



## CONVERGING DOCTRINES, DIVERGENT RITUALS: EXPLORING BUDDHIST FUNERAL PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY ASIA

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**Abstract** Funerals are one of the activities associated with and embedded in religious practices. In the three major sects of Buddhism, there are several different practices in burying the body, even though they refer to a single teaching or concept of death. This is interesting to discuss, considering that most religions worldwide use the same practice. This study explores how funeral practices are in the Buddhist tradition and what underlies these differences. Qualitative methods are adopted to answer these questions with a literature study approach. As a result, each Buddhist sect shows its uniqueness through reflection on Buddhism in general, which is not fixed on just one rigid teaching. For instance, the Sky funeral within the Vajrayāna tradition provides a perspective that humans are bound to nature. Giving bodies to birds and other animals signifies the strength of their bond. The practice of cremation in Theravāda is a way to release the physical remains left behind in the world. With this method, they can easily continue their next spiritual journey. At the same time, Mahayāna Buddhism describes a flexible perspective on religion and funeral practices. This study also suggests a more specific approach to looking at the complexity of funerals in Buddhism, especially in areas where Buddhism is a minority, such as Indonesia.

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**Keywords** Funeral Practices; Buddhist Ritual; Sky Burial; Cremation; Death

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### INTRODUCTION

Each religion has its own tradition for a person whom God has filled with the world. The funeral itself is deeply embedded in various religious practices that contain aspects of beliefs about death, life after death, and a proper place for a deceased person. Many funeral rituals are carried out as a way of expressing grief, last respect, and providing an appropriate resting place under traditions and conditions, as well as a medium of adhesive social ties between communities (Adams & Kusumawati, 2010; Ngubane, 2012; Rammohan et al., 2021). In general, in all religious traditions, be it world religions or indigenous religions in the world, they will bury dead humans with the same practice (Chen, 2012; Kharanaghi, 2024; Panuntun & Salewa, 2022; Prikhotko, 2020; Taboada, 2015). In contrast, Buddhism has its own number of funeral practices according to the sect from which they originate. This is because funerals, from the perspective of Buddhism, contain a high

dimension of spirituality. The teachings of the cycle of life (samsara) that continue to rotate until it reaches the position of nirvana (Harvey, 2000, p. 14).

Funerals in Buddhism are a ritual of reverence and an effort to help the soul that has been released from the body to step into the next life. The process is assisted by various rituals and prayers led by monks (Herat, 2023; Kawamura, 2021; Moon & Somers, 2023). Buddhism in several countries with fairly large adherents, such as Thailand, Myanmar, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Japan, and Indonesia, has different funeral rituals. It depends on the sects they belong to, such as Theravāda, Mahayāna, and Vajrayāna. However, the teachings practiced refer to the same Buddha. Although the funeral ritual in Buddhism contains a very profound philosophy, research on this tradition is still limited to one school only. Of course, this is a shortcoming in highlighting the meaning, symbolism, and role of ritual itself in Buddhism. Therefore, it is essential to conduct this study in order to make comparisons and fill in the gaps in the complexity and uniqueness of interpretations in Buddhism.

Several studies have discussed funeral rituals in the Buddhist tradition quite a bit. They still focus on one of the traditions and sects of Buddhism. Khatiwada (2024) outlines how funeral processions are performed in the Buddhist community in Nepal. Bouté (2024) also explains how the Buddhist community in Laos holds funeral rituals as a way to bond even with the deceased. Then Chatzisavva (2023) explains the Tibetan Buddhist funeral tradition, which is heavily influenced by Chinese tradition in practice. Furthermore, there are dynamics at Buddhist funerals that are influenced by the complexity of tradition and times. For example, there is a rejection of the establishment of chedi funerals carried out by Theravāda Buddhism in the 19th century (Bowie, 2021). Wang & Chen (2023) state that there was a shift in funeral practices at the end of the Qing dynasty due to secular influences that degraded traditional funerary culture. Then, Mingqian (2024) also discusses the tension related to the funeral ritual of monks in humanistic Buddhism, where there is a modern and traditional funeral tradition. None of these studies has explored Buddhist funeral rituals in various traditions, and why are the same Buddhist teachings translated into multiple practices?

Departing from this uniqueness, this critical study aims to make a significant contribution to how funerals are in the Buddhist tradition, especially in the funeral rituals between major sects. A comparison of the Theravāda, Mahayāna, and Vajrayāna schools in funerals will help us understand the evolution of the interpretation of the teachings on karma and reincarnation, translated in different forms. For this reason, this study formulated two questions to dive into each of these traditions. How are the forms of funeral in the Theravāda, Mahayāna, and Vajrayāna traditions? What is behind this different type of funeral practice? This question is asked because funerals are not only a purely religious ceremony, but have transformed into their own social and cultural identity for Buddhists in various countries in the world.

