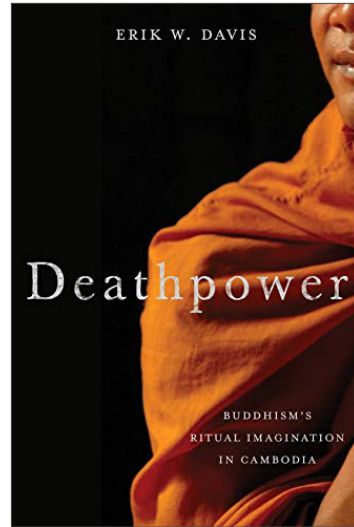


Book Review

Davis, Erik W. *Deathpower: Buddhism's Ritual Imagination in Cambodia*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. Pp. xii + 303.



Associate Professor Erik W. Davis is currently working and teaching in the Religious Studies Department at Macalester College in Minneapolis. Davis completed his bachelor degree at Macalester College (1996) with a thesis entitled 'Monasticism and Women: Gender and Identity in Buddhism' in 1996. In 2000, he submitted his master thesis, 'A heap of memories: An unsorted problem and potential method for the history of early Buddhism', at the University of Washington in Seattle. From 2003 to 2006, he carried out fieldwork in Cambodia for his doctorate at the University of Chicago Divinity School: *Treasures of the Buddha: Imagining Death and Life in Contemporary Cambodian Religion* (2009). The doctorate thesis forms the core argument of the book reviewed here: *Deathpower: Buddhism's Ritual Imagination in Cambodia* (2016). Published by Columbia University Press, the book includes major changes to Davis' doctoral thesis as well as new material from follow-up visits to Cambodia.

Davis' monograph investigates how contemporary Buddhism in Cambodia draws its moral authority and power from its handling of death and the dead. He argues that monks play a major role in the domestication of wild and negative forces by transforming or 'binding' them into resources of morality, power, and fertility. In

focusing on rituals, Davis aims to illustrate various social imaginations in contemporary Cambodian society. In his dense descriptions of rituals and their performed imaginaries, Davis employs emic and etic concepts, ritual texts, data from intensive ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and reflective analysis. In addition to developing a greater understanding of contemporary Cambodian Buddhism, death, and the spirits of the dead, readers will learn core concepts and imaginations of Cambodian society: about kings and monks, spirits and ancestors, rice and magic, gifts, and leftovers, as well as tattoos and amulets. Davis has thereby provided an important work not only on Cambodian Buddhism, but also on Cambodian society. He demonstrates specific expertise in many areas of society, while providing numerous points of departure for studies in other Southeast Asian countries in this theory-laden, but nevertheless accessible ethnography. *Deathpower* is a valuable offering for students and scholars of Buddhism, Khmer culture, Cambodian religions, and anthropology.

The book is structured into nine chapters, each of which ends with an ethnographic vignette from Davis' fieldwork to illustrate the argument. The introduction addresses the main goal of the book: to show the social imaginaries of Buddhism and death through Davis' extended research on rituals. Inspired by Cornelius Castoriadis' (1975) concept of the imaginary, Davis argues that funeral rites are the 'central act in the re-creation of the sociohistorical world in which Cambodians imagine moral possibility' (4). In line with Castoriadis and Bell (1992), he argues that rituals should be understood as performances to reproduce social values and norms. A second goal of the book is to offer a new perspective on Cambodian Buddhism by defining its relationship with 'its other'—which is locally referred to as 'Brahmanism'.

A central stage for handling death in Cambodia are Buddhist temples, where the cremation of the dead usually takes place. Chapter one draws on the extensive fieldwork Davis conducted between 2003 and 2006 at two urban temples. At the temples—one 'modernist-oriented', the other 'ancient'—Davis was witness to over 150 cremation ceremonies. Through these ceremonies, he reveals the social and economic structures of the crematoria. To conclude the chapter, the vignette illustrates the state between life and death, or 'bhlyk' (a.w.

phleuk). In ‘bhlyk’, people declared dead come back to life, often with a certain spiritual knowledge allowing them to work as spirit mediums.

