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From Riches to Rags: how new clothes for the dead become old robes for monks

RITA LANGER

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From Riches to Rags: how new clothes for the dead become old robes for monks

RITA LANGER

Abstract

The process whereby existing rituals are taken up and re-envisioned is a well known phenomenon in ritual studies. The offering of a piece of white of cloth to the officiating monks during the Theravāḍa Buddhist funeral ceremony provides a particularly good example. This custom originates in pre-Buddhist funerary rituals, which included the symbolic covering of the dead body with a new, uncut piece of white cloth intended as a new garment for the deceased, but which was afterwards donated to the officiating priests. The present article examines how in the Buddhist funeral the donation of the cloth came to be associated with the monks’ ascetic practice of making their robes from discarded rags (pañīsukūla).

A comparison of the lists of “rags” in the Theravāḍa and Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinayas and in the Visuddhimagga and Vimuttimagga, alongside a historical exploration of the attitude of the Buddhist laity towards monks who adopted ascetic practices, sheds new light on the significance of the pañīsukūla offering. Further, the manner in which an old pre-existing ritual is accommodated within a different conceptual framework provides a clear instance of the primacy of ritual continuity over ritual meaning.

The offering of a white piece of cloth to the Buddhist monastic community by laity is an integral part of Buddhist funeral rites not only in Sri Lanka, but also in other Theravāḍa Buddhist countries, such as Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. In all these countries it is customary on the day of the funeral to invite four or more monks to conduct the ceremony. After the recitation of the refuges and precepts the family of the deceased offers the monks a white piece of cloth about the size of a table-cloth wrapped in brown paper (or a part of the monk’s robe) as well as other items such as a tray with betel and refreshments. In Sri Lanka this is done with the words “We offer this cloth for the dead to the community

1 A very early version of this paper was presented at the conference of the Annual Conference of the Association for Asian Studies in March 2010 in Philadelphia (USA). I would like to thank my fellow panel organisers (Pattaratorn Chirapravat, Erik Davis, Rebecca Hall, John Holt and Justin McDaniel) for their comments and support at the early stage. I would also like to thank Rupert Gethin, John Kieschnick, Mudagamuwe Maithirimurthi, Burkhard Quesel, Paul Williams and Indaka Weerasekera (to name but few) for their help and comments. And finally my thanks goes to JRAS, Charlotte de Blois, the anonymous reviewer and the editing team for making this paper possible. It goes without saying that all mistakes are mine.

2 I did not observe this custom on my brief field trip to Sagaing (Myanmar), but this is not to say that it is not common in other parts of the country.

3 The cloth is not an expensive fabric such as silk, but a rather cheap and simple thin cotton as one might use as lining material.
of monks” (imaṃ matakawattham bhikkhusamghassa dema). The monks then chant the funeral verse “Impermanent are conditioned things” (aniccā vata saṅkhārā), often while touching the parcel, and then continue with further chanting interspersed with preaching. Finally the merit of the offering is given to the dead, the gods and everyone present. Of these activities it is only the offering of the piece of cloth and the chanting of the funeral verse that is exclusive to funerals; the other activities, such as taking the precepts, chanting and giving of merit, are performed in other contexts as well. So while the custom of donating a new piece of cloth at funerals is rather straightforward, its interpretation is something of a puzzle and far more interesting.

While this custom is widespread in Theravāda countries, my focus will mainly be on Sri Lanka, where the cloth offered at funerals is referred to by two expressions: ‘cloth of/for the dead person’ (Sinhala: mataka-vastra) and ‘refuse rag’ (Sinhala and Pāli: paṇṇukūla).

I have briefly dealt with the origins of this custom in an earlier publication (Langer 2007, pp. 84–88), but in the present context I shall summarise and expand on its historical connection with the ancient Indian offering of (1) a new garment for the dead to be worn on the way to the world of Yama, the god of death. I shall then briefly introduce the most common interpretation (amongst Buddhists and Buddhist scholars) of the cloth as (2) a ‘refuse rag’ (paṇṇukūla) from a charnel ground. However, pointing out a probable origin and an ill-suited interpretation does not do the topic justice and leaves a number of unresolved issues. I shall, therefore, explore (3) why and how a donation of a new garment came to be called a ‘refuse rag’.

I. “cloth of/for the dead” (mataka-vastra)

Holt (1981, p. 1) points out that:

Buddhist interpretations of death did not originate in an historical and cultural vacuum. Conceptions of afterlife and the prescribed behaviour relating to the dead were modified adaptations of prevailing Brāhmanical patterns of belief. This is especially apparent when we examine the beliefs and practices of the early Buddhist laity.

This statement is not only valid for mainland India, but can be applied to Sri Lanka as well. A good number of early Brāhmi inscriptions dating from the time Buddhism was introduced to the island mention brahmins. One might conclude from this fact that it is highly likely that brahmins were in Sri Lanka before the first century CE as well. The chronicles, too, even though they do not constitute evidence in the same way as inscriptions, are nevertheless

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4 D II 157, D II 199, et al. Pāli verses and passages were quoted from the editions and translations of the Pāli Text Society (abbreviations for titles in accordance with the CPD) with the exception of the Visuddhimagga, which is quoted after Warren 1950. Where no reference is given, the translation is mine.

5 Very occasionally I came across the interpretation ‘cloth of remembrance’ for mataka-vastra, as the term mataka is ambiguous in Sinhala and can mean ‘remembrance’ as well as ‘death’.

6 Etymology unclear; Visuddhimagga II.4 (Warren 1950, p. 48) explains: “Like refuse it goes to a vile state (paṇṇu viya kucchita-bhāsā ulati), thus it is ‘refuse’ (paṇṇukūla); it goes to a vile state is what is meant” (Nāṇamoli 1956, p. 60). According to PED, the verb ulati is an invention. The etymology of the Pāli word paṇṇukūla (also used in Sinhala), might not be very clear, but the term and concept is widely known in South and Southeast Asia as pansukul and seems to be used not just for a cloth, but also for the ritual sequence of chanting and offering of the cloth.

7 Paranavitana 1970, pp. lxviii-lxx, records 21 Brahmi inscriptions in which brahmins are mentioned.
of interest in this respect. They record that before Buddhism came to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE there was already a rich and varied religious environment on the island, which included brahmans. Drawing heavily on these chronicles, Rahula (1966, pp. 34-47) devotes a whole chapter to the “Religious Conditions” in “Pre-Buddhist Ceylon”. We have to assume that the thriving Brāhmanical culture on the island was following established patterns of dealing with the dead.

