

FUNERARY RITES AND THE BUDDHIST MEANING OF DEATH:
AN INTERPRETATIVE TEXT FROM
NORTHERN THAILAND

by

PHRA KHRŪ ANUSARANAŚĀSANAKIARTI

and

CHARLES F. KEYES*

Introduction †

The fact of death poses a fundamental problem of meaning — what in Buddhism is called *amata-pañhā* — for all humans in that there is an irreparable loss when a once-living person becomes a dead carcass. This brute fact of actual experience is taken as a central concern in all religions. Each religion, albeit in manifold different ways, asserts that there is a significance in death which transcends the sense of desolation caused by the cessation of a human life. For those who are bereaved, or who have become acutely aware of their own ultimate fate, religious assertion of ultimate meaning cannot simply be a set of abstract statements. Instead, religious interpretations of death must needs be interwoven into the fabric of human action, and most particularly into those phases of action which center on the actuality of death. For most human beings, in the past as well as in present-day societies, the articulation of religious meaning about death and the social actions which accompany death take the form of ritual.

Theravāda Buddhist interpretation of death, derived from scriptural sources, has been imposed upon diverse ritual forms found in the communities of Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. More specifically, members of the Sangha — that is, monks who belong to the Buddhist fraternity — have utilized their knowledge of texts containing, or assumed to contain, parts of the dharma, the teachings of the Lord Buddha, to give meaning to the gestures, objects, icons and words which constitute death rituals. Indeed, they play this role for all rituals in which the actual experiences of people are invested with religious significance. For the most part, the interpretations of monks have been, in the past as well as today, presented to the populace in the form of expositions of dharma — sermons (Pāli: *desanā*; Thai: *thētsanā*, เทศนา) — delivered orally in the context of ritual action. A sermon most usually is a recitation of a traditional text; but it might also be an extemporaneous instruction

* Phra Khrū Anusaranaśāsanakiarti (พระครูอนุสรณ์ศาสนเกียรติ) is district ecclesiastical head (เจ้าคณะอำเภอ) of Mae Sariang District, Mae Hong Son Province, and is Abbot of Wat Kittiwong (วัดกิตติวงศ์) in the town of Mae Sariang. Charles F. Keyes is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA.

† By Charles F. Keyes.

concerning the deeper dharmic meanings of aspects of the human condition. Relatively rarely, although increasingly more common, a monk has put his religious exegesis of ritual into writing, thereby making it available for others to read or to use as a sermon. Whatever the form might be, it has been the responsibility of monks from the earliest days of Buddhism to provide others with religious — that is, dharmic — meanings for the elements of the rituals which punctuate the process of human life.

This responsibility has led many monks to attend to the form as well as to the content of rituals. Indeed, in any Buddhist community it is always the monk (or ex-monk) who has spent many years in the Order who is the most knowledgeable regarding the traditional as well as the essential (as prescribed by scriptural authority) elements of ritual. Again, this knowledge has been communicated to others mainly by word of mouth; however, a few monks have composed written guides to the procedure of the rituals performed within their communities.

The text which I have translated here combines both an account of ritual procedure — in this case, of the forms of rituals connected with death as they are carried out in the community of Mae Sariang in northern Thailand — with a dharmic interpretation of this procedure. This text is unusual in that it was not composed for the benefit of practising Buddhists in Mae Sariang, but for the purpose of providing a foreign ethnographer — myself — with some depth of understanding of death rituals which I had observed while engaged in research in Mae Sariang.

I spent nearly 18 months in Mae Sariang during 1967-1968, engaged in a study of the religious life of northern Thai Buddhists living in Mae Sariang town as well as other aspects of culture and society in Mae Sariang District.¹ I was extraordinarily fortunate in my work on Buddhist practice to gain not only the approval of Phra Khrū Anusaraṇaśāsanakiarti, the district ecclesiastical head of Mae Sariang District, but also his active involvement in my undertaking. To this day he maintains an abiding interest in the culture of his native place, and pursues this interest with intellectual inquisitiveness. On many occasions, I discovered that my naive queries as to the nature of some practice served to stimulate him to provide me with a detailed and systematic account. Towards the end of my stay in Mae Sariang, he prepared, at my behest, a set of detailed notes on many of the ritual practices which I had observed. The record of customs associated with death which is presented here was originally written on 2 November 1968.

In the intervening decade, I have not had the time to return to this text, being concerned with other work growing out of my research in Mae Sariang, as well as other research in northeastern Thailand and in Chiang Mai. Only within the past year have I begun to focus once more on the rituals which I observed in Mae Sariang.² Specifically, I have devoted my attention primarily to those rituals connected with ordination into the Buddhist monkhood

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and with death because I believe that these two types of rituals are central to an understanding of how Buddhist meanings are established in the lives of ordinary people in northern Thailand (and elsewhere in Buddhist south and southeast Asia, for that matter). In the context of my work on death rituals, I have turned once again to the account which Phra Khrū Anusaraṇaśāsanakiarti prepared for me.

As I reread his account of death rituals, I was struck by the fact that it was one of the most detailed records of any concerning northern Thailand known to me of ritual procedure connected with death. I also became aware, a function of being involved in the translation of a traditional sermon connected with death rites — *ānisonṅ sīa sop* (อานิสองส์เสียดศพ: “The Blessings of Disposing of Corpses”³), that Phra Khrū Anusaraṇaśāsanakiarti had included a religious interpretation of funerary rituals which was very similar to the Buddhist meaning given to such rituals in a text which has quasi-doctrinal standing. Given these characteristics of Phra Khrū Anusaraṇaśāsanakiarti’s account, I felt that it would be of considerable value to translate it and to make it available to a wider audience.

I am aware of two other accounts of death rituals in northern Thailand which are similar in organization and content to that written by Phra Khrū Anusaraṇaśāsanakiarti in that they also include both details of ritual form and dharmic exegesis on these forms. One of these is included in a book on northern Thai customs by Sangūan Chōtisukkkharat, an author noted for his compilations of northern Thai customs, folklore and history.⁴ The other, written by Krai Krainiran, appeared in the Chiang Mai newspaper, *Khonmuang*, and has been translated and published in a northern Thai ethnographic work by Konrad Kingshill.⁵ A comparison of these two accounts with that of the Phra Khrū permits one (as I have done in my annotations) to identify additional details of ritual procedure and additional religious reflections upon death rites as they are carried out in northern Thailand. The differences between the texts reflect, to some degree, variations in practice in different parts of northern Thailand. In Mae Sariang, for example, Burmese (and Shan) influences are more pronounced than they are in other parts of the north (in this regard, see the following discussion of funerary rites for monks). In addition, each author has accorded somewhat different attention to ritual elements

3. This translation, together with annotations and an introduction, will appear in a forthcoming volume, *The Blessings of Religious Acts: Ritual Texts from Northern Thailand*, translated by Charles F. Keyes and Sommai Premchit; edited and introduced by Charles F. Keyes.

4. Sangūan Chōtisukkkharat (สงวน โชติสุขรัตน์), *praphēni thai phāk nūa* (ประเพณีไทยภาคเหนือ: “Customs of the Thai of the northern region”), pp. 217-250.

5. Krai Krainiran (ไกร ไกรนรินทร์), “rūṅang tung lek tung tōng” (เรื่องตุงเหล็กตุงทอง: “Concerning the iron and golden banners”). I have not seen the original version of this account, but only an English translation by Amnuay Tapingkae, which is included in Konrad Kingshill’s *Kudaeng—the Red Tomb: a Village Study in Northern Thailand*, pp. 159-164. Another account of funerary rites by Phairot Loetphiriyakamon (ไพโรธ เลิศพิริยกุลม), *khati chāo bān* (คตชีชาวบ้าน: “Village folklore”), pp. 165-167, adds little that is not found in other accounts. Yet another record of funerary rites by Singkha Wannasai (สิงฆะ วรณสัย), “praphēni lānāthai” (ประเพณีลานนาไทย: “Lānāthai customs”), pp. 86-97, came to hand too late to be used in preparing this study.

and meanings. Yet, while there are variations among the texts, what is striking is that there is so much overlap, particularly in the matter of religious meaning, which is fundamentally the same in all three accounts.

In addition to comparing Phra Khrū Anusaraṇaśāsana-kiarti's text to other similar accounts, I have also examined it in light of descriptions of death rites based on actual observations. I have drawn particularly on the ethnographic description of such rites in the village of Kū Dāēng (ทุ่ง), located near Chiang Mai, written by Konrad Kingshill and based on his research in the early 1950s.⁶ In an earlier ethnographic account, Reginald LeMay⁷ provided some general information about death rituals in northern Thailand based on his observations during a period following World War I. While LeMay's notes are not so focused as are those of Kingshill, they do hold some historical interest. Finally, I have drawn upon my own field notes, recorded during my research in Mae Sariang. While I did not observe those elements of death rituals which occurred prior to the procession to the cemetery for cremation, I did attend two cremations and another set of rites at which the remains of a cremated corpse were collected. In addition, I also observed much of the ritual activity surrounding the funeral of a monk in Mae Sariang in 1973; I have already published a study of this ritual.⁸ In addition to funerary rituals proper, I also had the opportunity to attend a number of rituals in Mae Sariang at which merit was made and dedicated to the deceased. I plan future studies based upon these materials. The observational information collected by myself and other ethnographers in northern Thailand permits one to ascertain in some particulars the extent to which the ritual procedure outlined by Phra Khrū Anusaraṇaśāsana-kiarti (and the others) has been realized in actuality.

My efforts to place the Phra Khrū's text in a larger ethnographic context have also been enhanced by my having access to a study of ritual life in a village in Nan Province written by Richard Davis.⁹ While Davis does not deal directly with death rituals, being concerned in his study with agrarian rites, he does provide many general insights into northern Thai ritual activity.

In the following pages I have given the Phra Khrū's account of death customs in Mae Sariang as the text and have placed my own observations made in Mae Sariang, information from other sources, and my comments in the footnotes. The somewhat unwieldy product does serve to preserve the integrity of the Phra Khrū's record. Together, text and notes make it possible to juxtapose guides for ritual procedure with descriptions of actual ritual behavior connected with death and both of these with religious exegesis regarding the significance of death customs.

6. Kingshill, *op. cit.*, pp. 157-178.

7. Reginald LeMay, *An Asian Arcady: the Land and Peoples of Northern Siam*.

8. Charles F. Keyes, "Tug-of-war for merit: cremation of a senior monk".

9. Richard Davis, "Muang metaphysics: a study in northern Thai myth and ritual", unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Sydney, 1974.

Death customs in Mae Sariang, northern Thailand ‡

1. (Types of) death

Death is of several types:

(a) Ordinary death (*tāi thammadā*, ตายธรรมดา¹⁰), that is death (caused) by diseases of various sorts.

(b) Sudden death (*tāi hōng*, ตายโหง¹¹), that is death caused by different kinds of accidents such as murder, falling from a vehicle, or drowning.

(c) Death (called in Northern Thai) *tāi kom tāi pāi* (ต๋ายก๋มต๋ายพราย), that is death in childbirth (*khlōt but*, คลอดบุตร), A woman who dies in childbirth because the child has died in the womb is said to *tāi kom* (ต๋ายก๋ม).¹² If she dies after the child has been born, even if the child lives, this (type of death) is called *tāi pāi* (ต๋ายพราย).¹³

(d) Death (called in Northern Thai) *tāi thūk tū* (ต๋ายตุ๊กตู่). The word *tū* (in Northern Thai) means sorcery (*khun sai*, คุณไสย)¹⁴ in central (Thailand). (This practice entails) the use of spells (*khāthā ākhom*, คาถาอาคม) (which are) pronounced (*sēk*, เสก) and blown on (*pao*, เป่า) cow or buffalo hide or whatever and sent to enter the stomach of the person who is intended to die. The person who has been bewitched will show the symptoms of a swollen and distended stomach or of swelling throughout the body. In three or four days, (the person's) condition worsens and he becomes feverish. These symptoms cannot be cured by medicine; spells must be used to effect a cure. Sometimes (the illness) is dissipated (by the use of spells);

‡ By Phra Khrū Anusarāṣāsanakiarti; translated and with notes by Charles F. Keyes.

