

The Study of Buddhist Material Culture, 1: Body

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Lunedì 26 Maggio 2025, h. 14:00-16:00
Palazzo Stocchi (Piazza Morlacchi 30)

Buddhist monasteries in both Ancient India and China have developed in dialogue with their wider Buddhist and non-Buddhist environment. This constant dialogue also concerns matters of daily life, such as bodily care. This lecture will focus on this aspect, and critically examines the various practices and objects related to bodily care, as codified by the normative texts of monastic discipline. For monastic authors, bodily care primarily involves bathing, washing, cleaning, shaving and trimming the nails, and activities of everyday life that are performed by lay people and monastics alike. In this sense, they are all highly recognizable and, while structuring monastic life, equally provide a potential bridge between two worlds that are constantly interacting with each other: monastic people and their lay followers. Bodily practices might be viewed as relatively simple and elementary, but it is exactly through their triviality that they give us a clear insight into the structure and development of Buddhist monasteries.

* Figure: Han Dynasty pigsty toilet; Nicole De Bisscop, *Onder Dak in China* (Under a Roof in China) (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2007), 124.

The Study of Buddhist Material Culture, 2: Animals

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Aula IX Palazzo Peiro (Via Aquilone 8)

Buddhist texts generally prohibit the killing and harming of all sentient beings. This is certainly the case in *vinaya* (disciplinary) texts, which contain strict guidelines on the preservation of all human and animal life. When these texts were translated into Chinese, they formed the core of Buddhist behavioral codes, influencing both monastic and lay followers. The subject of this paper is animals and their complex relations with human beings, as discussed in the disciplinary texts. The focus is on domesticated animals, a commonplace in both India and imperial China. They were bred and reared for their meat, for the protection of property, for transport, for hunting and other pastimes, and as rat-catchers. Depending on the context, they could be perceived as filthy, dangerous, useful, or friendly. They could be associated with improper behavior, seen as faithful servants and partners, or viewed as the innocent victims of human caprice, such as when their owners mistreated them or killed them for their meat. There was even debate over whether humans should own animals in the first place. Yet, all of these considerations were overshadowed by the Buddhist proscription against harming or killing any sentient being. Hence, the main focus of this talk is Daoxuan (596–667)’s interpretation of this principle in relation to the treatment of animals, informed by his reading of Indian normative texts and his own Chinese context. As we will see, his guidance was complex, but he always attempted to remain true to what was—and remains—a central tenet of Buddhism.

* Figure: Image of dogs waiting for leftover bones below a butcher’s counter, Late Tang, Mogao Cave 85. After Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan 1999, p. 131.