

Chapter 4. A journey to the netherworld

Reconstructing features of Indo-European mythology of death and funeral rituals from Baltic, Slavic, and Buddhist parallels

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Abstract. This paper reconstructs some aspects of the Indo-European mythology related to death, the journey to the netherworld, and the process of dying and returning from the world of the dead. Particularly, we compare and contrast a series of Old Indian (Vedic), Indo-Iranian, Old Slavic, and Baltic myths and burial rituals. We isolate the mythological motif of a path to the netherworld (the world of the dead or ancestors), *e.g.* crossing the waters, going over fire, ascending a tree, descending into a well, etc. The motif of a path is compared and contrasted with the motif of a mythological character that undertakes a journey to the netherworld, completes it, and returns back to the world of the living.

In Indo-Iranian and Old Slavic traditions, there is a number of myths and folktales that have a character whose name usually means ‘the Third’ (for example, Slavic Tret’yak) who goes to or finds himself in the netherworld (the third kingdom), overcomes a variety of obstacles (sometimes escaping three inevitable deaths), miraculously returns to the living, reestablishes the connection between the three worlds (netherworld, heaven, and earth), and thus recreates the tripartite Universe.

The aforementioned Indo-European motifs find their continuation in Buddhist soteriological myths. The latter are structured as a sequence of motifs: to exist in the world of the living – to die having reached the limit of life in due course – to be reborn by overcoming obstacles.

We also draw upon Old Slavic mythological motifs of ‘right’ (literally, ‘someone’s own, not forced upon the one who is dying’) and ‘wrong’ (literally, ‘someone else’s, not belonging to the one who is dying’) deaths. Colloquially, the ‘right’ death (‘someone’s own’) means a death of natural causes, but in myth it acquires an additional ethical facet of fulfilling someone’s role in this world (*e.g.* a heroic death, however violent or ‘unnatural’, is not ‘wrong’). The ‘right’ death is (or should be) followed by the right funeral ritual in which the motif of journey to the netherworld along a path with obstacles plays an important role. The ‘wrong’ death can in certain cases be overcome by a right ritual helping the dead receive their share (Russian *dolya*, Sanskrit *bhaga*, etc.), prevail over obstacles during the journey, and become proper ancestors, not the living undead. The Slavic motifs of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ deaths are compared with their counterparts in Indian, Iranian, and Baltic traditions, and the comparison is used to reconstruct major features of the Indo-European mythology of death.

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1. Slavic and Baltic parallels

1.1. Crossing the threshold

The sequence *life-death-afterlife*, or new life, is clearly present on the Indo-European level (and is perhaps universal). Baltic and Slavic evidence of funereal rituals affords us new insight into the sequence's conceptual background and sources.

An old Prussian funereal ritual reported by travelers around 870-890 includes the following events:

1. before either cremation or burial, the dead person is left at home as long as the ritual continues (note that the richer the dead is, the longer the ritual takes);
2. a ritual feast is held by the living, which is functionally tantamount to destruction of edible and drinkable matter; and
3. an equestrian contest that results in sharing the dead person's possessions by the participants according to their success in the contest takes place.

Toporov (2005) draws the following parallels from mythological and ritual evidence of the liminal state of the dead between life and death. According to Toporov, how a dead person is ritually 'helped' by the living to cross the threshold of death is similar to how the Universe is ritually 'helped' to resume its seasonal cycle in the ritual on the threshold of winter on the eve of New Year, which bears obvious macrocosmic connotations: cyclical destruction of the universe is to stimulate creative forces of the Cosmos, and so are the ritual contest and chariot races described in the *R̥gveda* (*cf.* the potlatch paradigm suggested by F.B.J. Kuiper). The equestrian contest can be viewed as an established social practice that embodies the primordial contest between the cosmic powers of the netherworld and of the upper world that in Vedic India corresponds to the macrocosmic fight of the god Indra with his adversary (known as *Vṛtra*, *Vala*, etc.) whom he defeats and thus restores the cosmos anew (Toporov 2005: 539-548). Toporov states that when a ritual is performed adequately and properly reproduces the primordial proto-ritual it guarantees its inclusion into the general cosmological pattern, thus achieving the goals of the ritual (Toporov 1987:14).