10. In this translation, transliterations of standard Thai and of Northern Thai words include indication of vowel length but not of tone. For the system of transliteration used for Northern Thai words, see *The Blessings of Religious Acts* (footnote 3).

11. McFarland's *Thai-English Dictionary*, p. 949, translates *hōng* as "a ghost; the devil; demons; plague-bringers" and *tāi hōng* as "to die from some fearful disease". I have chosen to translate this type of death as "sudden death" because of the gloss given to the cognate Northeastern Thai term, *tāi hūng* (ต๋ายหุง) by the *phocanānukrom phāk isān-phāk klāng* (พจนานุกรมภาคอีสาน-ภาคกลาง), p. 458: "... *tāi dōi paccuban than dūan*" (ต๋ายโดยปัจจุบันทันด่วน).

12. The Northern Thai *kom* (ก๋ม) is related to the standard Thai word *klom* (กลม), meaning "globular" or "spherical" (see Sangūan, *op. cit.*, p. 239).

13. In standard Thai (McFarland, *op. cit.*, p. 568), *phrāi* (พราย), cognate with Northern Thai *pāi*, means an evil spirit. Here the usage implies dying in a polluted state.

14. In the anthropological literature on Africa, a sharp distinction is made between witchcraft and sorcery (see E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azandi*). In northern Thailand, as in other parts of Buddhist southeast Asia (cf. Melford E. Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism*, p. 22), no such distinction can be made and witchcraft and sorcery practices are classed under the same rubric. I found that ideas about sorcery and witchcraft were more elaborate in northern Thailand than in northeastern Thailand where I have also carried out fieldwork (cf. in this connection, S.J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*, pp. 331-333).

sometimes (the person) dies. It is known that seers (*mō dū*, หมอดู),¹⁵ magicians (*mō sai*, หมอไสย),¹⁶ or mediums (*caonāi*, เจ้านาย) or possessed persons (*khon song cao*, คนทรงเจ้า)¹⁷ are the source of sorcery. When an ill person dies (from sorcery), at the time of the cremation some organ, such as the liver or heart, does not burn or sometimes cow or buffalo hide is found in the stomach of the person who has died from an illness. Those who have knowledge of sorcery are mainly Karen or Khmu.¹⁸ In addition to humans (who perform) sorcery, there are also spirits (*phī*, ผี) who (perform) or cause sorcery. The type of spirits which are likely to cause this are the *yakṣa* (known in northern Thailand) as *phī ka* (ผีกะ).¹⁹ Today, most of the populace still believes in sorcery.

Persons who die from sorcery or who die a sudden death die before their years (literally, die when their age is not yet complete) and also die bad deaths.²⁰

However (a death may be caused), once a person has died, relatives and neighbors come together to assist in the funeral (*ngān sop*, งานศพ).²¹ (People) do not come to assist at the house of the deceased because of an invitation from a ritual sponsor (*cao phāp*, เจ้าภาพ) as (is the case) at other merit-making events.²² (Once) they know of the death, (people) go on

15. *Mō dū* are practitioners who cast fortunes by consulting astrological tables.

16. *Mō sai* or *mō saiyāsāt* (หมอไสยศาสตร์) have esoteric knowledge gained through study of magical treatises, these being derived originally from India.

17. It is believed that *caonāi* or *khon song cao* (also called, in Northern Thai, *tinang phī*—ตั่งผี้: “spirit’s mount”) are those who become voluntarily possessed by a spirit and are used by spirits to communicate their messages to the living.

18. In Mae Sariang, where Karen constituted over half the population of the District, it was not uncommon for northern Thai to accuse Karen of being more adept at sorcery than they were themselves. The allusion to Khmu here, another tribal people, probably stems from the fact that Khmu formerly came to Mae Sariang to work in the teak trade. The Phra Khrū does not mention the Lua’ (Lawa), the autochthonous tribal people of the area. This probably reflects the belief held by many northern Thai that the Lua’ are very similar in culture to the northern Thai; in contrast, the cultures of the Karen and Khmu are less familiar to the northern Thai. It is not uncommon for people to accuse ethnically distinctive neighbors, particularly if they are economically disadvantaged as well, of being the source of sorcery.

19. A spirit that enters the body and devours the bowels; called *phī pōp* (ผีปอบ) in standard Thai and Northeastern Thai.

20. There is another type of death which the Phra Khrū does not consider because in a sense it is a residual type. Infants and young children who die are given almost no ritual attention. In a sense, northern Thai consider such premature deaths as reflecting a remaining attachment of the child to the spirit world. Carl Bock (in *Temples and Elephants: The Narrative of a Journey of Exploration through Upper Siam and Lao*, p. 261) has recorded northern Thai beliefs about such premature deaths as held in the latter part of the nineteenth century: “People . . . who die under the age of fifteen are believed to have been taken by their former parents who are now in the spirit-world, and are buried instead of being cremated, the bodies being simply wrapped up in mats, and interred without the privilege of a coffin. If the young person or child dies with its jacket on, the garment is slit at the sides, and the front turned to the back, a way of saying to the spirit of the dead child, ‘don’t come back again’.”

21. *Ngān* (งาน) signifies the totality of ritualized activities and associated non-ritual acts connected with a particular occasion. *Sop* (ศพ) refers to the physical remains, the body. In Northern Thai, the terms *sāk* (ซาก), *kāp* (คาบ), and *kāp nao* (คาบเน่า) (*nao* means “decaying”) are also used to refer to the body (cf. Sangūan, *op. cit.*, p. 217).

22. Sangūan (*ibid.*, pp. 216-217) says that traditionally people would be attracted by the loud wailing from the house of the deceased. The same practice is also noted by Krai (in Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 160).

their own (initative). (Northern Thai) call this “going to the house of the corpse” (*pai bān sop*, ไปบ้านศพ) or “going to the house of the spirit” (*pai bān phi*, ไปบ้านผี), or “going to the house of the spirit of the dead” (*pai bān phi t̄ai*, ไปบ้านผีตาย).²³

2. Funerary rites²⁴

If a person dies from an (ordinary) illness or from sorcery, the first (thing that is done to the body) is to take the corpse to be bathed in hot (and) then cold water.²⁵ When (the corpse) has been properly dressed,²⁶ the body is taken and placed wherever is convenient in the house (although it is) essential to place the head towards the (main) post of the house (*sao h̄yan*, เสาเขื่อน). A coin is taken and placed in the mouth of the corpse²⁷ and cotton thread is taken to bind the hands and feet of the corpse.²⁸ A pretty flower is placed in the hands of the body.²⁹ A white cloth is placed over the corpse.³⁰ Then the following items are found and placed at the head of the corpse: iron and gold banners (*tung lek tung t̄ōng*, ตุงเหล็ก

23. The term *phi* in this context signifies “soul”, or, perhaps, “ghost”, rather than “spirit” since the final rebirth form has not yet been entered and will not be until after the cremation.

24. *Phithi kiaokap sop* (พิธีเกี่ยวกับศพ), literally, “rites connected with the corpse”.

25. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 233) says that while the bathing custom is still practised in outlying areas in northern Thailand, it is not observed in the cities. In urban areas, he says, people follow the central Thai practice of sprinkling water on the corpse rather than the traditional practice of bathing it with hot and cold water.

26. LeMay (*op. cit.*, p. 121) says that:

When a Lao villager dies, his family wash the body with water and clothe it in a ‘pānūng’ [a type of lower garment] and a new coat, which is put on inside out with the buttons facing inwards. The reason for this is that the dead man has become a ‘phi’, or spirit, and spirits always wear their clothes inside out.

I have found only one other reference to this custom of putting the coat of a corpse on backwards and that one (Bock, *op. cit.*, p. 261; see above, footnote 20) refers only to corpses of children under the age of 15. Such a practice has been observed among the Karen living in northern Thailand (James W. Hamilton, “Structure, function, and ideology of a Karen funeral in northern Thailand”, p. 97). Hamilton interprets the Karen custom reflecting a belief in the world of the dead being an inversion of the world of the living (*ibid.*, p. 102).

27. Krai (in Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 160) says that a chew of betel nut, lime and other ingredients is also placed in the mouth. Kingshill (*ibid.*, p. 158) observed honey being poured into the mouth of the corpse of a layman to prevent decay, a practice that the Phra Khrū (below, p. 19) says was done traditionally only for members of the Sangha.

28. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 218) says that thread was bound around the wrists, the ankles, the middle of the body, and the neck. Krai (Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 160) reports that the relatives of the deceased “put a white thread three times around the dead man’s neck, his hand, and his feet”. LeMay (*op. cit.*, p. 191) records that “both hands are tied together with white thread”. Kingshill (*op. cit.*, p. 158) observed the hands and the toes of a corpse being tied.

29. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, pp. 217-218) says that flowers, incense and candles, the usual offerings for Buddhist sacra, are placed in the hands. Traditionally, incense was not included in such offerings and LeMay (*op. cit.*, p. 121) records that flowers and candles are placed in the hands of a corpse. Kingshill (*op. cit.*, p. 158) observed the use of all three items at a funeral in Kū Dāēng.

30. LeMay (*op. cit.*, p. 121) says that “the body is ‘laid out’ on a new mat in the centre of the room, and a string is fastened to either wall, running across the centre of the body at a height of six inches from it. This supports a cloth which covers the body . . .”. Kingshill (*op. cit.*, p. 158) observed a blanket being used instead of a white cloth.

ตุงตอง),³¹ three-tailed banner (*tung sām hāng*, ตุงสามหาง),³² a monk's almsbowl, and a lighted candle of time (*tīan nīān*, เทียนยาน)³³ (on top of a) flower vase. Clothes used by the deceased are placed along the sides of the body.³⁴

It is not common (in northern Thailand) to keep the corpse in the house for long as (is done) in central (Thailand). (At most) it will be kept for only seven days³⁵ in order to await (the arrival) of relatives coming from great distances or in order not to (hold) the funeral on a forbidden day (*wan hām*, วันห้าม) such as Wednesday or Tuesday. Cremations are especially forbidden on Tuesdays. (Also forbidden) are the ninth days of the waxing or waning of the moon and the days of the nine piles (*wan kao kōng*, วันเก้ากอง).³⁶ Such days have been forbidden for funerals since ancient times.

During the time when the body is still in the house, religious rites are held in the evening. Four monks are invited to chant *sī nīā* (สียา) and to give sermons. Chanting *sī nīā* is similar to the chanting of the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* as is done in central (Thailand).³⁷ The sponsor who provides the food invites monks to come and partake of the morning meal, (this being) called "partaking of food in front of the corpse" (*san nā sop*, จันทน์ศพ).

31. This item is an inevitable accompaniment to any rite connected with the dead (see Kingshill, *ibid.*, pp. 159, 160). For significance see below, footnote 105.

32. Kingshill (*ibid.*, p. 158) records the name of this item as *thong sām hāng* (ธงสามหาง), *thong* being the standard Thai word for "banner, flag", cognate with Northern Thai *tung*. Kingshill says that the color of this banner is white. For significance of the item, see below.

33. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 219) mentions a *fai nīān* (ไฟยาน) which has the same function as the *tīan nīān*. It is apparent that what is significant in this item is that the light can be continuous for the period of time that the body is kept in the house. Any implement which can be made to serve this purpose will do; indeed, Kingshill (*op. cit.*, p. 158) observed at the funeral he attended that a kerosene lantern was used. LeMay (*op. cit.*, p. 121) says that the light is placed just above the head.

34. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 218) says that the corpse is placed on a litter of bamboo slats, called *hāng lōi* (ห้างลอย) in Northern Thai. He also reports (*ibid.*, p. 217) that the face of the corpse is adorned with white powder, a practice that Kingshill (*op. cit.*, p. 158) actually observed. Krai (Kingshill, *ibid.*, p. 161) says that a vase with candles is placed at the foot of the body while LeMay (*op. cit.*, p. 191) reports that "a waxen boat is also placed in the dead man's hands".

35. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 222) says that a corpse of an ordinary lay person who died a natural death will be kept for three to seven days. LeMay (*op. cit.*, p. 122) says that the shortest time is two to three days, while "in the villages the average interval is at the most a few weeks". This latter period does not appear to accord with other evidence from northern Thailand. In the funeral of an older, respected villager which Kingshill (*op. cit.*, p. 165) attended, the time between death and cremation was four days. In Mae Sariang, none of the funerals of ordinary lay persons which I attended took place more than a few days after death. As will be noted below, corpses of monks and high-status persons are kept much longer.

36. The northern Thai mode of calculating, with reference to astrological influences, the days appropriate or inappropriate for undertaking many activities is most complex (see Davis, *loc. cit.*, chapter 3 and Davis, "The northern Thai calendar and its uses"). Davis ("Muang metaphysics . . .", *loc. cit.*, p. 120) reports that the "exquisitely complicated formula, called 'The Days of Nine Piles' . . . takes into account the lunar month, the twelve-day cycle, and an additional duodenary sequence which is used only in this formula". See Sangūan (*op. cit.*, pp. 223-226) for a telling of the myth associated with this formula.

37. According to Kenneth E. Wells (*Thai Buddhism: Its Rites and Activities*, p. 225) this text is a commentary on the Abhidhamma and is considered to be equal in sanctity to the scriptural source itself. See Wells (*ibid.*, p. 226) for a summary of the contents of this chant.

In Mae Sariang, no one makes coffins (called *lōng*, หล็อง,³⁸ in Northern Thai) for sale. The sponsor looks for wood and has a carpenter (called *salā*, สล้า, in Northern Thai) come to help in making one without fixing a charge for the labor. The coffin will be good or poor in the end, depending on the degree of wealth³⁹ of the sponsor.⁴⁰ When the coffin has been prepared, relatives will come to place the corpse in it.⁴¹ There is no ritual bathing (at this time) of the corpse as (there is) in central (Thailand). Before placing the corpse in the coffin, the sponsor invites four monks to chant. This is called “chanting (while the body) enters the coffin” (*sūt khao lōng*, สูตรเข้าหล็อง).⁴²

3. Day of the disposing of the corpse (*sīa sop*, เสียศพ)⁴³

On whatever day has been scheduled for the disposing of the corpse, the sponsor⁴⁴ will make merit in accordance with the religion in order to dedicate (*uthit*, อุทิศ) a portion of merit (*sūan bun kuson*, ส่วนบุญกุศล)⁴⁵ to the deceased. (This merit) serves to augment the

38. Compare standard Thai *tōng* (โถง).

39. Literally, “strength of wealth”.

40. See Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 218) for a discussion of the role of the carpenter at a funeral. Kingshill (*op. cit.*, p. 158) says that at one funeral which he attended, the deceased before his death had arranged with a local carpenter to make a coffin to his design; the coffin was actually made after the death occurred. In the village in northeastern Thailand where I carried out research, I saw one case where a coffin was made in anticipation of a death.

41. Kingshill (*ibid.*, p. 158) reports that at the funeral he attended, the corpse was kept for a day before the coffin was completed. LeMay (*op. cit.*, p. 122) says that “the body remains alone for one night, but the next day the coffin is made”.

42. LeMay (*ibid.*) reports a comparable custom: “in the afternoon four priests are called to offer up prayers for the dead. As soon as this rite has been performed, the body is placed in the coffin, which is nailed down”. A number of other customs are mentioned by other sources as taking place between death and cremation. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 219) and Krai (in Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 160) report that a sack of rice—called *tung hō khao* (ตุงห่อข้าว) in Northern Thai—is placed above the head of the body. Below the Phra Khrū indicates that the three-tailed banner is sewn into such a bag. Kingshill (*ibid.*, p. 158) reports having seen both a three-tailed banner and a sack of rice above the head of a corpse. Krai (in *ibid.*, p. 160) says that in addition to the three-tailed banner and the sack of rice, “they put . . . a ring with a real diamond, a coconut for cleansing the corpse just before cremation, dishes of food, threads, white cloth, and other goods in the coffin”. Kingshill (*ibid.*, p. 158) reports having heard of the custom of placing a dead cat in the coffin with the corpse, but this custom is not reported in any other source. Juxtaposed with the sermons and chanting of the monks—which go on every evening and, according to Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 219), are listened to only by elders—are games, poetry reading, and courting engaged in by young people (*ibid.*, pp. 219-222). The events of the first night after a death (at least of the death of a person who died from ‘natural causes’) and for each subsequent night until the eve of the cremation constitute a wake in a truly Irish sense. I attended such wakes both in Mae Sariang in the village in northeastern Thailand where I carried out field research. The overt purpose of such wakes, I was told, including very much the seemingly irreverent behavior of the young people, is to dispel the sorrow of the bereaved. For a description of a wake in a northern Thai village, see Kingshill (*op. cit.*, pp. 165-167).

43. The term *sīa* (เสีย) literally means “to lose (beyond memory)”. A colloquial standard Thai phrase used in telling of someone’s death is *sīa pai lāeo* (เสียไปแล้ว). The significance of the word is to dispose forever of the bodily remains of a person.

44. The sponsor would be a close relative of the deceased—a parent, spouse, or child in most cases.

45. The term “portion of merit” (*sūan bun kuson*, ส่วนบุญกุศล) is a standard expression indicating that merit is something that can be accumulated in parts.

merit for the soul (*dūang winyān*, ดวงวิญญาน)⁴⁶ of the deceased.⁴⁷ (This merit-making) is done by inviting bhikkhus and samaṇeras to come and receive alms-offerings at the house of the deceased. Traditionally, it was common to offer alms at the *wat*. It does not matter whether the number of monks and novices invited is odd or even.⁴⁸ The offering of alms before taking the corpse to the cemetery (*pā chā*, ป่าช้า)⁴⁹ is called *tān kṃyāng* (ตานเคื่อง, in Northern Thai), meaning the offering of alms-goods (*khrūyāng thaiyathān*, เคื่องไทยทาน). The rite is similar to the usual merit-making of alms-offering. This is to say (the rite includes) the taking of the five precepts (by those who make the offering), chanting (Northern Thai: *wēntān*, เว้นทาน) of the offering by an *ācān* (อาจารย์),⁵⁰ chanting of the *Karaniya-metta Sutta*⁵¹ by the clergy, and then the (actual) offering of the alms (by the sponsors) and the thankful rejoicing (*anumōthanā*, อนุโมทนา; Pāli: *anumodanā*) by the Sangha. Ordinarily a dharmic sermon will be given before the offering of alms-goods. One or two local texts⁵² will be used for the sermons⁵³ in accord with whatever the sponsor has arranged. If there is a son

46. The term *winyān* (pronounced *wīnān* in Northern Thai) is derived from the Pāli term *viññāṇa*, meaning “consciousness”. In orthodox Theravādin doctrine, it is the consciousness which links one life to the next. The modifier *dūang* (ดวง) suggests that the *winyān* is conceptualized as a form round or globular in shape. Together these two terms point to a substantial essence that becomes disconnected from the corpse at death; thus, I have chosen to translate the Thai terms by the word “soul”. This translation should not be taken as indicating that the Northern Thai do not believe in the Buddhist doctrine of *anattā*, “soullessness”, since the *dūang winyān* is not a permanent essence. I plan to devote a separate paper to this subject.

47. Merit made by others and transferred to the dead is an essential belief of all northern Thai (indeed all Thai) rites connected with the dead. See my paper, “The blessings of ordination: conceptions of merit-transference in a popular text from northern Thailand”, forthcoming. The idea of merit-transference to the dead is an old one in Buddhism and has been a part of Buddhist practice since early times. See Richard F. Gombrich, “‘Merit transference’ in Sinhalese Buddhism: a case study of the interaction between doctrine and practice”, pp. 203-219.

48. The Phra Khrū here is responding to a query I had posed as to whether auspicious and inauspicious rites were associated inevitably with even or odd numbers of Sangha participants.

49. Pronounced *pā cā* in Northern Thai. According to Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 222), the cemetery is also called *pā hīao* (ป่าเขียว). The cemetery is a place set aside for funerary rites. In rural areas, the territory surrounding a cemetery is wooded, in fact, and no one cuts the trees in the area for fear of offending spirits which live there. In Mae Sariang (as in Chiang Mai), the cemetery is an open field dedicated to the sole function of being the locus of cremations.

50. In northern Thailand, lay ritual specialists—inevitably ex-monks—called *ācān*, lit., “teacher”, lead whatever lay group congregates for making a ritual offering to the Sangha. On the role of the *ācān*, see Donald K. Swearer, “The role of the layman *extraordinaire* in northern Thai Buddhism”.

51. For a translation of this sutra, see *The Pali Chanting Scripture with Thai and English Translation*, pp. 84-89. This same translation is reprinted in Tambiah (*op. cit.*, pp. 215-216). The title of the sutra means “loving-kindness to be done” and it enjoins one to engage in moral acts and to avoid immoral ones.

52. That is, texts used traditionally in northern Thailand.

53. Such a sermon might well be the *ānisonṅ sīa sōp* (อาณิสงส์เสี่ยศพ), “The Blessings of Disposing of Corpses” (see *The Blessings of Religious Acts* for both text and translation) or, what might in fact be the same text, known in Northern Thai as *ānisonṅ lāng kāp* (อาณิสงส์ล้างคาบ), “The Blessings of Washing the Corpse” (see Sangūan, *op. cit.*, pp. 232ff.). This latter text is also called in Pāli *dhamma amata pañhā*, “The Dharma of Eternal Questions” (Sangūan, *op. cit.*, p. 232; Krai, in Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 160). Other possible texts include those known in Northern Thai as *ānisonṅ kon tāi* (อาณิสงส์คนตาย), “The Blessings of (Acts for) the Dead”; *ānisonṅ phī tāi* (อาณิสงส์ผีตาย), “The Blessings of (Acts for) the Spirit of the Dead”; *ānisonṅ sōp* (อาณิสงส์ศพ), “The Blessings of (Acts for) the Corpse”; *ānisonṅ tān hā kon tāi* (อาณิสงส์ทานหาคนตาย), “The Blessings of Alms-offering (Whose Merit) Find the Dead”; *ānisonṅ lūk cāi tān hā pō* (or *māe*); (อาณิสงส์ลูกชายทานหาพ่อ[แม่]), “The Blessings of a Son Offering Alms (Whose Merit) Find His Father (or Mother)”.

or grandson (of the deceased) with (the necessary) faith, he will be ordained (in order) to dedicate merit to the deceased. Such ordinations take place before the sermon. (This type of) ordination is called "ordination in front of the corpse" (*būat nā sop*, บวชน้ำศพ).⁵⁴ (The relative who is ordained will remain in the clergy) temporarily, the duration not exceeding three days.⁵⁵

If the deceased was an elder full in years, there will be (chanting) of a sutra of detachment (*sūt thōn*, สุตตรถอน) after the offering of the alms-goods has finished and before the corpse is taken down from the house. The sponsor will (first) prepare four ritual trays, (called) *satūang* (ตะตวง, in Northern Thai) and place them at four points of the corpse. Then he will invite four monks to chant that which is called "The Detachment Sutra" (*sūt thōn*, สุตตรถอน). (In Northern Thai) *thōn khut thōn cā* (ถอนขี้ตถอนจา) means the sutra of detaching (oneself) from things that are not good, having all depart with the corpse.

