Of Ancestors and Ghosts: How Preta Narratives Constructed Buddhist Cosmology and Shaped Buddhist Ethics. By Adeana McNicholl. Oxford University Press, 2024. 296 pages. $120.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780197748909.

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In *Of Ancestors and Ghosts*, Adeana McNicholl challenges the oft-supposed view that the category of *preta* in South Asian Buddhism represents just what is known today as "hungry ghosts." McNicholl argues that hungry ghosts are only *one* of the several identities of *preta* that developed over time in South Asian Buddhist traditions. Hungry ghosts are generally depicted as "pitiful figures, possessing mouths as narrow as the eye of a needle, distended stomachs, and naked, skeletal bodies" (p. 5). McNicholl observes that, because of the popularity of this image of the hungry ghost across the Buddhist world, Buddhist studies scholars have frequently associated it with the entire category of the South Asian *preta*. Her study instead reveals the multivalence of this category, as evident in Pali and Sanskrit Buddhist *preta* tales from the last few centuries BCE to the first half of the first millennium CE. Her sources illustrate several identities and roles of *preta*s: "a *preta* can take on some combination of the identity of a departed relative, a suffering ghost, a terrestrial deity, or a dangerous demon" (p. 8). McNicholl notes this diversity also in descriptions of the various conditions of the *preta*, stating that "[w]hile some live in a hellish state of distress and hunger, others . . . might enjoy supernatural powers and dine on fine food in celestial mansions" (p. 6). Through these discussions, the book highlights the complexity and multiplicity of the *preta*'s identity, which developed over time in South Asian Buddhism.

Central to McNicholl's argument about the multivalence and historical development of the category of *preta* is the proposition that the *preta*'s portrayals were an essential part of the Buddhists' endeavor to create a "cosmological system characterized by a physio-moral discourse, in which ethical cultivation was linked to the cultivation of bodies" (p. 21). This proposal is based on the accounts that relate the *preta*'s identity, appearance, and cosmological status to the quality of their actions in a prior life. McNicholl argues that such accounts help

construct a Buddhist cosmological model in which bodies act as "sites" for cultivating ethics and morality in the present life, thereby acquiring the requisite merit to sustain in future lives (p. 22). In this model, one's stock of merit, or the lack thereof, determines their fate in the next world, including their realm of rebirth, physical appearances, and life experiences. The book shows how this cosmological model is constructed over a long period of time through evolving portrayals of the *preta* and its realm.

This book is divided into two parts. Part I, "Constructing the *Preta* Realm," consisting of the first two chapters, traces how concepts of the *preta* and its realm were constructed relative to karmic discourses of cause and effect. The first chapter, "From Ancestor to Ghost: The Development of the *Preta* and Its Realm," examines the historical roots of the Buddhist *preta*. It suggests that the category of *preta* developed over time—from departed ancestor located simply in the realm of the ancestors to karmically reborn ghost located in their own realm of rebirth—while also maintaining its flexibility. Based on some stories in the *Tales of the Departed* (*Petavatthu*) and its commentary, the chapter proposes that early portrayals of the Buddhist *preta* conceived it as a departed relative who required offerings through the Buddhist sangha for sustenance in the next world. McNicholl speculates that this conception might have originated from the Greater Magadhan religious contexts in northeast India and later developed into the one aligning with the *preta* in Brahmanical ritual texts, who is a "deceased individual who required ritual action [through the *śrāddha* rite] to be promoted to the level of ancestor" (p. 33). Moreover, both the *Tales of the Departed* and its commentary show that Buddhist authors move away from this Brahmanical background and develop the category of *preta*s to reincarnated suffering ghosts. This is done by reinterpreting the offerings for *preta*s as an act of a "transfer of merit" from the donor to the *preta* and by explaining the *preta* as someone who was stingy in a prior life (p. 48). In its new form, the *preta* is considered pitiful—evident by its physical appearance and location in its own realm of rebirth—who can be uplifted by the merit generated through the offerings. The stock of merit thus helps promote the *preta* from the cruel *preta* world—a subterranean location between the human realm and the hells—to "elsewhere" (p. 51), and from the one appearing pitiful—possessing "a mountainous stomach, the mouth with an opening the size of the eye of a needle, and an affliction of hunger and thirst" (p. 55)—to the one