Both components of the Baltic funereal ritual - the feast and the contest - support Indo-European evidence: they are necessary to ensure that the sequence life-death-afterlife is cyclical, and that the whole cycle, when repeated, assures immortality.

1.2. State of mind at the moment of death

That the idea of immortality seems to belong inherently to the core of the funereal practices is shown by mythological data associated with death. Take, for example,

Indian religious beliefs regarding the state of mind at the moment of death: the future fate of a dying person is believed to be determined by it (see Edgerton 1927). According to those beliefs, there is continuity between this life and the life after death, and the soul's state at the time of death or near death determines the dying person's future life.

The earliest Vedic texts do not contain any traces of the belief that the dying person concentrates his thoughts on the next world, but the Middle Vedic (*Brāhmaṇa*) texts do, e.g. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 10.6.3.1 speculates about a 'frame of mind' (*kratu*) at the moment of death: 'Just as far as his *kratu* extends as he passes away from this world, with precisely such a *kratu* he enters upon the other world after death' (Edgerton 1927:223). An underlying idea of many Indian tales summarized by Edgerton is that a dying person builds his own future in accordance with his last wish at the moment of death. In other words he gains a desired identity as it is imagined by his mind. If a suicide is committed, whoever/whatever a dying person imagines himself to be just before taking his own life, he will eventually become that.

A couple of telling examples from Buddhist and Jain sources are worth mentioning at this point. In *Divyāvadāna*, ch. XXXIV, p. 478 sqq., the youth Brahmaprabha commits a suicide by cutting his throat in order to feed a starving tigress, but before doing so he announces that he is free from any worldly desire, his only purpose is to become a Buddha. He then indeed becomes a Buddha, although after many existences.

In Jain sources, there are tales of the *nidāna*, a wish for some worldly benefit in a future life, that has to be confessed as sinful in order to prevent it from coming into effect. For example, the dying ascetic Sambhuya is visited by a king and his harem; one of the ladies bows down to honor the dying saint, and a strand of her hair touches his feet; his desires are aroused, and he makes a *nidāna* that he may become emperor of the universe and enjoy a large harem; his desire is fulfilled, but the kingship leads him to sinful acts; as a result, he is reborn in hell. Had the ascetic confessed his sinful desire before dying, that would have implied repentance and reformation, and the *nidāna* would have had no effect³

The aforementioned continuity manifests itself in various effects that the final moments before death have upon the fate of a dying person. A new identity (fate) acquired by a dead person is determined by either the nature of his accumulated deeds (merits) or by a sinful or meritorious wish thought of just before death or at the very moment of death and independent of any past acts and their relative merits. A main point here is that something that has been accumulated during life (acts, wishes, etc.) produces a conspicuous effect. In Chinese Buddhist sources, there is a 'principle of birth and death' according to which a man's soul escapes from his body through an upper or lower body part at death. A bystander can tell whether the dead man will go to a good or bad rebirth by noticing which part of the corpse retains its warmth longest (Edgerton 1927: 234-235).

³ See also Buddhist Parallels 1 below.

1.3. Distribution of the dead's possessions

To uncover a common conceptual pattern, the following significant features can be emphasized in both Buddhist beliefs and the Old Prussian ritual.

In the Old Prussian ritual, a time passes before cremation (*i.e.* before the body is disposed of): the dead lies at home as long as an equestrian contest is taking place (from two months to half a year). The better among the participants (those whose horses are faster) get the better and the bigger parts of the dead person's possessions. The less or worse parts are placed at shorter distances from the dead person's house, and they are given to those whose horses are slower. Thus, both time and space determine the way the possessions accumulated by the dead person before death are distributed among the living.

Another significant feature is that accumulating deeds (good or bad), wishes, and merits is clearly equivalent in value and significance to the wealth and possessions accumulated by a dying or dead person. Suffice it to mention here that Buddhist monastic codes (*vinaya*) imply a set of mutual obligations between the dead and the living, *e.g.*

‘to perform the funeral and to transfer to the deceased the reward or ‘merit’, that results from the ritualized recitation of the Dharma; the deceased, in exchange, is to allow the distribution of his estate [...]’ (Schopen 2004: 96).⁴