The best known of the Indian practices for the dead (ancient brahmanical as well as contemporary) are the food offerings in the form of rice balls (pinḍa) given to the recently deceased (preta), in order to provide the disembodied spirit with a new body and nourishment to the ancestors (pitr). In present-day Sri Lanka, too, food offerings for the dead are very much part of the funeral culture and two occasions in particular are significant. On the evening of the sixth day after the death has occurred a monk is invited, but before he begins his sermon, food for the spirit of the deceased is arranged in a fenced-off part of the garden. Again, on the morning of the seventh day (and at certain intervals after that) monks are invited for an alms giving on behalf of the deceased and small portions of food from the monks’ plates are left out for the hungry ghosts. While direct food offerings for the dead are seldom discussed in secondary literature, the giving of merit takes centre stage. However, food offerings remain an essential part of the ritual and coexist with the giving of merit (possibly serving as a vehicle for merit), as I have shown elsewhere (Langer 2007).

Less well-known than the rice ball food offerings is the ancient Brāhmanical (as well as contemporary Hindu) custom of providing the recently deceased with a new garment. Although it has not been recognised in the secondary literature, it is this custom that underlies the Buddhist practice, precisely in the form of the “cloth for the dead” (mataka-vastra), as Ishald demonstrates. By way of a selection of sources (Vedic, Brahmancial, Buddhist and Hindu) in relative chronological order, I shall sketch out the long and unbroken history of the custom from Vedic times to contemporary Hindu and Buddhist practice.

The offering of a new garment for the dead is already mentioned in the Atharvaveda. Caland (1896, p. 16f) describes the custom according to the prescriptions of the various Vedic schools: after death, the body was dressed and covered with a new white cloth that is intended as a garment for the deceased to wear when entering the world of Yama. According to some Vedic schools, a piece of this cloth was cut off before cremation and worn by the relatives for at least a day before being offered (together with other items) to the Brahmin priest. Then, again according to Caland (1896, p. 79f), after returning from the cremation ground the relatives were supposed to perform the “covering of the naked” (nagnapnachādana), which involves giving a garment (as well as gold, a brass bowl, a jug of water and other items) to the brahmin.

There is no prescriptive Pāli text outlining how a Theravāda Buddhist funeral is to be conducted, but there are descriptive texts which mention not just food for the dead, but clothes as well: the Petavatthu, (perhaps compiled as early as third or second century BCE)

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8 Mahāvamsa X 102: King Pandukabhaya (377-307 BCE) cared for great variety of religious individuals and groups. See also Rahula 1966, p. 29.
9 Atharvavedasamhitā 18.4.31:
   *etat te deva’ savitā vāso dadāti bhartave |
   tat tvam ānasya rājye vasānas tārpyat cara || 31||
and its commentary are a collection of ghost stories.\footnote{10} The older verses of the Petavatthu are embedded in a later prose commentary, which contains numerous stories of hungry, thirsty and naked ghosts (petas) who appeal to humans for help. The petas, like the newly dead pretas of Brāhmaṇical belief (mentioned above) are totally dependent on others for their basic needs. In most of the stories the petas ask for food, clothes and lodging to be donated to the sangha and the merit of the good deed to be dedicated to them. The resulting in food, clothes and palaces appearing for them in the petaloka improve their situation. One of these stories, the Tirokuḍṭapetavatthu, which has long been associated with funeral rituals, relates how King Bimbisāra was troubled by large numbers of hungry ghosts who turned out to be his former relatives.\footnote{11} Interestingly, the verses still largely talk of actual concrete offerings to the dead, while merit is only mentioned in the last verses and the commentary. In this respect, the Tirokuḍṭapetavatthu constitutes an anomaly within the Petavatthu and probably marks a shift in emphasis from offering goods directly to offering of merit (with the mediation by the monks).

This is reminiscent of a description of the custom found in the later, authoritative Hindu source, the Pretakalpa (mid-seventh century CE) of the Garuḍa-Purāṇa (ca. fourth to seventh century CE), which states that the priest as a mediator accepts the donations which will benefit the preta in the other world: giving clothes in this world will protect the deceased from cold, heat and wind on his way to Yama’s world; sandals given to a brahmin manifest as a horse for the deceased, etc.\footnote{12}

Dubois’s (1906, p. 489) description of the Hindu practice in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries includes a tenfold offering to brahmins and shows that there is considerable continuity:

On the day after the funeral the chief mourner, accompanied by his relatives and friends, goes to the place consecrated to the burning of the dead. There he recommences the ceremonies of the previous evening, without forgetting the food for the crows, and places on the ground the strip of cloth, which has been torn from the pall. The brahmins present take the bath of the dead (mrītiṣka-snana), receive betel and depart. The heir, however, keeps back one of them, and gives him two measures of rice, peas and vegetables, wrapped in a new cloth, which he presents as well, so that he may make good a meal and be well clothed by proxy as it were for the deceased, in case the rice, the peas, the oil, and the water which have already been offered for the latter may not be sufficient to allay his hunger and quench his thirst, and so that he may not be without clothes to cover his nakedness in the next world.\footnote{13}

\footnote{10}Norman 1983, p. 71.
\footnote{11}The Pv verses are also found in the KhP (canonical handbook for novices) and still used at funerals when water is poured and merit is donated:

“As water rained on the uplands flows down to the lowland,
even so does what is given here benefit the petas.
Just as swollen streams swell the ocean,
even so does what is given here benefit the petas.”

(Masefield 1980, p. 26)

\footnote{12}Pretakalpa XIII 83 and 89; Abegg 1921, p. 181.
\footnote{13}The offerings of betel, food and a cloth as well as the feeding of the crows in the above description are all familiar elements from the contemporary Sri Lanka practice, too.
The custom seems likely to go back much further, but the earliest explicit evidence from Sri Lanka that I have found for donating a cloth for and on behalf of the dead and placing the whole ritual near the corpse is from the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{14} J.F. Dickson (1884, p. 233) describes what is indeed very close to the contemporary practice:

When a man dies he is buried by his friends quietly; a priest awaits the arrival of the body at the grave; the body is dressed in the ordinary dress of the deceased, and is placed on sticks on the top of the grave. The cloth, which covers it is removed and presented to the priest who says: \textit{Anicā vata sankhārā} . . . The priest departs, taking with him the cloth; the friends of the deceased remain to bury the body.

And as for the contemporary Hindu practice, Parry (1994, p. 80) describes how the funeral priest (Mahabrahman) drives a hard bargain to extract the maximum out of the bereaved family by accepting goods on behalf of the deceased:

Before his departure the Mahabrahman accepts the gift of sajja dan which consists, or should consist, of a year's supply of grain and other comestibles, cooking utensils, household furniture, bedding, clothes, cosmetics, toilet articles and a lump sum in cash — in fact all the standard requirements of daily life . . . The idea is that the offerings are received by the deceased in the next world . . . clearly what lends the idea of this transfer an additional authority is the theory that the Mahabrahman actually \textit{is} the deceased at the moment the gift is handed over.

