political cults and the economy and therefore constitutes a total social fact (Mauss 1990). Jan Assmann’s statement also has a particular relevance for the history of Buddhism. Death indeed was and is at the centre of Buddhist culture and has on a ritual, ideological and even economic level played a crucial role in its development and spread. Death was from its beginning an event that was seen as particularly central to Buddhist interests. Throughout Asia it has always been recognised that Buddhists are specialists in death. One of the things that attracted Chinese (and Tibetans, for that matter) to Buddhism was its clarity about what happens at death, the processes needed to ensure a successful death – the welfare of the dead person and his or her mourners – and its clarity about what happens after death and its links with the whole way someone has lived their life. No other rival religion in Asia had at that time such clarity. It was a major factor in the successful transmission of Buddhism from its original Indian cultural context.

Why was Buddhism so successful in explaining death? Death was written into Buddhism from the beginning. It is universally accepted in the various hagiographies of Siddhārtha Gautama (died c. 400 BCE), the wealthy aristocrat

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who was to become the so-called ‘historical Buddha’, known as Śākyamuni, that one of the things which first gave him the existential crisis that led to his spiritual search was the sight of a dead man. This came as a shock, but much more was the shock when he applied the lesson to himself. *He too* would one day be as this man was – dead. The breakdown which resulted took from him all taste for the pleasures of life. Aware that there were others in north India who felt like he did, and who sought a state of being in which death would have ceased to be a problem for them, he renounced his life of luxury (and his wife and child) and joined them, a ‘drop-out’. After many years in the forest, a homeless ascetic who lived on alms and practised physical austerities and deep meditation, he came to understand that if he could see in the deepest, most life-transforming way things the way they really are then *death would no longer be anything to him*. Seeing things that way, Buddhists hold, made Siddhārtha Gautama the Awakened One, the Buddha. This is a matter of the mind, understanding reality as it is, not physical asceticism but mental comprehension brought about through deep meditation. And that awakening was accompanied, so Buddhist tradition holds, by a triumph over Māra, the Buddhist ‘tempter’, whose very name suggests etymologically a personification of death.

So the Buddhist path from the beginning lay in a confrontation with death, at least for the spiritual virtuosi who could manage it. Doctrinally and philosophically speaking, there is also an intimate link between the notion of impermanence (Pali: *anicca*) and death. Things naturally arise and fall in accordance with impersonal causal processes. We suffer, we suffer all the time – including the unbearable but inevitable suffering of death – because we try to fix the processes of change, and we crave changeable things which in their cessation are bound to cause the one who craves them to be miserable. Applied to our lives, we are naturally bound to die, just as throughout life we were really inexorably dying all the time, from moment to moment, or even split moment to split moment. Our craving for our own permanence – something which is quite impossible – is one of the crucial factors that entail our deep existential suffering and misery. We are bound to die, and release comes when we let go in the deepest possible way and cease at even a subliminal level from resisting our inevitable impermanence. For, the Buddhist tradition argues, there is nothing about us unenlightened and hence inevitably suffering folk that could ever stand firm against the inexorable process of dissolution.

In this view, death is overcome through its deep acceptance, and its acceptance involves seeing that it is constantly occurring, from moment to moment to moment. Buddhist philosophy elaborated in great detail the

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different types of impermanence, and the complex causal connections between impermanent events. Impermanence and death are of the very essence of Buddhism. And it is this centrality of impermanence and death in Buddhism, reflected in the Buddhist doctrinal emphasis on change and absence of enduring identity – for death is a constant occurrence, we are really in many ways dead even while we are alive – when expressed in living cultures where close reciprocal relationships with the dead ancestors are essential to social identity and cohesion, that we shall see reflected in the studies contained in this book.