1.4. Depossession and repossession

Mutual obligations of the dead and the living belong to Indo-European antiquity. The importance of a proper funeral (such as destruction by fire) to all Indo-European peoples has been observed by Afanassiev (2008: 1239), *i.e.* all ancient Indo-European peoples known to him at the time believed that unless the deceased person's body was dealt with properly, the deceased person's soul (his immaterial component) would not find peace: it would roam the world, languish and suffer, take vengeance on relatives of the deceased and fellow country-men by sending them bad harvest, famine and diseases.⁵

Old Prussian customs also reveal a common feature that can be explained as originated from the common Indo-European background. As Toporov observed, all the possessions of the deceased are ‘spent’ in three ways: one part, his personal belongings (weapons, clothes, *i.e.* his personal attributes), are burnt at the same time as his body; another part is ‘spent’ gradually as food and drinks during a ritual feast held by the living and as expenses covering preparations for the funereal ritual and its execution; the third part is ‘spent’ in the course of equestrian competitions. The common feature of these three ways is that wasting or exhaustion of dead man's riches is disguised as distribution (Toporov 2005: 547). The spending or wasting of the riches is, as Toporov points out, a paradoxical variant of their distribution during the funeral.

⁴ See also Buddhist Parallels 2 below.

⁵ See also Buddhist Parallels 3 below.

Parts are divided according to a degree of success in competition. All that is meant to benefit the living as well as the deceased in his afterlife in the other world: the dead will be compensated in the next world for his property lost in this world.⁶

A more general point regarding a deceased person's property that is to be shared is worth emphasizing here. Slavic traditional lore amply uses the concept of *dolja* (Russian *dolja* 1. share, part, portion; 2. fate, lot; see Sedakova 1987). This concept is central to the funereal ritual and relevant from a comparative perspective. A share (*dolja*) that is allotted to anyone who is dying may be 'one's own' or, on the contrary, 'not-one's own': thus there is a distinction between 'one's own death' and 'not-one's own death' (*svoja smert' vs. nesvoja smert'*). 'One's own death' is a well-studied Indo-European phraseologic formulaic expression that is reflected in Old Persian, Lithuanian, Russian and Latin (comparable thematic parallels are also found in Hittite texts: Puhvel 1969, 169-75). Death is viewed as an allotted fate: several Slavic languages possess words that have a rather transparent morphological structure - a dead person is descriptively denoted as one with 'no (good) share': Ukrainian *nebogo*, Bielorrussian *neboshik*, Czech *neboztik*, Serbo-Croatian *uboze* (cf. Russian *ubogij* that combines semantic features of 'beggar; destitute' and 'deceased'). Correspondingly, the Slavic funereal ritual sometimes features the figure of a beggar that symbolically represents the deceased man and gets the deceased man's share of the property. The theme of dispossession and poverty of the deceased man is connected with the motif of Death (and the deceased man himself) being tormented by hunger and can be compared with the rite of 'feeding the grave' at funereal feast (Sedakova 1987: 57, 62, fn. 11). The above is strongly reminiscent of passages from Buddhist texts where living monks are expected to get their share of the deceased man's property as long as the funereal ritual is adequately performed. Please note that our purpose is to present Buddhist parallels as additional evidence of a substantial body of inherited features that go back to Indo-European antiquity.

Besides Baltic and Slavic evidence, Vedic and Greek antecedents of funeral rituals have been analyzed by Toporov (2005: 548-566). In Toporov's view, the time allotted by the living to the dead body in Old Prussian sources is a transitory period between death and cremation during which his friends and relatives have to behave 'correctly', 'adequately', *i.e.* they have to perform rituals of 'expenditure' or 'spending'. The purpose of the ritual feast is to 'spend' food and drinks. Equestrian competitions imply distribution of the dead person's possessions. The cremation of the body is to be accompanied by burning of the deceased person's clothes and weapons. All that is to ensure an adequate passage of the deceased from this world into the afterlife.

In Buddhist monastic practices, the adequacy of the ritual is controlled by a special figure of the belligerent ghost (the dead himself) who appears wielding a club to threaten the monks, if they have not fulfilled all requirements before distributing the 'robe and bowl'.⁷

⁶ See also Buddhist Parallels 4 below.

⁷ See also Buddhist Parallels 5 below.

1.5. Keeping dead bodies

Other features of Baltic, Slavic and Indian folk beliefs support our hypothesis of a common Indo-European background of the rituals described above.