The purpose of citing this heterogeneous body of evidence is to demonstrate, that the custom has a long history cutting across the boundaries of different traditions; secondly, that the offering of cloth (as well as food and other items) seems to require a priest or monk as mediator; thirdly (and particularly tangible in the contemporary context), that the piece of cloth (like the other items offered) might also have served as a symbolic payment to the priests or monks for services rendered at funerals.\textsuperscript{15} While it is useful to draw on and juxtapose Vedic, Brāhma, Buddhist and Hindu sources as sharing a common practice (in this case the offering of a new cloth for the dead), the same cannot be said with regard to the interpretation. Here the Buddhist interpretation has taken a very distinct route that has to be explored carefully and in some detail.

2. \textit{“refuse rag” (paṃsukūla)}

In contrast to the history of the practice that I have just outlined, both scholars as well as the people whom I interviewed seemed to focus on the concept of \textit{paṃsukūla} as the origin of the offering a piece of cloth at contemporary Buddhist funerals. The term \textit{paṃsukūla

\textsuperscript{14}But Robert Knox's (1681, p. 116 [1966, p. 218]) account of Sri Lankan funeral rites in the seventeenth century mentions a cloth to cover the corpse, even though nothing is said about donating it to the presiding monks: “But Persons of greater quality are burned, and that with Ceremony: When they are dead they lay them out, and put a Cloth over their Privy Parts, and then wash the Body, by taking half a dozen Pitchers of water, and pouring upon it. Then they cover him with a linen cloth, and so carry him forth for burning. This is when they burn the body speedily”. See also the illustration in the same book between pp. 116 and 117 (subtitled: The manner of burning their dead), which shows a corpse covered with a cloth on a burning funeral pyre.

\textsuperscript{15}To quote an example from a different context: in Sri Lanka it is customary that the bride groom gives a white piece of cloth to the mother of the bride as ‘payment’ for bringing up the bride.
refers back to the ancient (not specifically Buddhist) ascetic practice of wearing robes made from discarded rags which will be discussed in more detail below. First it is worth quoting some examples from secondary literature. Kariyawasam (1995, p. 43) refers to the ritual as “offering of the cloth on behalf of the dead” (mataka-vatrapûjā) and describes it without any explanation as follows:

Next follows this ritual, which consists of the offering of a length of new white cloth to the monks. The cloth, called a pamsukūla — literally, a dust-heap cloth — is intended to be cut into pieces and then stitched into a robe.

Tillakaratne (1986, p. 165) tries to establish a causal link and states with reference to Dickson’s description (quoted above):

Next, the strip of cloth with which the corpse was covered was presented to the monks. This rite was known as pāṃsukūlaya pûjā kirāma, the name being derived from the pāṃsukūla civaṇa or rag robe. It may be noticed in passing that in the early days of Buddhism monks sometimes made their robes out of strips of clothes thrown away in such places as graveyards. In later times this practice may have given rise to the custom of offering the cloth with which a corpse was covered to the monks who performed the last religious rites by the grave-side.

And finally, Gombrich (1991, p. 283) comments on the problem of ‘rag’ versus ‘offering’ as follows:

The modern pamsukūla ceremony is a curious fusion of this [i.e. offering of the cloth] with a dāne. By picking up the cloth from the coffin the monk is symbolically taking the winding sheet, or some other item of the corpse’s clothing, and thus conforming to the letter of the pamsukūla practice. On the other hand the dead man’s next of kin are giving the cloth, which therefore is the best new white cloth, to enhance the value of the gift; they have made the funeral an occasion for transferring the merit earned by a gift to the Sangha, thus destroying the spirit of the pamsukūla idea, so that the original meaning of the term has been completely lost.

Before we critically examine the suggestions that the rag robe wearers’ practice “may have given rise” to the modern practice (Tillakaratne), or that the relatives by donating a new cloth are “destroying the spirit of the pamsukūla idea” from which the practice originated (Gombrich) let us turn to the question of what precisely is a pamsukūla?

According to the Vinaya, (Mahāvagga, chapter VIII) the rag robe wearers practice became optional when the Buddha gave permission to his monks to accept robes donated by lay people. Reference to this practice is made in the Buddhist ordination ceremony (V I 58), where four resources (nissaya) on which a monk can count for his needs are enumerated: robes made from rags (for clothing); alms (for food), a foot of a tree (for lodging) and fermented urine (for medicine). However, this is immediately modified by the addition of a long list of items which monks are allowed to accept. In a Vinaya story (Vin II 196ff) Devadatta challenges the Buddha to make five ascetic practices, including wearing of rag robes.

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16 See below for examples of non-Buddhist ascetics practicing the rag robe wearing.
17 Square brackets are mine.
robes, compulsory for all monks. The Buddha neither agrees to this proposal, nor does he reject it outright, instead he makes the practices optional with some restrictions.

Rag robes are mentioned in the Pali Vinaya where the term *panṣukūla* is defined as comprising two groups of five types of cloth, beginning with the cemetery cloth. The Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, too, has two groups of five types of cloth, but interestingly mentions in addition two types of cloth that do not fall under the category of rags (*phyag dar khrod pa*; Pali *paṇḍukūla*), namely the *gos dur khrod pa* (cemetery cloth; Pali *soṣānīka*; Skt. *śmaśānīka*) and a cloth referred to as *gos bor blangs*, which will be discussed below. The rag-robe wearers’ practice is one of thirteen optional ascetic practices, which are mentioned in the Milindapañha. They are discussed in some detail in Upatissa’s Vimuttimagga and Buddhaghosa’s Visuddhimagga where different types of rags are listed. The Vimuttimagga was, according to Ray (1994, p. 298) compiled in the first or second century CE, according to Nānāmoli (1956, p. xiv) in the fourth century CE and either way it is assumed, that it was known to Buddhaghosa. The original Pali text is lost, but a Chinese (and in part Tibetan) translation survived. Buddhaghosa’s manual of Buddhist practice, the Visuddhimagga was compiled at the beginning of the fifth century CE. Both works list the thirteen ascetic practices and their definitions. For the rag-robe wearer’s practice they provide a list of ten types of rag cloth (Vimuttimagga) or twenty three types of rag cloth (Visuddhimagga) under the heading of *panṣukūla*.

