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The Missing and Their Families: Buddhism and the Role of Ritual in Processing Grief and Ambiguous Loss

Alex Wakefield¹

Abstract

This article considers the support that Buddhist ritual practices may offer families and relatives of missing people. Families of missing individuals experience a specifically defined form of grief known as ambiguous loss. Such loss is usually denied the traditional funerary or commemorative practices of other forms of bereavement. Nevertheless, psychologists and humanitarian organizations stress the importance of such practices and their socio-cultural context as a way for families to effectively process ambiguous loss. I highlight the value in these practices coming from Buddhist religious groups within Buddhist communities, while noting that disappearances often present exceptionally difficult circumstances for many religious traditions, including Buddhism. Examples are drawn from the

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Pāli *Nikāyas* supporting the argument for a “reconfiguration” of ritual to meet these needs, and case studies are cited to demonstrate religious communities supporting, via ritual practices, families of missing individuals. I therefore propose ritual as an element of Buddhist praxis that may effectively address the psychological and social requirements for families of missing people.

Introduction

This article began as part of a wider project on Buddhism and international humanitarian law (IHL), intended to foster dialogue and identify similarities between the two domains (Bartles-Smith 9). This project led several authors, myself included, to specifically consider internal displacement, and to what extent Buddhist ideas may support the care and protection of internally displaced people.

By the end of 2021, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated a record eighty-nine million, five hundred thousand people had been forcibly displaced worldwide, including refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people (UNHCR). Within this number, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre suggests over fifty-nine million internally displaced people recorded at the conclusion of 2021. The figures are disturbing, and anticipated to become worse as new geo-political events develop over the coming years. Within an initial context of internal displacement, I began to consider the unique challenges posed by disappearances, and those challenges experienced by

families and relatives of missing people—whether resulting from displacement or otherwise.² Family members experience a unique kind of psychological trauma when loved ones go missing which is defined as ambiguous loss. There are no standard religious approaches available to process this suffering, much less an institutionalized one within the schools of Buddhism. However, multiple secular authorities—psychologists, NGOs, humanitarian organizations—identify certain practices as complex yet powerful tools to process the grief and anguish over missing loved ones. These are practices are, surprisingly, usually associated with spiritual and religious groups: rituals and commemorative actions.

My question, therefore, is to what extent Buddhist religious groups can meaningfully address ambiguous loss experienced by families of missing individuals. I am interested in the faith-based support that such groups may offer families within Buddhist communities, and especially whether this support may be more beneficial *because of* its perceived religious legitimacy. Unlike support from humanitarian or legal organizations, societies have invested these groups with spiritual and cultural authority, and it is worth considering whether this has greater psychological benefits for processing ambiguous loss. Equally, I am interested in the socio-political consequences of such ritual practices, and how action at the community level (through religious institutions) may reach a broad population experiencing conflict or displacement. If religious authorities give more visible attention to this unique form of suffering, the public's moral sensitivity to the sufferings of displacement may be sharpened, and society's commitment to preventing displacement in times of conflict may be strengthened.

² Unless otherwise stated, I will use the term *disappearance* liberally in this article, to describe those who go missing due to any number of causes.

This article begins by examining ambiguous loss, and the psychological and social issues faced by the families of missing people. The potential for Buddhist groups to offer support to these families is suggested through examples of religious aid in the aftermath of disaster. Nevertheless, I consider how fraught the issue of disappearance remains at the community level, and how families dealing with ambiguous loss are often left particularly vulnerable in comparison with other groups experiencing trauma. To incorporate ritual practices within this discussion, I consider a transformative approach to Buddhist ritual, arguing there is a precedent for “reconfiguring” ritual found in the Pāli *Nikāyas*, of which some salient examples are provided. Finally, I examine case studies where religious practices have previously supported families of missing people or responded to the issue of disappearances and consider the importance of these practices being led by religious communities.

The Missing

The Missing is defined as people “whose whereabouts are unknown to their families,” or who are reliably reported missing, due to armed conflict or displacement (ICRC *Accompanying* 16). I use the terms *families*, *relatives*, and *loved ones* interchangeably to include family members, partners, or even friends of the Missing, but it must be noted that these terms will be interpreted differently across different socio-cultural contexts. This presents an issue from the outset, as culturally defined relationships to the missing individual may prevent support being offered to all who are experiencing the loss. Relatives of missing people will often face specific situational, legal, and psychological challenges compared with other groups experiencing displacement or conflict. For instance, without a formal death certificate families will often be unable to access the estate of their missing rel-

ative or receive financial compensation from the government in acknowledgement of their loss. A death certificate (or other legal recognition) may be harder to obtain in certain contexts than others, such as during protracted conflict. This is further compounded by the psychological distress experienced by families, having to decide whether to declare a missing loved one alive or dead, and without definitive proof of either status.