A peculiar Baltic practice to leave a dead body for a long time before a suitable disposal is analogous to Slavic (Russian) custom reported by the English trader F. Morrison in 1593 (reproduced in Toporov 2005: 567, fn.7):

‘...the Moscovites in Russia bring the dead bodies in winter thus frozen over, and so lay them on heapes in the Belfries of the Churches, where they lie without rotting, or ill smell, till about our Lady day in Lent the snow begins to thaw, and the earth to be fit for digging (for till that time the earth is covered with deepe and hard snow, and if it were not so covered, yet is so hard by continuall frost, as it cannot be digged. And at that time each family takes the bodies of their dead, and takes care to burie them’ (*Itinerary*, IV:4).

The quotation corroborates descriptions of funereal customs of the Old Prussians who were supposed to master a freezing technique of conserving the dead bodies.

Moreover, Russian folklore sources that report how the dead are transferred to the burial abundantly inform us that the body was carried either on sledges or on horses (Sobolev 2000: 115 sqq.).

1.6. The Third and the ship

Among significant characters of Slavic mythology and folklore connected with death and funerary rituals, there is a character called *the Third* (in Russian folktales - Ivan Tretej, Tretjak, the third/youngest son, etc.). He reaches the subterranean kingdom (death's realm), but is able to overcome death and come back to life, thus ensuring that the link between the Subterranean, Heaven and Earth is not broken. Tretjak and similar characters have important parallels in the Old Iranian and Vedic mythology - they correspond to Vedic Trita and Old Iranian Θrita, both the youngest (the third in line) among three brothers (for a thorough investigation of these characters and comparative evidence supporting their connection to the realm of death and cycle life-death-afterlife see Toporov 2006; see also Oguibénine, in press and Yanchevskaya, in press). The significance of the number three can also be seen in a Galician custom where the third husband is forbidden to enter the house through a door after the wedding, but has to use a window (thus he is identified with the dead and the wedding ceremony with a funeral). Another Slavic funereal custom is of relevance here: dragging a dead body through an opening in the house not normally used by the living to enter or exit, *i.e.* not through an entrance door. In other words, the ways the dead are dealt with are inversed with regard to the ways of the living. Moreover, it is believed that if a dead person is carried away through a door used by the living, he might come back and threaten them. The custom is reflected in a Russian folktale in which a girl is maltreated by Satan, doomed to death and carried from her house through a hole made under the threshold, not through a door (Anuchin 1890: 11-12, fn. 25). The girl is probably a folktale counterpart of the mythological Third, because after the girl is bur-

ied, a flower grows on her tomb and it turns into the very same girl who thus comes back to life. Like the Third, the girl overcomes her own death and actualizes the link between the realms.

The special connection of the youngest (or the third) son with death, as well as his place between the realms of life and death also have supporting evidence in Baltic data. Baltic folklore describes a custom when the youngest son of an ill father is named heir whenever the father's recovery from a mortal illness is impossible (Caland 1914: 511-512). That should be interpreted as another distant and yet related feature common to Baltic and Slavic folklore: the dying 'survives' through property that is transferred to the youngest son acting as a mediator between the living and the dying. Caland also reports a Lettish custom of placing children on the coffin carried to the burial place. A witness explains that it is done to ensure that the children remember the spot of the burial. However, according to Caland, another explanation is possible. He suggests that the continual references to the youngest fits into the framework of the age pyramid where the position and role of the youngest is pre-determined (Caland 1914: 484; 507-509).

Some Slavic artifacts used in funereal rites are particularly interesting from a comparative perspective and prove to be extremely ancient. For example, a ship is known to be used for burial in Russia since about the twenties of the 10th century as reported by Ibn-Faḍlān, an Arabic Muslim writer and traveler, who wrote an account of his travels as a member of an embassy of the Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad (Anuchin 1890: 72 sqq.;⁸ Montgomery 2000). Ibn-Faḍlān gives a detailed description of a funeral by cremation of a rich and important man. This is a ship burial (or boat grave) in which a ship or boat is used as a vessel for both the dead and the goods intended for the grave.⁹ Among the goods are: clothes and a sable placed on the dead person's head; quilt and cushions; alcohol, fruits, bread, and meat; moreover, a dog cut in two; all of the dead person's weaponry; two mounts and two cows cut into pieces whose flesh is thrown into the ship; a rooster and a hen; and the dead person's slave-girl who wishes to die with her master and who is to be burnt along with the master and his ship. Although many features of Ibn-Faḍlān's description are not, as Montgomery argues, originally Russian, it is clear that the dead are provided for a long trip to the Otherworld.

