Introduction

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From its beginnings in India to its varied cultural and regional forms throughout Asia, Buddhism has been and continues to be a religion concerned with death and with the dead. Buddhist doctrines, practices, and institutions all bear some relation to this theme. Doctrinal teachings speak of death as occurring at each moment, as one causally dependent set of conditions passes away and another arises. In this sense, death is simply change, the way things are. Unawakened persons, failing to apprehend this, read into the flux of momentary events illusory objects such as “self” or “others” and cling to them, although such objects cannot last and are not under our control. As one may read in any introductory textbook on Buddhism, attachments to possessions, relationships, and especially notions of a perduring self are deemed unwholesome, inevitably producing frustration and misery and binding one to samsāra, the cycle of deluded rebirth. From this perspective, as indicated by its presence among the four sufferings—birth, old age, sickness, and death—death becomes emblematic of the whole samsaric process. “Death” is suffering, both as an end, separating one from all that one cherishes, and as a revolving door, spinning one back into yet another round of unsatisfactory rebirth, up or down in accordance with one’s deeds, until ignorance and craving are finally eradicated. In this sense, death is not merely the way things are, but it also exemplifies the very problem that the Buddhist soteriological project is to overcome. The Buddha has “attained to the deathless”; his conquest of Māra just before his awakening was not merely the conquest of desire, but of death itself. In the words of Frank E. Reynolds, Buddhism has held forth the promise of “insight into a larger reality within which the power of death could be domesticated and defeated”\(^1\)—no small part of its attraction as a religious system.
Death also figures as a recurring theme in specific Buddhist practices. Because death represents both the transient, unstable nature of things and the suffering born of ignorance and craving, which is to be overcome, the sight or thought of death can, to the reflective mind, act as a spur to religious endeavor. We see this in the story of Prince Siddhārtha, the Buddha to be, who is prompted by the sight of a corpse being borne along in a funeral procession to leave his father’s palace and become a wandering ascetic. Death reminds the practitioner both that work remains to be done and that the time to accomplish it is fleeting. Thus Buddhaghosa, in the fifth century, recommended death, together with universal good will (Pāli metta), as one of two meditation topics suitable to persons of all temperaments.2 Buddhist death contemplations have assumed many forms, from simple reflections on death’s inevitability to yogic techniques for rehearsing the stages of dissolution at death to the graphic charnel ground meditations (sometimes performed using paintings or, more recently, photographs in lieu of corpses), designed to cultivate aversion to the body (asubhabhāvāna).3 Specific “deathbed” practices aim at using the liminal potential of life’s last moments to effect a soteriologically advantageous rebirth or even to achieve liberation. And since actions in this life are said to affect one’s condition in the next, in a broad sense, all forms of Buddhist practice might be said to include an element of death preparation.

Death also plays a vital role in Buddhism’s social and institutional dimensions. Rites for the deceased have been deemed most efficacious when performed by those purified by ascetic discipline—the Buddhist clergy or other local adepts and thaumaturges.4 The performance of funerary and memorial ritual represents a chief social role of Buddhist clerics and strengthens ties between sangha and laity. Funerary rites reaffirm both the message of impermanence and the need for religious endeavor, as well as the promise that if one follows the Buddhist path, death can in some sense be overcome. They reinforce the authority of Buddhist clerics by highlighting their ritual power to benefit the deceased and also constitute a major source of revenue for Buddhist temples. Death, in short, generates the underlying urgency that sustains the Buddhist tradition and also provides the paradigmatic occasion for reasserting its normative ideals, often with particularly dramatic force.

The essays in this volume shed light on a rich array of traditional Buddhist practices for the dead and dying; the sophisticated
but often paradoxical discourses about death and the dead in Bud-
dhist texts; and the varied representations found in Buddhist funer-
ary art and popular literature about the dead and the places they are
believed to inhabit. Before introducing the individual chapters,
however, we shall touch briefly on the place of “death” in the study
of Buddhism and the perspectives that inform this volume.

Death as a Topic in Buddhist Studies

Despite its centrality to Buddhist traditions, until recently death has
received surprisingly little attention in the field of Buddhist Studies
as a theme in its own right.5 While a full investigation of the rea-
sons for this neglect would require a separate essay, we suspect that
it may stem, at least in part, from a legacy of modernist assump-
tions about what Buddhism is “supposed” to be. Since the late nine-
teenth century, proponents of Buddhist modernism, in Asia and the
West, have sought to reconfigure Buddhism as rational, empirical,
and fully compatible with science—in short, a religion preemi-
nently suited to the modern age.6 “The message of the Buddha I
have to bring to you,” wrote the Sinhalese reformer Anagārika
Dharmapāla (1864–1933), “is free from theology, priestcraft, rituals,
ceremonies, dogmas, heavens, hells and other theoretical shibbo-
leths.”7 Traditional Buddhist depictions of the afterlife, with its ra-
diant pure lands, heavens, and terrifying realms of rebirth among
demons, hell dwellers, or hungry ghosts, simply did not fit this pic-
ture and so had to be “explained away,” either as accommodations
to the uneducated masses or as popular accretions unrelated to
Buddhism’s putative original form. Buddhist clerical involvement
in funerals and the economic reliance of Buddhist temples on rites
for the dead also drew charges that Buddhism was archaic, super-
stitious, and socially non-productive. Such criticisms posed a seri-
ous obstacle to Asian Buddhist leaders intent on demonstrating
the relevance of their tradition to modernizing projects. Central
to Buddhist modernism is a rhetoric lamenting clerical preoccupa-
tion with funerals and promoting Buddhism as a religion first and
foremost for the present world. Tanaka Chigaku (1861–1939), an
advocate of lay Buddhism in modern imperial Japan, lamented
that in the eyes of the laity, the Buddhist clergy had become little
more than undertakers, forced to absent themselves from auspi-
cious occasions such as weddings and New Year’s celebrations be-
cause their presence was associated with funerals. “They [the clergy] abandon the most important period of human existence, life, and purposefully labor at explaining the silence after death. Truly this is an extremely major force in misleading the secular nation.”

Holmes Welch records the explanation of Buddhist rites for the dead given by one of his monk informants, a disciple of the Chinese Buddhist reformer Taixu (1890–1947): “The Chinese sangha has never opposed them, but we who expound the sutras and spread the dharma often criticize them. They were not a feature of Buddhism in ancient times, yet because people think they were, they look down on Buddhism as superstition. When you write about this, you must make it clear that these things are old Chinese customs, but do not belong to Buddhist thought.”