There are protections within international law to ensure people do not go missing, and to recognize obligations to families and relatives of those who do. IHL and its primary instruments—the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, their Additional Protocols, and customary law—provide parties to a conflict with the “obligation to search for persons who have been reported as missing” (Sassòli and Tougas 730), as well as a legal recognition for the missing individual and for families to know the fate or whereabouts of their missing relative (ICRC *Accompanying* 18-21). Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions explicitly recognizes the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and its Central Tracing Agency (CTA). The latter mobilizes the ICRC’s resources and coordinates with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to trace missing individuals or collect information on their whereabouts, with a view to reuniting separated families.

Unfortunately, such efforts may often be frustrated. Many disappearances are, themselves, the result of violations of IHL (Sassòli and Tougas 732). The primary responsibility for preventing disappearances and to clarify the fate of the Missing lies with State authorities (ICRC *Missing* 4). Disappearances, however, will often occur in situations where social institutions have broken down. This may extend to local authorities, law enforcement, and the justice system, all of whom have a key role to play in fulfilling the obligations to missing people and their families. Difficulties are exacerbated when belligerents choose not to fulfil these obligations or

prevent humanitarian organizations from doing so on their behalf. Indeed, families themselves may choose to distrust information which they are entitled to receive under IHL, due to its association with an enemy party. Most relevant for the following discussion is the desire from relatives to see mortal remains returned to them (which is not guaranteed under IHL) and the negative psychological consequences resulting in this wish remaining unfulfilled (Sassòli and Tougas 732-3).

The practical and legal difficulties facing families of missing people are vast, and beyond the scope of any one community to address. What is more pertinent here are the psychological issues that such difficulties contribute towards. Families of missing people are subjected to particular psycho-social consequences unfelt by the general population, even those experiencing the same conflict or disaster. This is understood as *ambiguous loss*.

Ambiguous Loss

Ambiguous loss defines loss which is unresolved. When an individual goes missing, no certainty of death can be conclusively established, leaving relatives in a state of ongoing limbo and unable to effectively process or resolve their grief. It will often be impossible for a body or remains to be recovered. This lack of resolution will “[prevent] certain psychological re-adjustments, which are necessary to cope with the absence of a loved one” (ICRC *Accompanying* 42). Pauline Boss explains:

Most people need the concrete experience of seeing the body of a loved one who has died because it makes loss real. Most families of missing persons never find such verification of death and thus face greater challenges in shifting

their perceptions about absence or presence. (*Ambiguous* 26)

This verification comes traditionally in the form of established spiritual and social rituals³ that enable us to process death. A funeral, a wake, or any number of other death rituals exist to commemorate, to mourn, but also to recognize the passing of life and to accept it. In contrast, those without knowledge of a loved one being alive or dead do not have such closure:

People are denied the symbolic rituals that ordinarily support a clear loss—such as a funeral after a death in the family. Few if any supportive rituals exist for people experiencing ambiguous loss. Their experience remains unverified by the community around them, so that there is little validation of what they are experiencing and feeling. (*Ambiguous* 8)

Boss touches on the on the particular social consequences families of the Missing experience. Ambiguous loss can be exacerbated by the lack of acknowledgement of loss afforded to relatives of missing individuals. Whether by a funeral or even a simple death certificate, a death can be validated by the wider community in a way which a disappearance cannot. The family's grief becomes "disenfranchised" and considered as unreal or immaterial by community or religious institutions (Boss *Families* 522). Consequently, families may choose to actively withdraw from these social ties if they do not believe their experience of loss can be accommodated

³ I use the terms *rituals* or *ceremonies* to define either religious or secular customs that sequence actions for a particular purpose. These are complicated terms, and intentionally kept general throughout this paper for reasons I hope will become clear. Nevertheless, I am mainly focusing on contemporary rituals here which revolve around commemoration, which will become more apparent as we consider global case studies.

by the same cultural processes, removing them from relationships and support which are necessary to resolve ambiguous loss (Boss *Families* 525).