When the corpse is lifted down from the house, there are people who take *sompōi* water (น้ำส้มป่อย)⁵⁶ in an earthen pot, prepared by the sponsor, and wash the place where the corpse had lain all the way to the head of the stairs. There the pot is thrown away and broken on the stairs.⁵⁷ There is also another pot with *sompōi* water which is taken and placed at the entrance to the path to the cemetery for those who go to send off (*song*, ส่ง)⁵⁸ the corpse to wash their hands when they return from the cremation.⁵⁹

At the stairway, when the corpse is taken from the house, a substitute bamboo stairway of three steps is leaned against the stairway of the house. This (bamboo stairway) is called (in Northern Thai) "the stairway of the spirits" (*khandai phī*, คันทันใต้ผี).⁶⁰

54. Ordination is thought to produce significant merit which can be transferred to the dead (see Sangūan, *op. cit.*, p. 228; Keyes, "The Blessings of Ordination", *op. cit.*; and *The Blessings of Religious Acts*). Usually it will be a son, a younger brother, or a nephew who will be ordained temporarily at a funeral.

55. At one funeral which I attended in Mae Sariang a number of young boys had been ordained as temporary novices. I was told by informants at the funeral that such novices usually remain in the yellow robes for only a few hours and rarely for more than a day or so.

56. According to McFarland's dictionary (*op. cit.*, p. 815) *sompōi* is a Lao and Northern Thai word for *Acacia concinna* (*Leguminosae*), "a climber, the pods of which are important commercially. In India its pods are sold everywhere in the markets, and are used chiefly for washing the hair, but they are also medicinal as a mild cathartic and emetic." The pods of this plant are placed by northern Thai in water on ritual occasions, and the resultant liquid (particularly if it has been chanted over by monks) is considered to have powers of purification. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 231) says that cumin may also be added to the liquid, but in my experience in Mae Sariang, only the *sompōi* pods were deemed significant.

57. This custom is also reported by Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 229); Krai (in Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 161) says that "the person in the house took pots of water to clean the room in which the corpse had been lying and also the ladder; then they broke all the pots". Kingshill (*ibid.*, p. 164) says that at the funeral he attended no actual cleansing of the place occupied in the house by the corpse was performed.

58. The word *song* (ส่ง) is used in referring to seeing a person off on a journey or to indicate that something has been sent to another place. Here it conveys the idea of accompanying the corpse to the cemetery from where it will never return.

59. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 231) interprets this washing, plus that of cleansing the house after the corpse has returned, as a purification procedure undertaken to ensure that fortune (*sirimongkhon*, ศิริมงคล) returns to those who have trafficked with a corpse. He says that people returning from the cemetery will also wash their heads with the special water.

60. Krai (in Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 161) says that "a temporary ladder with three steps was made and put over the regular ladder of the house. When the coffin was taken down, it was carried over this temporary ladder." Kingshill (*ibid.*, p. 164) says that this custom has disappeared from Kū Dāeng.

When the corpse has reached the cemetery,⁶¹ the clergy who have gone to send off the corpse pull (*chak*, ชัก) the *paṅsukūla* (*bangsukun*, บังสุกุล) cloth.⁶² When the *paṅsukūla* cloth is pulled, no one else is nearby (for it is an occasion solely) for the clergy to reflect (*phitcāranā*, พิจารณา) on the corpse as a meditation on impurity (Pāli: *asubha-kammaṭṭhāna*). (This leads to) the reflection that the life of us humans is not permanent (*mai thiāng*, ไม่เที่ยง) in that in the beginning we are born, in the middle (of life) there is change, and at last we perish. Everyone is alike; no one can escape.⁶³

61. The Phra Khrū does not describe the procession to the cemetery. According to Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 227) a specially made and decorated tiered structure, called a *prāsāt* ปราสาท; Pali: *prāsāda*) is used to convey the corpse and coffin to the cemetery. Such a structure is made of bamboo and is decorated with paper. I have seen such structures used for funerals in northeastern Thailand and also know them to be used in villages surrounding Mae Sariang. In Mae Sariang town the *prāsāt* is placed upon a wagon kept at the main wat in town (Wat Kittiwong) in order to convey the corpse to the cemetery. The following passage is my description of a procession held on 30 July 1978 at the funeral of an old man employed by the major lumber company in Mae Sariang:

At the head of the procession was a man striking the special type of bell-shaped gong that is only used, outside the wats, when the monks and novices process out to receive their morning alms and when there is a cremation. Following the gong was a man carrying a pole to which was attached a special *thong* ("banner") with "three tails" [i.e. the *tung sām hāng*] and a top half symbolically shaped to indicate a human being and a sack filled with offerings of food for the deceased [i.e. the *tung khao*] provided by the dead man's relatives. Both the *thong* and sack were made of plain white cloth. Behind this came several men carrying long bamboo poles. Mō Thawōn [an informant from the lumber company] indicated that these were for poking the fire, but they were subsequently cut up and used, at least in part, as containers for water which the monks poured during their chanting. Behind these (poles) came the cortege itself—a wagon containing the coffin inside a decorated structure. The wagon was pulled by women and pushed by men. Also helping to pull the wagon, and in front of the women, were a group of "temporary novices" who were relatives of the deceased and had been specially ordained for the cremation. Following the cortege (in fact all around it) were other people who were also going to the cremation, but who took no special role.

At the cemeteries in villages, a new pyre is constructed for each funeral. In Mae Sariang this was also the case until early in 1968 when a permanent concrete crematorium was constructed. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 229) says that traditionally permanent crematoria, when they were constructed, were made of brick. LeMay (*op. cit.*, p. 192) says that when the corpse is taken to a cemetery, "the exact spot [for cremation] is chosen by flinging away at hazard a bag containing a single egg. The spot where the egg breaks is considered the 'home' of the dead man, and there the cremation takes place." I saw this custom in practice in the village in northeastern Thailand where I carried out research. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 229) records that when a funerary procession reaches the cemetery, it makes a three-fold circumambulation around the pyre. During this circumambulation, the living keep their left side (the inauspicious side) towards the pyre, but the body, carried around head first, has its right side nearer the pyre. At the funeral I attended in July 1968 in Mae Sariang, I noted the following events as having occurred before the monks took the *paṅsukūla* cloth, the next action which the Phra Khrū describes:

At the cremation grounds, the wagon was pushed right up to the crematorium. The preparations (for the cremation) included taking off the superstructure above the casket, draping white (*paṅsukūla*) cloths across the casket, and placing candles, flowers, and bamboo tubes next to the cloths and all around the casket. The casket was still on the wagon. Some female relatives distributed the ceremonial "lighters" consisting of paper bows, three sticks of incense, and treated wood which burns easily (this custom seems to be an innovation, modeled on central Thai practice) to each person present. Others also distributed *mīang* (fermented tea chewed by northern Thai) and cigarettes to the guests. The first symbolic act was the washing of the face of the corpse with coconut water. A coconut was taken and broken open over the face of the corpse and then the coconut was thrown away.

62. The term *paṅsukūla* has the root meaning of "dusty rags". According to Wells (*op. cit.*, p. 112), at the time of the Buddha "it was then prescribed that robes should be made of rags cast away, or of cloth used to wrap the bodies of the dead when taking them to the cremation grounds". He continues: "at present the *paṅsukūla* cloth is presented to monks who chant funeral services, and consists of fresh new robes laid across the coffin—not the dusty rags once left at cremation grounds". He also gives a translation of the Pāli formula chanted on such occasions. This formula includes the dedication of merit to the benefit of the deceased. The verb *chak* is used in referring to what the monks do with the *paṅsukūla* cloth because they do "pull" the cloth off the body or the pyre.

63. Meditation on corpses for the purpose of realizing the truth of the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence (*anicca*) has an important place in Buddhist practice.

Before pulling (off) the *paṅsukūla* cloth, four candles are lit at the four points of the corpse.⁶⁴ These are called (in Northern Thai) *tian sangkṭon* (เทียนสังกอน). After the clergy (have) finished (taking) the *paṅsukūla* (cloth), the coffin is opened and coconut juice is used to bathe the face of the corpse and then (the body) is raised onto the pyre and cremated.⁶⁵ While the cremation is going on, the sponsor is likely to have invited four monks to chant the seven texts of the Abhidhamma (*phra aphitham cet khamphī*, พระอภิธรรม ๗ คัมภีร์).⁶⁶ This is called "chanting in front of the fire" (*sūt nā fai*, สุตหน้าไฟ). This chanting in front of the fire is for sending off the soul (*dūang winyān*, ดวงวิญญาณ) of the deceased to heaven (*suwan*, สุวรรณ).⁶⁷

64. At the funeral I attended in Mae Sariang in July 1968, I noted the following in connection with the monk's taking of the *paṅsukūla* cloth:

There were seven monks. Each took hold of one of the white cloths and chanted in unison (or almost in unison since some the monks were from Thai and others from Burmese wats). Then they pulled the cloths off and handed them to a layman who in turn folded up the cloths and put them in the monks' bags. The monks then individually poured water from the bamboo tubes onto the ground, chanting as they did. This, Mr. Insūan (another lay informant) explained to me, was to "send" the merit to the deceased.

65. This custom is also reported by Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 229). I observed it being performed in Mae Sariang although it took place before the monks received the *paṅsukūla* robes (see footnote 64). A lay informant in Mae Sariang (an ex-monk and a leading layman in the town) told me that coconut water is considered to be the purest of liquids (*nām borisut*, น้ำบริสุทธิ์), presumably because it has never been exposed to any external influences prior to the coconut being opened. Honored guests in northern Thai houses are often served coconut juice as a sign of respect.

66. Obviously, it is impossible for monks to chant the whole of the Abhidhamma on this occasion. Rather, there would be chanting of a few selections (*gāthā*; cf. Wells, *op. cit.*, p. 226).

67. The following passage is my description of the events at a funeral in Mae Sariang which took place following the monks' receipt of the *paṅsukūla* cloths.

This was the only act by the monks [that is, they did not, as in the Phra Khrū's account, chant during the cremation]. Several women and young relatives (then) came forward and prostrated themselves three times before the casket. Then the casket was taken off the wagon and placed on the cremation pyre (both the bottom and top were taken off the casket so that the body would burn more easily). Then, each person came forward and threw his or her "lighter" on the pyre. This was the end of the ceremony, although several men stayed around to make sure that the fire consumed the body.

For another description of events which actually took place at a funeral in a northern Thai village, from the procession until the cremation, see Kingshill (*op. cit.*, pp. 170-171). On this occasion, the casket was carried on a litter by eight men rather than pulled on a wagon. Temporary novices preceded the casket, holding on to a white thread connected to the litter. The only act of the monks at this funeral, like the one I observed, was the taking of the *paṅsukūla* cloths. Kingshill says that after this act the monks returned to the temple. "We were told that priests could stay to witness the cremation, if they so wished. Sometimes, when a relative of a priest is cremated, the priest will stay. But, in general, their duty is done with the last chant, and they prefer to return to the temple" (*ibid.*, p. 170). Kingshill says that the casket was opened with an axe and the corpse taken out. The face of the corpse was anointed with coconut juice and then a bucket of water was poured over the whole body. He also adds that "occasionally, the bones of the corpse are cut with a saw to prevent the limbs from shooting up during the cremation" (*ibid.*). Finally, he says, the body was placed on a wood pyre and the casket and litter placed on top of it "so that it would burn better" (*ibid.*). The actual setting of fire to the casket follows a custom usually associated only with funerals of monks or very high-status persons:

The temple-leader had prepared a fifty-foot long fuse out of paper and gunpower, which he now unrolled on the ground. The fuse was lit, and the flame rolled down until it lit a couple of rockets at the end of the fuse. These rockets shot up along a wire to the top of the coffin. There they ignited other rockets, which, in turn, lit the pyre. This type of elaborate fire lighting is done only in very special cases, when the deceased is a village leader or a rich person, or, perhaps, a priest. For others the firewood is lit simply by holding the kerosene lamp, which had been standing on the coffin since the time of death, to the wood. (*ibid.*, p. 171).