Discomfort with traditional Buddhist notions of the afterlife also influenced modern presentations of Buddhism to a non-Asian general readership. We see this, for example, in the repeated assertion, contrary to historical and ethnographic evidence, that the Tibetan Book of the Dead was really intended for the living. First put forth in Lama Anagarika Govinda's (Ernst Lothar Hoffman, 1895–1985) “Introductory Foreword” to the 1957 edition of the Evans-Wentz translation, this odd claim recurs in the introduction to the 1987 Freemantle and Trungpa version: “Although this book is ostensibly written for the dead, it is in fact about life. The Buddha himself would not discuss what happens after death, because such questions are not useful in the search for reality here and now. But the doctrine of reincarnation, the six kinds of existence, and the intermediate bardo state between them, very much refer to this life, whether or not they also apply after death.” Since around the 1990s, in the context of the “death awareness” movement, the topic of death in Buddhism has suddenly come to the fore in a plethora of therapeutic “self-help” books introducing Buddhist (typically Tibetan) perspectives on death and dying to the spiritual seeker. Yet even in these works one often detects an awkwardness regarding traditional notions of the afterlife; cosmological descriptions of postmortem realms are attenuated and psychologized, and the ontological status of rebirth occasions debate, apologetics, and extensive reinterpretation.

Scholars of Buddhism have not failed to note that the marginalizing of Buddhist death rites and afterlife concerns in the rhetoric of Buddhist modernism is profoundly at odds with the actual prac-
tice of most traditional Buddhists, historically and in the present. Yet we too have not proved altogether immune to modernist emphases on Buddhism for the “here and now.” While not necessarily in the business of promulgating normative definitions of what Buddhism “should” be, we are committed—especially where the broader field of religious studies remains dominated by the study of Christianity and other Western traditions—to the often uphill struggle of promoting Buddhism as a worthy area of inquiry. This concern may have helped to shape a broad scholarly preference for areas in which Buddhism could be shown to be “relevant”—its ethical discourses, its cogent philosophical insights, and its social and political formations—while its approaches to so commonplace a matter as death have failed for a long time to garner sustained interest. 11

Another factor contributing to a long neglect of death in Buddhist Studies may lie in a perceived incompatibility of many Buddhist death-related practices with the doctrine of “not-self” (Skt. anātman; Pāli anatta), the denial of any permanent essence, such as a soul. While the philosophical and soteriological importance of this unique doctrine is beyond dispute, in the modern period, it has often been lifted out of any specific context and virtually enshrined as the sole standard for judging what is authentically Buddhist. “With this doctrine of egolessness, or anattā, stands or falls the entire Buddhist structure,” as Nyanatiloka has it. 12 This move was neither simply an artifact of the now much maligned “textual Buddhism,” whose study long dominated the field, nor solely a “Protestant presupposition” privileging doctrine over practice. 13 Rather it represents a singling out, from more diverse canonical material, of a particular strand against which all aspects of the tradition were to be measured. Just as the anattā doctrine in a classical context once represented “an intransigent symbolic opposition to the belief system of the Brahmin priesthood,” 14 so in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we suspect, it expressed an intransigent symbolic opposition to Christian hegemony, deployed by both Asian and Western spokespersons for the Buddhist cause. As a rhetorical strategy, this was little short of genius: the God of Western religion, along with the embarrassing ghosts and spirits of Buddhism’s own “superstitious” past, could be dismissed at a single stroke. However, modernist deployment of the anattā doctrine did not stop with its traditional use as an identity marker for the Buddhist tradition or as a support for specific
forms of meditation and scholastic analysis, but elevated it to an all-encompassing, normative measure of everything claiming to be “Buddhist”—an inflated and distorting burden that, historically, it had seldom been made to carry. The reduction of all that is properly Buddhist to discourses of not-self and non-attachment tends to erase death in particular as an issue of any significance. In the words of Walpola Rahula, “The difference between death and birth is only a thought-moment: the last thought-moment in this life conditions the first thought-moment in the so-called next life, which, in fact, is the continuity of the same series. . . So from the Buddhist point of view, the question of life after death is not a great mystery, and a Buddhist is never worried about this problem.”

Not only that, but ubiquitous Buddhist death-related practices, including the placation of unhappy ghosts, funeral prayers, and rites of merit transference for the deceased, along with cults of the holy dead centered on the worship of relics and icons, seem to be more concerned with achieving permanence and stability than with underscoring egolessness or themes of evanescence and decay. From a “not-self”-centered perspective, the pervasive presence of these seemingly heterogenous elements could be explained only as a concession to the ignorant or by appeal to decline rhetoric, in which early Buddhism’s pure and lofty quest for nirvāṇa was said to have gradually become obscured by rites and folk elements imported from the broader religious cultures of Vedic India and other regions where Buddhism had spread.

From around the 1960s, scholars conducting anthropological research, chiefly in Theravāda countries, began to address seriously the on-the-ground beliefs and practices of actual Buddhist communities, including their death rites, and devised models to illuminate how these beliefs and practices coexisted with doctrinal teachings of impermanence and not-self. Yet though heuristically useful, their models still tended to take not-self doctrine as a normative standard and to relegate death-related rites and discourses to an opposing category. Thus in Melford Spiro’s famous tripartite typology of nibbanic, kammaic, and apotropaic Buddhism, Buddhist death rites transferring merit to the deceased and placating their potentially hostile spirits are assigned to the latter two systems, in contrast to the “nibbanic” position: “In normative Buddhism there is no soul; hence, nothing survives the death of the body. Rebirth is caused by the deceased’s craving for existence; the nature of his re-
birth is determined by his personally created karma. This being so, the bereaved has no power to do good or ill for the deceased. Keeping these normative assumptions in mind, it will be noted that they are all inverted by the assumptions underlying the Burmese death and burial ceremonies.\textsuperscript{18} In Richard Gombrich’s schema, a clash between “cognitive” and “affective” religious systems has its roots in Sinhalese Buddhist attitudes toward death; these emphasize survival of the personality rather than \textit{anattā}-based views of the individual as constituted solely by a series of karmically linked momentary psychophysical formations: “I think that this affective belief in personal survival, clashing with the cognitive belief in merely karmic survival, is the basis for a whole system of affective religion which diverges from official doctrine.”\textsuperscript{19} Such models are heuristically useful, and at the time they were proposed, they represented a significant advance in that they took the practices of living Buddhists seriously. Nonetheless, by their very structure, they inevitably implied an unequally weighted polarity in which Buddhism’s “orthodox” soteriological project stood on one side, while death rites and on-the-ground beliefs about the dead represented “other stuff.”\textsuperscript{20} From that perspective, to study death was still, by implication, to study a second-tier phenomenon.