To reinforce the above views, this study builds on three basic assumptions that form an essential foundation for funeral rituals in Buddhism. First, the funeral in Buddhism is a process for a person to guide and help a person to continue in the next life. So it's not just a spiritual procession where someone leaves the world at this time. This procession is not seen as a formality, but ensures that the person who has died gets a better life again. Second, the core teachings that are central but practiced in different forms become a form of community adaptation to several other beliefs and to local beliefs and cultures. Third, there is a funeral ritual as an adhesive between the surrounding communities that are abandoned. In addition, rituals that are full of spiritual values will strengthen inter- and/or intra-religious interactions because this recording has become a social commodity like a celestial cemetery in Tibet. These three assumptions are expected to improve the foundation of this study in looking at Buddhist funerary traditions from various perspectives.

## METHODS

To explore and understand the Buddhist funeral rituals in various traditions. This study adopts a qualitative approach using the literature study method. This study focuses on exploring the meanings and symbols of the practices contained in the various traditions in Buddhism itself. The analysis and discussion in this study were made by looking for references that have the same debate, but are not limited to intersectionality with other aspects. For the additional resource, I used videos and several social media posts to get a better visual picture, especially of the sky funeral. Considering that the funeral tradition in Buddhism has received a lot of attention from various connoisseurs of content that is not commonly done, such as celestial funerals. In specific discussions, the researcher will discuss it with a content analysis approach to get an in-depth explanation, especially on its impact on socio-culture in society. In addition, through the Literature study method, this study also aims to bridge the gap of previous research while adding to and enriching research on funeral rituals in Buddhism.

## FINDINGS

### **Cremation Burial in Theravāda Buddhism**

The practice of cremation as a final tribute to a deceased person has been practiced in Europe and the Middle East since around 3000 B.C. (Buschmann et al., 2022). While Muradian (2022) states that if the development and spread to the East Baltic region around the 2nd-1st millennium B.C. further, the first country to legalize cremation was Italy in 1888 (Breschi et al., 2018), and Britain as the first modern country to adopt the practice of cremation that began around the 20th century (Knight, 2018). In the Buddhist tradition, the practice of cremation was carried out for the first time since Siddhartha Gautama died,

where it has become a normative practice in several sects of Buddhism (Berkwitz, 2023; Strong, 2018).

In its development, cremation has become one of the most widely used practices by Buddhists in various parts of the world. It should also be noted that cremation is not the only way to bury a body in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition. However, this practice is more commonly found in Southeast Asia, China, and Japan, but it has its own uniqueness and diversity, following local traditions (Stone & Walter, 2008; Williams & Ladwig, 2012). Behind this practice, keeping some important points, Buddha taught that every human will experience three phases of life: birth, life, and death. The cycle illustrates that if nothing is eternal in this world, there will always be a change of impermanence (Harvey, 2000, p. 34). After the body is burned, it will become ashes and is considered to have returned to the basic elements of humans, such as earth, water, fire, and air (Anālayo, 2021).

As a sacred ritual, cremation is a medium for the deceased Buddhist to continue their next spiritual journey. In other words, facilitating their rebirth in a different form can be better and higher in level or vice versa (Harvey, 2000, pp. 11-14). Although cremation is also practiced by Hinduism, both of which teach the impermanence of the human body, there are differences in the meaning, purpose, and concept of life after death. Hinduism focuses on purifying the soul to go to heaven through the practice of cremation. At the same time, Buddhism emphasizes that cremation is an attempt to help the Rebirth with embodied karma before he dies. in addition, cremation can also be used as a place to help abandoned families and emotional exchanges in the form of grief, moral support, social bonds, assistance and others (Fletcher & McGowan, 2024; Oestigaard & Goldhahn, 2006).

### **Sky Burial in Vajrayāna Buddhism**

Vajrayāna Buddhism in Tibet has a fairly anti-mainstream approach to other sects regarding funerals. They bury the followers and leaders of this sect by giving their bodies to vultures and even to dogs (Stoddard, 2010). This funeral is called sky funeral, in Tibetan Jhator, which means giving alms to birds. This practice has been carried out for dozens of years, precisely about 11,000 years (MaMing et al., 2016). Some studies described by Dan Martin (1996) say that the sky funeral was adopted by Zoroastrianism, which originated in Iran. In comparison, the sky funeral has also been carried out by the Finno-Ugric, with a different practice (Rogachev & Vaganova, 2025). For Buddhists in the region, this practice of sky burial serves as a reminder to them that there is no eternity in the world, including themselves. This concept refers to impermanence in Buddhism (Harvey, 2000, p. 34).

