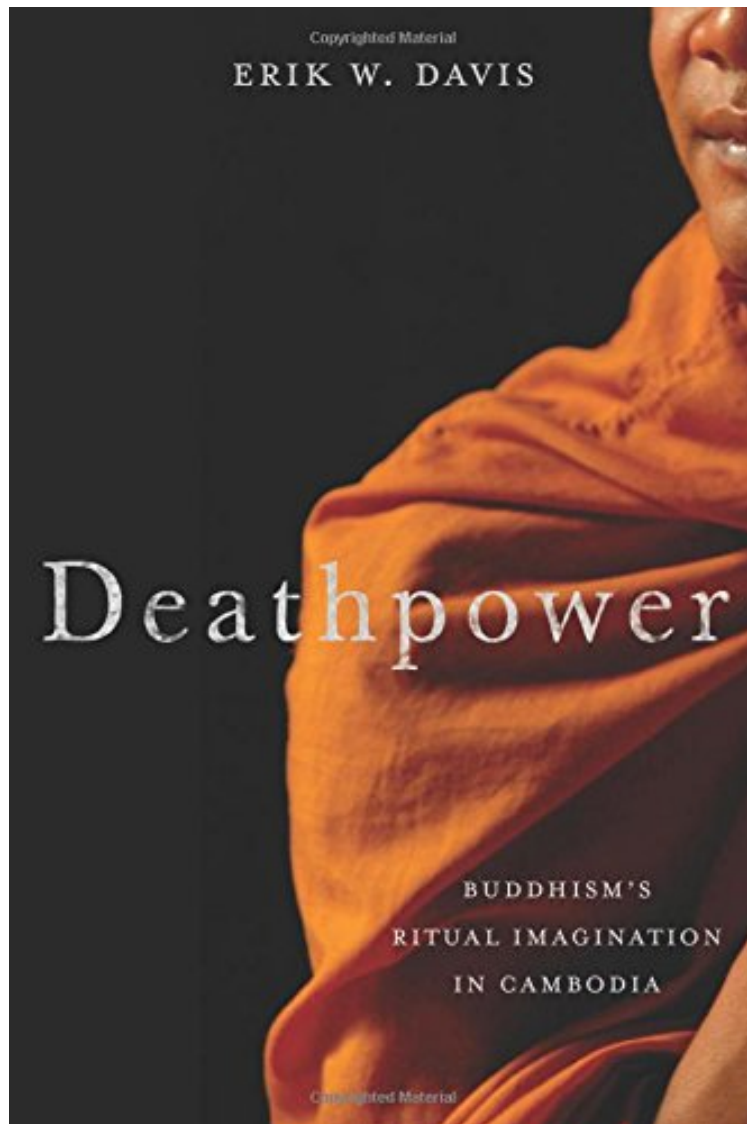


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## Deathpower: Buddhism's Ritual Imagination in Cambodia

*Erik Davis*

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**Erik Davis : Deathpower: Buddhism's Ritual Imagination in Cambodia** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Deathpower: Buddhism's Ritual Imagination in Cambodia:

Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Cambodia, Erik W. Davis radically reorients approaches toward the

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

Deathpower provides a compelling and provocative analysis, both reflective and challenging, that will stand the test of time. More importantly, Davis is clearly emotionally and intellectually invested in his work. His care for Cambodia and its people is a model of responsible and sincere scholarship. (Justin McDaniel, University of Pennsylvania) In an original and thought-provoking book, Erik W. Davis studies the Cambodian social imagination of the wild and savage in relation to moral and hierarchical civilization based on water and rice, providing a rich interpretive ethnography connecting death and death rituals, kingship, agriculture, fertility, monasticism and monastic robes, gifts, hungry ghosts, witchcraft, boundaries, violence, and much else besides. Throughout he considers the interrelationship of what are called 'Buddhism' and 'Brahmanism.' (Steven Collins, University of Chicago) In this capacious and intricate book, Davis tells us how Cambodian Buddhists domesticate 'death power' by ritually linking rebirth to the agricultural cycle and by empowering Buddhist monks to confront, bind, and overwhelm the wild spirits that spring into the world when anyone dies. His fresh, wide-ranging findings make this an invaluable book, and his often luminous style makes it a reader's feast. (David Chandler, Monash University) Davis's beautifully written and provocative examination of the ritual power that allows the living to care for and transform the dead is not only a significant addition to literature on Buddhist funerary practices, it is also the most perceptive, meticulous, informative, and important study of contemporary Cambodian Buddhism to date. Davis's book will be a classic for its fascinating theoretical treatment of the religious imaginary in Cambodia and for its humane consideration of death and all it involves. (Anne Hansen, University of Wisconsin-Madison) A significant contribution to the anthropological study of death.... [Davis] goes much further than funerary practices to shed light on witchcraft, gift exchange, the nature and circulations of rumor, rituals of sovereignty, and the acquisition of various forms of power.... Valuable for serious students of anthropology, Buddhism, and Southeast Asia.... Highly recommended. (Choice) One thing I love about this book is the way in which Davis's sophisticated analysis is complemented by his gifts as a storyteller. (Buddhadharma) A beautifully realized ethnography of Buddhist rituals in Cambodia, full of details and well-crafted narratives that bear witness to the empathic depth of his fieldwork. Given its fruitful marriage of precise ethnography and daring theory, Deathpower is one of the first English-language books on Cambodia that will reshape the study of Buddhism beyond Southeast Asia. (Trent Walker Religious Studies) An expected pleasure and a surprise.... Davis is an engaging and richly detailed writer, a skill which leaves me no other option than to wholeheartedly recommend Deathpower. (Mortality Journal) A beautifully crafted book on funeral rituals and the Cambodian social 'imaginary.' (Journal of Religion and Violence) His work is persuasive and well researched, and should be compulsory reading for any scholar who is interested in both Cambodian studies and contemporary Buddhism in Southeast Asia. (Pacific Affairs) About the Author Erik W. Davis is associate professor of religious studies at Macalester College. His research interests include contemporary religious movements, spirit possession, and the ritualization of ethnic boundaries.