Over roughly the last two decades, in Religious Studies generally, the “other stuff” has achieved respectability. What we may call “popular religion” (though the term itself is contested) is no longer understood as a leftover or marginal category posited in contradistinction to “official religion.”\textsuperscript{21} Other, older schema of “folk” versus “elite” or “great” and “little” traditions have been critiqued and largely abandoned. Buddhist Studies scholars, actively contributing to this shift, have begun to claim as legitimate topics for study a range of hitherto marginalized areas, including Buddhist funerary and mortuary culture. Indeed, few topics pose so devastating a challenge to two-tiered official/popular or elite/folk distinctions. We now know, for example, that Buddhist death rites in India, far from being concessions to an uneducated laity, were instituted by monastics. Monks initiated Buddhist funerals within the monastery, placated unhappy ghosts, and practiced burial \textit{ad sanctos} in the vicinity of their holy dead; the cult of stūpas and donations for merit transference to the deceased similarly appear to have been first practiced not by the laity but by monks and nuns, some of them learned doctrinal specialists.\textsuperscript{22}
We are in sympathy with those who see religious culture not as a static or unified field but as inevitably entailing differences, disputes, and oppositions. The antinomy between teachings of impermanence (of which the anattā doctrine represents an especially rigorous formulation) and discourses and practices stressing the continuity of the deceased represents a real and near ubiquitous feature of Buddhist funerary contexts. Once we break free of the assumption that one pole of this antinomy should be understood as “normative” (thus casting the other in a problematic light), we can begin to recognize the very tension between them as itself constitutive of Buddhist approaches to death.23 Death, as anthropologists have long recognized, brings together a number of contradictory logics, and Buddhism is no exception in this regard, juxtaposing a number of strikingly disparate elements in death-related settings. One might note, for example, the tension between strict readings of karmic causality, according to which the individual’s own acts are solely determinative of his or her postmortem fate, and belief in the power of ritual action, performed by others on the deceased’s behalf, to eradicate that person’s misdeeds and guide him or her to a superior rebirth. (This particular tension has a counterpart in Hindu tradition, where the teaching that the soul transmigrates in accordance with inexorable karmic law coexists with notions that the postmortem well-being of the deceased depends on rites performed by their descendants.)24 Another recurring tension can be found between Buddhist ideals of world renunciation and the lingering pull of family obligations. Still others could be named. Indeed, death represents an ideal lens through which to examine how diverse, even contradictory elements have been drawn together in the dynamic, ongoing processes by which specific Buddhist cultures are formed, challenged, and redefined—a major premise that informs our collection.

“Death in Buddhism”: A Cross-Cultural Category?

Since the late 1980s and 1990s, the subject of death in Buddhism has at last begun to draw scholarly attention, especially in the areas of funerary and mortuary practice.25 However, the majority of these studies have tended to focus on a particular geographic or cultural area, mirroring broader, field-wide trends. Once dominated chiefly by textual, philological, and doctrinal concerns, Buddhist Studies
has expanded in recent decades to include the methods of history, anthropology, and sociology, as well as literary criticism, cultural studies, gender studies, and other disciplines. Buddhologists are no longer required to have reading knowledge of several Buddhist languages or to be versed in multiple canons; instead, they are increasingly expected to be familiar with the historical and social specifics of particular Buddhist cultures. Recognition of local diversity has led to an emphasis on “buddhisms” rather than a unitary “Buddhism,” and some of the most intense areas of inquiry and debate in recent years have centered around efforts to understand more precisely how Buddhism as a pan-Asian tradition has transformed, and been transformed by, local religious cultures. (One thinks, for example, of recurring tropes of “foreign impact” versus “sinification” in the study of Buddhism in medieval China or of the discovery of “combinatory paradigms” by which local kami were identified with buddhas and bodhisattvas in premodern Japan.) Scholars in Religious Studies have occasionally even suggested that “Buddhism” is too diverse to be of use as an analytic category and should be abandoned in favor of “Indian religion,” “Japanese religion,” and the like. While few would endorse so extreme a position, the vast range of regional and historical variation embraced by the rubric “Buddhism” has for some time represented scholarly common sense. And nowhere does such local diversity appear more strikingly than in connection with beliefs and practices surrounding death. As Mark Blum reminds us, “In every society in Asia that may be considered traditionally Buddhist, indigenous belief structures regarding the dead that were operative before the assimilation of Buddhism persist and form an integral part of that assimilation.” Do the varied Buddhist discourses, practices, and representations associated with death in fact show sufficient consistency across cultures to warrant grouping them as “death and Buddhism”? Or do they differ so radically according to cultural context as to render such a rubric misleading?

This became a pressing problem for us, the volume editors, in the course of our personal research. We have both been engaged for some time in the study of death-related practices in specific Buddhist cultures, one of us focusing on medieval Tibet (Cuevas) and the other on premodern Japan (Stone), and we felt a growing need to learn whether, and if so, to what extent, our research findings were specific to these particular cultural settings or reflected
broader, transregional patterns. We consequently organized a conference called “Death and Dying in Buddhist Cultures,” held at Princeton University in May 2002. Our aim was to provide a venue for methodological reflection on how we, as scholars of Buddhism working in diverse cultural settings, could most effectively address the study of Buddhist approaches to death and the afterlife. In light of the thematic continuity that emerged, the conference participants concluded that while still sustaining a rigorous historical or social focus on the specifics of particular areas, it was now appropriate to move discussions of Buddhism and death into a wider conversational arena and to launch a more comparative investigation into the issue of death across the major Buddhist cultures. This conclusion provided the impetus that carried the project beyond the initial conference and led to the compilation of this volume.

**The Buddhist Dead**

We have already noted the pervasive tension between Buddhist doctrinal teachings of transience and non-attachment and the emotional adherence to stability and permanence found in multiple aspects of Buddhist funerary practices and attitudes toward the deceased. Buddhist societies have shared widespread assumptions about the prolonged “liveliness” of the Buddhist dead and their persistent ties to the living. This raises some fascinating problems, especially for those interested in the social and historical dimensions of Buddhist attitudes toward death and the dead or in how doctrine is appropriated in social practice. Are the dead ever truly dead in Buddhism? Just who are the Buddhist dead? Where are they, and what forms do they take? And in what ways do those who are still alive relate to them?