During protracted conflict, affecting whole societies or communities, there will often be a lack of formal recognition of the specific hardships endured by relatives of missing people:

In those cases where humanitarian assistance is available, some families are eligible because they are refugees or internally displaced persons and meet the criteria for vulnerability specified by the various humanitarian organisations . . . However, the families of missing persons are usually not regarded as being specifically vulnerable by humanitarian organisations.⁴ As a result, there are no assistance programmes for their especial benefit. Some ad hoc assistance is given through family associations or by NGOs, but this is not sustainable. (ICRC *Accompanying* 39)

Even in cases where direct financial or legal humanitarian assistance can be provided, meaningfully addressing the ambiguous loss experienced by families is an essential element in reducing prolonged suffering. Boss provides three levels of effects by which ambiguous loss is evaluated: individual, family, and community. The individual level represents the psychological consequences directly felt by relatives of the missing individual. The family level explores this within the dynamics of relations or others within the same household experiencing the loss, and the resulting disintegration of a previously well-defined family structure—for example, the

⁴ There is a gendered dimension to this issue. Men are more likely to go missing globally, due to a number of causes. Consequently, women will generally be the ones left behind to deal with the financial, legal, or administrative fallout. They are, generally speaking, less likely to have had access to these processes and may come from patriarchal societies where a husband's name appears on most official documentation that affects her and her children (ICRC *Accompanying* 31).

need for wives and children to re-evaluate their role in a household when a husband or father goes missing. Finally, the community level represents the wider social structure, and to what extent culture and religious practices can meaningfully address the loss (Boss *Families* 524-5). My question is to what extent the presence of specific religious ritual practices, designed to address ambiguous loss and disappearances, at the community level can reduce the psychological suffering of the individual and family. This becomes especially relevant as research shows that community approaches are increasingly preferred by families of missing people, therefore suggesting that intervention from a wider social group may be more effective at addressing ambiguous loss than individual approaches (Boss *Families* 520).

Formal recognition by religious communities on the loss experienced by families of the Missing can validate their experience and aid grief-processing. I propose this recognition using religiously sanctioned rituals. Research explores the psychological benefit that such rituals offer, including to honor loved ones, publicly recognize the suffering of families, and welcome solidarity from others in their communities (ICRC *Accompanying* 63-4). Indeed, Boss highlights that for many experiencing ambiguous loss there is a tendency to cancel or dismiss previously established rituals, when in fact it is the need to validate and reconstruct them which is such a crucial role of the wider community (*Families* 528). From a Buddhist perspective, it is unclear to what extent disappearances are validated by religious communities, and whether religious rituals can, in fact, be reconstructed to meet families' specific challenges. Rituals are a fundamental aspect of Buddhism as it is practiced in many global contexts. There is undoubtedly a need here, identified by non-religious research, to explore the potential for such rituals in the context of supporting families of missing people.

Religious Groups and Trauma Relief

The role of religious leaders and groups in trauma relief is underestimated and not limited to an ability to provide spiritual care. Such groups and individuals will have, in fact, a unique potential to help in the aftermath of disaster; they can be easily recognizable, well-known locally, and carry authority among their communities. These figures are therefore well-positioned to provide an effective initial support network (Falk *Thai* 35):

A religious institution has the capacity to act in all the different stages of disasters: response, reconstruction, recovery and mitigation. (Falk *Gender* 181)

As Elizabeth Harris notes, these various functions were seen in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka:

. . . Buddhist temples became a focus for providing immediate palliative aid. Tents were erected in *vihāras* (Buddhist monasteries) to house refugees . . . Traditionally, food and material requisites were brought by laypeople into the *vihāras*. In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, this action was reversed. Laypeople came to the monks to be fed and sheltered. (Harris 4)

Practical rather than spiritual, the immediate aid from religious groups had a sizable impact on communities in the aftermath of the disaster, with Harris noting that “informal aid of this kind was more effective than state aid in the first few days” (5). Fast, efficient implementation of humanitarian aid is a constant concern for all organizations providing relief after a disaster has occurred. It is therefore worth noting the immediacy and efficacy of those responses from religious community groups in these crucial early moments.