LeMay (*op. cit.*, p. 122) describes another mode of lighting the fire: "each relative or friend will speed the departing guest on the way to his next re-incarnation by placing a lighted candle or shaving of wood on the funeral pyre".

What has been said thus far concerns the practices connected with the corpse (of one who, died naturally or died from witchcraft. According to the beliefs of northern (Thai) householders) there are different arrangements for corpses (of those) whose death (was sudden) or (was of the type which northern Thai call) *tāi kom tāi pāi* (ตายก่อนตายพราย; that is, death during childbirth).

4. Sudden death

It is believed that the souls (*dūang winyān*, ดวงวิญญาณ) of persons who die sudden deaths, (that is, deaths) considered to be *akālamaraṇa*, untimely deaths, deaths which are not good, will remain around the place where they died. They will not be reborn as is ordinarily the case. Villagers fear (these souls) very much, fear that the spirits of those who died sudden deaths (*phī hōng*, ผีโหงง) will haunt (*lōklōn*, หลอกหลอน) them or cause good people to fall ill. They will vow to feed (*liang*, เลี้ยง) (these spirits) from then on. Anyone whose illness is caused by a spirit of one who died a violent death (*phī hōng*, ผีโหงง) is said to have been stricken by such a spirit (*thūk phī hōng*, ถูกผีโหงง). Knowledge that one has been stricken by a spirit of one who died a sudden death comes from seers (*mō du*, หมอดู) spirit doctors (*mō phī*, หมอผี) or possessed persons, that is mediums (*khon song khū cao nāi*, คนทรงคือเจ้านาย). (These specialists tell) why the spirit of one who has died a sudden death has caused (the illness) (and tell) what the spirit wants to eat. When they have said these things, a "vow" (*bon*, บุญ) is made. A vow is telling the spirit that if the ill person is freed from his affliction in so many days, then an offering of a duck, a chicken, a pig, liquor or something will be made. When the person gets better in the period (specified), then the offering will be made (to fulfill) the vow. This belief is still held today.

Those who die sudden deaths are cremated or buried wherever they die.⁶⁸ It is not common to take the corpse to place it for merit-making in the house as (is the case of) an ordinary corpse because of the fear of (what in Northern Thai is called) "*khuy*" (ขี้ต), (that is, evil). Today, it is common for the corpse (of one who has died a sudden death) to be taken and placed in the *wat*. The corpse of one who has died a sudden death is not kept long. (As with funerals for those who died ordinary deaths), clergy are invited (to the funeral of one who had died a sudden death) to send off (*song*, ส่ง) the corpse.⁶⁹

68. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 239) says that those who die sudden deaths are cremated within the day following death and that rites take place at the *wat*, not in the home. I observed two funerals (on the same day, 14 April 1968) for two people in Mae Sariang who died sudden deaths. One was a young girl (14 years old) who sickened and died within a day. The second was a 56-year-old Chinese merchant who committed suicide by taking rat poison after an argument with his wife. Both were cremated and, before the cremation, monks came and chanted and received *paṇsukūla* robes. The most dramatic sudden death in Mae Sariang during the time I lived there was the murder of a very wealthy mine operator (among other business occupations) and politician. While his funeral took place in Chiang Mai, his wife sponsored in Mae Sariang a special merit-making rite four months after the event in order, as she said, to overcome the bad karma of his violent death.

69. Kingshill (*op. cit.*, p. 165) describes a funeral for a man in the village of Kū Dāēng whose unexpected death on a Buddhist sabbath (precept) day was deemed to have been an unnatural death. The body was buried in a grave under a *bō* tree, that is, the tree which minds people of the *bōdhi* tree under which the Buddha found Enlightenment. At this funeral, Kingshill reports, the body was not removed through a hole in the floor as custom dictates.

It is held that the soul (*dūang winyān*, ดวงวิญญาณ) of a person who has died a sudden death is not pure and is not capable of entering a *wat*. Thus, when merit is made to be dedicated to the person who died a violent death, such as (on the occasion) of an alms-offering of bowls (filled) with rice (*khan khao*, ข้าวข้าว) or of food baskets (*kūai sang*, ถ้วยส่ง), monks are invited to give the blessing of dedication of a portion of merit outside the *wat*. This is called "alms-offering outside the *wat*" (*tān nōk wat*, ทานนอกวัด).⁷⁰

5. *Death in childbirth* (*tāi kom tāi pāi*, ต่ำยกั่มต่ำยพราย)

It is believed that death in childbirth is not good, (being) more unfortunate than any other kind (of death). Burial takes place on the same day as the death occurs. There are no religious rites whatsoever; monks are not invited to receive alms or to send off the corpse. The corpse is not placed in a coffin. A litter is used to carry (the body) to the cemetery. The corpse cannot be taken from the house by way of the stairs; (rather), it is passed through a large opening made by prying up the floorboards of the house. After the corpse has been passed through this opening, it is placed on a litter and taken directly to the cemetery. If the corpse is (of one) who died with a child in her womb, (that is, what in Northern Thai is called) *tāi kom* (ต่ำยกั่ม), before it is buried—and it cannot be cremated⁷¹—a magical practitioner (*mō saiyāsāt*, หมอไสยศาสตร์)⁷² takes a sickle used for cutting rice to break open the womb. If the child is dead, it is taken and buried with the mother.

When the burial has been satisfactorily completed, if the husband is returning from the cemetery—usually he would not be likely to go and send off the corpse of his wife—he must not return home. Rather, he must go immediately to the *wat*.⁷³ Having slept (overnight) at the *wat*, he requests (permission) to be ordained as a novice, or even sometimes as a monk. He remains in the clergy sometimes for three days, sometimes seven days, sometimes fifteen days, depending on his faith.⁷⁴ When he leaves the *wat*, a magical practitioner (*mō saiyāsāt*, หมอไสยศาสตร์) performs the rite of cutting him from the *pāi* (พราย; spirit of one who has died in childbirth). This is so that the *pāi* (spirit) which is his (late) wife will not be attached to him. If the child has not died, a rite cutting it off from the *pāi* is also held. It is believed that if the ordination and the (rite of) cutting off from the *pāi* are not held, the *pāi* (spirit) which is his (late) wife will attach itself to him until the day he dies. If he wants to marry again, any woman who knows the story will be prejudiced against him and will not

70. At the ritual of *salākkaphat* (สลากภัตต์), or *kinkūaisalāk* (กินก่ายสลาก) as it is called in northern Thailand, alms-offerings are given to the monks and the resultant merit dedicated to a specific deceased person (see footnote 85). At one such ritual in Mae Sariang, I observed "alms-offering outside the *wat*" being performed by a family whose relative had died a sudden death.

71. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 239) also says that such corpses can never be cremated.

72. Sangūan (*ibid.*) says that the rites connected with a person who has died in childbirth are performed in accord with magical (*saiyāsāt*, ไสยศาสตร์) rather than with Buddhist religious (*sāsanā*, ศาสนา) beliefs.

73. Sangūan (*ibid.*, pp. 239-240) reports that a sacred cord (*sāisin*, สายสิญจน์) will be tied between the husband and his dead wife and then cut by the magician. As soon as this is finished, he goes directly to the *wat*.

74. Sangūan (*ibid.*, p. 240) also notes that ordination by the husband of a woman who dies in childbirth is a northern Thai practice.

be willing to marry him. Merit-making for a person who dies this type of death is performed after the burial has been satisfactorily completed.

6. Rites following the cremation

While the corpse is still present for merit-making in the house, (the house) is said to be "the corpse's house" (*bān sop*, บ้านศพ) or "the spirit's house" (*bān phī*, บ้านผี). There is chanting and the giving of sermons each night (during this period while the corpse is in the house). (During the ensuing period) after the corpse has been cremated, but before there has been the chanting (which will end the funerary rites), the house is called a "cold dwelling" (*hūan nēn*, เชื้อเย็น)⁷⁵ and no religious rites are held.

Three or four days following the cremation, at a time fixed by the sponsor, there will be chanting at the house. (This chanting,) called the "household *saṅgaha* chant" (*sūt saṅgaha bān*, สูตรสังคหะบ้าน),⁷⁶ (is performed) in order that there might be auspiciousness (*siri-mongkhon*, ศิริมงคล) for the house and for the people who live in the house. This is not done at all in order to dedicate (merit) to the deceased. The household *saṅgaha* chant (includes) the chanting by monks of the *Maṅgala-sutta*⁷⁷ and the dharmic sermon called *Dhamma Jaya-saṅgaha*.⁷⁸ In the afternoon of the same day before the (chanting) of the household *saṅgaha* chant, monks are invited to go and pull *paṅsukūla* (cloth at the) remains (*at*, อัฐิ) in the

75. Sangūan (*ibid.*, p. 215) says that the term *hūan nēn* (เชื้อเย็น) applies to the house during the whole of time between death and the final rites, and he says that the term is a shorthand way of referring to funerary rites. These rites may also collectively be called *pōi phī tāi* (ปอยผีตาย), "the festival of the spirit of the dead". He interprets the term *hūan nēn* as signifying the grief felt by household members during the period of funerary rites. Such an interpretation does not accord with other uses of the term *nēn* (pronounced *yen* in standard Thai), as below in the interpretation of "cool water", which signify detachment from emotional states. Sangūan also says (*ibid.*, p. 231) that after a cremation has taken place, members of the household in which the deceased lived will place a device, known in Northern Thai as *tālāo* (ตำหลวง) and in standard Thai as *chalāo* (เฉลว), at the doorway of the house. McFarland (*op. cit.*, p. 271) defines a *chalāo* as "a device made by folding and crossing thin bamboo strips to the shape of two equilateral triangles, so interlaced as to form a six-pointed figure, having open spaces between the slats". The *tālāo/chalāo* is used not only by northern Thai and Thai, but also by neighboring tribal groups as well as by other Buddhist groups in southeast Asia, as a protective amulet against evil spirits. Sangūan says that it is used in the funerary ritual so that the spirit of the deceased will be frightened and will not return and enter the house.

76. *Saṅgaha* (Northern Thai : *sangkaha*, สังคหะ), which in some contexts means "collecting, accumulation", here has the meaning of "kindliness, assistance, support, aid". Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 230) says that the significance of this chant is "to make merit in order to cleanse the house of inauspiciousness (*avamāṅgala*)".

77. See *Pali Chanting Scripture* (*op. cit.*, pp. 65-73) and Tambiah (*op. cit.*, pp. 214-215) for the same translation of this chant. The title of the chant means "The Great Blessings" and the substance concerns how the positive consequences of bliss can be attained through moral action. The chant is also believed by many people to have intrinsic power (i.e. to be a spell) to create auspiciousness.