The “Buddhist dead” who appear in the essays collected here may be divided broadly into two groups: the “special dead” and the “ordinary dead.” While the distinction is by no means confined to Buddhism, these two categories assume particular meanings in Buddhist contexts. All beings, both deluded and enlightened, eventually vanish from this world, but their departure is understood in radically different terms. For the special dead—those who have achieved awakening or accumulated significant merit—death is a liberation. Special vocabulary is often employed to distinguish the exit of enlightened beings from ordinary samsaric death. Indeed,
such persons are not said to have “died” at all but rather to have entered final nirvāṇa, as in the case of the Buddha, or to have gone to a pure land; alternatively, buddhas and bodhisattvas are sometimes said to manifest death as a form of religious instruction, a skillful means to awaken others to the truth of impermanence. Pāli sources use the technical term “dying by extirpation of samsāra” (samuccheda-maraṇa) to indicate the particular death of buddhas and arhats that will not lead to another rebirth, while Mahāyāna exegeses distinguished between ordinary, deluded rebirth, driven by the forces of karma (in Japanese, bundan shoji) and the voluntary rebirth of bodhisattvas, chosen out of compassion in order to benefit beings (hennyaku shoji). However their liberation may be understood, the special dead are said to have escaped the samsaric cycle once and for all, putting an end to suffering. As though to demonstrate their spiritual status, such individuals are often represented as having died exemplary deaths, in a state of calm meditative focus and accompanied by wondrous signs. The extraordinary nature of their attainments is also mapped onto their physical remains. Buddhist hagiography abounds with fantastic tales of the bodies of dead sages and adepts behaving quite differently from those of ordinary people. The paradigmatic example is of course the Buddha, whose body is said to have produced jewel-like relics (Skt. śarīra) in the crematory fire. So too have the bodies of many subsequent Buddhist saints. Such relics were believed to retain the charisma of the original living person and to be able to multiply, respond to prayers, and even move under their own volition. The remains of the Buddhist special dead, in short, behave in a manner quite opposite to the inertness and decay that one expects from an ordinary corpse. The extraordinary status of the special, or enlightened, dead is further represented in Buddhist societies by the production of paintings and photographic images of ideal deaths; by the stories recorded and repeated about exemplary lives and spectacular exits; and even by the special clothing worn in life and left behind in death. Several essays in this volume deal with the social, political, and symbolic power of the Buddhist “remarkable” dead.

But these are the elite among the dead. In contrast, the far more numerous, unenlightened dead are said to be still bound to the rebirth process by craving and attachment; they will be born in yet another realm of samsaric existence in accordance with their prior deeds. Many are represented as living painful and desperate lives as
hungry ghosts, animals, and denizens of hell. Those with a slightly greater stock of merit may be living as gods or demi-gods or, better yet, may be reborn as humans—the most advantageous state, from a Buddhist perspective, for cultivating religious practice. These ordinary, not yet enlightened dead, and especially those suffering in inferior realms, serve routinely as cautionary examples in Buddhist didactic literature and artistic representations. They are also the objects of the extensive and varied funerary and mortuary rites of merit transference that have flourished in all Buddhist cultures and provided a major economic base for Buddhist institutions.

Having noted the distinction between the “remarkable” and the “ordinary” Buddhist dead, however, we must also stress that the line between them is often blurred or even deliberately collapsed. Funerary and mortuary rites performed by the living have sometimes been thought to elevate the status of the ordinary dead, eradicating their sins and enabling their relocation to a buddha land or other superior realm. Death itself has also been understood in Buddhist cultures as a unique and potent juncture when even those who have done evil can potentially escape samsaric rebirth by right contemplation in their last moments. And finally, whether we speak of the special dead or the ordinary dead, they are by no means lost to the living. The enlightened dead can in some cases respond to prayers, and their spiritual power remains in their relics and images and narratives about them, while the ordinary dead are able to communicate their condition to surviving relatives, receive their memorial offerings, and sometimes watch over and protect them.

The essays contained in this collection, each with its own thematic focus, historical period, and geographical setting, deal with both the remarkable and the ordinary dead. To underscore our cross-cultural concerns, we have deliberately avoided grouping them by geographical region or by strict chronological order of their subject matter. While readers will undoubtedly discover multiple connections among the individual chapters for themselves, we may note here some of the larger thematic considerations that inform the volume’s content and organization.

The Buddha as Paradigm and New Readings of Mortuary Sites

The two opening chapters of this volume deal with the figure of the historical Buddha, who in death, as in other matters, has been para-
digmatic for the entire tradition. They also offer insights into the social practices of Buddhist communities by suggesting new readings of the mortuary sites that figure prominently in Buddhist literature: the cremation pyre and the charnel ground. John Strong’s opening essay on the Buddha’s death and funeral underscores the importance of the Buddha as the model for all extraordinary Buddhist deaths. Strong argues that the Buddha’s death should be understood not merely as his entry into final nirvāṇa, the end of the visible life of a blessed figure, but rather as a rite of passage in which the Buddha and his body undergo a significant change of status, highlighting the tension between the impermanence illustrated by the Buddha’s departure from this world and his continued material presence in the form of relics and the stūpas enshrining them. Once dismissed as a concession to popular piety, relics have now begun to draw scholarly attention commensurate with their importance in Buddhist practice and institutions. Buddha relics were seen as functionally equivalent to the living Buddha, imbued with his virtues; deposited in stūpas at monasteries, they possessed legal personhood and were able to hold property. Readily portable, they facilitated the spread of Buddhism throughout Asia, aided in the formation of pilgrimage routes, and lent stature to the temples and monasteries that housed them. Relics also extend the narrative of the Buddha’s biography in the world, continuing to spread the dharma in lands he never visited; at the kalpa’s end, it is said, they will reassemble beneath the bodhi tree and undergo a parinirvāṇa of their own, demonstrating just as the living Buddha did that all conditioned things must eventually perish. Anthropological perspectives suggest that the enshrining of relics can be seen as a form of “secondary burial,” marking the successful transit of the deceased through a polluted, liminal state to a purified and stable condition and thus linked to themes of regeneration. While the crematory fire that consumed the Buddha may have vividly demonstrated the truth that all things are impermanent, Strong argues that it also generated for the Buddha a “new body” in the form of relics. Indeed, he suggests that the primary purpose of the Buddha’s funeral, especially the burning of his body, was to ensure the production of these relics. Other essays in this collection similarly suggest that “cremation-productive-of-relics” has been an essential function of funerals for the Buddhist “special dead.” Strong also analyzes specific elements in the symbolism of accounts of the funerary treat-
ment of the Buddha’s corpse, treatment modeled on the funeral rites reserved for great Indian monarchs. The multiple layers of shrouds, prescribed for royal funerals, in which the Buddha’s body was cremated were reduced by the flames to just two robes, as in monastic garb; thus the cremation, Strong argues, in effect signals a transformation of the Buddha from the status of monarch to that of monk. Throughout the Buddhist world, death and funerals have often been thematically assimilated to monastic ordination—another, soteriologically meaningful way of “leaving the world.”