Regardless of material support, the Buddhist monastic community also provides spiritual support to its followers, in the form of *dharma*-talks, religious explanations, and a spiritual framework within which to situate disaster and trauma:

In times of difficulty, people turn to monks for consolation and for explanations about life and death. The monks are also important in conducting rites and ceremonies, and for maintaining continuity and order. (Falk *Thai* 30)

Within the context of ambiguous loss, rituals and commemorative practices are routinely considered an important and effective way of processing one's psychological trauma. These are, as suggested, a way of understanding and validating their experiences. For those within Buddhist communities, the effects of religious practices will often be strengthened by the weight of legitimacy invested in the monks, nuns, or members of the wider *samgha*. There will often be a more pronounced relationship between those offering aid and those receiving when they share a religious or cultural framework. Harris uses the example of the Damrivi Foundation in Sri Lanka:

The Damrivi Foundation⁵ . . . consciously sought to address lacunae in aid provision after the tsunami, particularly in trauma counselling and in ritual closure. Neither service could have been offered so effectively by non-Buddhist organisations. (9)

Harris's point addresses a fundamental aspect of how faith groups can provide a unique form of aid by drawing on the shared culture of religious

⁵ The Damrivi Foundation was started by a group of Buddhist academics and practitioners and displays a wide remit of ethical and social activity. It is not a traditional monastic community, but its remit overlaps considerably, and is therefore pertinent for the considerations of this article.

individuals. For Buddhist faith groups, an understanding of the beliefs of the affected community can help members of the *saṃgha* to position their spiritual care in a specially tailored framework. Moreover, if these groups are already well-known with relationships to the community, their ability to respond to disaster may be more effective. Faith-based aid can benefit from a closeness with its recipients that overseas or even state aid may struggle to match.

One caveat will be caution as to how much responsibility is being placed on these religious groups or individuals. As seen above in the case of Sri Lanka, the *saṃgha* will often shoulder the burden of material provisions for those affected by disaster, but this charity should not absolve other relevant groups of their responsibilities. Although religious groups can (and do) offer immediate relief and support to communities enduring trauma, it is unfair and potentially dangerous to expect them to do so without assistance from the government. This is especially true for ongoing crises or longer-term issues, such as how to address the needs of displaced persons or those affected by protracted conflict. These issues, as with the challenges posed by disappearances, do not have simple, immediate resolutions, and it is not the sole responsibility of the *saṃgha* to resolve them.

Missing People and Religious Communities

Disappearances present a unique problem for many religious groups and traditions. There is often no explicit religious or cultural script for dealing with such events, much less established ritual practices to aid those experiencing this distinctive form of grief:

The disappearance of an individual from his or her family and community is an unusual occurrence, and expressions

of sympathy and solidarity are insufficient at best. In such cases, nobody really knows what to do, not even the families. Having no recourse to rituals of symbolic value pertinent to their situation, especially in contexts where religious and traditional practices are at the heart of social life, makes it even harder for families to fit a meaning to their experience and lessen their pain. (ICRC *Accompanying* 56)

In cases of missing people, any benefit that religious groups can provide in the aftermath of disaster is complicated by the ambiguity surrounding disappearances. Other stages of life (whether a birth, a marriage, or a death) are recognized across cultures and spiritual movements. Disappearances, in contrast, are not usually affirmed by traditional practices. When a person goes missing, the inherent uncertainty of the situation bleeds into religious praxis:

Ambiguous loss brings with it a host of new complications that religions are often unequipped to deal with. There is no body, so traditional funerary practices cannot be performed. Unlike those who are killed, there is no finality, our way of expressing grief in culturally documented norms. (Isuru, Bandumithra, and Williams 4)

In fact, the establishment of these norms can often work against those experiencing ambiguous loss:

‘It is nearly 27 years since my brother disappeared. We do religious activities and bless him. But we did not perform death rituals or give Panshukuula [sic] (a Buddhist blessing performed after death). It is bad if we do such things to someone alive . . . ’

‘Our uncles and villagers ask us to give alms to Buddhist priests and invoke merits. My parents and I don’t want to

do that since we believe that he is alive somewhere.' (Isuru, Bandumithra, and Williams 4)

An inability to perform these well-established rituals results in no resolution, which is particularly concerning to the relatives of missing persons. Not only do the families of the missing lack meaningful rituals of closure (especially as for many, that closure will be predicated on receiving material remains), but in a Buddhist context, they also lack the opportunities these rituals offer to make merit on behalf of the dead and to contribute as active agents in seeking better rebirths for their loved ones.

