



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ULAMBANA TRADITION IN CHIENESSE CULTURE AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF DĀNA (GENEROSITY) TEACHINGS

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Abstract: *The Ulambana tradition, which is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, is one of the most important Buddhist rituals reflecting the values of filial piety, compassion, and generosity. Within the framework of Buddhist teachings, this tradition symbolizes the practice of dāna (generosity) as a moral foundation for cultivating compassion and accumulating merit. This study aims to analyze the correlation between the Ulambana tradition in Chinese culture and the understanding of dāna teachings among Buddhists. This research employs a qualitative comparative method with a historical analysis approach to compare the development and interpretation of Ulambana practices across various cultural and historical contexts. Data collected through literature review, document analysis, and interviews with Buddhist figures and practitioners. The findings indicate that the Ulambana tradition functions not only as a ritual of honoring ancestors but also as a means of reinforcing the value of dāna through collective acts of giving and compassion. Historically, Ulambana practices have evolved in line with cultural adaptations without losing their essential teachings in fostering altruism and spiritual cultivation. In conclusion, the Ulambana tradition serves as an effective medium for internalizing the value of generosity (dāna) within the social, cultural, and spiritual life of Chinese Buddhist communities, while simultaneously bridging historical heritage with contemporary religious ethical practices.*

Abstrak

Tradisi Ulambana yang berakar kuat dalam kebudayaan Tionghoa merupakan salah satu upacara Buddhis terpenting yang mencerminkan nilai-nilai bakti, welas asih, dan kemurahan hati. Dalam kerangka ajaran Buddha, tradisi ini melambangkan praktik Dāna (kedermawanan) sebagai landasan moral dalam menumbuhkan kasih sayang serta mengumpulkan kebajikan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis korelasi antara tradisi Ulambana dalam kebudayaan Tionghoa dengan pemahaman ajaran Dāna di kalangan umat Buddha. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif komparatif dengan pendekatan analisis historis untuk membandingkan perkembangan dan penafsiran praktik Ulambana dalam berbagai konteks budaya dan sejarah. Data penelitian diperoleh melalui studi pustaka, analisis dokumen, serta wawancara dengan tokoh dan praktisi Buddhis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tradisi Ulambana tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai ritual penghormatan kepada leluhur, tetapi juga sebagai sarana untuk meneguhkan nilai Dāna melalui praktik memberi dan berwelas asih secara kolektif. Secara historis, praktik Ulambana mengalami perkembangan seiring dengan adaptasi budaya tanpa kehilangan esensi ajarannya dalam menumbuhkan altruisme dan pembinaan spiritual. Dengan demikian, tradisi Ulambana berperan sebagai media yang efektif dalam menginternalisasikan nilai kedermawanan (Dāna) dalam kehidupan sosial, budaya, dan spiritual masyarakat Buddhis Tionghoa, sekaligus menjembatani warisan sejarah dengan praktik etika keagamaan pada masa kini.

Kata Kunci: Analisis historis, Dana (Kedermawanan), kebudayaan tionghoa, tradisi buddhis, ulambana

INTRODUCTION

The Ullambana tradition, known in Chinese culture as the Yulanpen Festival or Hungry Ghost Festival, is a spiritual celebration observed on the 15th day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar. It holds profound significance related to filial piety toward ancestors and compassion for suffering beings. This tradition originates from the story of Mulian, who saved his mother from the realm of the Pretas, as described in the Ullambana Sutra of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Consequently, Chinese culture attaches meanings of filial devotion, compassion, and respect for ancestors to this ceremonial ritual.(Jabbar, 2025).

The Chinese cultural context of the Ullambana practice is not merely a customary ritual but is also imbued with religious values that have been integrated with Buddhist teachings. Ullambana serves as a medium for expressing virtues and social solidarity within the community. Previous studies have shown that the observance of Ullambana has become a long-standing tradition among Chinese communities and contributes to the formation of religious values within their social life.(Sonika, 2024).

The teaching of *dāna*, or generosity, in Buddhism is one of the fundamental principles taught by Gautama Buddha, particularly as one of the *pāramitās* (perfections) that cultivate compassion and benevolence in the religious practice of Buddhist adherents. It also serves as a moral foundation supporting the practice of generosity both internally, at the level of personal virtue, and externally, in social engagement.(Alberd Alberto Ardiansyah & Surya, 2023).