Once the dead do not return to life, the funeral is held. In chapter two, Davis provides an excellent account and abstract analysis of funerals in Cambodia. The dead can pose a major threat, due to the release of possibly dangerous ‘braling’—invisible but vital ‘parts’ of the human body. Therefore, many parts of the ritual are intended to confuse the spirit of the dead so that it cannot return. For Davis, another key point of the funeral is that the monks transform the potentially malevolent spirits and their braling into harmless or benevolent Buddhist ‘viññāṇā’ by symbolically and physically ‘binding’ them.

Throughout history, ‘binding’ has been a central motive in domesticating the ‘wild’. In chapter three, ‘Rice, Water, and Hierarchy’, Davis illustrates the importance of imaginaries from agriculture and the claiming of agricultural land. Today, rice farming in particular remains a central imaginary resource. These imaginaries entail an important binary: the ‘wild’ or ‘forest’ (‘brai’) versus ‘civilized/agricultural land’ (‘sruk’). Monks and kings have gained authority by domesticating the wild and/or by violating this binary.

In chapter four, ‘Building Deathpower and Rituals of Sovereignty’, Davis elaborates on the process of binding to analyze the ritual of consecrating temples, or ‘pañcuḥ sīma’ (‘dropping the stone’). In this ritual, kings are invited to cut the strings of a physically bound stone, so that it will drop into a pit in front of the main shrine. During ‘pañcuḥ sīma’, sacrifices are transformed into gifts, as is the case during ‘Krung Vāli’, a popular ritual to invite spirits. In both of these Buddhist rituals, sacrifices (which once included human sacrifices) are transformed into Buddhist merit-making gifts. For Davis, these are ritual performances of Buddhist hegemony over Brahmanism, because through them, the Buddhist sangha orders the religious cosmos, and thereby legitimates itself.

As Buddhism reveals its religious and moral authority during funeral rites and the transformation of (non-Buddhist) sacrifices into gifts, the ‘paṃsukūla’—the rag robe of the dead—in chapter five is the illustration of both processes: the rag robe is embodied with the spirit of the dead. This enlivened robe of the dead reveals a Brahmanist understanding of an afterlife in which the spirits of the dead may remain among the living. In the ritual of the same name (paṃsukūla),

monks employ a 'ritual technique' to promote the imaginary of the Buddhist afterlife of karma, merit, and rebirth. The ritual, which is not only performed at funerals but also at other liminal occasions, serves again to domesticate the spirits and therefore as a claim of superiority over the 'wild' spirits of Brahmanism.¹

The most important holiday period in Cambodia is the fifteen days dedicated to the ritual care of the dead, or 'Bhujum Piṇḍa'. In chapter six,² Davis explores Bhujum Piṇḍa, a central act in accumulating merit for the deceased, to illustrate the reciprocity of gift-giving to the monks. Only Buddhist monks can transfer merit to the dead. The dead can then, in turn, be reborn sooner and become benevolent ancestors. For his description of the circulation of social value and the production of social morality, Davis draws on his fieldwork as well as textual sources to illustrate the fate of the preta (Buddhist spirits of the dead).

A great deal has been written about giving, sacrifice, gifts, and counter-gifts, but it has rarely been argued that they produce or involve meaningful leftovers. In an innovative twist of thought, Davis looks at 'Leftovers, Rumor, and Witchcraft' (chapter seven) and stresses the significance of consuming leftovers to point out their two-fold significance—as both impure and as (re)vitalizing. He shows how morals play out in ritual imaginations of consumption: 'monks eat in public, witches eat in secret' (227). And, as the vignette at the end of the chapter concludes: spirits starve to death if they receive no offerings.

In the final chapter ('Buddhism makes Brahmanism', chapter eight), Davis reminds the reader of his main argument: that death and the handling of death creates power, and that this 'deathpower', as he calls it, is 'monopolised' by Buddhist ritual practitioners. This leads Davis to investigate the concept of 'Cambodian Buddhism'. Here, he argues against the binary oppositions inherent in concepts of syncretic or hybrid religion. The reproduction of the 'other' of Buddhism, in

¹ The argument in chapter five is elaborated on in Davis' (2012) article.

² A curious case in which workers who returned from urban areas to their home villages and were called 'pretas' (Buddhist spirits of the dead) is analyzed to show urban-rural relations and equalities in moral settings. The case is elaborated in another publication by Davis (2011).

