

Myanmar's Free Funeral Service Movement: A Case Study of Socially Engaged Buddhism from Below

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Abstract

This research explores how contemporary charitable social service organizations in Myanmar have shaped a distinct form of "socially engaged Buddhism from below." While previous scholarship on Myanmar's parahita (welfare of others) movement has largely focused on the moral authority and "top-down" leadership of prominent monks, this study emphasizes the agency of lay Buddhists in transforming community-based traditions into a nationwide grassroots social safety net.

Central to this development is the Free Funeral Service Society movement, which emerged in the late 1990s in response to state-driven urban renewal projects that marginalized the poor by relocating cemeteries to remote outskirts. What began as a local initiative to provide free hearses has evolved into a sophisticated network providing medical care, disaster relief, and emergency services. This movement has

facilitated a significant paradigm shift in Buddhist practice: the institutionalization of "social service" (luhmuye) as a legitimate and popularized form of merit-making.

By tracing the history of luhmuye, the study illustrates a transition from traditional, exclusive community mutual aid based on reciprocity to an inclusive charitable practice that serves individuals regardless of ethnicity or religion. The research highlights how lay practitioners have negotiated and institutionalized this new ethic, distinguishing "social service" (luhmuye) from traditional "religious service" (bathaye). Unlike traditional merit-making, which centers on the monastic community as the primary "field of merit," this grassroots engagement empowers the laity—particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—to accumulate merit through direct service to social others in need. Ultimately, this paper argues that the free funeral movement represents a unique localized form of socially engaged Buddhism that reconfigures the relationship between religious practice, social welfare, and civil society in contemporary Myanmar.