Strong’s essay suggests that this symbolic association may have its beginnings in the Buddha’s funeral.

The second chapter, by Gregory Schopen, also begins with a story of the Buddha, a controversial narrative from the Lalitavistara. Here too we see the symbolism of a transformation in the Buddha’s status marked by dress—in this case, his changing of clothes just prior to his awakening. However, as might be expected, the clothes into which he changes are no ordinary garments. On the contrary, much to the surprise of his witnesses, the Buddha dons the discarded and thoroughly polluted shroud of a recently deceased village girl. Wearing only robes made of the shrouds of corpses is celebrated in some texts as one of the dhūṭagunas or extra ascetic practices that a monk might undertake. Schopen shows us that the symbolic import of the Buddha’s act, while in one sense exemplifying an ascetic ideal, also reveals on close reading of Indian Buddhist Vinaya texts just how anxious Buddhist monks were to preserve an impeccable public profile. Acceptable public impressions, Schopen argues, were important for gaining and keeping lay sponsors, whose support was crucial to the maintenance of monastic institutions. At the same time, Schopen draws attention to the anxiety and horror that surrounded death and the dead in Indian society. The pervasive sense of the impurity and contagion of death is what gave the tale of the Buddha’s change of dress so much power and left many of the more conservative Buddhist monks (i.e., those image brokers and rule makers in monastic administrative positions) uncomfortably ambivalent about how best to explain and justify the Buddha’s daring to pollute himself in such a dangerous manner. What Schopen exposes here is an undercurrent of opposition between those seeking to live the Buddhist monk-ascetic ideal and those responsible for maintaining the monasteries. For the latter, those Buddhist ascetics who lived with the dead in cemeteries or
wore the contaminated shrouds of corpses threatened to tarnish the image of Buddhism in a society of potential patrons who could in no way tolerate exposure to death or contact with the dead.

Exemplary Deaths and Their Legitimizing Power

Chapters 3 through 8 deal with the possibility of acquiring meditative and ritual control over one's own death process; the remarkable deaths of Buddhist adepts said to have achieved such control; and the value that narrative accounts and visual representations of such extraordinary deaths have held for disciples and devotees, both as sources of inspiration and for the religious authority that they conferred on the community to which the deceased had belonged. Across Buddhist cultures, committed practitioners have sought to die with a calm and focused mind, not only to follow the Buddha's example or to demonstrate their own attainments, but also because it was believed that the quality of a dying person's last thoughts exerted a determinative influence on that individual's next rebirth. Dying well means approaching the final moments with a pure and virtuous mind. To ensure right mindfulness at the time of death, sūtras, Vinaya texts, and ritual manuals have recommended attending the sick and dying, whether they are monastics or lay people, and exhorting them to cultivate wholesome thoughts in their critical last moments. The ideal of a mindful death was by no means confined to Buddhism but was part of the broader Indian religious culture and persists to the present day. Here we find another set of contradictory logics recurring in Buddhist approaches to death: in the juxtaposition of the ideas that an individual's postmortem fate would be determined by the sum of his or her acts throughout life and that proper ritual action at the last moment, on the part of the dying person or of those in attendance, could at once dissolve that person's accumulated sins and enable his or her birth in a superior realm.

Koichi Shinohara's chapter analyzes instructions for deathbed practices to be conducted in the monastic setting as set forth by the Chinese Vinaya authority Daoxuan (596–667) in his commentary on the Dharmaguptaka vinaya. Drawing extensively on both Indic and Chinese sources, Daoxuan's recommendations include removing a dying monk to a separate hall, placing him in a prescribed posture, and having him hold a five-colored cord or pennant attached to the
hand of a buddha image, so as to help him to form the thought of following the Buddha to his buddha land. Attendants should also offer the dying monk sermons and encouragement to assist his mental focus at the end. Daoxuan’s instructions for deathbed practice would exert a far-reaching influence on rites for the time of death throughout East Asian Buddhism, especially in Pure Land circles. In analyzing Daoxuan’s sources and other related Chinese Buddhist texts, Shinohara notes the recurrence of two contrasting themes: one emphasizing the impermanence of all things and the need to relinquish attachments at the time of death and the other stressing the importance of one’s final thoughts as a way of securing rebirth in a pure land or other superior realm. He suggests that while both views can be found in Indian Buddhist sources, the growing momentum of Pure Land beliefs and practices in Chinese Buddhist circles in Daoxuan’s time heightened the tension between them. For Daoxuan, as for later commentators, the tradition of deathbed reflections on impermanence was subordinated to the goal of birth in a pure land. Shinohara’s chapter underscores the fact that even within the Buddhist tradition of a specific time and place, aspirations concerning one’s postmortem state and understandings of the significance of deathbed practice were not necessarily uniform but might be contested and redefined.

Tensions between differing soteriological goals are also addressed in Jacqueline Stone’s essay, which focuses on the use, in medieval Japan, of deathbed practices associated with esoteric Buddhism (mikkyō). From a purely doctrinal standpoint, esoteric Buddhism was understood as the vehicle for realizing buddhahood in this very body, while hopes for the next life were commonly framed in terms of birth in Amida Buddha’s Pure Land. While a modern Buddhist sectarian reading might see these two goals as mutually incompatible, Stone finds that the picture was far more complicated. For the most part, medieval Japanese Buddhists freely combined esoteric practices with Pure Land aspirations in the deathbed context with no evident sense of contradiction. However, some thinkers of the esoteric Shingon tradition sought to reinterpret both the concept of “birth in the Pure Land” and deathbed ritual practice in light of esoteric models of the direct realization of buddhahood. Stone’s chapter explores three such attempts that approach the problem in strikingly different ways: by reinterpreting deathbed practice as a form of esoteric ritual union with the Buddha; by re-
jecting aspiration to specific pure lands as inconsistent with the es-
oteric teaching that all reality is the realm of the cosmic Buddha 
Mahāvairocana; and by a creative “double logic” that simultane-
ously acknowledges both birth in the Pure Land and the realization 
of buddhahood with this very body, holding these two goals in a dy-
namic tension without resolving the opposition between them.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on representations of ideal deaths and 
the roles they have played in the lives of Buddhist communities. 
Raoul Birnbaum’s chapter details the death of the modern Chinese 
Buddhist master Hongyi (1880–1942). Hongyi’s death was distinc-
tive in a number of ways, one of which was that his appearance 
in death was captured in a remarkable photograph. This picture of 
Master Hongyi portrays the “beautiful death” of an extraordinary 
Buddhist figure, inspired by representations of the Buddha’s own 
death, and incidentally demonstrates that Buddhist ideals about dy-
ing in an exemplary manner have by no means been confined to 
premodern times. Birnbaum reminds us, however, that an image is 
meaningful only to the extent that it is seen by an audience. The 
symbolic power of Hongyi’s image takes form in the eyes of its 
viewers and provides for them both a model of and a model for the 
ideal Buddhist death. In this way, Birnbaum argues, the photograph 
of the dead master Hongyi also serves as a form of relic. As in John 
Strong’s essay, we see here the power of the materially present relic 
to help maintain the connection between a deceased Buddhist 
master and his devoted followers.