THE DEAD BETWEEN ‘DOCTRINAL ABSENCE’ AND
‘ANTHROPOLOGICAL PRESENCE’

As many contributions in the present volume show, the dead continue to play a role in the life of the living; not only in the form of memory, but as ‘active’ members of a family or a community. They can live on in the form of other entities, as ancestors, spirits, ghosts. Therefore, what counts as dead, as being and agency has to be explored in very specific contexts. As Holt (2007) puts it for Sri Lankan Buddhism, the dead are ‘gone, but not departed’. As classical and recent anthropological studies of death (Hertz 1960; Metcalf and Huntington 1991) have shown, in many societies death is usually conceived as a process of transformation, and less as the end of the agency of a deceased person, as is very often assumed in biological, ‘Western’-inspired understandings. And yet the idea of ‘the dead’ as active members of the community, while undoubtedly very much present in the cultures covered by this book, provides an obvious paradox for anyone whose exposure to the study of Buddhism has been entirely or primarily its doctrine. For from the beginning, we have been taught, Buddhism holds that the dead have been reborn (or reincarnated – the attempt sometimes made to suggest some sort of difference between the two in ‘Buddhist English’ has little to recommend it). Whether the dead are reborn immediately after death, as is the doctrinal position of the Theravāda Buddhism of Southeast Asia, or there exists a short period of up to forty-nine days before rebirth, as is common in the Buddhism of e.g. Tibet or China, makes little difference. The fact is that soon after death the dead have gone beyond recall, reborn perhaps as happy beings known as ‘gods’ (*deva*), or as warlike ‘anti-gods’ forever jealous of the gods, or perhaps once more as humans, or non-human creatures such as animals, fish, cockroaches or wiggly worms, or hungry ghosts, or worst of all reborn in one of the many terrible hells of Buddhism in accordance with the moral quality of their past deeds while alive (‘karma’).

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Of course, it is perfectly possible that one's dead family members have been reborn close to their living descendants, and hence are still capable one way or another of being in a dependence relationship with the living. But once more the majority doctrinal position of Buddhism has been to deny that these beings could be seen as actually still being our former family members who have passed on and to whom we hence preserve our familial duties of former times. This is because (we are told in so many introductory books on Buddhism) the Buddha did not hold that the reborn being is literally in all respects the *same* as the being who died. The reborn being is certainly not in any meaningful sense the same *person* as the one who died, and this point is recognised quite explicitly in several influential Buddhist philosophical traditions (Williams 1998: Chs. 3, 5). A cockroach cannot be the same person as one's grandfather.

The link between the 'reborn being' and the 'being that died' is explained in terms of causal dependence, where karmic causation is held to be a central factor in holding the whole process together. And it is essential to Buddhist doctrine that with causation there is absolutely no need for some sort of permanent, unchanging, enduring self-identical bearer of personal identity – a 'Self' – to link the one who dies and their rebirth (Collins 1982). All that happens is that at death the psychophysical bundle, made up out of a stream of physical events, sensations, conceptual activities, various other mental events including crucially one's intentions, and that awareness which is necessary to any conscious experience (i.e. the five classes of psychophysical events known as the 'aggregates') reconfigures. Doctrinally speaking, a living being is nothing more than a temporarily structured configuration of physical events, sensations, events of conceptualisation, various mental events such as intentions, and awareness, without any enduring Self (Pali: *attā*; Sanskrit: *ātman*) to glue him or her all together. Even when alive these aggregates (Pali: *khandha*; Sanskrit: *skandha*) form a flow, a stream, with no stability save that provided temporarily by the structuring causal force of previous actions. At death one configuration breaks down and another configuration takes place. Thus the person is reducible to a temporary bundle of events where all constituent events are radically impermanent, temporarily held together through causal relationships. Thus even if one's family members have been reborn in close relationship to their grieving family, this doctrinal position would entail that the rebirth cannot in any meaningful sense preserve enough identity to entail the normal social relationships and duties incumbent upon close or even fairly distant family members. The dead may be all around us, but they are no longer *our* dead.

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And yet, as we shall see in the collection of papers published in this book, anthropological work in cultures where Buddhism plays a major part shows that the doctrinal scenario represented here must obviously be transformed and reinterpreted where reciprocal relationships with the dead ancestors is an essential part of living as a member of the group and its own social identity and cohesion. These dead ancestors are frequently felt to be present and still to be themselves for sometimes a considerable, if not indefinite, time after death, certainly more than forty-nine days. They continue to be present, albeit as transformed entities. Because Buddhism is in a society it necessarily performs a social role, and that role (a role of all religions) is one of caring and coping for the needs of society. As society also includes the dead, Buddhist funeral cultures comprise a multitude of ritual and other activities focusing on those who remain alive in some sense despite being considered dead. The deceased have to be cared for, they have to be fed, to be appeased or simply to be remembered as the duties to and relationships with the dead are essential to the flourishing of many, perhaps all, societies.

