



Deathpower: Buddhism's Ritual Imagination in Cambodia

Erik W. Davis

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Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Cambodia, Erik W. Davis radically recasts attitudes toward the nature of Southeast Asian Buddhism's interactions with local religious practice and, by extension, reorients our understanding of Buddhism itself. Through a vivid study of contemporary Cambodian Buddhist funeral rites, he reveals the powerfully integrative role monks play as they care for the dead and negotiate the interplay of non-Buddhist spirits and formal Buddhist customs. Buddhist monks perform funeral rituals rooted in the embodied practices of Khmer rice farmers and the social hierarchies of Khmer culture. The monks' realization of death underwrites key components of the Cambodian social imagination: the distinction between wild death and celibate life, the forest and the field, and moral and immoral forms of power. By connecting the performative aspects of Buddhist death rituals to Cambodian history and everyday life, Davis undermines the theory that elite Buddhist monks universally oppose rural belief systems. Instead, he shows Cambodian Buddhism to be a robust tradition with ethical and popular components extending throughout Khmer society.

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