This practice teaches Buddhists to be able to learn by reflecting on their bodies only as vehicles before they actually attain enlightenment. In addition, they are also trained to let go of selfishness in order to accept anattā (Hoang, 2019) and śūnyatā (Corda, 2013). Furthermore, giving bodies to birds and Dogs as a form of help for those who also

experience dukkha (e.g., hungry) is a way to be free from that state (Harvey, 2000, p. 37). In addition, this sacred procession also reminds Buddhists to realize that death is a certainty and does not need to be feared or avoided. Then, with that, it also returns to the concept that this body is given only to attain enlightenment and not as an end.

Research suggests that local culture is involved in this funeral, with the existence of the book *Bardö T'ödröl* (the Tibetan dead book) as a guide to guide the dead towards Rebirth (Gielen, 2006). If we look at the philosophy of meaning behind this practice, we will be brought to an interesting perspective. In the *Vajrayāna* tradition, sky funeral emphasizes that human beings have a connection to nature, come from nature, and return to nature (Loizzo & Rayner, 2017). In line with that, it turns out that this practice also has a good impact on the sustainability of Himalayan Vultures and other wildlife in the Qinghai Plateau of Tibet (Maming et al., 2016). It shows a significant contribution to the local ecosystem. In addition to being a tradition that continues to develop, it is also in line with the concept of giving (Harvey, 2000, p. 42).

### **Cremation and Ground Burial in *Mahayāna* Buddhism**

*Mahayāna* Buddhism has an interesting approach compared to the two sects above. They use two methods of funeral, namely, cremation and ground burial. However, cremation is still the leading practice in managing the body (Song, 2024). Just like *Theravāda*, cremation is considered one of the ways to separate their bodies quickly. It allows for an acceleration towards reincarnation and rebirth (Harvey, 2000, pp. 11-14). Since Buddhism spread to Japan from the Chinese Plains, the practice of cremation began to be widely adopted (Blair, 2014; Pacey, 2015). The concept of the physical is only part of the container for enlightenment, not a primary goal that also dominates. In addition, cremation in the *Mahayāna* tradition is not just a physical ritual that shows the dimension of human impermanence; however, it is a reminder that the cycle of life and rebirth must be facilitated.

In the underground funeral tradition, some *Mahayāna* Buddhists still practice this method. Apart from being a sign of respect for the body, it is also a preservation of traditions that have been carried out for a long time by their ancestors. For instance, several Chinese and Japanese communities implemented tombs using stones and funeral pits (Kudinova et al., 2022; Kuhn, 2015). There are very symbolic rituals to fulfill this procession's primary purpose, which they believe is one way to make the journey of spirits easier by placing particular objects during the ritual (Song, 2024). Furthermore, symbols on *Mahayāna* Buddhist tombs depict the adoption of art even for the dead. The art depiction is manifested in the form of murals by Kitora Kofun and Takamatsu Barrow, which originated from a combination of traditional Japanese and Chinese cosmic (Williams & Ladwig, 2012).

These two funeral methods can be seen from the purpose and the factors behind them. First, cremation is one of the steps taken from the doctrine, which is more universal.

As a universal practice in Buddhism, cremation reflects the basic teachings about impermanence. Meanwhile, Ground Funeral describes the complexity of Buddhism in some communities that still adhere to local practices. For instance, in the Teochiu community in China, they require an additional ceremony called "xiu gugu" for the dead body whose abnormally bad death or who causes the spirit to be uncalm (Song, 2024).

## DISCUSSION

At first glance, there is indeed no difference in the purpose of the funeral ritual applied by the three major sects of Buddhism above. Although not all of the above individual sects holistically apply the same practices, Buddhists are worldwide. The above explanation represents only a few countries that implement the practice because they are just practicing Buddhism and showing the rest of the world not to have too much fun in the world. Because Buddha taught that life is about dukkha (Harvey, 2000, p. 31). We must break free from the shackles of dukkha by predetermined means. The short life must be used as a field to do all good actions towards fellow humans and nature (Harvey, 2000, pp. 69-77). So karma, either in life or at the next birth, can release dukkha and lead to nirvāṇa. Through the three images of funeral practices above, the concept of impermanence is one Buddhist teaching, but it translates through different practices.

The understanding of death in buddhism beyond from the biological and personal phenomena. those become reflection points of the reality and existential. It is a communal and social tragedy that can strengthen solidarity (Prickett & Timmermans, 2022). referring to the anicca (impermanence) and anatta (noself) concept, the teaching of buddhism encounter the essentialist paradigm that consider death as an absolute or final term of individual. Differences in practice when translating Buddhism provide space to express grief for the dead and abandoned. They can still become Buddhists without having to break away from the teachings of their ancestors. Social exchange through emotion, sympathy, and empathy during the funeral procession will make them aware of the existence of an immediate social network (Kastenbaum, 2019). This social bond is proof that the death ritual has a vital role in uniting the community. Bustomi et al. (2023) stated that religion or issues related to religion are able to unite people even though they are of different faiths and other backgrounds.