appearing like a heavenly figure, among others. In this way, McNicholl shows how, by linking a karmic framework to the *preta*'s existence, Buddhist monastics create a new identity and a distinct cosmological location for it. Importantly, she observes that despite this development in the *preta*'s identity, later texts—like the *Story of Koṭikarṇa* in *Divine Stories* (*Divyāvadāna*)—feature the *preta* as both reincarnated suffering ghost and departed relative, whereas texts like the *Sutra on the Application of Mindfulness of the True Dharma* (*Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna sūtra*) also recognize various other types of *preta*s. McNicholl remarks that this reflects "the lingering connection that remained between the *preta* and the ancestral dead" (p. 52) and the continued acknowledgment of the wide variety of *preta*s in the early South Asian worldview.

The second chapter, "The Fruits of False Views: Arguments for Karma in *Preta* Narratives," argues that *preta* literature treats the *preta* as a "mirror and model" for framing Buddhist views of karma and its fruits in relation to competing ideas on this discourse (p. 71). Although both Buddhist and Brahmanical literature maintain that all actions bear fruit in future lives, Buddhists characterize their view of karma by emphasizing "right view"—a shift that McNicholl identifies in *preta* literature. Buddhist authors use stories of reincarnated ugly *preta*s to emphasize the importance of right view—the view that "there are fruits of actions, that there is another world (namely, a life after this one), and that there are individuals who correctly affirm this due to having personally seen these fruits" (p. 68). In other words, the tales describing the lives of *preta*s who are reborn in the cruel *preta* world as a result of immoral actions in a previous life emphasize how *preta*s act as models to teach karma lessons because they can "see before their own eyes" the fruits of having false views (p. 81). The chapter discusses several tales that provide this insight. One of them is the tale of a householder named Cūḷaseṭṭhi. He is reborn as a *preta* with displeasing features—naked and emaciated—because he was stingy and miserly in his previous life. His experience as a pitiful *preta* provides him with the insight to teach King Ajātasattu the fruits of bad conduct. Cūḷaseṭṭhi's tale emphasizes that the *preta*'s, in McNicholl's words, "hands-on experience" of a pitiful rebirth due to actions in a prior life makes it both a legitimate voice and a visual exemplar attesting to the truth of Buddhist views of karma and its results (p. 66).

In the book's part II, "Karma and Embodiment" (chapters 3 to 5), McNicholl traces the ways in which *preta* tales reveal, and subvert,

hierarchies of human difference—particularly those based on class, caste, and gender—articulated through karmic discourses. This exercise is first taken up in chapter 3, "Consuming the Fruits of One's Own Actions: Wealth, Class, and Caste," which discusses how depictions of the *preta* constitute and invert social hierarchies based on class (*varṇa*), caste (*jāti*), and occupation. The chapter accomplishes this objective by interpreting discourses on stinginess and wealth and by identifying aesthetic connections between *preta*s and marginalized humans. It shows how, on the one hand, *preta* tales promote an "ethics of generosity," instructing individuals not to have a stingy mindset (p. 100), as it can lead to one's rebirth as a *preta* due to the lack of the requisite merit for sustenance in the next world. On the other hand, these tales reinforce hierarchies by generating an "ethics of wealth," in which the possession of wealth—the prerequisite for accumulating merit—is associated with high class, caste, and occupations such as agriculture, trade, and cattle-keeping (p. 97). The ethics of wealth is also linked to ideas of virtue, in that wealth is perceived as a sign of past virtue, and the lack of it as a prior moral failing. Thus, these discourses conceive hierarchies based on class/caste and occupation by portraying certain groups as inherently morally or ethically deficient. They suggest that the rebirth as a *preta* can be a result of simply being affiliated with families of low class/caste and occupation like hunters, butchers, and executioners.

The chapter further explores aesthetic correlations between *preta*s and human others, arguing that the two are connected through the aesthetics of disgust. Terming it as "ethical aesthetic" resemblances, McNicholl discusses how "humans [particularly those who are poor, sick, and have 'divergent' bodies] become somatically linked to their former punishment as a *preta*" (pp. 106–107). Such correlations of the aesthetic of disgust also appear in connections made between *preta*s and low class/caste individuals, including *caṇḍāla*s. Lastly, the chapter observes instances that invert these social hierarchies. This is noted with respect to two main themes. The first is the critique of stinginess presented through tales connecting *preta*s and monks, which "accuse hungry monks of being 'hungry ghosts'—of being freeloaders who leech off the local populace without earning what they eat" (p. 115). The second concerns the techniques of "temper[ing]" the hierarchical socioeconomic and somatic discourse, for instance, by promoting an ethics of non-attachment, compassion, and generosity (p. 122).