IMAGINING DEATH AND THE RITUAL PROCESS

With the expression 'Buddhist funeral cultures' we do not strictly limit ourselves to the domain of ritual or text, or an original idea of death in early Indian Buddhism. We understand the term in the sense of an imaginary, the latter term here denoting not something false or fantastic, but – similar to Steven Collins' notion of the 'Pali imaginaire' (1998: 72ff.) – as a concept referring to a capacity or faculty of the mind dealing with death and the dead. This imaginary is also created and expressed in ritual and everyday practices. Farrer (2006) has used the term 'deathscapes' in a very similar sense. On the one hand this can refer to concrete spaces of death like cemeteries, crematoria, monuments or, in general, material aspects of death (Sidaway and Maddrell 2010). On the other hand, this can deal with the complex conglomerate of abstract discursive and subjective spaces which death 'inhabits': texts, stories, emotions, but also rites and social practices are just a few examples. These stand in constant dialogue with the concrete spaces of death mentioned before. Due to these multiple links of death to various fields and domains, it cannot be understood as a timeless and universal idea or concept. Because 'society is not only made up of the living but also includes the dead' (De Coppet 1981: 198), death reflects the larger changes in society and history. Rituals, death imaginaries and deathscapes are open to transformations caused, for example, by political changes, sectarian divisions or religious purifications. In the chapters dealing with death and spirits in Laos (Bouté and Ladwig: Chapters 5 and 6) and

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Heise on the Chinese ghost festival (Chapter 10) we see how socialist revolutions have led to certain rationalisations or even ritual restructurings that still have an influence in the present. Another example of the change of funerals is how the civil war in Sri Lanka has also left its traces in the preachings performed at funerals (Kent 2010). Robinne's chapter on theatre plays staged at a monk's funeral in Burma (Chapter 8) show that these performances are also commentaries on the present state of affairs. Besides dramatising the emotions of loss and mourning, imposed government propaganda (including the caricaturing of Westerners, for example) has been integrated into these plays. However, also a subversive and subtle critique of the Burmese junta can be aired in these performances.

What one encounters in the field, especially when dealing with local Buddhist funeral experts, is the claim that the rites – as prescribed and normative forms of behaviour – have changed little. Although Langer in her contribution (Chapter 2) proposes for the Sri Lankan case that 'death rituals appear to be quite resilient to change', closer inspection through a historical perspective often reveals a different picture. As in Chirapravati's contribution (Chapter 4), this might be expressed through a change in the role of objects in funerals, but might also be visible through deeper ritual restructurings. However, taking our informants seriously in that matter also means acknowledging that the *imaginary of continuity*, or the non-change of certain elements of these rites, is crucial for them. In the sense of Langer's quote above, death is considered a serious issue that demands regulation and the weight of a continuous tradition to be dealt with.

Death is a total social fact that cannot be cut out and analysed as a single-standing social event; it is rather a starting point of a long transformative process and an initiation into an afterlife (van Gennep 1960) of various deathscapes. Many studies of the volume therefore focus on the collective experience of death and how it is dealt with ritually. Death, as a disruption, the occurring of a sudden absence and non-presence, poses a threat to the social and cosmic order. Rites can be understood as instant and prophylactic measures to handle this exceptional situation and regain order. This process is most clearly expressed in Robert Hertz's classical study on the collective representations of death:

The brute fact of physical death is not enough to consummate death in people's minds: the image of the recently deceased is still part of the system of things of this world, and looses itself from them only gradually by a series of internal partings. [...] Thus, if a certain period is necessary to banish the deceased from the land of the living, it is because society, disturbed by the shock, must gradually regain its balance. (Hertz 1960: 81–2).

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This shock, or state of exception caused by death, is a confrontation that calls for ritual explication, but also a ritual smoothing of the transition. As Faure (1991: 184) has attested for Chan Buddhism, ritual is a form of mediation that ‘simultaneously hides and reveals death: it marks its apotheosis, but also diffuses or defers its suddenness by turning the corpse or its substitutes into signifiers’. Ritual in that sense structures the space and time necessary for the movements and transformations of the corpse (Parkin 1992). This transformation of the corpse involves a number of stages such as the preparation and laying out of the corpse, recitation of texts, procession, and the final transformation of the corpse through incineration or burial. This process is accompanied by a ‘care for the dead’ by the living by providing food, merit, prayer and so forth. Obviously, there are large variations to this pattern. Even in one culturally relatively homogenous community differences caused through status distinctions can be huge: a monk has a very different funeral from a well-off layperson, and again this one is differentiated from the poor peasant. Langer’s contribution starts with the (rhetorical) question ‘Is there such a thing as Theravāda Buddhist funeral?’, to which Tam in his contribution on Southeastern Chinese funeral rites (Chapter 11) gives us an indirect answer. For him, ‘in the end defining a “standard” Chinese Buddhist death ritual is not a particularly useful project’ (a similar point made for Tibet in Gouin 2010). It is not about the search for an original, historical blueprint of these rites, nor about defining a standard. So does the search for common patterns or a comparison between larger categories make sense at all?