It is evident that the Russian ceremony belongs to a hoary antiquity and inherits Indo-European features that have been shown to be prominent in Vedic and Buddhist soteriological views (Oguibenine, in press). The views are thematically linked with the ideas of overcoming obstacles to reach a long unencumbered existence, whereas the journey to overcome these obstacles is metaphorically conceptualized as

⁸ Anuchin's account, one of the first on Ibn-Faḍlān's report, is obsolete on several points. Montgomery's translation is more accurate and is accompanied by thorough comments without avoiding some controversial issues.

⁹ No less significant is the fact that the Indo-European words for 'ship' and 'death' are almost identical: cf. Lettish *nave*, Lithuanian *nove*, Old Russian *nav*, Gothic *naus*, Old Icelandic *ndr* 'dead body', and the common Indo-European **nau* 'ship' (Ivanov 1987: 9).

a trip over dangerous waters, thus implying a figurative representation of a ship or boat as a vehicle for salvation.

1.7. Overcoming death

Several other features of the ‘anthropology of death’ are presumably of Indo-European origin. Ivanov (1990: 5-6; *cf.* also Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 1985) finds the following main stages in the Indo-European funereal ritual:

- preparing the dead body for the burial, starting with lamentation and mourning;
- carrying the dead body to the place of a burial;
- putting the dead body (in some variants jointly with sacrificial animals and other people) on a pyre (basic variant) or into water or earth; wine is poured into the fire;
- making a ritual effigy (a double) of the dead person out of bones;
- creating a temporary dwelling place for the effigy;
- burying the urn filled with bones.

The idea of overcoming death in order to attain afterlife following one’s death plays an essential role in the Indo-European conception of death. This conception is basically founded on the idea that death culminates life and is followed by afterlife (= new life). Vedic and Buddhist mythologies elaborate soteriological doctrines of *āyus* (allotted lifespan) that is not supposed to be interrupted unless a violent death occurs. A natural death ends one’s lifespan, but one’s lifespan can and has to be extended by overcoming death, *i.e.* death is an obstacle among others to be overcome, ‘crossed’ (Oguibénine, in press). Funereal rituals reenact scenarios of overcoming death, hence their successive stages are not only part of the ritual, but also are meant to enhance the ritual and to ensure that death is overcome.

Indo-European terminology that reflects the endeavor of overcoming includes the verb **terh₂-* ‘to cross over, pass through, overcome, vanquish’. As Watkins (1995: 355) suggests, a prominent semantic feature of this verb is ‘temporariness, transitoriness, non-permanence, which made it pathetically apt in the context of the object DEATH’. Vedic and Buddhist motifs of overcoming death, often expressed in words related to the Indo-European verb **terh₂-* and its derivatives, are central in narratives that present life and death as events cyclically following each other in a context of continuous struggle against various obstacles (Oguibenine, in press). It is important that this motif appears in fragments that describe funereal and similar rituals when a dead person is praised because of his exceptional characteristics. The motif can be seen when we compare, as proposed by Ivanov (1990: 6-7), Hittite funereal rituals with Greek praises of a dead hero: the lamented dead king is said to become a god [*šuniš* (= *DINGIR^{LIM}-iš*) *kišari*] according to the text KUB XXX.16 + XXIX I Vs, I 1-17, where the Greek verb *ταρχύω* ‘to pay one’s last respects to’ is used (*Iliad*

16.456-457, 674-675). It can be surmised that the dead hero is identified with the king or a god when last respects are paid to him by erecting a tomb or a commemorative stela. The Greek verb is etymologically related to (if not borrowed from) Anatolian words: Hittite *tarḫ-u-* ‘to overcome, vanquish’ (< IE. **terh₂-*), Lycian *trq(q)as-*, *trqqñt-* ‘god’, *trqqñtasi* (Aikhenvald, Bajun, Ivanov 1987: 155-160).

