

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00388-0 - Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China

Edited by Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig

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SOUTHEAST ASIA AND CHINA

The centrality of death rituals has rarely been documented in anthropologically informed studies of Buddhism. Bringing together a range of perspectives including ethnographic, textual, historical and theoretically informed accounts, this edited volume presents the diversity of the Buddhist funeral cultures of mainland Southeast Asia and China. While the contributions show that the ideas and ritual practices related to death are continuously transformed in local contexts through political and social changes, they also highlight the continuities of funeral cultures. The studies are based on long-term fieldwork and cover material on Theravāda Buddhism in Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and various regions of Chinese Buddhism, both on the mainland and in the Southeast Asian diasporas. Topics such as bad death, the feeding of ghosts, pollution through death and the ritual regeneration of life show how Buddhist cultures deal with death as a universal phenomenon of human culture.

PAUL WILLIAMS is Emeritus Professor of Indian and Tibetan Philosophy and founding co-Director of the Centre for Buddhist Studies at the University of Bristol. He is author of *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (2nd edition 2009); *The Reflexive Nature of Awareness: A Tibetan Madhyamaka Defence* (1998); *Altruism and Reality: Studies in the Philosophy of Bodhicaryāvatāra* (1998); *The Unexpected Way: On Converting from Buddhism to Catholicism* (2001); and *Songs of Love, Poems of Sadness: The Erotic Verse of the Sixth Dalai Lama* (2004). He is co-author, with Anthony Tribe and Alexander Wynne, of *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (2nd edition 2012), and was sole editor of the eight-volume series *Buddhism: Critical Concepts in Religious Studies* (2005).

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The centrality of death rituals has in anthropologically informed studies of Buddhism been little documented. The current volume brings together a range of perspectives on Buddhist death rituals including ethnographic, textual, historical and theoretically informed accounts, and presents the diversity of the Buddhist funeral cultures of mainland Southeast Asia and China. It arises out of the University of Bristol's Centre for Buddhist Studies research project *Buddhist Death Rituals in Southeast Asia and China*, funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). This project involved extensive new research in Thailand, Laos and China. Other items from that project included several public exhibitions, extensive stills photographs and several video films. The project team produced two 30-minute films on the Ghost Festival in Laos and China, one on urban funerals in Chiang Mai (Thailand) and several shorter clips dealing with funeral cultures in Laos, Thailand and China. Most of this material (and an extensive bibliography on the topic) is available free of charge from the project website located at the webpage of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies (Centre for Buddhist Studies) at the University of Bristol.

It gives us great pleasure to thank the AHRC for the funding that made this project possible. We also want to thank all those who contributed in different ways to its success, including those who took part in making and appearing in the films, all the contributors to this book and, in particular, the three research fellows/assistants who were involved during the lifetime of the project: Rita Langer, who originally conceived the project and saw its birth as well as undertaking some of the research involved; Patrice Ladwig, who was the research fellow throughout the body of the project and undertook a great deal of the research and organisation involved; and Ailsa Laxton, whose wonderfully efficient organisation and also expertise in putting on exhibitions came at just the right time. Thank you all so much not only for your impeccable efficiency but also for the sense of humour that

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Thank you Laura Morris and all those involved at Cambridge University Press for accepting this book and also for its production.

Funeral rites may not be a laugh a minute, but we hope the results – the 'outputs', as we are nowadays expected to call them – will still be informative, stimulating of further scholarly research, and perhaps even entertaining.

PATRICE LADWIG
AND
PAUL WILLIAMS