COMPARISONS, CATEGORIES AND DIFFERENCES

Large-scale comparisons are, since the theoretical decline of grand narratives and the influence of deconstruction, a bit out of fashion. Recent research on the basic categories of Buddhist studies such as ‘Theravāda’ or ‘Mahāyāna’ have been critically scrutinised (Skilling and Carbine 2011). However, Williams argues that despite doctrinal diversity one can with appropriate caution speak of Buddhism and Mahāyāna as categories. Buddhism in that sense has ‘doctrinal diversity and (relative) moral unity’ (Williams 2009: 1). Although we cannot offer in this volume a systematic comparison between mainland Southeast Asian Theravāda Buddhist funeral cultures and Chinese cases, we believe the outcome of such an endeavour depends on the framework and scope of comparison. There is a whole spectrum between deconstructing categories such as Theravāda through, for example, the study of in-depth micro-histories, and the reflexive conceptualisation of

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categories that can serve as a basis for systematised and general comparisons. Neither the contributions in the volume nor this introduction deliver a systematic comparison, but we suggest that it is worth paying attention to several potential fields of comparison. First, there is a certain historical and regional affinity. Mainland Southeast Asia, especially the mountainous border regions of Yunnan, Laos and Burma, are a meeting place of both regions (Evans *et al.* 2000). Laos, for example, represents the eastern limit of Theravāda's expansion into Southeast Asia. In relation to funeral cultures, Gregory Kourilsky (2012) has, for example, suggested that certain elements found in the Lao Ghost Festival have clear parallels in the Chinese and Vietnamese festivals. Ladwig's and Heise's chapters deal with these festivals in their respective contexts and can serve as comparative examples. Here, the textual sources such as the story of Mulian in China and the Theravāda Moggallāna point to common origins that are ritually interpreted in different ways. Kapstein (2007) has also looked at the transformations of this narrative in the Tibetan–Chinese context.

A second example for the potential of comparison in the domain of funeral cultures can be advanced with regard to the importance of ancestor cults. Bouté's contribution on the Phunoy – a Tibeto-Burman minority living in the borderlands of Laos and China – suggests that their ancestor cult at least bears some resemblance to Chinese practices. The same can be said for the descriptions of bad or 'green' death, which also contains a comparative potential (see further below). We do not want to suggest that mainland Southeast Asian Buddhism is simply a mixture of Chinese and Indian influences, but that some partial connections exist and are worth following up in future research. Peter van der Veer's (2009) comparison between India and China as civilisations can here serve as a model.

Another level of comparison *inside* the Theravāda tradition is advanced by Langer. Looking at funerals and chants in Sri Lanka, Laos, Thailand and Burma, her comparative examination looks for 'core elements' of these rites and their variation. Langer gives us an overview of these elements: the presentation of a rag-robe (*paṃsukūla*), the giving of merit, the asking for forgiveness and religious wishes. She then discusses the 'optional elements' like Abhidhamma chanting and the use of protective *parittas*. With reference to Lévi-Strauss's idea of *bricolage*, Langer understands the performed rites and the chanted texts as a toolbox from which certain elements can be drawn. Although religious specialists might point to the coherence of chants and their genealogy from the Pali canon, variation and individual appropriation is rather the norm than the exception. Here, the canon (for the Theravāda case) and the chants used in funeral rites, are less a fixed compendium of texts, but rather an 'idea' that is

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efficacious through its imagined homogeneity and continuity (Collins 1995). Despite these variations, Langer – through a meticulous analysis of funeral chants – succeeds in uncovering common patterns across a vast temporal and spatial spectrum perhaps also based in the long tradition of regular exchanges between Southeast Asian and Sri Lankan Buddhism. Langer concludes her contribution with the statement, ‘On the whole, Theravāda monks from Thailand would find little difficulty in joining into a chant of monks from Sri Lanka.’