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18 The five types of ascetics are: *arunaśika*, *pinḍapātika*, *panṣukūlika*, *rakkhamālīka*, *machaṃmaṇa*.  
19 Paṇiça *panṣukūli* sosani pāṇiṣkani undukaṃkhāyitam upacikkaṃkhāyitam na sukaṃkhāyitam (Miln. 7.1344) list the same ten as we find in Vin V.129, but without grouping them in two lots of five.  
20[[61b5]] nyu du uans pa dang | zhi ba dang | dus la bab par rig nas de’i igyab nas go kyi bhag ste dur khrod du khyer nas de dag gi go los de go phyir khyer te’ongs nas dge ’don la ’bul ba de ni *gos bor blangs* zhes bya’o || *gos dur khrod pa* gang zhe na | yongs su || *61b6* ]dzin pa med pa’i dur khrod nas blangs pa gang zhe na de ni *gos dur khrod pa* zhes bya’o || *gos phyag dar khrod pa* gang zhe na | phyag dar khrod pa man na lha ste | lam po che’i go dang | dgon par bor ba dang | chu’nam pa dang | sril zan dang | tal nal nyid ni [61b7] | lha pa yin te | tal nal zhes bya ba ni ha cang zegs pa gang zhe na | yongs su.  
21 From Riches to Rags

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22 Mil. 339. See also Ray 1994, pp. 293–232.  
23 One who has done this should get a robe of one of the following kinds: one from a charnel ground, one from a shop, a cloth from a street, a cloth from a midden, one from a child-bed, an ablation cloth, a cloth from a washing place, one worn going to and returning from a charnel ground, one scorched by fire, one gnawed by cattle, one gnawed by ants, one gnawed by rats, one cut at the end, one cut at the edge, one carried as a flag, a robe from a shrine, an ascetic’s robe, one from a consecration, one produced by supernormal power, one from a highway, one borne by the wind, one presented by deities, one from the sea’ (Nānāmoli 1956, p. 63; Visn II.15 [Warren 1950, p. 50]. Similarly Sv III 1010 and Nidd II–a 120).
Varieties of ‘refuse rags’ according to different Buddhist texts

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<td>pāṃsukūla</td>
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<td>A first five</td>
<td>A. ownerless cloth:</td>
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<td>1. from a high</td>
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<td>2. from a shop</td>
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\[\text{\textsuperscript{14}}\text{Unfortunately “water” is not specified here and it might just be possible that this is the equivalent of the sāmuddika ("washed up by the sea") cloth in Visuddhamagga.}\]
I have marked in bold items in this Table that seem to refer to a cloth that is to be associated with the dead, but removed from the cemetery (either a shroud or some form of clothing), which I shall discuss below. The shading marks types of cloth that do not appear in any of the other lists; it is apparent that most of the shaded boxes simply contain variations on a theme (such as “eaten by goats”). However, of interest here is the addition in the Visuddhimagga of two types of cloth (5 and 6), that are potentially contaminated by pollution caused by factors other than death. I will discuss these aspects in more detail below. Apart from doubling the number of types of cloth which are suitable for use as rag robes, the Visuddhimagga also introduces a classification of all thirteen ascetic practices as occurring in three grades. For the pāṃsukūla the grades are as follows:

There are three kinds of refuse-rag wearers: the strict, the medium and the mild. Herein, one who takes it only from a charnel ground is strict. One who takes one left [by someone, thinking] ‘One gone forth will take it’ is medium. One who takes one given by being placed at his feet [by a bhikkhu] is mild. The moment any of these of his own choice or inclination agrees to [accept] a robe given by a householder, his ascetic practice is broken. This is the breach in this instance. (Nāṇamoli 1991, p. 63; Vism II. 20 [Warren 1950, p. 51f.])

It should, therefore, be borne in mind that pāṃsukūla generally refers to “discarded rags” and that wearing robes made from shrouds is just one, albeit the strictest one, of the many possible options.25 However, from early on the texts seem to have focused on this option as the quintessential ascetic practice.26

But what precisely was an Indian cemetery like and what kind of rag could one find there? There are a number of words for ‘cemetery’ in Pali reflecting a variety of funeral customs, but the terminology is not always clear cut and there seems to be a certain overlap in usage.27 Moreover, a single place might have been divided into different areas for burial and cremation.28 In Buddhist texts there are frequent references to cemeteries as places where corpses were left to rot, decompose and be eaten by animals. It is, however, not clear how widespread this type of disposal of the dead actually was in ancient India, as it does not leave archaeological traces. Its prominent presence particularly in later literature might be more indicative of a growing fascination with rotting corpses, rather than of the actual presence of the practice. In the canonical passages cemeteries where bodies were left to rot are mainly presented as places for meditation practices, such as asubhabhāvanā, but in the stories of the

25This opening up of “softer options” is reminiscent of the treatment of the nissayas and the modification of Devadatta’s proposal.
26Schopen 2007, p. 74. The same is true for interpretation of the contemporary practice of offering a piece of cloth at funerals.
27This becomes apparent when looking into the definitions found in the standard Pali dictionaries: sīvathikā (PED: “a cemetery, place where dead bodies are thrown to rot away”); kaṭṭāsī (CPD: “cemetery; used figuratively of samādā”); jihāna (CPD: funeral pyre; place of cremation [usually commented as suṣāna, cemetery, but often the two meanings are distinct]); suṣāna (PED: “a cemetery”) and most interestingly ānukā-suṣāna (CPD: “charnel-ground, cemetery of carrion; the cpd. is used about a ground where dead bodies may be found unburnt, but was perhaps originally formed to designate the precincts of the cremation ground as a horrible, foul-smelling place with remnants of corpses; the cpd. does not occur in any canonical text; it is used in cts. to paraphrase sīvathikā [which may also be done by the simple suṣāna], and in the tales in later texts it often corresponds to suṣāna in an older version of the same story”).
28I observed in a village in Sri Lanka that funeral pyres were erected in the burial ground, which prompted me to think that this might also have been the case some centuries ago, even though it would be difficult to find conclusive evidence.
Vinaya and the post-canonical literature cemeteries really come to life: some of these places have gates, keepers (Susānagopakā) and permanent residents; one could live off food left there for the dead (Vin IV 89); monks who go there to meditate might get sexually aroused at the sight of female corpses (Vin III 36); courtesans abandon male babies there (Pv-a II 19, Dh-p-a I 174); a king’s cook carves meat from a corpse’s thigh and serves it to the king who becomes a cannibal (J-a V 458), etc. And, last but not least, one can find useful items there, including old clothes of the dead, pots, utensils and shrouds (cloths in which the corpses were wrapped). However, according to Vin III 58 monks were only allowed to take cloth from decomposed bodies and the commentary devotes some space to the definition of “decomposed”.

3. From “garment for the dead” to “rag robe for monks”

It is obvious that being presented with a new piece of cloth at funerals and picking up a refuse rag from a charnel ground are two conceptually quite different acts. Therefore the scholarly and popular explanation of the funeral practice as pamsukūla does not seem to fit. And the question arises as to why a simple donation of a new garment for the dead ever became associated with the ascetic practice of wearing rag robes?