Kurtis Schaeffer’s chapter extends the category of sacred relic 
to include the published life story of an extraordinary Buddhist 
teacher. Schaeffer takes this notion as his central theme in his ex-
amination of the Tibetan hagiographical literature narrating the 
death of the twelfth-century yogi Milarépa (ca. 1052–1135), one of 
Tibet’s most beloved Buddhist saints. In an insightful analytical 
twist, Schaeffer also examines the biography of the biographer, 
comparing details of Milarépa’s remarkable death with those of the 
death of his most renowned hagiographer, Tsangnyön Heruka 
(1452–1507). Tibetan accounts of the deaths of both Milarépa and 
his biographer mirror in several essential ways the traditional ac-
counts of the Buddha’s death, again stressing, as do other essays in 
this volume, the paradigmatic importance of the Buddha’s example. 
But, as Schaeffer points out, the death of the biographer Tsangnyön 
Heruka is modeled more on Milarépa than on the Buddha, though
at the level of ultimate reality the latter two are understood to be essentially one and the same.

Schaeffer’s primary focus, however, is the hagiographical texts themselves and the relationship between physical texts and revered relics. Echoing Strong’s argument that the main goal of the Buddha’s cremation was to ensure the production of relics, Schaeffer suggests that one of the prime purposes of hagiographical writing was to produce a relic of sorts for veneration, again underscoring the importance of relics as reinstating the continued presence of the absent Buddhist master. Strong, in another context, has interpreted relics as an extension of the Buddha’s biography; Schaeffer here considers biography as a form of relic. He also shows how, in the aftermath of the master’s death, the relic, as well as the hagiographical text as relic, could be used to serve political and economic agendas. He concludes that relics, either in corporeal or textual form, were particularly effective in gaining patrons and sponsors and even in promoting the superiority of one Buddhist group over another.

“Giving Up the Body”

Chapters 7 and 8 deal with the controversial subject of religious suicide or—more appropriately in a Buddhist context, “giving up the body”—a particular category of exemplary death in which the ascetic exercises control over his or her death by deliberate self-sacrifice for soteriological aims. Liz Wilson has recently argued that buddhas, strictly speaking, “die by choice, voluntarily giving up a portion of their allotted span of life,” and thus display their mastery over life and death. From this perspective, religious suicide reenacts the Buddha’s passing and homologizes the ascetic’s death to the Buddha’s *parinirvāṇa*. Historically, sacrifice of the body has been undertaken in Buddhist contexts as an offering to the Buddha or to his relics, to demonstrate his teachings, or to seek the Pure Land; it has been seen as the ultimate ascetic act, which, if carried out for pure motives and in a proper state of mind, could bring about birth in a superior realm or even liberation itself. Yet as Reiko Ohnuma has demonstrated about the Buddhist “gift” more generally, the sacrifice of the body, even when performed in the purest renunciatory spirit, still retains something of the “logic of exchange”: one gives up the present body, subject to decay, to receive
the adamantine body of an enlightened one. James Benn’s chapter turns to the political dimensions of this act and considers in what ways the deliberate self-sacrifice of Chinese monks could be understood as a type of Buddhist martyrdom. Focusing on accounts in Daoxuan’s Xu gaoseng zhuan (Continued biographies of eminent monks), Benn examines six cases, dating from the sixth and seventh centuries, of monks who sacrificed their lives in a dramatic statement of resistance to anti-Buddhist policies of the Chinese state. The disciples of these monks and the devoted consumers of their remarkable stories all viewed these deaths as exemplary. Here too we see how representations of the ideal deaths of Buddhist teachers could serve as models on which future deaths might be patterned. As in the case of Tsangnyön Heruka’s biography of Milarepa, discussed by Kurtis Schaeffer, the hagiographical narratives of these ideal Buddhist deaths were used to construct and promote the identity and status of specific Buddhist communities.

D. Max Moerman’s chapter discusses an alternate form of Buddhist self-immolation—“death by water”—in premodern Japan, where birth in a pure land became the dominant reason given for Buddhist ascetic suicide. Along with the method of auto-cremation discussed in Benn’s chapter, that of self-drowning (jusui) is well attested in Japan and was often carried out at sites having cultic associations with specific pure lands. Moerman’s chapter focuses on a variant of this practice known as “sailing to Potalaka” (Fudaraku tokai), in which ascetics set out from various points along the southern coast of western Japan in small, rudderless boats, hoping to reach Potalaka (J. Fudaraku), the island paradise of the bodhisattva Kannon (Skt. Avalokiteśvara). None of them returned. In tracing resonances with non-Buddhist notions of realms of the dead located on islands or across the sea, or the ritual use of boats to send disease and defilement away from the community, Moerman reminds us that Buddhist cosmologies and death-related rites were often informed by those of other traditions. His study of “sailing to Potalaka” draws on examples of this practice spanning the medieval period, using both visual representations and textual accounts, including the reports of Jesuit missionaries. This practice was at once both “personal devotion and public spectacle,” as the departure of the boats bound for Potalaka would typically be witnessed by crowds of devotees, prompted by the desire to form karmic connections with the ascetic and share in the merit of his act. Like Raoul
Birnbaum’s account of the death photograph of Master Hongyi, Moerman’s chapter underscores the point that exemplary deaths, to be exemplary, require witnesses and that the seemingly personal act of dying in ideal Buddhist fashion had a profoundly social dimension. This observation also raises some questions about the term “voluntary death,” by which ascetic suicide is often described. As Moerman notes, the presence of insistent crowds determined to gain merit from witnessing the act may have rendered some instances of religious suicide not quite so voluntary.

The Dead and the Living

One recurring theme of the essays collected here is that the Buddhist dead are seldom really “dead” in the sense of being utterly gone and inaccessible. Chapters 9 through 11 address the ongoing relations between the dead and those still living. They treat examples of those special individuals who are able to mediate between the two realms, by either journeying to the realm of the dead or otherwise making contact with the deceased and relaying their messages to those left behind. Such individuals may operate within the context of established Buddhist institutions or on their periphery. Historically, they have played, and continue to play, key roles in Buddhist cultures by providing “proof” of recompense for good and evil deeds and thus reinforcing Buddhist ethical norms.