Comparison, however, is also based on markers of difference. In contrast to the chapters dealing with Theravāda in mainland Southeast Asia, the two contributions by Tam and Chen (Chapters 11 and 12) both refer to the ‘imperial metaphor’ (Feuchtwang 1991) that becomes visible, for example, in the passport-like documents that the deceased need in order to cross the boundary to the afterlife. This is completely absent in the instance of Theravāda and the Chinese cases are marked by a different idea of orthopraxy. For Feuchtwang (2009: 103), China has ‘a civilization of the government of conduct, its correction, exemplary performance and enforcement’. Although Ladwig has found similar ideas of the bureaucracy of hell in Laos that could be related to the imperial metaphor, the difference between them is still large. There is no bank of hell among Theravāda Buddhists and no burning of spirit money or houses can be observed. The sacrificial economy connecting the world of the living and the dead follows a different logic. The latter point is also visible in the different roles of monks. Whereas in China expert laypeople or half-official monks can also officiate at funerals (see the *xianghua heshang* in Tam’s chapter), the Theravāda saṅgha seems to have a much more clearly defined position in death rituals. Without them, the contact to the dead is difficult whereas in China burning money or paper replicas of offerings can be done without the intermediary role of monks. On the whole, our volume has more contributions regarding mainland Southeast Asia, but the excellent volumes edited by Cuevas and Stone (2007), and Watson and Rawski (1988) present more information on East Asian funeral cultures. The material presented there can be contrasted and compared with the Theravāda cases presented here.

THE LOCALISATION OF BUDDHIST FUNERAL CULTURES

The majority of contributions look at Buddhism as being very much ‘of a place’, as all Buddhism really is and to which all study of Buddhism needs constantly to return. In cultures where Buddhism has been predominant, the relationship between Buddhist doctrine and social behaviour is a very

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complex one indeed (see, for example, Gombrich 1971). But it would be quite wrong to approach Buddhism as it occurs ‘in a place’ (and when does it not occur in a place?) with some sort of legislative model of what *should* happen or what Buddhists *must* do. Given the large variety of what has been called ‘Buddhisms’ (Ling 1993), we do not intend to reconstruct an original death ritual and then look at the local variations that have evolved. Instead, we want to examine the creative local appropriations that in a manner of a *bricolage* make use of certain elements already apparent, for example, in early Buddhism. The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, recounting the last days, death and the funeral of the Buddha (cf. Strong 2007), could in this light be seen as a textual toolbox out of which certain elements are appropriated and are then translated into ritual practices constituted by partially prescribed, but also improvised actions accommodated to a local context.

Given the centrality of funeral rites in the development and spread of Buddhism, many of the contributions give us a detailed image of the localisation of Buddhism in the field of funeral culture. The interaction with pre-Buddhist ideas and cosmologies of the dead are, for example, exemplified in the multiplicity of concepts of what constitutes a person and how this entity, substance or conscience is transformed in the course of death. Conceptualising this interaction of Buddhist concepts and their transformation on the local level in a specific setting has a long history in anthropology and Buddhist studies. Discussions on the interaction of ‘great and little tradition’ (Obeyesekere 1963), the structural division of labour of Buddhism and spirit cults (Tambiah 1970), or more generally speaking notions of syncretism, have all examined the transformation of Buddhism on the local level. These discussions can also be applied to Buddhist funeral cultures.

However, like the concept of comparison discussed above, most of these discussions are currently somewhat out of fashion through the influence of a flexible hybridism model of culture. Shaw and Stewart (1995: 7), for example, propose that seeing a ritual or religion as syncretic ‘gets us practically nowhere, since all religions have composite origins and are continually reconstructed through ongoing processes of synthesis and erasure’. Historical studies of Buddhism have proposed a less radical, but still similar, view. Buddhism was from its very beginning linked to a variety of local cults and entities that have been subsumed under the category of spirits or ancestors, as for example DeCaroli (2004) has shown. Through this flexible approach to funeral culture we can understand that there were also specific openings in Buddhist cosmology that allowed for an easy integration of indigenous cults. Reynolds (1976: 207) suggests that ‘one of the reasons Buddhist cosmography fitted so well into mainland Southeast Asian