The key to a better understanding seems to lie in the attitude towards ascetic practices. There are, throughout the history of Buddhist practice, two strands or “voices” as Freiberger (2006, p. 243) calls them: the city/bookish monk and the forest/meditation monk. Seneviratne (1999, p. 168) observes, that the “tension between ascetic absorption with oneself and involvement with the secular society in a mundane, ministerial, or ritualistic capacity has always characterised the history of Buddhist monasticism”. A look into the ancient Pali texts reveals that this tension is indeed as old as the Buddhist scriptures, which reflect an ambiguous attitude towards strict asceticism.

Some texts show a negative attitude towards such extreme ascetic practices as wearing clothes made from shrouds. These practices are sometimes associated with non-Buddhist ascetics and also with the Bodhisattva who, after trying all kinds of severe ascetic practices, had deemed them useless and incorrect (in terms of the Middle Way). A number of suttas, such as the Mahāsakuludāyi Sutta (M II 1–23), portray the Buddha as disinclined to compete in the field of asceticism but more interested in expounding the Middle Way:

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29 I am grateful to Dr Petra Kieffer-Pülz for sending me a copy of her unpublished MA dissertation (Das Leichenfeld in der kanonischen und frühen nach-kanonischen Pali-Literatur [Göttingen, 1983]), which proved to be a treasure trove of stories and references on the topic of charnel grounds and cemeteries.

30 These two strands, of course, reflect a traditional division and provide a useful model. It goes without saying that the reality is (and most probably always was), far more complex and interesting as the existence of very scholarly forest monks such as Nyanatiloka and Nyanaponika proves. See also Tambiah 1984, pp. 53–77; Gunawardana 1979, pp. 40–47; Strong 1992, pp. 68–74, et al. on this divide.

31 “Shroud” is here named separately from “rags” and about ten other fabrics including “bark” and “owls’ wings”, etc.

32 Groups or individuals following a set of ascetic practices (including pamsukūla and chavadusāni; aṅkatīṭhiyā paribhājakā following asceticism with regard to clothing, food and lodging are contrasted to monks who have given up immoral behaviour, wrong views and the āsava (A I 249); attātapa “self-tormentors” (A II 206, M I 343) as wrong practice; ascetic practices followed by saññiya-bhānavana are deemed to lead to bad destiny after death (D I 166, M I 307–08); followed by a tapassī (D III 41); similar set of practices are followed by the bodhisattva, but given up as fruitless (M I 78) to name but few references.
Suppose, Udāyin, my disciples honoured, respected, revered and venerated me, with the thought: ‘The recluse Gotama is content with any kind of robe and commends contentment with any kind of robe’. Now there are disciples of mine who are refuse-rag wearers, wearers of coarse robes; they collect rags from the charnel ground, rubbish heaps, or shops, make them into patched robes, and wear them. But I sometimes wear robes given by householders, robes so fine that pumpkin hair is coarse in comparison. So if my disciples honoured me . . . with the thought: ‘The recluse Gotama is content . . . then those disciples of mine who are refuse-rag wearers, wearers of coarse robes . . . should not honour, respect, revere, and venerate me for this quality, nor should they live in dependence on me, honouring and respecting me’. (Nāṇamoli 1995, 633, M II 7)

A bit further on in the same sutta these ascetic practices are negatively contrasted with qualities which are deemed more worthy of veneration: higher virtue, knowledge and vision, higher wisdom, four noble truths, the way to develop wholesome states. This sutta follows a classic pattern: a negative side (being overly attached to ascetic practices) is contrasted with the middle way (eightfold path, four noble truths, four jhānas, etc.). The general gist is that Buddhism has more to offer than mere asceticism, and Freiberger (2006, p. 250) sums this up when he calls the Middle Way a “rhetorical tool against severe asceticism”.

The compilers of the Mūlasārīvatāvāda Vinaya, seem to go one step further and show outright hostility towards the ascetic practices such as rag-robe wearing. According to Schopen (2007, p. 80):

In fact the Mūlasārīvatāvāda vinaya addresses the issue over and over again but always, it seems, with the same intent: to make the practice of taking cemeterial cloth difficult, if not impossible, and to marginalise, if not ostracise, Buddhist monks who engage in it. The redactors of this Vinaya appear to have taken several different approaches to “the problem”, one of which was connected with property law and the definition of property.

Schopen (2007) quotes other examples from the Vinaya, which make clear that the ascetic practice of obtaining rags from or dwelling in a cemetery might also make the monk vulnerable to accusations of theft, murder and even cannibalism. Schopen (2007, p. 74) also detects another “voice” (to speak with Freiberger), which found expression in early Mahāyāna literature and advocated a revival of the dhutanga practice. However, he points out (2007, p. 94ff) that even Mahāyāna texts that portray the practice of cemetery dwelling essentially in a positive light did not escape the influence of the Vinaya restrictions.

Other texts show a more positive attitude towards asceticism in general and rag-robe wearing in particular. The Theragāthā and Therīgāthā contain examples of famous theras/therīs engaging in ascetic practices, such as Bhaddiya who practices all the dhutangas. The later commentarial Sāratthapākāsīnī portrays the Buddha as the quintessential ascetic picking up his first pamsukūla, a shroud, and being hailed for his great deed by the gods. The context is particularly interesting as it explains a Saṃyutta passage in the Kassapa Saṃyutta (S II 217–22), which has the Buddha swap robes with Mahākassapa:

“But will you, Kassapa, wear my coarse (hempen), cast off rag-robe?”: He said, ‘Kassapa, will you be able to wear these rag-robos, worn out by use? He said this not with reference to the strength

33Th 842–865.
of his body [but] with reference to the perfection of his practice. This is the intention here: “I entered the charcoal ground and took this robe, that had been put on the slave girl Puṇṇa and thrown into the charcoal ground, and which was covered with [enough] living beings [to fill a] waterpot. I shook off these beings and, following in the great tradition of the noble ones, took [the cloth]. On the day of my taking the robe, the great earth shook, roaring a great roar in the ten thousand worlds; in the sky the wind blew; and in the [whole] world deities put their palms together in respect. It should be a monk who is a pāṃsukūlikā by nature, a forest dweller, one who keeps to himself, one who goes on uninterrupted alms begging, who takes this robe. Are you able to behave in a manner appropriate [for this robe]?” But the Thera possessed for himself the strength of five elephants did not doubt/question: Will I fulfil this practice? He was strongly desiring of doing what is appropriate with the robe of the Sugata and said: “I will wear it, bhante”.34

This commentarial passage shows a clearly positive attitude towards the rag-robe wearers practice in that it puts it in the tradition of the noble lineage, declares it as one of the cosmic events in the lives of Buddhas worthy of earthquakes and makes clear that not every bhikku is capable of wearing a rag robe. It also seems to set up Mahākassapa as the heir of the great tradition of the pāṃsukūlikā.