When one considers the purpose of religious belief to be in overcoming uncertainty, and making sense of the inherent chaos in everyday life, faith is left in a difficult position when such uncertainty cannot be meaningfully resolved:

In the Buddhist and Hindu cosmos, the uncertain, natural and ambiguous status of the disappeared carried with it potential chaos, disorder and disunity. To the extent that the ambiguity threatens the established social order, it is polluting and must be brought under control. (Thomason-Senanayake 198)

Karma is a good example here. In many places, women whose husbands have disappeared will often be perceived as bringers of bad karma and are shunned for their inauspicious nature⁶ (ICRC *Accompanying* 55). Regardless of one's thoughts on the karma theory, inconsistencies of doctrine or ritual process on this issue open the door for hindering support to survivors and relatives. In the absence of meaningful support from formal religious groups, relatives will often turn to alternative sources of information and comfort which will exacerbate their suffering:

⁶ Note here a resurgence of the gendered dimension to disappearances.

Many families of the disappeared sought out soothsayers (*sastra karayas*) and horoscope readers (*sastra kari*) as well as sorcery shrines . . . and oracles . . . because they transcend both the political and social order. (Thomason-Senanayake 174)

Sastra and other such rituals took on a heightened importance not least because they provided information and validated what the state denied. (Thomason-Senanayake 182)

This last point is crucial, as Jane Thomason-Senanayake highlights a consequence from the inability of religious groups to address the issue of missing persons in the context of international law. Although not necessarily the fault of religious leaders, disappearances and the confusion that surrounds them often have political consequences. Disappearances can be caused willfully (as in forced disappearances) or the confusion generated by disappearances during armed conflicts or other emergencies can be exploited by bad faith actors to their advantage. The power of the disappeared to generate maximum confusion and disruption in the religious sphere is understood—often it is these spheres which are the foundation of social life. If religious groups cannot meaningfully address the circumstances behind disappearances, it will allow other parties to co-opt the confusion and inspire activity that benefits them while harming the broader public.

Our concern should be the reduction of suffering experienced by relatives of missing people. Should Buddhist groups adopt rituals specifically to address ambiguous loss and the Missing, they may work at each of the three levels of effects defined by Boss: individual, family, and community. Religious validation of such experiences would provide support to individuals of the faith, as demonstrated in those cases where disaster re-

lief was offered in Buddhist societies by Buddhist groups. Equally, religious rituals may work to preserve cohesion among families and the community in situations where other social institutions have broken down or been dismantled. This could be especially pertinent in cases where the State is unable to unwilling to provide their legal obligations set out by international bodies of law. In these situations, it provides an instance where communities can ensure respect for humanitarian principles, via religious acknowledgement of the fundamental rights of missing people.

Transforming Ritual

As discussed, rituals and ceremonies are often fixed around prevailing social norms and events. Consequently, from both Buddhist and non-Buddhist analyses, their value is often understood in preserving tradition. But this is only partially true, as Robert Sharf comments:

. . . the claim of any particular ritual tradition to be invariant—to preserve intact an ancient or primordial archetype—is largely a conceit. As ethnographers and historians have documented, even the most conservative of ritual traditions undergo constant change, whether the practitioners are aware of it or not. Ritualists and their audiences adapt to contingency, but in doing so they must be careful lest they undermine the sense of timelessness and hence the legitimacy of the performance as well as the institutions that countenance it. (248)

This balance between meeting the needs of a changing society without losing the spiritual legitimacy of the ritual practices, is essential to identifying how Buddhist rituals may effectively support families of missing people. When part of the healing process is rooted in the perception of

tradition, it is natural that some tension may arise. Two points can be made in response here. Firstly, disappearances are, regrettably, not a recent phenomenon. As long as armed conflict has existed, disappearances have remained a consequence of it. It is unlikely that the nascent Buddhist community of India was unfamiliar with missing persons, and equally unlikely that the monastic community was not approached for spiritual guidance on the issue.⁷ Secondly, one must ask whether a reluctance to transform ritual is about preserving tradition, or rather about preserving a more specific status-quo. Sharf notes that “ritual legitimizes local norms and values by casting them as an integral part of the natural order of things” (248). For rituals designed to aid closure in missing person cases, one must consider the political act implicit in commemoration—and equally, that of choosing to ignore.