The question of subversion of norms is further discussed in the context of gender and sexuality in chapter 4, "Virile Householders and Fertile Wives: Gender and Sexuality in This World and the Next." The chapter demonstrates how, while *preta* tales reinforce wider norms promoting men's virility and procreation, they simultaneously reject their reproductive obligations. This is evident in the way *preta* tales address the question of who is eligible to perform rites for the departed. Even though the tales uphold values in virility and procreation and emphasize the son's responsibility to perform ancestral rites—a stance that aligns with the Brahmanical view of an ideal male householder—they simultaneously expand the pool of eligible donors from first-born sons to all humans. McNicholl states that by expanding the eligibility to all humans, *preta* literature maintains a balance between "the traditionally male obligations toward the care of the departed and a monastic rejection of men's future reproductive responsibilities" (p. 132).

Portrayals of the *pretī* body likewise illustrate how Buddhist authors navigate the tension between promoting a broader early South Asian image of an ideal woman as a nurturing mother-wife and the monastic institution's values of feminine reproductivity and sexuality as obstructions to the soteriological path. McNicholl shows how *pretī* tales reinforce normative views of women as crucial actors in maintaining the ethics of generosity, fulfilling merit-making responsibilities, and continuing the patriline by raising sons—all of which are central to the performance of rites to the departed. The tales also reveal "anxieties" about female gender and sexuality in ways that are both replicable to Brahmanical views and unique to the standpoint of the Buddhist monastic institution (p. 152). For example, like Brahmanical texts, *pretī* tales, such as the *Kaṇṇamuṇḍa Petī Tale*, exhibit women's desire and agency in pursuing sexual relationships while simultaneously portraying women as sexually dangerous. However, *pretī* tales also distinctively use such repertoires to link women's bodies and their reproductive capabilities with disgust, suffering, and the cycle of samsara. As McNicholl asserts, following Amy Langenberg, this standpoint "opens the conceptual possibility of women renouncing the household life—and with it, [the obligations of] future reproductivity" (p. 154).

The last chapter, "Decaying, Dying, Decomposing: The Aesthetics of Disgust and the Production of the Ethical Subject," explores how descriptions of the *preta* deploy the aesthetics of disgust as a literary strategy to generate ethical and moral action. Here again, McNicholl

suggests that the tales both incorporate and alter broader conventions—in this case, Sanskrit aesthetic theories of disgust and repulsion—to evoke affective responses in order to convey distinctively Buddhist understandings of karma and samsara. *Preta* tales provide vivid descriptions of repulsive and disgusting *preta* bodies: They are "so decayed, rotten, and burnt that though anthropomorphic, they resemble a charred human corpse more than a human being" (p. 156). The stories often mention *preta*s who consume disgusting substances—excrement, urine, pus, blood, their newborn children, and their own bodies—in futile attempts to sate their hunger. As the chapter stresses, these "graphic descriptions" formulate an important "discursive strategy" for moral and ethical cultivation (p. 158). They first produce an affective experience of *saṃvega*, "a mental and physical reaction of shock or agitation," which instills "a sense of fear and awe toward the dangers of samsara and impermanent phenomena" (p. 158). The reaction of shock then cultivates two additional emotions—*śraddhā* and *prasāda*—through which individuals undergo a transformative experience. With the former, the individual gains "confidence in the Buddha's teaching on karma and in the efficacy of the hospitality relationship of giving offerings to mendicants," and with the latter, "a sense of mental clarity and conviction that compels the individual to give those offerings" (p. 158). In this sense, *preta* tales appear to have a distinctive, to use Naomi Appleton's concept, "narrative vision"—the imagined affect and audience response through the visual in narrative.[1] By evoking affective responses of confidence and mental clarity through graphic descriptions of repulsive *preta* bodies, the tales intend to help individuals not only realize the truth of karmic cause and effect and thus engage in merit-making activities but also instil a sense of resolve to seek liberation from samsara.