Schopen (2007, pp. 63–66) discusses a passage in the Lalitavistara, which, too, has the bodhisattva pick up a shroud as pāṃsukūla cloth and the gods hail his act. However, the composer of the Lalitavistara story then continues to report details of how this cloth is washed in a divine pond and only worn as undergarment, which is then covered by ‘proper’ robes, again provided by divine intervention. Schopen suggests that this indicates the “author’s unease” at the original report of the bodhisattva wearing a shroud, which is not a feature found in the Spk episode above which ends with the hailings of the gods.35

A Thai work called Brāpāṃsukūlānīsamaṃ, too, has the Buddha pick up his first pāṃsukūla, but here it is an expensive cloth in which a still-born foetus is wrapped. The cloth was left out in the street in the expectation that the Buddha might pick it up and when he does, again, the earth trembled with delight.36 Like the Sāratthapakkāsini, this work also portrays Mahākassapa as “patron saint of the pāṃsukūlikā” (Strong 1992, p. 72) and provides a rare insider’s view:

Too often, the ascetic practices in general and the pāṃsukūlikā practices in particular have been studied from the perspective of the town-dwelling monks, who tolerated but did not follow them, rather than from the perspective of the forest-dwelling monks, who advocated and maintained

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35 Extremely interesting is also Wilson’s (2003, p. 67) observation regarding this Lalitavistara story: “But this story is invoked in Thai Buddhist funerary rites with the explicit intention of making a meritorious connection between the newly deceased and the monastic wearer of the donated cloth”.

36 The Brāpāṃsukūlānīsamaṃ is appended to a collection of Jātaka tales, but I could not find any indication of the dating. For translation see Martini 1973.
them. This is understandable, since most of our sources (canonical and commentarial) have, in fact, emerged from the town-monk tradition, which follows the ‘vocation of books’.37

This might be a good point at which to sum up briefly the monastic attitude towards ascetic practices. The practices were neither prohibited nor made compulsory (as Devadatta had demanded), but subjected to critical scrutiny (e.g. by the bodhisattva and Buddha). They appear to have been tolerated rather than popularised and decidedly positive reactions are the exception. However, it is quite probable, that the majority of these texts were written by “town monks” and that the view of the more ascetically inclined “forest monks” is underrepresented, as Strong has pointed out. Schopen (2007, p. 93) goes one step further and argues that the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya shows an outright antagonistic attitude towards strict ascetics, such as rag-robe wearers and cemetery dwellers:

We see one group of monks, the monks who redacted this Vinaya and were in a position to make the rules, who are concerned with or preoccupied with issues of social identity and the public image of the members of their community, trying to contain or marginalise another group or type of Buddhist monks, monks who were śmāśānikas, monks who wore the clothing of the dead. There are no good or apparent doctrinal reasons for objecting to śmāśānikas, monks of course, and our redactors do not make even the slightest effort to provide any. What they are concerned with and appear to want to avoid, as virtually all of the texts cited here would seem to make clear, are unfriendly and damaging accusations of cannibalism, theft, murder, association with foul pretas, and, importantly, impurity connected with the anonymous dead. But while the specifics here are connected with monks who wear shrouds, the pattern of containment, distancing, and marginalisation of certain types of monks, and the overarching concern with public image that overrides the value of individual religious practice, are not.

Over and again Schopen emphasises that the Vinaya monks react so strongly against the rag-robe wearing and cemetery dwelling ascetics because the latter were violating Indian concepts of decency and purity, and by doing so brought the whole sangha into disrepute with the laity on whom it depended. But this raises the question of whether this was the real reason for their antagonism, or was there some other, more likely underlying, motivation?

I would like to propose a different rationale: “town monks” had to compete for resources not only with non-Buddhist ascetic groups (such as Jains and Ājīvikas), but with the Buddhist ascetic “forest monks” as well. There is ample evidence in Indian literature that what is deemed as indecent and polluted for ordinary people (such as shrouds) is a sign of sincerity, a badge of honour, for ascetics.38 I would like to suggest that strict ascetics (Buddhist as well as non-Buddhist, rag robe wearers as well as forest dwellers) were a threat to “town monks” because the former were too popular with the laity who quite possibly expected monks to display some form of asceticism. Strict ascetics might have seemed better value for money.

38Values of society are turned upside down when it comes to ascetics, who might wear rags, smear their bodies with ashes or even dispose of clothes altogether. Even dead ascetics are highly venerated according to the Yatidharmasamuccaya (Olivelle 1995, p. 176): “After performing the funeral [for an ascetic], one should not observe a period of impurity or make water offerings. When a man carries or touches the corpse of an ascetic or digs a grave for him, he is purified immediately and takes a bath similar to the one taken at the end of a sacrifice”. (Square brackets are mine.)
in the eyes of the laity and this is precisely the attitude to which the suttas advocating the “Middle Way” seem to have reacted.

It might be interesting, therefore, to now examine the attitudes of laypeople towards asceticism. A glance into history confirms that far from being a neglected fringe section causing embarrassment for the sangha, ascetic monks, such as the pansulikas sect in Sri Lanka were an important factor. The commentaries (Mp I 92ff.) record that during the first century when Buddhism in Sri Lanka was in crisis, two factions of monks, the rag robe wearers (pansulikas) and the teachers (dhammakathikas), discussed if practice (patipatti) or learning (pariyatti) was more important for the survival of the sangha. The former were “defeated” and agreement was reached that learning was more important than asceticism.39 However, this initial defeat within the monastic environment did not seem to have impeded the growing popularity of the pansulikas who were in evidence from the second century BCE to the twelfth century CE and were periodically favoured by royalty.40 According to the Cūḷavāṃśa the once strict ascetics were in due course showered with privileges by various kings. Gunawardana (1979, p. 43) states:

Even though the Pansulikas were getting used to a ‘soft’ life, far beyond even what Buddhaghosa considered permissible, they continued to receive enthusiastic patronage. They were held in such high regard that even their kinsmen were honoured. Sena Ilanga, for example, distributed rice and clothing among the mothers of Pansulika monks.

The pansulikas were clearly a favourite not just with royalty, but with ordinary laypeople, who even started a revolt against King Udaya III when he did not honour their privileges.41 Gunawardana (1979, p. 46) concludes that: “In the eyes of the masses the self-denying life of the ascetic would have been a refreshing contrast to the ease and comfort of the life of the monk at the larger monasteries”. Another ascetic sect, the “forest dwellers”, came into evidence in the tenth century CE and attracted similar treatment from the king and the laity in Sri Lanka. Ironically by showering the pansulikas with luxuries, to which they, according to Gunawardhana, seem to have succumbed gradually, and to a larger degree than the forest monks, the laity provided precisely the “ease and comfort” that these ascetics had renounced. However, one crucial indicator for the high value placed on asceticism seems to be that the name pansulika continued to be applied despite the discrepancy with reality be it in the tenth century CE or today.42 Calling monks “pansulika”, or a donated cloth,  

39Rahula (1966, p. 138ff.), in an attempt to construct a more socially and politically engaged role for the monks in his time, hails the “victory” of the dhammakathikas over the pansulikas in the first century BCE in Sri Lanka. However, Seneviratne (1999, p. 173) judges, that “Rahula’s analysis ignores the value placed on asceticism in ancient times, which was probably as high as it is today”. See also Rahula 1966, p. 195ff.