The *Pāli Nikāyas* have a complicated relationship with ritual. Many ritualistic and ceremonial practices are treated cautiously, and it is unclear how some contemporary practices would be received by the Buddhist community of the time.⁸ However, this can be answered by returning to ritual as being conflated with the religious status-quo. P. D. Premasiri argues that it is not religious ritual *per se* to which the *Nikāyas* object, but rather the “over ritualisation of religion” leading to the “loss of all spiritual and ethical meaning” (151). In other words, ritual is useful only insofar as it contributes to the spiritual wellbeing and progression of its followers. The critique of the *Nikāyas* is directed instead against ritual which is overly performative and overly attached to tradition.

⁷ Identifying historical examples of such responses would be a valuable contribution to further research on this topic.

⁸ This is complicated by a legacy of colonial study on Buddhism which has historically privileged the textual and philosophical elements, at the expense of the ritualistic, performative, and cosmological elements. Hence any consideration of early Buddhist ritual must take into account such bias.

In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha asks a smith's son, Cunda, which "rites of purity" he prefers. Cunda replies that the rites of purity are "prescribed by the brahmins of the west." Tending the sacred fire and paying "homage to the sun" (among other rites) are how he understands purification (AN 10.176). The Buddha then explains that "purification in the Noble One's discipline is quite different from the rites of purity prescribed by the brahmins of the west," and that impurity will remain despite any ritualistic actions if one has not successfully overcome unwholesome states of mind.

In this discourse, the Buddha critiques the Brahminic interpretation of ritual purification practices while exalting those which are rooted in skillful means (an approach shared by Mahāyāna textual traditions as well). There are unmistakable benefits to rituals and ceremonies, whether by chanting as a group or by devotional acts, and these spread through the community by actions such as the giving of merit (as seen above in Buddhist responses to disaster relief). The emphasis returns to whether the process strengthens positive spiritual and mental states. It is by this system of moralizing or psychologizing ritual that ritual can be properly understood in the Buddhist context, in contrast with the prevailing religious tradition of the Buddha's time (Premasiri 158). This understanding of ritual is valuable both for centering Buddhist qualities in the ritual process and for challenging the social conditions in which change is necessary.

The Kūṭadanta Sutta

The *Kūṭadanta Sutta* is the fifth *sutta* from the Pāli *Dīgha Nikāya*. Its inclusion in the *Dīgha* is relevant and will be discussed shortly.

In the *sutta* the Brahmin Kūṭadanta wishes to perform a great sacrifice of animals. Kūṭadanta's eagerness for a successful sacrifice leads him

to consult the Buddha.⁹ The Buddha, through a narrative concerning a previous king Mahāvijita, prompts the Brahmin to understand the value of alternative action based on practical Buddhist principles that would achieve the same results. To deal with brigands terrorizing the countryside, the king distributes food and alms, leading the people to be content and joyful, refusing to commit to hateful actions. In this context, the Buddha explains “sacrifices” based on skilful means and thought, rather than those which indulge killing and punishment: “In this sacrifice, Brahmin, no bulls were slain, no goats or sheep, no cocks or pigs, nor were various beings subject to slaughter, nor were trees cut down for sacrificial posts . . .” (DN 5, 141).

The idea of sacrifice is moralized according to Buddhist principles. More “profitable” sacrifices are, in order of precedence, described as giving alms to the monastic community, providing shelter for the *saṃgha*, going for refuge, undertaking the precepts, and ultimately committing to the spiritual path (139-40). The common understanding of what ritual practices entail are expanded on, enabling them to align more with Buddhist values—in this instance, the sacrifice becomes bloodless, at once embodying the central tenet of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence). This would lend weight to Premasiri’s argument that early Buddhism sought to transform rituals by moralization, and that Buddhist ritual distinguished itself from the Brahmanic by centering on connecting with spiritual and ethical values, and not merely a traditional formula to be followed (2001). This is an example of similar “reconfiguration” of religious and cultural rituals, a practice that is encouraged by Pauline Boss specifically to aid families processing ambiguous loss (*Families* 528).

⁹ Walshe comments on the irony of a Brahmin consulting the Buddha for advice on performing sacrificial acts, their primary vocation (550). This is seen as evidence for the narrative of the *Kūṭadanta Sutta* being essentially fictitious. For our purposes this has little relevance. Whether invented or not, its inclusion points to its value for the early Buddhist community in addressing a key difference with the prevailing religious orthodoxy.