The assumption of an ancient practice tends to be that it is sadistic about the sky burial. The body of the corpse is cut into several parts and then given to a vulture or dog. In fact, giving the body to nature is a form of implementing the teaching of dāna (giving) (Harvey, 2000, p. 61) and helps release dukkha for hungry creatures (Harvey, 2000, p. 170). In fact, it is a modern paradigm that wants to separate us from the environment. In this context, I agree with Latour (2012) that we will never be modern human beings if we are still separated or considered superior to the environment. Through the sky funeral, we are

taught to return to the literal human being that man and nature are one bound unit (Maarif, 2021, 2023). The relationality of these two subjects makes Buddhism acceptable to the broader community because it does not oppose the teachings of their ancestral heritage.

Furthermore, in the era of increasingly advanced development. Sky Funeral is one of the destinations for tourists from abroad. With this phenomenon, we can label their trip as religious tourism. According to Muzurura et al. (2022), seeking new spiritual experiences and intersecting with cultures embodied with tradition can be said to be religious tourism. Even if you want to reflect more deeply, religious tourism will impact several regions' economic and development sectors (Srivastava et al., 2024). The sky funeral can be enjoyed as one of the religious ritual events in general. These practices become spaces for interfaith encounters that describe the side of interrituality (Moyaert, 2019) and interreligious engagements (Lattu, 2025).

In the context of cremation funerals, there are eco-spiritual practices that answer the challenges of the times for those who live in urban areas. Sometimes, limited and expensive land for funeral grounds is the most common problem. However, cremation can save land and has advantages in energy efficiency (Rothstein, 2018). According to Franco et al. (2022), pollution caused by cremation tends to be lower. Likewise, Dini (2008) mentioned cremation as an environmentally friendly practice in the modern era. The practice of cremation still tends to be common only in urban areas. Meanwhile, in rural areas, cremation has not become a comprehensive practice because it is pretty expensive. So, many are reluctant to use this method.

Ground funeral describes an agenda to stay physically and spiritually connected with the ancestors (Hatton, 2022; Rowe, 2009). Therefore, in the Buddhist tradition, this practice receives strong respect and tolerance to continue to be implemented (Holtorf, 2020). because if the cultural heritage is destroyed, it cannot be replaced In addition, if you use the opinion of Pals (2014, p. 232) this method will make a once mediocre place (profane) will be transformed into sacral where it will describe and remind of past, present, and future events. The dynamics of religious issues will always be present, and the task of religion is to provide these answers through inclusive and holistic interpretations. The flexibility of Buddhism is proof that this religion can constantly adapt to the challenges and needs of the people in the region.

## CONCLUSION

The concepts of impermanence, rebirth, karma, and suffering inherent in the procession of death and funeral are interpreted in various funeral practices. Adopting various funeral practices in the Buddhist tradition illustrates a philosophical richness rooted in the one teaching that man will not live forever. Sky funeral, as one of the extreme funeral practices of the Vajrayāna tradition, provides a perspective that humans are bound to the

environment. Giving bodies to birds and other animals signifies the strength of their bond. The practice of cremation in Theravāda is a way to release the physical remains left behind in the world. With this method, they can easily continue their next spiritual journey. At the same time, Mahayāna Buddhism describes a flexible perspective on religion and on funeral practices. The sect accommodates the needs of the community following the local culture but remains rooted in the core teachings of Buddhism by adopting cremation and underground funeral methods.

This diversity reflects the long practice of evolution and the extreme adoption of keeping Buddhism relevant in a wide variety of social and geographical conditions. In addition, by comparing funeral practices in the three major schools of Buddhism, it is emphasized that funeral processions are not limited to meeting the physical needs of the deceased. Instead, it can be transformed into a place to strengthen spirituality, strengthen social networks and solidarity, and raise awareness of the importance of ecological justice through this practice. With these findings, this study provides and contributes a new perspective on the sector of comparative religious practices and what is behind it.

These findings clearly explain how funeral practices in the three schools of Buddhism are practiced and why they differ despite the same doctrinal concept. However, the study has shortcomings and limitations. It only discusses funeral practices in a relatively narrow space without further exploring their variations and complexities within a specific community. Similarly, this study only discusses practices that are representative of dominant data or practices that are more often used by each of the above streams. Further studies are needed to look more deeply at how funeral practices in Buddhist minority populations, such as in Indonesia, to get an authentic and detailed picture of how they deal with the situation and still be able to carry out the practice without any outside cultural intervention so that it will make a richer contribution to the Buddhist study sector.

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