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Title	Buddhism
Authors	Padoan, Tatsuma
Publication date	2015
Original Citation	Padoan, T. (2015) 'Buddhism', in Laycock, J. P. (Ed.) Spirit Possession around the World: Possession, Communion, and Demon Expulsion Across Cultures, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, pp. 54-62. isbn:978-1-61069-589-3
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	https://www.abc-clio.com/ABC-CLIOCorporate/product.aspx?pc=A4264C
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Download date	2026-11-05 21:59:38
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/7614



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[Padoan, T. (2015). "Buddhism", in J. Laycock (ed.), ***Spirit Possession around the World: Possession, Communion, and Demon Expulsion Across Cultures*****. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.]**

Spirit Possession in Buddhism

The complex set of religious traditions collectively known as Buddhism, has been intersected by the phenomenon of spirit possession since its very beginning 2500 years ago. It is difficult to portray a unified picture of spirit possession in the different contexts where the Dharma (the "Law" of the Buddha) spread out. Nonetheless, a few shared philosophical tenets seem to characterise most of the Buddhist approaches to this phenomenon. The denial of an inner self in favour of a doctrine of not-self (Pali *anatta*) – predicated on the recognition of an impermanent (*anicca*) aggregate of five factors of personality (*upādāna-khandha*) – significantly differentiates the way spirit possession has been doctrinally conceived in Buddhist traditions (Smith 2006). Here in fact, possessing forces are not claimed to act on a unified notion of self, but rather on the temporarily constituted aggregates that make up the person (Collins 1982).

Also, Buddhist traditions often incorporated in their cosmologies local gods, spirits and demons, belonging to coexistent, and sometimes competing, systems of belief and practice. This was undertaken through specific acts of ritual and narrative appropriation, by subjugating, taming, or adopting such nonhuman actors, and reframing them either as protectors of the Dharma or as deluded beings in need of salvation (DeCaroli 2004). These last two categories are often contrasted to each other in early Buddhist scriptures, describing e.g. local deities who are allowed to reside in the monasteries, with the task of defending the monks from unwanted spirits (*Petavatthu*, 30). Such unwanted spirits belong to different classes of "nonhumans" (*amānussa*), who may sometimes possess or "grasp" (*graha*) either monks or laypersons.

In the *Sutta Nipāta Commentary*, a "spirit-deity" (Pali *yakkha*, Sanskrit *yakṣa*) is said to possess the minds of those who cannot answer his questions, while another commentary tells the story of a female spirit-deity who possesses a Buddhist novice, causing him much distress (*Dhammapada Commentary*, 3.209).

Ancient monastic regulations allowed monks to interrupt their rain retreat when struck by possession of *piśāca*, monsters who feed themselves with raw flesh, excrements and all sorts of impurities (*Vinaya-piṭaka*, 4.196). They also describe cases of monks acting as exorcists (*bhūtavejjaka*), who unwillingly caused the death of the spirit (1.146) or even of the possessed person himself (1.147).

From these passages, possession emerges as an observable and acknowledged event, and exorcism performed by Buddhist monks is described as an accepted practice. But the rise of Mahāyāna (first century CE) and esoteric Buddhism (sixth-seventh century) saw a systematic assimilation within the Buddhist tradition of divinatory practices of possession associated with gods and demons of the Hindu pantheon.

The Tibetan version of the *Subāhuparipṛcchānāmatantra* (*Questions of Subāhu*), for instance, describes a Tantric ritual in which a *pratisenā*, a minor oracular deity, is invited into the body of a young boy or girl through recitation of secret *mantra*s and the creation of a sacred space. The youth, gazing at a specific shining surface (a mirror, a sword, the moon, the sun, water, a lamp, or others), will be able to see past, present, and future events, looking through the eye of the oracular deity (Orofino 1994).

This kind of ritual, called elsewhere *āveśa* or *svasthāveśa* (lit. "possession of one who is in a good state of health"), involved the use of children as mediums for oracular possession, and became particularly widespread in East Asia. In China the term used was *aweishe*, and the rite was first explained in the *Amoghapāśa sūtra* (*Bukong juansuo tuoluoni zizaiwang zhou jing*, *T*. 1097, translated by Manicintana in 693), where it was described in connection with healing practices. This Buddhist ritual of possession, besides being widely employed, underwent significant transformations in Tang and Song China, through a closer association with practices of visualisation and identification with Tantric deities (Davis 2001).