The Indo-European verb **mer-* is known to mean ‘to die’ in numerous Indo-European languages. However, recent comparative evidence shows that the original meaning of the verb was ‘to disappear’ (semantic development from ‘to disappear’ to ‘to die’ must have been due to tabooing: Ivanov 1990a: 5 sqq. adducing Hittite data). This correlates with the aforementioned ideas about the king becoming a god at his death: not only does the attitude towards death include praising the dead person becoming a divine and powerful being, but also it includes the euphemistic use of a verb that means ‘to die’. Hittite euphemistic use of the expression ‘to become god’ in the context of death is also reflected in the custom of religious worship of an effigy of the king after his death.

Worshipping relics of the dead or constructing a funereal monument are features of funerals attested among Indo-European peoples. In spite of their universality, it should be made clear that relics are, as the Buddhist inscription of Senavarma, King of Oḍi (early first century CE), says,

‘saturated / invigorated / enlivened by morality, saturated / invigorated / enlivened by concentration, wisdom, emancipation, knowledge, and vision’,

in other words, as suggested again by Schopen,

‘what is invigorated with morality and wisdom is what continues to live after the breakdown of the body’ (Schopen 1997: 154).

It is striking that the Indo-European funereal ritual includes a step described above as ‘making a ritual effigy (a double) of the dead person out of bones’. Both Buddhist practice and Hittite ritual include worship of an image of the deceased king: bringing water, oil, bread, and cattle to feed the deceased person’s ‘sitting effigy’ as the Hittite expression *ALAM aššan* is tentatively translated by Otten (1958: 24-25). Otten’s summary (Otten 1958: 13) also suggests that the Hittite ritual feast included an offering of a meal to the bones of the cremated deceased person, and the offering was shared by all who had come to collect the bones. Moreover, the dead person’s *soul* was given drinks *three* times. That is a remarkable echo of the Slavic name **trizna* ‘funereal feast’ in which Toporov uncovers an underlying hint of the number ‘three’ (Toporov 2005).

1.8. The Old Woman

Slavic folklore has another prominent character, the Old Woman (*Baba Yaga*) who represents death and can cause it. A similar character is found in Baltic and Hittite traditional death lore: Lettish *Velu Mate* ‘Mother of Spirits / of the Dead’ and Hittite ^{SAL} ŠU.GI ‘Wise Woman’ respectively (Toporov 1985: 540 and Toporov 1987: 20

sqq.; Otten 1958, passim). The Old Woman of Slavic folktales invites a hero doomed to death who then overcomes it through his victory over the Old Woman. Accordingly, the hero's initiation appears to be a link in a chain of ritualized events reported in tales that reflect the funereal ritual, while the ritual itself is meant to counterbalance and overcome the horror of death by promoting the idea of a new life (the afterlife).

2. Buddhist parallels

2.0. Indo-European background

So far we have mostly compared Slavic and Baltic evidence with Old Indo-European data, but it also has analogies in Buddhist data, thus confirming an inherently traditional character of Baltic and Slavic realms as most ancient heirs to the Indo-European religion, and, if not unexpectedly, the genuine position of Buddhism within the Indo-European.

Indo-European background, if not origin, can be identified in the Buddhist funeral, because death is interpreted as disappearance and compensated by collecting belongings of the deceased, separating them from the dead body, and finally by distributing them among the living. Buddhist legal texts (*vinaya*) explicitly specify a set of mutual obligations between the dead and the living as a specific instance of an established Indian norm (Schopen 2004:96).

2.1. Future fate

Buddhists, particularly later Southern Buddhists, differ from the Jains in that they do not believe that the effectiveness of a wish expressed on the death-bed depends on how much merit has been accumulated by the dying person. Some time may elapse between the making of a wish and the moment of death, but it is essential that the same frame of mind continues up to the very moment of death. That the fulfillment of a wish is immediate and sufficiently independent of any previously accumulated merit is cogently illustrated by a Buddhist tale highlighting a courtesan murdered by four youths: she wishes to be reborn as an ogress and kill her murderers; her wish is fulfilled, but it cannot be said that she has accumulated any merit that can expedite the fulfillment of her wish (HOS 29.129).

However, as Edgerton convincingly shows, the later Southern Buddhists also held other and fairly different views on what determines the future fate. Their views were somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, a quite popular belief held that the totality of a dying person's past acts influenced his consciousness. On the other hand, they believed that only the state of mind just before death was crucial. An interesting conclusion was that if one could forget his sins completely at the moment of death, he would be saved (Edgerton 1927: 234).