The chapter by Bryan Cuevas examines narratives of Tibetan délok (Tib. ’das log), people who pass into the world of the dead and then return to recount their experiences. Cuevas focuses on one such story in particular, that of an ordinary Buddhist laywoman named Karma Wangzin, who lived in the seventeenth century, and examines the main features of this woman’s narrative, including her intimate account of her own death, her journey to hell, and her eventual return to the world of the living. He analyzes the remarkable tale of Karma Wangzin within a social-historical framework and sifts through the details of her story for evidence of popular Tibetan attitudes toward death. Cuevas notes that perceptions of death and of the postmortem realms that emerge in délok narratives, while rooted in formal Buddhist doctrine, also diverge from it in significant ways, being at once both more vague and ambiguous and yet fleshed out with local specifics in a way not seen in formal treatises. These informal notions, which are shared across gen-
der groups and social-religious classes in Tibetan Buddhist society, constitute what he defines as “popular” religious belief. At the same time, Cuevas shows that even formal teachings about the fate of the deceased in the bardo were compounded not only from Indian Buddhist Abhidharma concepts of the interim state but also from indigenous ideas of the soul (bla) and its vulnerability to demonic attack, underscoring the extent to which Buddhist traditions are inextricably embedded in the matrices of local traditions.

Similar interactions with local practices and similar confluences and divergences between formal doctrine and informal ideas are highlighted in John Holt’s chapter, which examines relationships between the living and the dead as expressed in the activities of the lay village priestess Viṣṇu Kalyāni in contemporary Buddhist Sri Lanka. This priestess is revered for her seemingly astounding ability to communicate with the recently deceased, and, like the délok Karma Wangzin in Cuevas’ essay, she functions as a sort of “communications broker” between the two worlds. Holt demonstrates how common fears of the “restless dead” in a Sri Lankan village and appeals to Buddhist principles of merit and karmic retribution work together to empower this priestess in the eyes of her community and authenticate her otherworldly communications as manifestly true. At the same time, he notes, her activities also indicate that after death, links to relatives are not altogether severed; the deceased actually remains an important and interactive member of the family left behind. Holt argues that such concerns about how the living relate to the dead are not merely a feature of the contemporary “spirit religion” emerging as a byproduct of social change in urban areas, but they have also formed a central focus of Sinhala lay Buddhist piety since ancient times.

Matthew Kapstein’s chapter concerns one of the most celebrated journeys in the shared Buddhist tradition to the world beyond: the descent into hell of the Buddha’s disciple Maudgalyāyana (Ch. Mulian) to save his mother. In East Asia, the legend is most fully elaborated in two Chinese Buddhist texts, the Yulanpen jing and the Dantuqianlian mingjian jiumu bianwen (Transformation text on Mulian saving his mother from hell). Kapstein considers the place of this popular Chinese literature in Tibet and demonstrates how the narrative of Mulian’s heroic descent, transformed and reformulated by Tibetans, was assimilated into a distinctively Tibetan Buddhist framework. In so doing, he contributes a significant Ti-
betan example to recent scholarship analyzing how Buddhist practices and discourses emphasizing filial piety coexisted with the tradition’s renunciate ideal. In China, the Mulian story gave rise to the popular “ghost festival,” which centered on Chinese concerns for the salvation of deceased relatives and ancestors. In Tibet, Kapstein notes, no such festival ever took root, but the Chinese legend did spawn Tibetan analogues to Mulian, such as the thirteenth-century visionary Guru Chöwang (1212–1270) and the epic hero Gesar of Ling. Moreover, the legend of Mulian helped to inspire the development of the Tibetan délok literature.

“Placing” the Dead

As anthropologists have long recognized, the dead, despite the fact of being dead, continue to be present among the living. Thus, the dead are always in need of care and a suitable “place” in society. Chapters 12–14 address the social and physical locations of the Buddhist dead through examination of funerary and mortuary rites. Hank Glassman’s chapter investigates the role of Japanese Buddhist funerary and mortuary practices in shaping norms of family and kinship in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. New practices that emerged at this time—including the separate burial of husbands and wives of different family origins; the preservation and enshrining of bones, often identified with Buddhist relics; and calendrically determined visits to family grave sites—both reflected and stimulated a growing consciousness of ancestors, lineage, and the importance of the paternal line. Glassman’s essay focuses in particular on the female dead. He suggests that as emphasis on the patriarchal household grew and women’s legal, social, and familial status correspondingly declined, married women came with growing frequency to be buried with their husbands’ families, leading eventually to the early modern system of family graves and memorial rites that persists to the present. Where and in what manner the dead are placed, Glassman argues, tells us much about how society is structured and how particular representations of family identity are reinforced. Glassman shows that the place of the female dead in Japanese society, and of married women in particular, shifted over time, and these shifts have both marked and helped to bring about specific changes in the Japanese family and the status of women within it.

Mark Rowe’s chapter explores recent controversy over the prob-
lem of “placing” the dead in contemporary Japan. Decreasing grave space, the graying of society, and changes in women’s status and in concepts of the individual have been accompanied by a growing disaffection with the family grave system and the Buddhist memorial rites that support it. Rowe examines the new and highly politicized practice of scattering the ashes of the dead, as conducted by the Grave Free Promotion Society, founded in 1991, as an alternative to what many perceive as a Buddhist monopoly on death ritual. The varied responses of Buddhist priests that Rowe analyzes show how foundational doctrines can be deployed to legitimate widely divergent practices: while some priests endorse the scattering of ashes as consistent with normative Buddhist doctrines of impermanence and non-attachment, others invoke dependent origination (Skt. pratītya-samutpāda) to argue the importance of ancestral ties and thus the importance of preserving family-based graves and traditional Buddhist memorial rites. Rowe also discusses innovative voluntary burial societies, introduced by some Buddhist temples as an alternative to family graves, where the system of memorial rites is supported not by preestablished bonds of kinship and locality, but by ties of voluntary association. Like Glassman’s essay, Rowe’s chapter suggests that funerary and memorial rites not only reflect social change but also constitute a vital arena in which social norms may be challenged and reshaped.