40Their popularity seemed to have peaked between the seventh and tenth centuries CE. Some examples of the privileges granted by various kings: Aggabodhi VII (CV 48. 73 “delicious food fitting for himself”); Sena I (CV 50.65f. “monastery, revenues, equipment, helpers, slaves”); Kasapa IV (CV 52.27 “to the mothers of Pansulikas (bhikkhus) he dispensed rice and clothing”); Udaya IV (CV 53.48 “articles of equipment”); and Mihinda IV (CV 54.18–26 luxuries including “garlic, black pepper, ginger, molasses, clarified butter, honey, cloaks, blankets, clothing”).

41According to Gunawardana (1979, p. 43): “Their popularity is best exemplified by an incident, which took place during the reign of Udaya III (935-938) when the citizens of Anuradhapura rose in revolt against the king for having violated the traditional privileges enjoyed by the Pansulika monasteries at Tapovana”. The privilege mentioned here was the right of the monastery to grant asylum to anyone who might need it. See CV 53.14–27.

42Similarly “forest monks” in contemporary Theravāda communities do not literally live in forests and at the roots of trees.
a “pamsukūla” upgrades the interaction to a higher status, and this might also go some way to explain why the simple offering of clothes for the dead became infused with a sense of pamsukūla. The pamsukūlikas as a separate sect or group might not have been in evidence after the twelfth century, but lay people’s fascination with or need for ascetic monks remained.

Looking at it from this angle, Buddhaghosa’s three grades of dhutangas with respect to pamsukūla thus appear in a different light. The obvious puzzle why the name of pamsukūla is retained – even when the mild grade (accepting a robe from a monk) seems to have very little to do with “refuse rags” – becomes clearer: people wanted pamsukūlikas monks and the Visuddhimaggas’s approach, as it were, is one of “if you can’t beat them, join them”. Furthermore, some of the definitions of types of refuse rags in the Visuddhimaggas seem positively designed to bridge the gap between refuse rag and donation and are worthy of closer examination:

“‘A cloth from a street’ is a cloth thrown into a street from inside a window by those who seek merit”. This is presumably done in expectation of monks or ascetics passing by.

“‘One from a childbirth’ is a cloth thrown away after wiping up the stains of child birth with it.” This is the only type of rag that has a story attached: the mother of Tissa uses a precious, expensive cloth to remove child birth stains and throws it onto the road wishing that a pamsukūika might pick it up. Here, as was the case in the Brapāṁsukūlānisaṁsām (see above), a donation is disguised as a rag.

“‘One worn going to and returning from’ (patapaccāgata) is one that people throw away after they have gone to the charnel ground and returned and bathed”. Here donation is not mentioned, but the possibility of picking up a sosānīka (“a charnel ground cloth”, which is the first rag listed) from places other than the charnel ground, is implicit.

This opens up the definition to such a degree that it was in practice possible to donate a new cloth to the monks while still continuing to refer to it as pamsukūla — clearly a win-win situation for both monks and lay people alike. However, there are other interesting aspects to these “additions”.

The last of the examples quoted above, the patapaccāgata cloth, introduces a curious category of a cloth that is associated with the dead but removed from the cemetery (see categories marked in bold in the Table above). It is also found in the Pali Vinaya as “cloth of one that has gone and returned” (gatapaṭiyāgata, see Table). The equivalent in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya is, according to Schopen (2007, p. 84), a cloth which is either “brought and carried off” or “taken and accepted” (gos bor blangs) and defined as follows:

What is discarded cloth that is brought? Namely, when kinsmen know that one of their kin has been struck, died, and passed away, they wrap him in cloth and, after they have carried him out to the cemetery, they carry that cloth back again. Then coming [to the monastery], they give that cloth to the monastic community — that is called “discarded cloth that is brought”.

\[43\text{Nāṇamoli 1956, p. 63, Vism II.16, 17 (Warren 1950, p. 50f).} \]

I include here also the “cloth used to cover a corpse (施覆尸衣)” of the Vimuttimagga list (under the sub-heading of “thrown away cloth”), as it is a separate category from the “cemetery cloth” (under the heading of “ownerless cloth”).
I agree with Schopen, who observes how in this category of cloth the emphasis changes from rags to donation. However, while Schopen suspects here the “beginnings” of the modern pansūkīlā practice (which, of course, involves the cloth being donated before the body is disposed of), I would argue that it is the incorporation of an already existing practice of donating a cloth to the officiating priest or monk as described in the first part of this article.\footnote{It should nevertheless be noted that the \emph{gos hor blangs} is according to the Tibetan Vinaya not a \emph{pansūkīlā} cloth. The \emph{gos hor blangs} and “the cemetery cloth”, which are included in the \emph{pansūkīlā} lists of the other texts, are treated as separate categories in the Tibetan Vinaya.}

To return to the examples from the Visuddhimagga: the last two types of cloth might also hint at the motivation of such a “rag-donation”, namely that it might not simply be something people wanted to get rid of but something which they need to dispose in order to remove pollution. While the Pali Vinaya and the Vimuttimagga both included two types of death-polluted rags (the cloth found on the cemetery and the cloth brought from the cemetery), the Visuddhimagga goes one step further and includes other polluted types of cloths, such as “childbed cloth” and “ablution cloth” (defined as “cloth of luck” due to its use in witchcraft).\footnote{Interestingly, the Tibetan Vinaya had explicitly excluded the two types of cloth which are affected by death pollution (see table above) and treated them separately from the \emph{pansūkīlā}, but includes in the category of “\textit{wet nurses’ cloth}” (\textit{ma ma’i gos}), which might be associated with illness and possibly even childbirth, but the term is, unfortunately, not defined here.} Wilson (2003, p. 67) observes with reference to the Visuddhimagga list:

> We can see from these tales about the transfer of merit through the “abandoning” of funeral fabrics that cloth can be as powerful an agent of biomoral transaction as food. Furthermore, if we examine the twenty-three kinds of rags that Buddhaghosa specifies as acceptable to the refuse-ragman, we find some other powerfully transactive examples. We see in Buddhaghosa’s list all kinds of fabric that people would do well to be rid of, like cloth used for purificatory purposes after visiting the cremation ground and cloth that ‘sick people throw away as inauspicious when, with the advice of exorcists, they have washed their heads and bathed themselves’. The cloth that a sick person disposes of to ward off disease-causing forces is a cloth infused with the substance of the giver. It says to the vengeful spirit or deity of disease (in the silent language of sartorial signification, or through sympathetic magic, if you prefer that terminology), “Look, you’ve got your victim right here, in this cloth; now go away, consume your offering, and leave us alone!” So people do well to be rid of such cloth.