2.2. Monk's possessions

To begin with, the Buddhist monastic code (reflecting Buddhist beliefs and prescribing ritual practices) is explicit in suggesting that a monk's monastic status or reputation, *i.e.* a monk's identity, strongly depends on his material possessions. An example is found in *Cīravastu* 124.11-125.9 where a 'little known' monk is the one who had no medicine, while the *Avadānaśataka* 1.271-273 mentions the Buddha himself and a selfish monk as 'widely known' and as being recipients of robes, bowls, medicine, and so on (Schopen 2004:114-115 and 2004:102: 'Who you were was determined by what you received and had').

Special attention should be paid to the following features of Buddhist funerary practices that can be fruitfully compared to Old Prussian evidence.

At death, a monk's property had to be divided and distributed. This occurrence is vividly depicted in several accounts of the *Mūlasarvāstivādin* monastic funeral from the *Cīvaravastu* (Schopen 2004: 106-121).

There we find an account of the distribution of a deceased monk's belongings (his bowl and robes) that had to be done by a distributor-of-robes only after several preliminary steps: removing monk's body, honoring the body, cremating the body and reciting the Dharma for the monk's sake (Schopen 2004: 106-107).

Obviously, the recitation of the Dharma is an inherently Buddhist practice. It might seem that no comparative issue can be discovered here: the recitation by itself is something beyond the materiality of the dead body; with recitation, a new aspect is revealed by the ceremony - that of the immaterial, non-corporeal substance of the deceased. Moreover, the Dharma, *i.e.* the recited Vinaya rules, belong to the core of the Buddhist doctrine and practice. And yet, the comparison is convincing because the same fundamental features appear in Buddhist practices as well as in the evidence being compared.

2.3. Competition

For example, there is an account of the death and funeral of the murdered monk Udāyin whose body lies hidden in a heap of trash. Several categories of individuals, in accordance with the Old Prussian evidence, compete for the privilege to honor his body (fellow monks, the king and a lay-sister, the Queen Mālikā who finally wins on her claim to have been a disciple of Udāyin). Not surprisingly, the account mentions that Udāyin's robes have to be brought back before performing the honors (Schopen 2004: 97, 108-110).

A highly instructive issue is that competition sometimes turns into an exchange of claims and counterclaims regarding a dead monk's property. More precisely, an account in the *Kṣudrakavastu* (preserved in Tibetan, commented and translated by Schopen 2004: 98-100 and 110-113) that describes origins of the 'relic cult' says that after the death of the monk Śāriputra his remains, his bowl and his monastic robes (*i.e. all his possessions*) were taken by the novice Cunda and handed to a

monk named Ānanda. But then a controversy emerges regarding Śāriputra's possessions that are to become his relics: another patron of Śāriputra, the householder Anāthapiṇḍada, who is a lay follower of the Buddhist faith, also claims the relics. Consequently, a deadlock develops that Schopen rightly describes as an indication of friction between the lay and monastic communities. It is resolved by the Buddha summoning Ānanda and asking to turn the relics over to Anāthapiṇḍada. The whole story is actually not only about access to and control of relics, two highly sought-after privileges, but, more importantly, about the festival that was to accompany the raising of the *stūpa* that would host Śāriputra's relics. Anāthapiṇḍada takes the relics, but accidentally locks the door when he goes away from home, thus creating an obstacle for the laypersons who cannot pay homage to the relics. The Buddha rules then that laypersons can build *stūpas*, but only within the monastic complex. The outcome of this ruling is, interestingly, the increased amount of wealth received by monasteries, because the *stūpa* festivals give rise to trade, gifts, and donations. Thus, the deceased monk's relics in some sense 'produce' wealth that is divided among the other monks.

Another piece of evidence tells us that the estate of the monk Upananda, a large quantity of gold, had to be distributed among his fellow monks favoring direct participation in the funeral: only those present will receive a share. Additionally, on another occasion, the order of preference is based on competition between the most senior and the most junior monks. That is called the 'first and last' principle (Schopen 2004: 115-116, 102-103).

Thus we see that competitions before the final disposal of the body and distribution of possessions are present both in the Old Prussian funereal games and in the Buddhist accounts (although this combination is unevenly and diversely embedded in latter texts). The deceased person's wealth, whatever its form, is at stake and its distribution is made rather concordantly.