78. This perhaps may be the *Jayamaṅgalagāthā*, "Conquest and Blessing" (see *Pali Chanting Scripture*, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-137 and Tambiah, *op. cit.*, p. 216, for text and translation).

cemetery.⁷⁹ Relatives take the remains and place them in a pot (which) is (then) taken and deposited at the *wat*. (There) later (the remains will be placed in what in Northern Thai is called) a *kū* (กู่; i.e. a reliquary) (which) is constructed as a memorial (*anusōn*, อนุสรณ์).⁸⁰ They might also be taken and buried at the cemetery. When the household *saṅgaha* chant is finished, the funerary rites will have been completed.⁸¹

79. On 19 April 1968, I attended the collecting of the remains (*kep kradūk*, เก็บกระดูก; lit., "collecting of the bones") of a woman who had been cremated in Mae Sariang. The following is my description of the events which took place on this occasion:

There were about ten people present, including four novices whom I took to have been ordained for the cremation, three or four youngish women and late teenagers, and two or three young men, plus (one monk). They had brought with them the following: a silver bowl containing *sompōi* water, a small earthenware pot, a basket, *pānsukūla* cloth, and a cone of *khriāng būchā* (เครื่องบูชา; i.e. candles, flowers, and incense used as an offering to Buddhist sacra). There was also a wreath of artificial flowers, made out of tinfoil, which may have already been at the cemetery and picked up for use on this occasion. The young men went and collected several large leaves from plants nearby. One woman, who seemed to be the youngest, knelt in front of the pyre and prostrated herself two times. Then she and other women, plus one or two of the men (including one novice) dug through the ashes and pulled out some bones. Most were placed in the bucket, while some were placed on the leaves near the pyre. Finally, when a large number had been collected in the bucket, the *sompōi* water was poured over them. Then as many were put in the pot as could be put there. This was then covered with a small white cloth which was tied with a piece of cotton thread. The remaining bones were placed on the large leaves and the wreath was placed over them. The pot was then taken away from the pyre and placed on another bed of leaves. An older woman placed the white cloth across the pot and then placed the cone of *khriāng būchā* over it. (The monk) came over and crouched in front of the cloth. He chanted, slowly removing the cloth and cone of *khriāng būchā* as he did. He ended by chanting a blessing (*hai phon*, ไห้พร). Then the pot was taken and placed in the center of the wreath on the pyre and the ceremony was over. (No remains were taken away from the cemetery.) (The monk) says that this ceremony is held either three or seven days after a cremation (in this case three days).

LeMay (*op. cit.*, p. 122) says that "as soon as it becomes possible, the ashes of the deceased are gathered together and kept by the family in an urn or small pot". Kingshill (*op. cit.*, pp. 171-172) observed somewhat different customs associated with collecting the relics of those cremated in Kū Dāēng:

The ashes and remaining bones are collected a few days after the funeral. Some villagers go out to the cemetery at any time, perhaps even the following morning. Others consult one of the priests for an auspicious time or hours (*ibid.*, p. 171).

At one funeral, the monk advised the widow to collect the remains on the morning of the seventh day following the cremation. He describes the events associated with this particular collecting of the remains as follows:

One of [the widow's] sons and a son-in-law . . . went to the cemetery early in the morning, put the ashes and a few remaining bones into an earthenware jar, and wrapped all of it into a white cloth. They then took it to the temple, where the two priests and two senior novices chanted a *suad* . . . over the remains. The sons took the bundle back out to the cemetery, where they buried it in an unmarked spot (*ibid.*, pp. 171-172).

80. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 230) says that the remains of high-status persons and of monks are enshrined in a *kū*. The remains of ordinary persons are placed, he says, in a sand reliquary in a watercourse where they are eventually washed away. Kingshill (*op. cit.*, p. 172) reports that in Kū Dāēng remains of ordinary persons were buried in the cemetery. He also reports how one man was dissuaded by a monk from enshrining the remains of his wife in a *kū*. The monk told the man that "it would be improper to build a tomb since the spirit [i. e. the soul, *dūang winyān*] of his wife would then stay at the tomb and would not have a chance to go elsewhere or be reborn. The remains of this woman were, therefore, also buried in the usual manner in an earthenware jar in an unmarked spot in the cemetery." In Mae Sariang the usual practice was also to bury the remains in the cemetery. The northern Thai practice contrasts with what I observed in northeastern Thailand where the remains of every adult who died a normal death were enshrined in a reliquary (called a *thāt*, ฐาต) located on the periphery of the *wat*. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 230) suggests that when a reliquary is constructed—as it is even in the north for monks and for high-status lay persons—it becomes the object of rites focused on the spirit that is connected with the shrine. Thus, a type of ancestor worship emerges.

81. The ritual process has thus moved from the disruption of the household following the death to the restoration of order (auspiciousness) with the household *saṅgaha* chant.

If there is making of merit to dedicate to the deceased again, it will be undertaken at the large affairs following the end of the rice harvest. (Then) relatives will join together (to sponsor the rites called in Northern Thai) *pōi khao sang* (ปอยเข้าสัง; “feast of rice [offerings] for the dead”) or *tān hūan nōi* (ตานเขื่อนน้อย; “alms-offering of a little house”).⁸² When these major merit-making (events have been held), the responsibility of the relatives (to the dead) is finished. There will (subsequently) be only alms-offering of containers of rice (*khan khao*, ขันเข้า)⁸³ and alms-offering of food baskets (*kūai sang*, ก้วยสัง)⁸⁴ at the *salāk* (สลาก) festival⁸⁵ or, occasionally, alms-offering of *dhamma* (texts).

If the deceased was a Shan or a Burman, a (ritual) to make merit to dedicate to the deceased (called, in Burmese?) *hāēm sōm* (แหม่มซอม)⁸⁶ is held three to seven days after the sending off of the corpse. Another merit-making (ritual), called (in Burmese?) *hāēm sōm kōcā* (แหม่มซอมโก้จา), is held in the eleventh lunar month, southern (Thai reckoning).⁸⁷ *Hāēm sōm kōcā* is similar to the Khonmūang (northern Thai) alms-offering of the *huan nōi* (เขื่อนน้อย) or *khao sang* (เข้าสัง).

Merit-making on the seventh, fiftieth, and hundredth days (following death) are all new (practices) for Mae Sariang Buddhists, being customs which have only recently come from central (Thailand) and have not yet spread among the people. These were not observed traditionally (in northern Thailand).

Everything said thus far concerns funerary customs of householders (*khrihat*, คฤหัสถ์) in general. The corpses of monks and novices are treated differently from those of householders.⁸⁸

82. At this ritual, a scale-model house (about one quarter actual size) is constructed in which all those things normally used by the deceased in her or his lifetime are placed. The house and its contents are then offered as alms to clergy invited to the home of the deceased. It is evident that the rites perpetuate an idea that goods can be offered for the actual use by the deceased. For a discussion of this ritual, see Sangūan (*op. cit.*, pp. 296-298) and for the same or related customs, see Kingshill (*op. cit.*, pp. 173-176). I observed a number of these rituals in Mae Sariang and plan a separate study based on my observations.

83. These offerings contain foods which do not need to be consumed immediately (i.e. uncooked rice, dried foods, canned foods, tea, etc.). In Mae Sariang, it is also popular to place such items as soap, toilet paper, matches, and so on in these offerings. *Khan khao* can be offered at any time; a popular time being an anniversary of a death.

84. A type of offering specifically connected with the *salākaphat* rite.

85. This ritual is a mass merit-making affair at which the alms offered to the clergy are distributed through a lottery (cf. footnote 70). For an account of this rite see Sangūan (*op. cit.*, pp. 62-70), and for descriptions of the actual performance of the rite in northern Thailand, see Kingshill (*op. cit.*, pp. 204-207) and Davis (“Muang metaphysics...”, *loc. cit.*, pp. 290-304). For a text associated with the ritual, together with some interpretation of the text, see *The Blessings of Religious Acts* (*op. cit.*). Again, I had the opportunity to observe many occasions on which this ritual was performed in Mae Sariang and I plan a separate study based on my observations.

86. There were in 1967-1968 two *wat* in Mae Sariang which followed Burmese practice, and two others which followed closely related Shan practice. I have translated the terms applied to Burmese/Shan customs from the Thai and am unable to reconstruct the original Burmese/Shan form.

87. The northern Thai calendar is two months ahead of the calendar as found in central (referred to in older northern Thai texts as “southern”) Thailand, as well as in other parts of the country. Thus, when a lunar calendar date is mentioned in the north, it must be specified whether or not the date is in accord with northern or central (southern) Thai reckoning.

88. I have described and analyzed a funeral of a monk in Mae Sariang in another context (Keyes, 1975, *op. cit.*). The customs in Mae Sariang are similar to those of the Shans and Burmese and differ somewhat from those followed elsewhere in northern Thailand. For typical northern Thai practice, see Sangūan (*op. cit.*, pp. 247-250) and for some discussion of Shan practice, see Sangūan (*ibid.*, pp. 337-339). For discussion of the significance of death rituals for the most revered northern Thai monk of modern times, see Keyes (“Death of two Buddhist saints in Thailand”, *op. cit.*).

When a monk or novice passes away (*dai thung kāē moranaphāp*, ได้ถึงแก่มรณภาพ),⁸⁹ instead of bathing his corpse with hot and cold water, as is done for corpses of householders, wax (*khi phung*, ขี้ผึ้ง) is taken to close the ears, eyes, nose and mouth, and two or three quarts of honey (*nām phung*, น้ำผึ้ง) are taken and poured into the mouth (of the corpse). This honey protects the corpse from decaying since (in the past) there was no medicine which could be injected to prevent decay as there is today. The corpse (of a monk or novice) must be kept for a long time, for months or years. The corpse is wrapped thickly in clerical robes (*phā cīwōn*, ผ้าจีวร) and then placed in a coffin when it has been finished. The corpse is placed for merit-making (*bamphen kuson*, บำเพ็ญกุศล) at the *wat*. Later, as is convenient, the corpse is unwrapped and taken for the rite (known in Northern Thai as) *pōi lō* (ปอยล้อ; “the feast of the cart [on which the corpse of a monk is placed]”). (This ritual) is held when the villagers are freed from the work of the harvest.

Whether the funeral or a monk or a novice is a large or small affair and whether the corpse is kept for a long time (before the funeral) depends on the importance of the deceased. If the monk or novice was a junior member of the monastery (*lūk wat*, ลูกวัด), the corpse will not be kept for long before the cremation is held and there will be no tug-of-war (*kānchaklāk*, การชักลาก) of the *prāsāda* (ปราสาท),⁹⁰ (the tiered structure on which the corpse is placed during the period of the final rites).

The place where a monk or novice is cremated is not to be mixed up with (the place used for funerals) of householders; it is held in a separate (location). Surrounding the pyre four bamboo poles are erected with a monk’s robe stretched out and attached (to the type of the poles). This signifies that it is the place for the cremation of a monk or novice.

If the corpse is that of a *bhikkhu* who held the status of abbot of a *wat* or higher (status) or who was a monk of many years in the monkhood (lit., aged many Lent) and was greatly respected and revered by the people in general, it will be kept a long time. At the time of the cremation, the large feast called *pōi lō* (ปอยล้อ) will be held. The festival (will last) for three or sometimes seven days, depending on the ability (of people) to organize it. During the festival there will be religious rites and sermons and chanting every night, and during the day, each day, there will be a tug-of-war (*kānchaklāk*, การชักลาก) of the *prāsāda* (containing) the corpse. It is believed that the tug-of-war of the *prāsāda* (containing) the corpse yields merit and demonstrates the respect and reverence (which people have) for the corpse. During the cremation rites, different *wat* make fire rockets which are called (in Northern Thai) “*bōk fai lō*” (บอกไฟล้อ; “tubal fire rockets”). (These) are used (to start) the cremation (fire). No ranking person takes the fire to begin the cremation as was done at the cremation of the *caokhun* (เจ้าคุณ) of Mae Hong Son. If there had not been a royal

89. Words used to refer to the death of a member of the Sangha, as well as to the death of a royal personage, are more elaborate than those used for ordinary mortals. These words are derived from Pāli/Sanskrit.