Interestingly, Bizot observed the \emph{pansūkīlā} ritual in pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodia not just in the funeral context, but also in a healing context where it was performed for the living as a form of exorcism. During the course of this healing ritual, the body of the ill person is covered with a \emph{pansūkīlā} cloth, which Bizot interprets as both a shroud and then as a womb (Bizot 1981, pp. 63, 69–70). In order to be healed, the initiate runs through a process of death and rebirth in which the \emph{pansūkīlā} cloth plays a crucial role before it is finally pulled away.

Ladwig also observed the \emph{pansūkīlā} ritual being conducted for the living in Northern Thailand as well as Bangkok. Here it is meant to avert bad luck and is quite popular, as mass ceremonies conducted in Bangkok seem to indicate. Referring to Bizot, Ladwig similarly concludes that the cloth in this context is instrumental to the process of symbolic death.
and rebirth.\textsuperscript{47} He also points out another interesting occasion for the \textit{paṇṣukūla} ritual. It is common after a cremation in Thailand and Laos (but not Sri Lanka or Burma as far as I am aware) to collect bones from the ashes of the pyre, wash them and arrange them in anthropomorphic shape (head pointing west, the direction of death), which is then covered with a white cloth. Monks then come and perform the brief ritual, which resembles a condensed funeral culminating in a symbolic rebirth when the bones are turned around (head pointing east) half way through the ceremony. Here, too, the cloth seems to play a part both in the death as well as rebirth process.

The characteristics of different types of the \textit{paṇṣukūla} cloth as listed in the Visuddhimagga seem conflated here: the cemetery cloth (\textit{sosānika}), child-bed cloth (\textit{sothiyā}) and, by way of healing context in the ritual for the living described by Bizot and Ladwig, possibly also the ablution cloth (\textit{nahānaacola}). In one neat act of pulling the \textit{paṇṣukūla} cloth off the patient, various types of pollution (and/or misfortune) are removed. Erik Davis (2012, 63), who has researched the \textit{paṇṣukūla} ritual in the contemporary Cambodian funeral context also remarks on the issue of impurity and concludes that the monks are not only unaffected by it, but have the ability to positively transform “an item of no value — a funeral pall, dust-heap rags— into an item of great value”.\textsuperscript{48}

To return to our starting point, the contemporary Sri Lankan funeral practice. As noted above, the so-called \textit{paṇṣukūla} cloth is formally offered at funerals in Sri Lanka with the words: “We offer this cloth of the dead to the community of monks!” (\textit{imaññi matakavatthāññi bhikkhusanghassa dema}).\textsuperscript{49} Although the Visuddhimagga stretches the definition of what constitutes a \textit{paṇṣukūla} cloth considerably, it does seem to draw a line between \textit{paṇṣukūla} cloth on the one hand and donation and alms on the other hand: “One given thus ‘We give it to the order’ or got by those who go out for alms—cloth is not a refuse rag”.\textsuperscript{50} This seems to me to place the offering of the white piece of cloth outside the Visuddhimagga’s definition of a \textit{paṇṣukūla} cloth and makes it a formal offering (\textit{dāṇaya}). I, therefore, agree with Gombrich (see above) as far as the “curious fusion of the \textit{paṇṣukūla} ceremony with \textit{dāne}” is concerned. However, I am not convinced by his interpretation, namely that by offering a new cloth the spirit of the \textit{paṇṣukūla} practice is destroyed. I would argue that, on the contrary, the spirit of the \textit{paṇṣukūla} practice is evoked in order to upgrade an old and outdated ritual, the offering of a garment for the dead, and to buddhicise it. The fact that the appellation \textit{paṇṣukūla} cloth is applied even to what seems to be a clear cut case of a breach of that same practice seems to me strong evidence of its allure.

The advantages are obvious: the amount of merit yielded from a donation stands in direct proportion to the virtue of the receiver and declaring a donation to be a \textit{paṇṣukūla} cloth instantly upgrades the receiver to an ascetic monk, while at the same time serving as a subtle

\textsuperscript{47}P. Ladwig, “‘Sleeping in coffins and getting rid of bad luck’: Death rituals for the living and the question of ‘occult economies’ in Thai Buddhism”. Interdisciplinary Colloquium, School of Humanities, University of Bristol, 17 February 2009. Short film clips of this ritual can be found on the website of the University of Bristol, http://www.bristol.ac.uk/thrs/buddhist-centre/projects/bdr/films/ (accessed 21 May 2013).

\textsuperscript{48}See also Chirapravati’s contribution on the \textit{paṇṣukūla} ritual in Thai paintings in the same volume (Williams and Ladwig 2012).

\textsuperscript{49}In Sri Lanka the \textit{paṇṣukūla} ritual is never performed for the living, as far as I am aware.

\textsuperscript{50}Nānamoli 1956, p. 64. (Visn II.19: Warren 1950, p. 51: \textit{Yam pana, saṅghassa demā ti dinnaññ colakahikkhāya vā kannaññi laddhan, na taññi paṇṣukūla}).
reminder to the monks that they promise to be content with just that, rag robes. The capacity of the \textit{pāṇḍukūla} cloth to remove pollution makes it relevant as a ritual connected with birth and death.\textsuperscript{51} And finally, the acceptance of the \textit{pāṇḍukūla cloth} at funerals not only represents the re-enactment of the Buddha picking up a shroud, but places the monks near the corpse and adds a dramatic and decidedly “Buddhist element” to the funeral day. It is not hard to see now, why the ritual of \textit{pāṇḍukūla} is so enormously popular not just in Sri Lanka but in most Theravāda countries of South and Southeast Asia.

\textbf{Conclusions}

It is most likely that the origins of the offering of a white piece of cloth at funerals lie in the pre-Buddhist ritual performed in the context of cremations, which include the symbolic covering of the body with a new, uncut white piece of cloth and donating it to the priests. The most commonly found explanation that the offering of the white piece of cloth is connected with the \textit{pāṇḍukūla} practice seems at first glance ill-suited since both acts are conceptually quite different. After exploring the background of both acts as well as the attitudes towards ascetic practices in general, a far more interesting picture emerges. The old custom of a donation of a cloth for the dead has been given a new lease of life by infusing it with a Buddhist spirit of \textit{pāṇḍukūla}. The process of recycling rituals is by no means peculiar to Buddhism, but it is not often that one can reconstruct step by step the motivations and the mechanism by which this is done.

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\textsuperscript{51}Wilson 2003 also speaks of demerit and bad karma, and seems to use these terms almost interchangeably with pollution in this context.


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Rita.langer@bristol.ac.uk

RITA LANGER

*The University of Bristol*