Cambodia and throughout Southeast Asia, is often performed by Buddhist actors. For Davis, in staging its superiority over the less pure, less moral other, 'Buddhism makes Brahmanism'. To elaborate on the concept of Cambodian Buddhism, Davis provides an example from his fieldwork. He asked a friend who had just placed offerings in front of a statue of Garuda on a Buddhist temple ground if this was Buddhist. The friend responded: 'The incense and candles are for the spirits; it's Brahmanism. Only the morality and the meditation is Buddhism' (218). Drawing on Castoriadis, Davis refers to the Cambodian imaginary of Buddhism: 'The Cambodian imagination institutes these oppositions that Cambodians routinely undermine through daily practice, without appearing to weaken their force in the construction of their emotional or moral lives' (224). He sums up: the social imaginary of Cambodian Buddhism includes 'other' (Brahmanist) elements, but they are portrayed as lacking morality; ultimately, Buddhist ritual practice is always performed in ways that confirm Buddhism's hegemony.

Davis' ethnography, 'Deathpower', is a landmark in theorizing and describing contemporary Cambodian Buddhism and culture, and especially Cambodian Buddhist rituals. Detailed analysis of the most important rituals is the focus of the descriptions, where not only the practices of the actors involved, but also the material and texts used during the rituals provide a holistic perspective on Cambodian Buddhism. The argument of the book comprehensively follows the objective of showing the dominant imaginaries in Cambodia and its manifestation in rituals. The book represents one of the most recent studies devoted to contemporary Cambodia beyond the Khmer Rouge period. Nevertheless, it also offers numerous points of departure for studies of memory and reconciliation—for example, the relatively soon rebirth of the dead, and their vulnerability to the lack of food offerings, do not require negotiation with the spirits of war as in Vietnam (cf. Kwon 2008).

The focus on imaginaries and the description of rather ideal-typical abstracted rituals nevertheless has some problems. Different interpretations of rituals, of meanings and their negotiation, insofar as they exist, are not dealt with in detail, if at all. The rituals are mostly presented free of contradiction and differing perspectives or

interpretations from different actors. While this approach certainly serves the purpose of pointing out the structured imaginary ‘behind the scenes’, the abstract arguments sometimes stray far from the contemporary. The concept of the ‘king’, for example, as the source of power in Cambodia, is not only used in historical parts, but sometimes also related to present day political leaders. The current king, however, has little power and has increasingly been replaced in representative or political roles by political leaders within the country (Norén-Nilsson 2016). Although this political power structure situation shapes the imaginary of Cambodian rule today, these dynamics are not discussed beyond a few mentions in the book (122, 129).

Another area of study where abstract concepts cannot do justice to local negotiations concerns the relationship between Brahmanism and Buddhism. The imagined superiority of Buddhism over Brahmanism ‘shapes Buddhism’. While this emphasis on the hegemony of Buddhist morality over spirits is certainly correct from a Buddhist perspective, it overlooks the fact that seeking immoral, religious help by means of magical aid (Brahmanism) to gain status or a promotion is popular in Cambodia today (Christensen 2020). Unlike Buddhist merit-making, which only takes effect after rebirth, Brahmanist practices have an immediate, amoral effect. This magical, immediate orientation of Brahmanism sometimes makes it more suitable for everyday matters, and in this sense, more powerful than Buddhism. Davis does not deny this effect, but his focus on the hierarchical relationship between Buddhism and Brahmanism disguises the negotiations inherent in Cambodian Buddhism today.

Davis’s work provokes thought and provides an excellent stepping stone for further research. His observation that the funeral is the most unchanged ritual after the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops in 1989 could be re-examined in the coming years. Environmental regulations and the technological renewal of crematoria may soon lead to changes in concepts and rituals. Other imaginaries, more influenced by the liberal market economy and economic development, not only structure Brahmanist, but also Buddhist, rituals today. Thus, new patterns of thought and practice have emerged and will emerge that will be part of Davis’ upcoming projects and publications, which include ‘Caring Powerfully for the Dead: Deathpower in Comparative Context’, ‘Past

Lives Present Tense: Past-life Memory in Contemporary Cambodia', and 'Religious Creativity and Social Conflict'.

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.15239/hijbs.04.01.13>