In contemporary studies on the practice of *dāna* in Buddhism, *dāna* is understood as the practice of giving that encompasses various forms, not only material but also emotional support and Dharma teachings, which contribute to inner happiness and the spiritual development of Buddhist practitioners. Research indicates that the practice of *dāna* in Theravāda Buddhism is viewed as a practical means of realizing spiritual ideals through the ethics of generosity, where mental intention (*cetanā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) are essential components of giving, contributing to tangible well-being in contemporary society.(Thukhavati, 2023).

Several contemporary academic studies indicate that the practice of the Ullambana tradition is not merely a cultural ritual but also reflects the internalization of Buddhist teachings, including the practice of *dāna* in the form of merit transfer (*pattidāna*) to ancestors and suffering beings who are the focus of the activities. A study by Sonika (2024) on the implementation of Buddhist values

in the Ullambana ceremony within Buddhist communities emphasizes that this tradition not only involves symbolic offerings but also strengthens cross-sect cooperation and social solidarity as a tangible expression of generosity taught in dāna, while simultaneously contributing to the moral development and well-being of the community. (Sonika, 2024).

Scholarly studies on the Ullambana Festival demonstrate a strong correlation between cultural rituals and Buddhist teachings that are social and ethical in nature. Research by Zhao (2022) It emphasizes that Ullambana is a tradition that has undergone a process of Sinicization since the introduction of Buddhism to China, in which local cultural and moral elements of Chinese society, including ancestor veneration, have assimilated with Buddhist practices focusing on social welfare and merit transfer. Although this study places greater emphasis on cultural elements, Zhao notes that Ullambana as a festival represents a combination of Buddhist religious rituals with cultural morals concerning generosity and care for the deceased, thereby illustrating how cultural rituals can convey religious moral values that closely align with the concept of dāna in Buddhist practice.

There are differences in interpretation between cultural traditions and religious doctrine; however, the practice of Ullambana still reflects the universal value of generosity. This is manifested in various forms of giving directed toward ancestors, beings in states of suffering, and the broader community, both in material and non-material forms, which conceptually align with the understanding of dāna in Buddhist teachings. (U.P. Magga Panno Jhony, BBA., 2025).

Thus, this study comprehensively examines the correlation between the Ullambana tradition in Chinese culture and the understanding of dāna (generosity) as a form of integration between tradition and spirituality. It aims to provide both theoretical and empirical contributions to cross-cultural and religious studies, as well as to broaden the understanding of how cultural traditions can serve as a medium for practicing contemporary Buddhist values.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interpretative paradigm as its epistemological foundation. The interpretative paradigm emphasizes understanding social reality as a construction of meaning shaped by experience, cultural context, and processes of social interaction between actors and the phenomena under study. This approach is chosen because the aim of the research is to interpret the

meaning of the Ulambana ritual and the value of generosity (dāna) as integral parts of the cultural and spiritual life of society, rather than merely explaining phenomena in quantitative or causal terms.

According to Pervin & Mokhtar, (2022) the interpretative paradigm is a philosophical approach that emphasizes the understanding of subjectivity, context, and social meaning in relation to the phenomena being studied, making it highly relevant for complex social and cultural research.

The interpretative paradigm is rooted in hermeneutic and social thought traditions that reject positivistic views which seek objectivity and the generation of universal scientific laws. Within this paradigm, the researcher is viewed as an active “reader of meaning” who interprets social phenomena based on evidence and context. This makes the interpretative paradigm particularly suitable for research that explores the relationship between cultural values and religious teachings through textual data, historical sources, and symbolic meanings. A similar perspective is presented in an article on the Interpretative Paradigm and Qualitative Approaches, which emphasizes the understanding of social constructions and subjective meanings as the core of qualitative research. (Fisika, 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results:

1. The Reality of Ulambana Tradition Practices in Chinese Buddhist Communities

The results of this study indicate that the Ulambana Ceremony remains an important tradition that is preserved within Chinese Buddhist communities in Indonesia and across Asia. Ulambana is commemorated annually on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month as an expression of filial piety toward ancestors and as an act of merit transfer (pattidāna) for beings suffering in the realm of hunger. In local communities, the Ulambana tradition commonly includes food offerings, collective prayers, and the distribution of social assistance to those in need. This practice is consistent with portrayals of the Ulambana Festival as reflecting universal practices of giving and respect for ancestors as well as compassion toward suffering beings. Sonika, (2024) based on field research findings, notes that the practice of merit transfer (pattidāna) during Ulambana rituals is consistently observed across various Buddhist traditions. Furthermore, cultural values such as obedience, respect, and benevolence are also internalized

through the performance of this ritual.

2. The Concept of Dāna in Buddhist Teachings

In Buddhist tradition, dāna (generosity) is regarded as one of the most essential ethical practices for attaining puñña (spiritual merit or blessings) and constitutes a fundamental part of the pāramitā (spiritual perfections). Dāna is described as the practice of giving with sincere intention, counteracting the three roots of unwholesome actions greed, hatred, and ignorance and serving as an initial path toward the eradication of self-attachment. The article “The Practical Way of Generosity (Dana) to Achieve Real Happiness in Theravada Buddhism” explains that dāna has been practiced since the time of the Buddha through teachings in the Pāli Canon, emphasizing material giving and spiritual support for the well-being of all beings. (Thukhavati, 2023).

Discussion:

The Correlation Between Ulambana Values and the Teachings of Dāna: The findings reveal a strong correlation between the ritual practices of Ulambana and the understanding of dāna teachings. The Ulambana ritual involves acts of giving offerings to ancestors, hungry ghosts, and the broader community as expressions of filial piety, empathy, and generosity. This closely aligns with the core principle of dāna, which emphasizes selfless giving for the benefit of other beings, whether in material or immaterial forms. In Ulambana, offerings are commonly directed toward: 1) deceased ancestors; 2) beings in suffering (pretas or hungry ghosts); and 3) communities or individuals in need of assistance.

These actions represent more than mere cultural rituals; they reflect moral contributions that correspond with the essence of dāna, which prioritizes spiritual intention and compassionate motivation in accordance with Buddhist teachings.

Philosophical and Ethical Implications: Textual analysis of the concept of dāna in Buddhist literature demonstrates that generosity is not limited to material giving, but also involves the intention to alleviate inner suffering and reduce personal attachment. In many classical Buddhist texts, dāna is described as the initial step on the spiritual path leading toward liberation from ego attachment and greed, commonly referred to as akusala-mūla (unwholesome roots).

This concept parallels the meaning of the Ulambana ritual, which emphasizes pure intention, compassion, and the application of loving-kindness (karuṇā) toward all beings.

Consequently, Ulambana functions not only as a cultural ritual but also as a moral practice that reflects and reinforces the teachings of dāna within Buddhism.

Socio-Cultural Dimensions: Although the Ulambana tradition is deeply rooted in Mahāyāna sūtra narratives such as the story of Maudgalyāyana's effort to save his mother it has evolved into a ritual with broad social dimensions. The tradition encourages collective acts of giving, strengthens community cohesion, and facilitates the internalization of moral values inherent in dāna. Ulambana also serves as a moment of reflection on intergenerational relationships and social solidarity within Chinese Buddhist communities.

Main Findings: 1 **Integration of Ritual and Moral Values:** The practice of Ulambana demonstrates a clear integration between cultural ritual and Buddhist ethical values, particularly in the context of generosity (dāna); 2) **Values of Empathy and Generosity:** The act of offering and providing social assistance during Ulambana reflects values of empathy and generosity aligned with dāna as a form of spiritual practice that generates merit and inner peace; and 3) **Spiritual and Social Perceptions:** Buddhist communities perceive Ulambana not merely as a tradition, but as a medium for moral learning and the cultivation of social solidarity.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings and analysis, it can be concluded that there is a positive correlation between the Ulambana tradition within Chinese culture and the understanding of dāna teachings in Buddhism. Ulambana is not merely a cultural practice, but also serves as a moral medium through which the values of generosity, empathy, and selfless giving are actively practiced.

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