In the *Instantly Efficacious Āveśa Ritual Explained by Maheśvara* (*Suji liyan Moxishoule tian shuo aweishe fa*, *T*. 1277), a text translated by Amoghavajra (705-774), the ritual procedure is described as involving four or five virgin girls or boys of about seven or eight years of age. The adept ritually transforms himself into the god Maheśvara, and summons spiritual emissaries to enter the body of the children, in order to accomplish all his requests (including healing, increase of benefits, defeat of enemies and friends' reconciliation) (Strickmann 2002). In this text we can find two major features which began to characterise possession rituals in esoteric Buddhism: the fact that they are officiated by a Tantric master who, through the use of *mudrā*s and *mantra*s, identifies himself with Buddhist divinities; and, the inclusion into the Buddhist pantheon of Hindu deities, considered as different expressions of Enlightenment.

Such rituals increasingly encountered the favour of political elites, in the countries where esoteric Buddhism was more influential, thus developing a close connection with central power authorities. Vajrabodhi's (671-741) exorcism for the daughter of the Tang emperor Xuanzong, employing two female child mediums (Davis 2001: 123); the involvement of Nech'ung oracle in Tibetan politics, also consulted by Dalai Lama and

his administration as one of the several institutionalised monastic oracles performed by "oracle-priests" (Tibetan *sungma* or *ch'ökyong*) based in major Buddhist monasteries (Samuel 1993); and, secret possessions by Tantric Gods as part of high-caste Newar Buddhist initiations in Kathmandu Valley (Gellner 1994), are just few examples of how frequently Buddhist discourses employed spirit possession in association with power.

However, possession and mediumship are also commonly widespread outside these elitist circles. Lay spirit-mediums called *lhapa*, *lhak'a* or *pawo*, are present in villages throughout the Tibetan region. These are practitioners independent of the institutional religious authority, although they need blessing from *lama*s for their work and are often trained by them. They are more frequently male than female, and usually perform healing rituals with the aid of animal spirits, consisting in "sucking the illness" out of the patient's body (Samuel 1993: 195).

The Nepalese mediums of the Kathmandu Valley, instead, are more commonly low-status women, often described as occupying a somewhat "half-way central" position, in a sliding scale continuum with male, institutional Tantric priests at one end, and female, peripheral witches at the other. When performing, mediums rely on paraphernalia, such as daggers and *vajra*s (thunderbolt-weapons), borrowed from high-caste Vajrācārya rituals, through which they can employ Tantric power and authority in order to tame the demons and legitimise their pronouncements (Gellner 1994: 36).

But esoteric Buddhist traditions are not the only ones that entertain a close relationship with possession. Theravāda Buddhism, with its large diffusion in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and the rest of Southeast Asia, represents an open field of different practices and doctrines in which rituals dealing with spirit exorcism and mediumship have intensely developed.

During the exorcism for the Great Cemetery Demon Mahāsōnā, performed in Sri Lanka in the Galle area, the officiants aim to reconstruct a symbolic order of the universe, which the demons, by possessing their victims and tricking them with illusions (*māyā*), had tried to subvert (Kapferer 1991). The ritual proceeds from 5pm to 6am, through offerings, fearsome intonations of poems and songs, executions of *mudrā*s and *mantra*s, fierce drumming and dances, manipulation of sacred implements, and final dramatic acts which include comic dialogues. This ritual process gradually displays a hierarchic cosmological structure. Appropriate offerings are given to different classes of beings, starting from the inferior plane of ghosts, passing throughout encounters with demons, gods and guardian deities, and arriving up to the Buddha. During this cosmological ascent, each level is subsumed and integrated into the superior

one, so that the demons reveal their subordination to the divine beings, and the hierarchical order is restored (ibid.: 127). This ordering of the universe is also marked by specific actions and incantations, through which the evil spirits are expelled from the body of the patient. Music plays a specific role in this process, since it has the generative power to materialise demons and gods. Drumming rhythms are in fact created by the combination of five basic sounds, which are equivalent to the five elementary substances (*mahābhūta*) of matter. Specific rhythmic styles are associated by the exorcists to specific nonhuman entities, and should evoke their mood (*rasa*), thus manifesting their presence into the dancer-exorcist himself, who is dressed in female attire. This is especially done in order to trap the demons into the exorcist's body and defeat them, because demons are thought to be attracted by the feminine character. Before the dances start, demons are dragged down the feet of the patient, and trapped into a basket of offerings dedicated to them. Then they are drawn into the body of the exorcist, and eventually transferred to a rooster. The cock is considered as an equivalent of the human being, due to his walking upright on two legs and his domestic character, and he is thus used as a final substitute for the patient (ibid.: 142). The whole process, including the male exorcist's dance in female attire, is conceived as a way to trick the demons in the same way they had tricked their victims, in order to ultimately reveal the illusory nature of both the demonic manipulations and the reality itself. This is remarked at the end of the ritual by a set of comic dialogues occurring between the drummer and the exorcist-dancer. The parodic character of the comedy actually aims at playfully inverting the traditional understanding of social situations, by disclosing, through the comic effect, the inconsistencies of common roles and ideas, upon which we build up our conventional sense of reality (ibid.: 210).