90. The *prāsāda* constructed for a monk is far more elaborate than that made for the funeral of an ordinary person, although those made for royalty and high-status lay persons are similar. This structure signifies the sacred cosmos of Hindu-Buddhist thought.

gift of the flame (to begin the cremation at that ritual), they would have used *bōk fai lō* also.⁹¹ After the cremation (of a monk or novice) is completed, the remains are later collected and installed in a *kū* (กู่; reliquary) at the *wat*.⁹²

7. Dharmic metaphors⁹³ connected with funerals⁹⁴

(a) *Bathing (the body) with hot and cold water.* Owing to the fact that the deceased had not bathed during his (final) illness, his body is likely to be dirty. After death, the body is bathed and cleansed and is properly dressed. In addition to this, people traditionally (saw in the act of bathing the body with hot and cold water) a metaphor for people to consider. "Hot water" means the fruits of various evil actions which cause one to receive suffering and trouble. Such (suffering and trouble) can be compared with bathing with hot water. "Cold water" means the fruits of good karma, that is merit (*bun kuson*, บุญกุศล) which for those who have gained it results in their receiving the cool shade which is constant happiness (*sukkha*). (This happiness) can be compared with bathing in cool water.⁹⁵

(b) *Placing money in the mouth of the corpse.* While we humans are alive, we are greedy (*lobha*) to accumulate material goods and wealth; we are, thus, avaricious. We do not know how to sacrifice and distribute wealth for the benefit of ourselves or for the collectivity. Once dead, it is impossible to take personal wealth with one. Even if (money) is placed in the mouth, it is still not possible to take it with one. Another interpretation (*nai*, นัย) says

91. In this passage, the Phra Khrū is referring to the funeral of the late provincial abbot of Mae Hong Son whose cremation both he and I attended in 1968. This monk, like certain other high-status individuals, was honored by having the flame to start the fire sent by H.M. the King of Thailand himself. Both for this reason and because the monk was not a native northern Thai (he originally came from northeastern Thailand), northern Thai customs were not observed at his funeral.

92. The Phra Khrū does not give any attention in his account to the funerals of royalty or other high-ranking persons. In part, he probably did not consider this topic because such funerals would almost never be held in Mae Sariang. Today, rites for high-ranking lay persons follow central Thai (or royal Thai) customs. In the past, such rites were comparable to those for a monk. For brief notes about traditional rites for high-ranking and royal northern Thai, see LeMay (*op. cit.*, p.127), A. R. Colquhoun (*Amongst the Shans*, pp.289-290), Bock (*op. cit.*, p. 262).

93. Although McFarland (*op. cit.*, p. 510) glosses the term *paritsanā* (ปริศนา, from Sanskrit *pariśāna*) as "a question; an inquiry; an interrogation; an allegory; a riddle; a parable", I believe that "metaphor" conveys better sense of the usage of the word here. In this context, various elements of ritual action are interpreted as pointing to a deeper meaning which comes from Buddhist dharma. "Metaphor" seems to me to convey best the relationship between the act and the religious interpretation.

94. The Phra Khrū here is most certainly drawing upon his knowledge of certain ritual texts—such as *ānisong sīa sop* or *ānisong lāng kāp* (see footnote 53)—for the interpretations he gives. See, in this connection, the translation of *ānisong sīa sop* in *The Blessings of Religious Acts* (*op. cit.*) and the compilations of dharmic metaphors based on *ānisong lāng kāp* in Sangūan (*op. cit.*, pp. 232-238) and Krai (in Kingshill, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-163). Although each source has dealt with a somewhat different set of metaphors than those considered by the Phra Khrū, all serve to find Buddhist significance in ritual acts connected with death.

95. Krai (in Kingshill, *ibid.*, p. 161) interprets the bathing with hot and cold water as follows:

The sins in our bodies are like hot water; they are bad ideas, prejudice, deceitful minds, and anger which emanate from the six doors: the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. If we can draw these sins out and throw them away, everything becomes cold, like the hot water, when left to stand, will become cold as the quiet mind of a holy priest.

Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 233) suggests that this custom may derive from the Indian practice of bathing corpses with water from the Ganges.

that the deceased takes the money (to use) as the fare for the boat or raft to the land of spirits (*mūṅg phī*, เมื่องผี).⁹⁶

(c) *Binding (the hands and feet of the) corpse with string.* The metaphorical meaning of binding first the hands (and then the feet) is equivalent to the Pāli saying, *puttaṅ jive dhanāṅ hatthe bhariyā pāde*. Translated (this means) the passion (*taṅhā*) or love for a child is like a rope binding the neck; the passion of love for wealth is like a hemp put on (Northern Thai: *sup*, สูป) the elbows; the passion of love for a wife is like a sheath put on the feet.⁹⁷

(d) *The candle of time.* The candle of time (เทียนยาม) is lit beginning on the day of death and continues (to burn) until the day of the disposal of the corpse. In addition to burning the candle so that there is light to see the corpse, people traditionally (also said that this) practice had a religious moral meaning. They said that the hearts of humans are dark because they have become beclouded by impurities (*kilesa*), passion (*taṅhā*) and ignorance (*avijjā*), making one incapable of seeing the good which is the portion of merit. When the heart is dark, one must use a light (*prathip*, ปราชิต) which is the dharma as a means to illuminate the way to make the heart bright and to see the ways in life leading to good. The dharma can thus be compared to that light.⁹⁸

96. Sangūan (*ibid.*, p. 235) gives the same interpretation as that presented here, although in slightly different words. Krai (in Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 162) offers the following exegesis:

All people are lovers of money. Some try to get it by any means, such as cheating or stealing. When a person dies, the money is put in his mouth to show that the dead cannot eat. For money is a worldly thing; we cannot take it with us when we die.

Krai also provides an interpretation of placing a chew of betel in the dead person's mouth, an interpretation not found in other sources:

Man has a dirty mouth. He uses his mouth to gossip with his neighbors. He eats everything, whether it is clean or dirty. When he dies, he cannot eat anything, even ground betel.

97. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 235) says that the meaning of the strings is to remind one of the pitfalls of love of children and wife, of parents, and of wealth. He goes on (*ibid.*, pp. 235-236) to say that "even if these strings cannot be cut with a knife, even if they do not burn in the cremation fire, they can be cut by wisdom (*pañña*) and practice of the Eight-fold Path". Krai (in Kinghill, *op. cit.*, p. 162) interprets the strings as follows:

Roping the body with three turns of white thread. The three turns of thread are passion, anger, and prejudice, which are bound to our bodies. This is called our burden (*trāsāeng*, ตราสง). When the corpse is taken to the cemetery, the undertaker cuts the three turns of thread, thereby removing the three burdens by the three wisdoms: charity, kindheartedness, and meditation. The four principles of Buddhist belief are: (1) Life is burdensome and unhappy; it is tragic. (2) The ambition of man is to be this and that, making him indifferent to life. (3) To know how to stay away from these ambitions. (4) The Middle Way will lead us to destroy unhappiness and tragedy.

The whole essence of Buddhist doctrine has thus been linked to the threads used to tie parts of the body of a dead person.

98. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 237) says that a lamp (*takhān*, ตะเทียน), which may be used instead of a candle, is like a human life because once its fuel is finished, it goes out and cannot be relit. Krai (in Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 162) interprets the lighting of a lamp as follows: "Light represents wisdom. When the light is out, life meets death. Life without wisdom is hard and dark life." Kingshill (*ibid.*, p. 158), who observed a kerosene lantern being used instead of a candle at a funeral in Ku Daeng, was told that the "lamp was lit and placed at the head of the body, 'so that the ghost of the deceased can see all that is going on in the room, including the gifts that are placed near the body for making merit' ". He was also told by a monk "that the purpose of this lamp was to light the way for the dead person so that he might find the way to the other world".

(e) *Beautiful flowers placed in the hands (of the corpse)*. (This) means that the soul of the deceased will take flowers to go to pay respects to the jeweled hair relic of Cuḷamanī in the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven.⁹⁹

(f) *The monk's almsbowl*. (This) signifies the almsbowl of the Lord Buddha. That is, at the time of a funeral, the Lord Buddha processes here to (show his) mercy (*prōt*, โปรด). By having an almsbowl for the Lord Buddha, (offerings of) food (*āhān khāo wān*, อาหารคาวหวาน), areca nuts, fermented tea (*mīang*, เมี่ยง), betel leaves, cheroots, uncooked rice, and a one-baht coin can be placed in it. After the corpse has been taken down from the house, the almsbowl is taken directly to the *wat*.¹⁰⁰

(g) *Three-tailed banner (tung sām hāng, ตุงสามหาง)*. This banner of white cloth is sewn so that it is a bag with three edges. In this bag-banner are placed various kinds of food. It is taken and placed at the head of the corpse when the corpse is in the house. When the corpse is taken to the cemetery to be cremated, there are those who carry the bag in front of the corpse. This three-tailed banner signifies the Triple Gems. Buddhists during their lifetime take the Three Gems as their refuge and as the foundation for the path in life leading to good. Even after death, (the Triple Gems) are taken as the refuge for the soul going to a state of peacefulness (*sugati*). The three-tailed banner is thus comparable to the Triple Gems.¹⁰¹

(h) *Three-step stairs (or) the spirit stairway (bandai phī, บันไดผี)*. (This) signifies the three realms (*bhava*), namely the sensual realm (*kama-bhava*), the realm of form (*rūpa-bhava*), and the formless realm (*arūpa-bhava*). So long as we humans still have impurities (*kilesa*), we will go round and round, dying and being born in these three realms, without end until (we)

99. Krai does not mention this metaphor, but Sangūan (*op. cit.*, p. 218), although out of context, does interpret the placing of flowers, as well as candles and incense, in the hands of a corpse in the same way as the Phra Khrū has done. LeMay (*op. cit.*, pp. 191-192) says that flowers, candles and a waxen boat are placed in the hands of the corpse, "the symbolism of this ceremony being that the flowers and candles are to be offered to the relics of the Lord Buddha in the Crystal Pagoda of Heaven, and the boat is to carry the dead man across the vast Ocean of Eternity, and help him escape from the relentless Wheel of Life". G.E. Gerini (*A Retrospective View and Account of the Origin of the Thet Maha Ch'at*, p. 9) tells the story of the reliquary in the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven in the following terms:

(The shrine is a sacred spire) in which a tooth relic is enshrined. This tooth was stolen at the distribution of Buddha's relics which took place after his cremation, by a Brahmin . . . who concealed it in his top-knot [*cula*] so that it became, so to speak, a gem [*mani*] or crest for the Brahmin's hair. Indra snatched the precious tooth from the Brahmin and enshrined it in the spire, which is situated in the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven. The same spire contains Buddha's hair.

Implied in the interpretation by the Phra Khrū (and Sangūan and LeMay) is that the soul of the deceased will first go to the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven before being reborn in a new form.

100. Sangūan does not mention this metaphor. Krai (in Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 163) gives the following interpretation of the almsbowl: "When a man is still living, he is not much interested in the problems of sin or charity. When his life is about to reach its end, he feels that he will die soon, so he begins to learn how to be charitable to priests".