Throughout its five chapters, *Of Ancestors and Ghosts* skilfully dissects the ways in which authors of *preta* tales drew on existing repertoires concerning the fate of the departed, the nature of the next world, and the mechanics of karma and rebirth to formulate distinctively Buddhist discourses aligned with the values and goals of the monastic institution. The book uncovers how these formulations result in the construction of a complex multi-realm karmic cosmology that is

1. Naomi Appleton, ed., *Narrative Visions and Visual Narratives in Indian Buddhism* (Equinox Publishing, 2022).

interlinked with hierarchies of human difference, particularly those based on class, caste, and gender. McNicholl emphasizes that the historical development of the *preta* and its realm, as well as their fluid portrayals, play a central role in this project. *Of Ancestors and Ghosts* thus advances the emerging scholarship on Buddhist non-human others, showing how early South Asian Buddhists closely integrate the human and non-human worlds to build a karmic cosmology and to express the complex workings of karma and the nature of the next world.

While McNicholl effectively integrates the *preta* and the human worlds in her analyses, her study does not address the relationship between the *preta* and other non-human beings in the production of this cosmological model or in shaping the *preta*'s identity and its realm. Such an inquiry is especially important because other non-human entities—notably, *yakṣa*s—hold similarly fluid status in the Buddhist cosmos. The parallels between *yakṣa*s and *preta*s in the fluidity of their identities, appearances, and locations suggest that monastic authors may have conceptualized the *preta* and its realm in close relation not only to the human world but also to other non-human entities. Even though, unlike *preta*s—who, as McNicholl notes, hold a marginal status in the Buddhist cosmos—*yakṣa*s are revered for their role as local earth-spirit protectors, their existence in both beneficial and harmful forms makes entities like *yakṣa*s an important parallel subject for consideration. In my ongoing doctoral work, I have found that, in both textual and visual images, more generally, while beneficial *yakṣa*s appear with "normative" physical and facial characteristics, harmful and fearsome *yakṣa*s feature grotesque bodies and grimacing faces. Like *preta*s, a *yakṣa*'s location in the cosmos is flexible, with beneficial *yakṣa*s located on both subterranean and heaven levels and harmful *yakṣa*s located on the hell realms but also on subterranean levels.[2] Textual sources also frequently consider karmic deeds of individuals when associating

2. For examples of beneficial and harmful forms of *yakṣa*s in visual arts, see John Guy, *Tree & Serpent: Early Buddhist Art in India* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2023), "Catalogue: Beginnings of Buddhist Imagery," cat. 14, "Railing post with *yakṣa* on *makara*" (pp. 44–45) and cat. 19, "*Yakṣa* abducting a woman" (p. 51). For literary references, see Anne Keßler, "Yakṣas and Yakṣiṇīs," in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen (Brill, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1163/2212-5019_beh_COM_000202. Guy (*Tree & Serpent*) and Keßler ("Yakṣas and Yakṣiṇīs") also refer to *yakṣa*s' cosmological locations.

them with particular types of *yakṣa*s.[3] These similarities in *yakṣa* and *preta* portrayals make one think of the various ways in which Buddhist monastics may have conceptualized the *preta*'s fluid identity and its role in the construction of a karmic cosmology in relation to other similar non-human entities—a line of inquiry that could be addressed in this work.

Inspiring further explorations in Buddhist studies and, more generally, premodern South Asian studies, McNicholl's study contributes to several other fields of inquiry, such as death studies, narrative studies, folklore studies, and comparative religious studies. Her narrative style of writing exhibits a strong interest in narratives and the skills to communicate and artfully simplify the complex world of *preta*s for her readers, scholarly and non-scholarly alike. Readers keen on stories may particularly enjoy the analogies to *preta* stories at the beginning and end of each chapter, which help simplify the analyses and make the book an engaging read.

3. For example, the *Mahākapi jātaka* gives a vivid description of a man afflicted with *kiṭāsa* (disorder of the skin characterized by whiteness) who gets this condition as a result of his betrayal of a friend. The story compares his appearance to that of a *yakṣa*, describing him as pitiful, with a thin and emaciated body full of smelly, discharging sores. From the context, it appears that the reference to *yakṣa* here is to the fearsome ones. See also Adeana McNicholl's discussion in the second chapter of the *preta* Cūḷaseṭṭhi's tale in which he becomes a *yakṣa*—in this case, a terrestrial deity—upon successful accumulation of merit (p. 71).