Exorcism is however not the only way to deal with spirit possession in Theravāda Buddhism. Harmful spirits can be converted into good beings by transferring Buddhist merits to them, and this emerges as one of the key mechanisms for pacifying the dead and improving their condition in the Otherworld. In contemporary Theravāda Buddhism, transfer of *karmic* merits is often used to transform the relationship between spirit and medium, changing the source of agency (i.e. who is acting upon whom), the control of possession, and sometimes the ontological status of the spirits themselves.

Ascetics from Kataragama in southern Sri Lanka, for example, initially experience divine possession (Sinhala *ārūḍe*, from Sanskrit *āruḍha* "mounted upon") as a negative and troublesome intrusion by an evil spirit (Obeyesekere 1981). After they recognise the spirit as a dead ancestor, and they start to accept its presence, they are in some cases urged to make proper offerings to the Buddhist institutions. This act produces in fact a

good karma, which is subsequently transferred by the Buddhist monks to the ancestors themselves, taming their turbulent and harmful behaviour, and converting them into protectors of the medium. This process of "nonhuman conversion" (from turbulent deities to protectors of the Dharma) marks the beginning of the career of the ascetic. The dead ancestor eventually reveals himself as the intermediary of a major deity, usually Kataragama, Kālī, or Huniyan, with whom the medium entertains a life-long relationship, becoming a full-fledged priest/priestess and being consulted for his or her divinatory capacity (ibid.: 70).

Similar processes of conversion are also found in rituals of possession in Cambodia, concerning local spirits called *neak tā*. These are spirits of place, usually associated to the ancestral founder of a village, thus incarnating local forms of political and social authority. They have the capacity to advise by means of oracles, but also to condemn by causing misfortunes to humans who violated the village's moral order and its taboos (Davis 2013). *Neak tā* are commonly conceived as pre-Buddhist entities, but they were actually integrated into the Buddhist cosmological system through the ritual practice. Thanks to merit-making rituals, for example, a person possessed by a malevolent spirit (Khmer *brāy*) can take over and invert the relationship of agency with this entity. Namely, he is able to switch from a position of passive recipient of the spirit's action to that of active manipulator of the spirit itself, and change its status of *brāy* into that of *pāramī* ("benevolent spirit"). Moral transformation of the spirits, achieved through the transfer of merits, is thus equated to their ontological transformation. Accordingly, by means of donations to the Buddhist clergy and transfer of merits, the spirit can further ascend the realms of rebirth, and eventually be transformed into a cosmologically superior *neak tā*. If such transformation occurs, the spirit is able to reverse again the agency relationship, making the medium its royal consort (*snāṇ*) and finally dominating the human actor. However, the source of legitimacy of both the *neak tā* and the medium is ultimately located in the hands of the Buddhist monastic institution. The whole cosmological transformation is in fact possible, only through the mediation of the monks, who are in charge of merit-making rituals and receive the donations, thus consolidating the moral subordination of the village authority to the Buddhist Dharma (ibid.: 193).

This is just one of the possible relational patterns involving local institutions and Buddhist clergy, played out by the phenomenon of possession. Often these patterns reflect the relationship between Buddhist discourses and local spirit cults, as exemplified by the phenomenon of shamanism in Mongolia, where local shamans were considered sometimes as complementary, sometimes in competition with monks, with

regard to the mastery of spiritual entities. This relationship may reach a high degree of complexity even nowadays, among Darhad people in northern Mongolia, who are considered to possess an external "yellow side" and an internal "black side". While the "yellow side" (Mongolian *shar tal*) is linked to a peaceful, balanced, morally unambiguous character associated with Gelugpa Buddhism – a strongly established institution in the area until the rise of socialism – the "black side" (*har tal*) is linked to a violent, uncontrolled and morally ambiguous shamanic character. During the spirit possession ceremonies (*böö böölöh*) the black component is thought to be "vomited" (*booljiih*, semantically connected to *böölöh* "shamanising") and reversed outside, so obscuring the Buddhist side of the person (Pedersen 2011).