But with this distinction in spiritual terms, the Buddha's advice also has social consequences. Contextually, the *Kūṭadanta Sutta*'s inclusion in the *Dīgha Nikāya* suggests a purpose of countering the Brahminical and late-Vedic orthodoxy of the Buddha's historical and social milieu.¹⁰ When the Buddha speaks of transforming established sacrificial or ritual practices, he is challenging Vedic authority and power. Consequently, ritual transformation becomes a political act.

To follow this argument to the contemporary discussion of missing persons, Buddhist-led ritual practices therefore would not only allow for processing of grief based firmly in positive and spiritual transformation but may also promote unity among communities through a statement or call to action. Ceremonies do not only service the memory of the Missing, but also raise awareness of the circumstances that led to the disappearance. Mobilizing resources, garnering attention, and communication with international communities are all potential consequences of highlighting the tragedy in this way:

These collective actions articulate 'grief activism' that aims at transforming political practices from creating division and necropolitical violence into fostering communities and relationalities . . . the many graves without a name also stimulates people to act. (Mirto et al. 108)

It may be that this reconfiguration of religious rituals addresses the consequence of ambiguous loss at each of the three levels of effects. Relatives and families are given the opportunity to validate their loss through the

¹⁰ I follow here research by Joy Manné on the organisation of the Pāli Canon. Manné suggests certain thematic categorisations which can be broadly found in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, including a prevalence of *suttas* in the DN intended to position the Buddhist teaching against other religious groups of the time (Manné, Joy. "Categories of sutta in the Pāli Nikāyas." *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, vol. 55, 1990, pp. 29-87).

language of their culture and faith. Their experience is seen and understood. At the same time, their unresolvable expectations of the loss (such as that a body will be received, and traditional burial can occur) are discouraged, but importantly this discouragement comes from within their community from groups they will be more receptive to accepting it from (Boss *Families* 520). On a wider social level, it offers whole communities the opportunity to process their loss together. A ceremony for a missing son in armed conflict undoubtedly highlights and processes personal grief, but also draws attention to the wider context behind the disappearance and the causes that led to the conflict, therefore providing many across the community with a shared experience, with no one way to “lose” a relative. A communal religious response to disappearances can be seen in many contexts, and the results are often surprising.

Case Studies

Sicily

How then would these look in practice? Ultimately, some measure of individuality would remain across communities; circumstances of disappearance are not the same everywhere, and neither are interpretations of Buddhism. Rather than argue to institutionalize the process, I consider here examples for the purpose of inspiring Buddhist communities to create their own rituals for commemorating the Missing.

An initial case study does not come from a Buddhist majority country, but a Christian one in Sicily. Here, certain Sicilian communities extend traditional grieving rituals (the funerals, the mourning) to the unidentified migrants lost at sea in the Mediterranean. In the last ten years, the number of migrants making the perilous crossing to Italy, Greece, and other European countries has been large enough to be pejoratively called

a “crisis.” The journey by sea is not safe. Thousands have died enroute, and often these bodies will never be found. If they are recovered on the shores of Europe, they will often remain nameless, with no means of identifying who they are or where they came from (Mirto et al. 104).

Giorgia Mirto et al. examine instances where Sicilian widows mourn at the graves of unidentified migrants. They pray for the deceased, lay flowers at the grave, and reference the “moral obligation” they feel to extend the rituals of death from their relatives to those whose relatives could not mourn for them:

Their care for the dead reveals a profound appropriation of mourning and the subsumption of deceased migrants within their own community of deceased. Beyond this, the appropriation of mourning allows the application of the ritual practices for overcoming grief. (108)

The community has identified those left out of the traditional death process—the Missing and their relatives. They have no way to offer practical support to the families left behind experiencing the ambiguous loss. Instead, they adapt their own formalized religious rituals (drawn from Catholicism) so that they can continue to pray for the soul of the missing person, doing what they can to look to the next world while their relatives left behind cannot. Nevertheless, what is striking about this case study is the return to concurrent religious and political consequences of mourning in this way. Mirto et al. note that memorials in Southern Italy will sometimes explicitly criticize political bodies for their failure to act or implore others to use these events as impetus for further action (108). The ritual process is not limited to a spiritual addition here, but as a way of spreading awareness and inspiring a way to reduce the need for similar subsequent rituals. By mourning publicly, they are making a political statement.