An interesting and telling feature of how a person's identity is determined and shown after death is explicit in those parts of Buddhist monastic codes that rule how survivors should behave if a deceased monk has left debts. It is worth noting here that his debts are to be repaid by his fellow monks: the debts are not only anthropological or religious debts (The anthropological and religious debt is so explained in the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 6.3.10.5 'A Brahmin, at his very birth, is born with a triple debt - of studentship to the seers, of sacrifice to the gods, of offspring to the fathers'). Brahmanical literature and Buddhist Vinaya treatises were equally preoccupied with financial debt, and often both sorts are intertwined (Schopen 2004:122). Because a monk's identity depends on his material possessions, whatever a deceased monk has acquired before his death, for example, by borrowing from householders, is part of his identity and status. It is not surprising to find that borrowed money had to be repaid by the monks of his community after selling the bowl and robes of the deceased. Although this event appears customary and unremarkable, the rites described above show that death is understood as passage through life to afterlife (*cf.* Vedic ideas of obstacles and impediments on one's way to salvation: life itself is seen as an obstacle to salvation - Oguibénine, in press). The persuasion that the personality of a deceased man

crosses the threshold of death is almost palpable in Buddhist texts about monastic order (curiously, in spite of the Buddhist philosophical doctrine of no abiding Self). The act of overcoming is ritually symbolized by the transfer of the property of the deceased monk to his brethren. It is noteworthy that in Brahmanism, whose numerous features were absorbed by Buddhism, the material debt of a departed ascetic or *agnihotrin* is tightly connected to religious merit. As the Brahmanic collection of legal maxims *Nāradaśmṛti* I.7 says,

‘If an ascetic or an agnihotrin dies in debt, all of the merit from his austerities and sacrifices belongs to his creditors’.¹⁰

Furthermore, in the funereal ritual as described in *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* a direct connection is established between the distribution of the deceased monk’s property and particular stages of the ritual: the ritual is segmented into a few series of actions that are linked within a series and imbued with particular significance. The more remote a series is from the moment of death, the less a degree of participation of the monk who performs this part of the ritual. For example, the first series begins when the gong for the dead is being beaten, and the monk who comes in at that moment remains until the end of the ritual; in the next series, when the *caitya* is being performed, another monk comes in and remains for the duration of the ceremony, *i.e.*, he participates only in later parts of the ritual; finally, a monk who comes ‘only when a formal motion is being made’ (*i.e.*, some Vinaya texts are being read) misses most of the ritual except the final part. It is important to note that a degree of participation in the funeral determines who has the right to receive more of the dead monk’s estate, *i.e.*, the monk who comes first gets the most of it (see Schopen 1997: 208-209).

2.4. Rites of separation

In the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* monastic funeral the obligatory actions performed before any distribution of a deceased monk’s property are threefold: ritualized removal of the body, honor of the body including various preparations prior to cremation, and a ritualized recitation of select sacred Dharma texts. Most significantly, as Schopen underlines, an exchange takes place at this moment. The ‘robe and bowl’, an euphemism for all personal property of a monk, is separated from his body and distributed among the living who perform the funeral and thus transfer to the deceased the reward (the ‘merit’) resulted from a ritualized recitation of the Dharma (Schopen 2004:96).

2.5. Final remarks

Whether we consider the rules of the Old Prussian funereal ritual, or the instructions of Buddhist Vinaya prescriptive texts, parallels between the two practices are striking. One set of similar features is particularly worth noticing: the monks participating in the funeral receive the deceased monk’s merit, whereas the ritual they are performing

¹⁰ Schopen 2004: 123; after Lariviere 1989.

generates merit that is transferred to the deceased, thus circulating merit between the dead and the living. Similarly, Wulfstan's account of Old Prussian funeral customs clearly shows that a deceased's person possessions distributed before his cremation are described, on the one hand, as 'possessions', 'personal belongings' (cattle, money, etc.) as *feoh* (cf. Latin *pecus*), and, on the other hand as 'fate, success, achievement' (the latter is analogous to the merit in Buddhism).

That Vedic, Greek (both meticulously studied by Toporov 2004: 553 sqq.), Old Prussian and Buddhist traditions share common features seems indisputable. Explanations based on accidental convergences are less plausible. An alternative explanation based on the assumption that common features are not inherited, but are mere manifestations of the universal, is obviously available always, but is too simplistic.

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