In the final chapter, Jason Carbine examines a concern with “caring for Buddhism” in contemporary Myanmar (Burma), as seen in a monastic “cremation volume” recording the grand public funeral of the Sudhammā monk Bhaddanta Indācāra (1897–1993). Through its account of Bhaddanta Indācāra’s life, photographic record of the funeral rites, and ceremonial eulogies, this volume, Carbine argues, constitutes a work of pedagogy for the care of the monastic dead, illustrating by example the roles that various sectors of Burmese Buddhists—monks and nuns, military officials, and the laity in general—should play in paying reverence to the special dead. Carbine suggests that caring for the monastic dead is understood as caring for and sustaining the very ideals of Buddhism, though this ethos may be subject to varying interpretation by different social constituencies. With Carbine’s essay, the volume comes full circle: the last rites of the high-ranking Buddhist figure Bhaddanta Indācāra reenact the paradigm of the Buddha’s own funeral, with which Strong’s opening chapter begins. Like the Buddha, Bhaddanta Indā-
caña’s body produced relics in testimony to his attainment, and, like those who tended to the body of the Buddha, Bhaddanta Indacaña’s followers, in properly memorializing him and caring for his remains, demonstrate their commitment to preserving the Buddhist ideals that he exemplified in life and in death.

What this collection of essays demonstrates most strikingly is the recurrence of common themes in death-related discourses, practices, and representations across Buddhist cultures. These include pervasive tensions between the message of impermanence and the desire for continuity and stability; the ideal of the exemplary death, modeled upon that of the Buddha, as an index to an individual’s spiritual state and as a source of legitimation for the followers of particular Buddhist teachers; the importance of relics, whether cremated remains, hagiographical texts, or even photographs, in demonstrating a teacher’s attainments and in some sense reestablishing his presence in the world; the liminal power of the moment of death itself, when proper meditative and ritual practice can direct one toward a favorable rebirth or even liberation; and the ongoing relationship between the dead and the living, whether mediated by religious specialists or by funerals and memorial rites, in which concern for the well-being of the deceased becomes a powerful motive for moral conduct and merit-making. Other persistent themes may be adduced as well. These essays demonstrate that approaches to death in Buddhist societies have typically brought together multiple and at times paradoxical logics drawn from diverse doctrines and theoretical systems, as well as from local religious traditions and, most recently, from discourses of modernity. They also shed light on the role of Buddhist memorial rites in the construction of social identities, gender categories, and kinship ties. In the end, all the contributions to this book reveal just how integral matters of the dead have been and continue to be to Buddhists everywhere.

While the essays in this volume represent a range of methods and subjects, we have made no attempt to be comprehensive. Some comment on the more obvious gaps may be in order. For example, our collection does not include an essay focusing on the more technical aspects of doctrine, such as Abhidharmic analyses of death, discussion of death consciousness and rebirth-linking consciousness, or the interim state. This lack does not reflect an anti-doctrinal bias on our part but is rather an artifact of our initial
question about the feasibility of studying “death in Buddhism” in a way that is both transregional and culturally and historically grounded—a focus that, in retrospect, may have discouraged contributions with a more exclusively doctrinal orientation. We deliberately chose not to engage in comparison with death practices in non-Buddhist cultures. Some of the individual chapters have noted points of potential comparison with late antiquity or medieval Europe; James Benn, for example, suggests a possible comparison between some Buddhist self-immolators and the martyrs of Christian and Islamic traditions. In the wake of the shift away from the largely text- and doctrine-based approaches characterizing an earlier generation of Buddhist Studies and the move to include ritual, devotional, and material culture as areas of study, Robert Sharf has noted, “Buddhism may no longer resemble European humanism, mysticism (the “perennial philosophy”), or enlightened rationalism, but it has come to bear an uncanny resemblance to medieval Christianity: both were preoccupied, at some level, with saints, relics, and miraculous images.”

Last rites and *ars moriendi* for the dying, along with notions of purgatorial realms, form other suggestive points of comparison. Scholars of premodern forms of Buddhism who have also looked into the work of Peter Brown, Carolyn Walker Bynum, Patrick Geary, Jacques Le Goff, Frederick Paxton, Jean-Claude Schmitt, and others cannot help but notice parallels. But whether such “uncanny resemblances” will prove to be methodologically fruitful in light of disciplined comparative study or merely instances of the “nagging issue of universal, or at least general, features of behavior” is a question that must await a different volume.

Notes


11. We are indebted to Robert Gimello for suggesting to us a connection between the marginalizing of death rites and the afterlife in discourses of Buddhist modernism and the long neglect of death in Buddhist Studies.


15. Collins has shown that even in the Pāli canon (by no means as univocal a corpus as is often imagined), the anatta doctrine and related discourses do not by any means “exhaust the range of psychological and behavioural concern of the individual Buddhist, however much of a meditative or scholastic specialist he might be” (Selfless Persons, 70).


17. Stanley Tambiah, a pioneer in the critique of two-tiered elite/folk models of religion, has lambasted this position as “Pāli Text Society mentality” (while acknowledging “those extraordinary individuals belonging to this society who did not merit this opprobrium”) (The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984], 7). At the same time, however, such assumptions of decline uncannily mirror contemporaneous Protestant accounts of a pristine, original Christianity corrupted by rituals deriving from late antiquity and perpetuated by the Roman Catholic Church (see Jonathan Z. Smith, Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990]). We thank Donald S. Lopez, Jr. for pointing out this parallel to us.


20. One might wonder if such models were informed to any extent by the dual-path structure set forth in Pāli sources, with good rebirth as a proximate goal and nibbāna as the ultimate goal. However, scholarly discourses positing a dichotomy between normative doctrine and traditional Buddhist death rites are by no means limited to Theravāda contexts. A striking case may be seen in the Buddhist sectarian research centers of contemporary Japan, where many Buddhist scholars (often Buddhist priests themselves) have come to be troubled by what they see as a profound disjuncture between “orthodox” doctrines of emptiness and not-self and the rites of merit transference to the spirits of the deceased, which parishioners expect of them. See, for example, Mark Rowe, “Where the Action Is: Sites of Contemporary Sōtō Buddhism,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 31, no. 2 (2004): 362–69.


22. The work of Gregory Schopen on Indian Buddhism has been groundbreaking in this regard. See, for example, the following, all reprinted in his *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*: “Burial Ad Sanctos and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism: A Study in the Archaeology of Religions” (1987), 114–47; “On Avoiding Ghosts and Social Censure: Monastic Funerals in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*” (1992), 204–37; “An Old Inscription from Amaraśīvatī and the Cult of the Local Monastic Dead” (1991), 165–203; and “Two Problems in the History of Indian Buddhism: The Layman/Monk Distinction and the Doctrines of the Transference of Merit,” 23–55.

23. This is in no way to deny doctrine’s own claim to normative status, which is very different from assumptions on the researcher’s part that doctrine necessarily will, or even should, play a normative role for actual Buddhists.


28. We were inspired here by Peter Brown’s category of the “very special dead.” See his *Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 69–85.


31. See, for example, Faure, “Relics and Flesh Bodies.”


36. Strong, Relics of the Buddha.