Village spirit cults in north-east Thailand, instead, are often organised according to a relation of reciprocity between monks and exorcists (Tambiah 1970; Kitiarsa 2012). The spirits most associated with possession are called *phii paub*. The *mau tham* (exorcist) can be considered as both a caricature and an inversion of the figure of the Buddhist monk. His social position is diametrically opposed to that of the monk, in that he is virtually illiterate and considered somewhat eccentric, and he primarily treats women's diseases. The monk instead occupies a central position in the moral economy of the village, building his authority on erudition and his detachment from women. However, when the exorcist performs his rituals, he recites Buddhist verses *gāthā*, besides undergoing an initiation ceremony resembling monastic ordination. Also, he is required to offer prayers to the Buddha at his private home shrine every evening. Whereas the monk chants *gāthā* to teach morality and to transfer merit and blessing, the exorcist uses the sacred words, usually totally incomprehensible to him, to exert control over the spirits. This is achieved during a complex ceremony, in which he is invited to the home of the person afflicted by the *phii paub*, and summons the *thewada* (divine angels) to enter his body, in order to directly confront the malevolent spirits who possess the patient. A battle between the spirits and their human receptacles thus begins, leading to the revelation of the identity of the *phii paub*, and its subsequent expulsion from the body of the victim (Tambiah 1970: 328-9).

Both the rituals of exorcism and divination described here are currently performed in Japan, where the aforementioned practice of *āveśa* (Japanese *abisha*) has been undertaken by the Tendai and Shingon branches of esoteric Buddhism since at least the ninth century (*Shūi Ōjōden*, *Zoku Gunsho Ruijū*: 262). Exorcism is an important practice for the Nakayama branch of the Nichiren school, whose head temple is the Hokekyōji in Chiba prefecture. Monks from this tradition employ techniques based on the Lotus Sutra, the school's sacred text, combining them with esoteric prayers of

empowerment (*kaji kitō*). Rituals of exorcism are performed at the temples, by monks who have undergone the hundred-day ascetic practice called *aragyō*. During these "fierce austerities", the practitioner undergoes regular cold water ablutions (*mizugori*), food and sleep deprivation, exhausting chants of *sūtra* and learns how to manipulate *bokken* (magic castanets used for expelling the spirits) in order to acquire the ascetic power necessary to fight malevolent nonhuman beings. Monks who undertake this ascetic training are entitled to perform exorcism, usually consisting in a direct confrontation with the spirits, practising persuasion (*settoku*) in order to force the entities to mend their wrong conduct (*aratamemasu*) and leave the body of the patient (Blacker 1999).

There is however an instance in which several of the practices we have examined so far, i.e. divination, exorcism, asceticism, esoteric identification, blessing and the cosmological inclusion of local deities, are subsumed in one remarkable ritual process. This happens to be the "honourable séance" (*oza*) performed by members of the pilgrim associations (*kō*) affiliated to the Ontake cult. Mt Kiso Ontake (3067m) is a semi-active[1] volcano located in central Japan, which has become the place where lay pilgrim groups have been conducting the worship of divinised ancestors (*reijin*) since the eighteenth century. The way they communicate with these ancestors is through spirit possession, which has become a trademark activity on the mountain (Akaike 1981; Sugawara 2009). Members of the Jingū Meishin Church, from Aichi prefecture, use to stop in the afternoon at the shrine located at the seven spot (*nanagōme*), before doing the night climb to the top. Here, at 5pm, they start reciting Buddhist and Shinto prayers, while a medium (*nakaza*) unfolds a cosmological diagram (*maṇḍala*) on the ground, portraying five fierce esoteric deities called *godai myōō*. With his hands he directs the divine forces first on the *maṇḍala*, inviting the deities to move on it, and then on himself, calling the *myōō* upon his body. Finally he enters the diagram, realising a full identification with Fudō myōō, the deity depicted at the centre. A phase of uncertainty then occurs, when the body of the medium becomes an open channel for a multiplicity of different entities, including the *akuryō*, malevolent spirits from the lesser levels of existence. Meanwhile a shaman (*maeza*), in this case the female leader of the group, is busy in keeping these evil entities away, cutting magic squares in the air through the performance of a succession of nine protective *mantra*s and *mudrā*s called *kuji*, and exorcising them from the body of the *nakaza* when necessary. From then on, the medium becomes possessed

[1] Since the time of my fieldwork, in 2009, the status of Mt Kiso Ontake has dramatically changed, when in September 2014 this volcano suddenly erupted, causing the death of fifty-seven people.

by a series of deities and spirits, the most important of which are those of the past ascetic guides enshrined in the mountain. When the possession stabilises, he starts to speak with the voice of the ancestral founder of the movement, and a dialogue between him and the shamaness begins, extending the blessing and the oracles of the god to the whole assembly.

As exemplified by this brief overview, Buddhist discourses of spirit possession significantly permeate past and present history of Asian societies. Far from being isolated remnants of a distant past, they challenge us to explore, from a different angle, issues of power, personhood, body, and agency, all the more relevant to an understanding of contemporary world.

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