101. Sangūan does not mention this metaphor. Krai (in Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 163) says that "the three-tailed flag may be compared to the 'Three Refuges': The Lord Buddha, the Law, and the Priesthood. Buddhists are supposed to seek refuge in these three". He distinguishes the three-tailed flag from the sack of rice and gives to the latter the following interpretation (*loc. cit.*): "the bag of rice consists of one hundred little packages of rice which are supposed to be for the dead. However, they are given to the beggars at the cemetery." Kingshill (*ibid.*, p. 158) was also told that the three-tailed banner represented the Buddhist Trinity and says that the sack of food (*thung khāo*, ถุงข้าว) symbolizes "the food which the dead person should carry with him on his way to the other world".

reach Nibbāna. Traditionally, people made the three-step stairs and placed it so that people below (the house) would think about this dharmic metaphor.¹⁰²

(i) *The two pots containing sompōi water.* The first pot is used for anointing the corpse (as it is) taken down from the house. The other pot is taken to the entrance of the path leading to the cemetery for those who have sent off the corpse to use in washing their hands as they return home. The *sompōi* water in these two pots, used for anointing and washing, (serves to) drive away completely accursed misfortune (*saniat canrai*, เสนียดจัญไร), various evil things and the vile (Northern Thai: *khut*, ขี้ต) beings (*tūa*, ตัว).¹⁰³

(j) *The wax (used) to close (the orifices) on the head of the corpse.* (Traditionally, people) drew the following dharmic metaphor for reflection (from this action). We humans have pleasant and unpleasant emotions which emerge from the sense-organs (*āyatana phāinai*, อายตนะภายใน) of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind being affected by the sense-objects (*āyatana phāinōk*, อายตนะภายนอก) of form, sound, smell, taste, sensation, and moral sense. (This contact) thus creates feelings, as, for example, when the eyes see a form and the ears hear a sound. If the form is lovely, it is pleasing and desirable. (If) the ears hear a sound which is pleasant, it (also) is pleasing and desirable. When we have desire, that is, craving (*taṇhā*), this causes action (*kamma*) to be undertaken, actions which cannot follow a good path but which will take an evil path. Thus, it was taught to close the ears, the eyes, the nose, and so on (so as to) control oneself to be wary and not to have pleasure or wickedness. The contact between these two (aspects) of sense can be compared to taking wax to place in the eyes, ears, nose, and so on.¹⁰⁴

(k) *Iron and gold banners (tung lek tung tōng, ตุงเหล็กตุงทอง).* It is believed that if there are iron and gold banners, the dead person will be able to go to a peaceful state. Even if he should be subject to suffering, he will be freed from this suffering. Even if he is not freed, it will be caused to be lessened. Thus, on every occasion when there is a corpse, iron and gold banners are placed (by it). When the corpse is taken down from the house

102. Krai (in Kingshill, *ibid.*, p. 162) gives an additional interpretation of the stairway: "The ladder with three steps... is comparable to the three conditions [that is, the three realms mentioned by the Phra Khrū] ... The ladder is destroyed to show that the dead man is freed from these conditions, that he will never be born again".

103. Sangūan (*op. cit.*, pp. 233-234) says that the breaking of the pot signifies the inevitable destruction of form essence (*rūpa-dhamma*), nominal-essence (*nāma-dhamma*) and the constituent elements (*khandha*). He also says (*ibid.*, p. 236) that the washing of the place where the corpse had been signifies taking the Noble Eightfold Path and the Three Conditions of Being (*traī lakkhanā*, ไตรลักษณ์) to cleanse the corpse. Finally, he says (*ibid.*, pp. 236-237) that those who wash their hands and head with water to which *sompōi* and cumin have been added will have accursed misfortunes and suffering and sorrow dispelled. "Cumin and *sompōi* water cleanse one of inauspicious things (such as death)." Krai (in Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 163) says that "the lustral water is to be used by all the people in the procession to cleanse themselves when they return. It is considered holy water, which will protect a person from all kinds of evil."

104. This metaphor is not mentioned by either Krai or Sangūan.

to go to the cemetery, the iron and gold banners are taken to the *wat*. Because they have been taken from the *wat*, they are called homage (Northern Thai: *pūcā*, ပျံ့ချာ) (items).¹⁰⁵

Conclusion‡

There are still other dharmic metaphors which can be posited with reference to the elements of funerary rituals. Sangūan¹⁰⁶ reflects on the corpse being dressed in new clothes. Even though the clothes may be beautiful, he says, the deterioration of the body remains obvious. Thus, it can be seen that nothing is as beautiful as when there is still life. Krai¹⁰⁷ notes that in some funerals a measuring stick is placed in the coffin with the corpse. "This is a sign," he says, "to warn the dead man of his size. Thereby he will act according to his real condition, his real size and will not try to exaggerate." Both Krai¹⁰⁸, reflecting on three

‡ By Charles F. Keyes.

105. Krai (in Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 160) provides the following exegesis on this item:

[*Tung lek tung tōng*] is a native word meaning 'flag'. It is a symbol for the dead. . . . Nowadays . . . goods are expensive; gold and silver are scarce. We cannot make offerings by giving real things to the dead. Therefore, the iron and golden flags have become a substitute for these properties. The little pieces of gold leaf are used as a substitute for gold, and the tin foil of a package of cigarettes can take the place of silver. Sometimes the whole is painted with mercury. Soil, rice, and other pieces of property making a total of twelve, are put on the tray.

This interpretation seems to suggest that the *tung lek tung tōng* are a recent invention, being a substitute for some real wealth that used to be dedicated to the dead. In fact, this item has probably long been imbedded in the northern Thai tradition. Kingshill (*ibid.*, p. 159) records an old sermon, told by a monk, which provides the mythical basis for the inclusion of *tung lek tung tōng* in rituals connected with the dead:

[O]nce upon a time there was a priest whose hobby was working as a blacksmith. One day he went into the jungle to find a big tree out of which to make a new stove. When he had finally found one which was big and strong enough for his purpose, he returned to the temple to get an ax to cut down the tree. He never returned to cut the tree, however, because he was suddenly taken ill and died within a few short moments. After his death his [soul (*winyān*)] went to stay in the tree in the jungle and became a lizard . . . , because he had been thinking of cutting down the tree before his death. One day a girl from the village went into the jungle to cut firewood, but she could not find her way home. So she went to the tree where the lizard was living and asked him to protect her from all danger. The lizard had mercy on her and did as she had asked. The next morning, after the lizard had shown the girl the way back to the village, she asked him whether there was anything he wanted her to do when she got back home. The lizard asked her to make an iron flag and a golden flag and to offer them to the priest in the temple so that he could be released from being a lizard watching a tree. When the girl had done as he had requested, and transferred her merit to the lizard, the lizard was released and reborn in the other world. Today we believe . . . that by giving an iron flag and a gold flag to the temple at a funeral, the merit thus made will help the spirit of the dead person to be reborn in the other world.

The following is my description of a *tung lek tung tōng* which I observed at a ritual of merit-making for a dead relative of a person living in Mae Sariang:

The *tung* was about one and half feet high. The top of the *tung* was a representation of a lotus made from tin. Hanging from the rim at the top of the implement were a number of symbolic objects including a boat, paddle, raft, pole for propelling a raft, and seven pieces of wood of the same shape. Some of the latter had pieces of metal inside and some had other things. The symbolism of the boat and raft (as given to me by a young Mae Sariang man who was serving as my assistant) is that the soul of the dead might need a craft to cross the river dividing hell from heaven or (according to another older informant) to reach the land of the spirits.

The basic symbolism of the *tung lek tung tōng* then would appear to be as a representation of the implements (physically, banners reaching to the heavens, boats, wealth to pay the way; metaphysically, the merit made by oneself and by others who have transferred to the one) which can be used in attaining heaven or a good rebirth.

106. *Op. cit.*, p. 233.

107. In Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

108. *Loc. cit.*

planks on the bottom of the coffin, and Sangūan¹⁰⁹, who considers three pieces of bamboo which are pulled when the corpse is taken down from the house as well as the threefold circumambulation at the pyre, assert that the number three signifies the three conditions or states of existence: the condition of sensuousness, the condition of form and formless condition. So long as humans act in accord with their desires (*taṇhā*), they will continually be reborn in one of these conditions. Krai says, therefore, that "a wise person should pray to be freed from these conditions absolutely. Success in this will bring hope for [Nibbāṇa]."¹¹⁰

Krai sees in the vase of candles placed near the coffin "a sign of gratefulness. The dead is considered a sinless body, so we ought to give him recognition for being cleansed from his sins." He also sees the offerings of flowers, candles and incense placed near the corpse as a symbol of the Triple Gems.¹¹¹ Sangūan notes that a path (to where is not mentioned) is traced on the ground at the time of a funeral. This act means that one should be intent on doing those things (making merit, offering alms, keeping the precepts and meditating, aspiring for Nibbāṇa) which are the correct path and avoiding those things which intoxicate us with sentient existence, thereby closing the path to Nibbāṇa.¹¹²

Krai sees two actions as serving to sever the deceased from the world in which he has lived:

Choosing a man wearing a diamond ring to lead the funeral procession [has the following meaning:] Man is love with living. When he dies, he must get rid of this love. The man who wears the ring will not look back, but must look at the diamond ring until the procession gets to the cemetery. Diamond is a good thing to look at in order to forget all of the past.

At the gate (to the village) there is some mark of demarcation which "is to show the dead man has been associated with the world long enough. He ought to forget about it absolutely, never to come back again."¹¹³ Sangūan interprets the taboo against looking back when one is on the way to the cemetery with a corpse as signifying that when a person has died, and become a spirit, he ceases to be a relative of those who were his parents, children, nephews, nieces, and so on. Thus, he should no longer concern himself in their affairs.¹¹⁴

Krai sees in the thread used by the monks and/or novices in leading the corpse to the cremation grounds a means whereby the deceased can be led to Nibbāṇa.¹¹⁵ While he does not make the point, this symbolism is intensified if those who are holding onto the string are novices ordained to make merit for the deceased.

Sangūan says that the coconut juice used to bathe the face of the corpse at the cemetery signifies the pure spirit of "the Buddha, the arhats, and the pacceka Buddhas who have completely eliminated all impurities" (*kilesa*).¹¹⁶

109. *Op. cit.*, p. 236; p. 235.

110. In Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

111. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

112. *Op. cit.*, p. 234.

113. In Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

114. Sangūan, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

115. In Kingshill, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

116. Sangūan, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

There are even more items in Krai's list (he includes a total of 21 metaphors), but the remaining ones are rather obscure (e.g. six girdles on the coffin).

Although the number of metaphoric messages which might be drawn from the actions and implements which are manifest during funerary rites is variable, the basic mode of interpretation by the Phra Khrū, as well as by Krai and Sangūan and certainly by many others who have given sermons at funerals, is the same. These acts and objects point to fundamental Buddhist doctrines: that death and decay, and more basically, impermanence, is inherent in all things; that so long as one is attached, through desire (*taṇhā*), to significant others or to material things, one will be bound to a cycle of rebirth in one of the three states of sentient existence; that one can only break the ties which bind one to these states by following the Eightfold Path taught by the Buddha; that the Path begins by taking refuge in the Three Gems and progresses through moral action to final detachment from all things; that the goal of the Path is Nibbāṇa.

The Buddhist interpretation of funerary rites does not entirely eclipse other meanings which such rites hold for northern Thai, including northern Thai monks. Death also generates real fears which are given substance in the minds of northern Thai as spirits, disembodied souls, and more diffuse pollution. Such fears are most evident in the case of sudden deaths, and particularly in the death of a woman in childbirth, but they are present at most other deaths as well, save perhaps at the death of a revered monk.

In another context I plan to present a fuller analysis of the meanings carried by the acts and ritual apparatus in northern Thai funerals, both with reference to texts on ritual procedure such as has been presented here in the form of the work by Phra Khrū Anusaraṇaśāsanakiarti and with reference to the process of actual rituals observed in particular places in northern Thailand. The point with which I would like to conclude here is that while northern Thai funerary rites may be composed of elements which are of non-Buddhist origin, may vary in form from place to place, and may convey many non-Buddhist meanings, they still have been made to be a fundamental vehicle for asserting ultimate truth as that truth has been formulated in Buddhist terms.

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