Thailand

Through anthropological work in Southern Thailand, Monica Lindberg Falk identifies a Thai Buddhist spiritual response to ambiguous loss that has been subsequently cited as a key example of religious rituals evolving to process the trauma of disappearance (Wayland and Maple 26). This was made in response to the devastation following the tsunami in 2004 (Falk *Recovery* 98).¹¹ Ceremonies were an important part of much post-conflict recovery. For those missing, where no body or remains were discovered, a previously little-known practice involving a “counterfeit” funeral was recovered and implemented by relatives with the blessing of the monastic community.

There seem to be no general regulations about how to conduct the ‘counterfeit’ funeral. In [the interviewee’s] description of the ceremony she said they displayed pictures of the missing persons but they had no coffins. They burned pieces of paper with the dead person’s names written on them. A large number of monks were invited to the funeral and all relatives, neighbours and friends attended the ceremony. The aim was to communicate to the deceased that they had died and encourage them to lead their family and relatives to the dead bodies so that they could be cremated. (Falk *Recovery* 100)

Falk goes on to note that in a separate case, an empty coffin was used inscribed with the missing individual’s name. Similarly, this involved food and flowers enjoyed by the individual, something not organized in the

¹¹ This disaster affected several Buddhist-majority countries, each with individual responses (spiritual and humanitarian). This may be worth comparative examination in future research.

previous case (*Recovery* 100). Such flexibility allows the ritual to transform and meet the specific needs of the relatives. Grief, and therefore grief processing, will vary from family to family. However, the important point is the religious legitimacy awarded to these ritual practices by the participation or blessing of monks, nuns, and religious groups.

It may be that unanimity on doctrine is not particularly important here. Indeed, these practices and their benefits may be disagreed on from Buddhist to Buddhist. What is essential is the ability to use a familiar language of Buddhism—in this case, through ritual mediated by respected religious leaders—to allow the processing of grief and ambiguous loss in a manner which reflects the religious inclinations of the relatives. Wayland and Maple consider this to be an example of longer-term thinking, where the concern moves beyond identification, to learning how to process with the indefinite absence of a missing relative (26). Indeed, this broader concern is crucial—in cases where mortal remains cannot be recovered, alternative ways of supporting families through ambiguous loss must be relied on. Even from a psychological perspective, the language becomes more focused around spiritual language—celebration, remembrance, ways to commemorate without physical remains (*Falk Recovery* 100).

Religious belief is clearly not essential to properly provide for processing ambiguous loss. Nevertheless, it is easy to be struck by how secular psychologists and therapists return to spiritual language and the importance of ritual in considering missing relatives. If we return to the *Nikāyas'* perspective, it is understandable why this is. Ritual, when based on moral and psychological foundations, offers real potential in spiritual development and the overcoming of negative states of mind. It is about transformation, not only of the practitioner, but the social conditions surrounding the disappearance. From a broader perspective of IHL, these practices may complement the legal framework which guides communities on what provisions should be offered to families of the Missing, the

protections they are entitled to and their obligations to be fulfilled. Respect for these at a community level may facilitate respect for the wider implementation of IHL:

These rites of spirituality and memorialization seek, through resignification, to confront dehumanizing acts. As a feedback process, the observance of differentiated approaches according to ethnic and cultural aspects of the victims and affected communities has a great impact on the level of cooperation with the search mechanisms. (Sassòli and Tougas 743)

There are practical and psychological benefits for Buddhist groups to accommodate ritual practices to explicitly support the families and relatives of missing people. Led by faith groups and individuals, these practices may provide religious validation of ambiguous loss, as well as mobilize a community experiencing disaster or protracted conflict to recognize this unique and complex form of grief.

Conclusion

Families of the Missing experience suffering unlike others experiencing displacement or protracted conflict. Buddhism aims to minimize suffering in the world and has developed robust religious and ethical principles and practices to achieve this goal. This article has suggested the unique support that religious ritual practices, led by Buddhist religious groups, may work to this effect. The reconfiguration of traditional practices, along with the development of new ones, is not denounced by Buddhist traditions so long as the goal remains the reduction of suffering.

The value of these rituals is twofold. Firstly, they offer a religious option to the benefits of practices identified by secular research. Both

Boss and the ICRC have identified the benefits that rituals offer families of the Missing, and this presents an opportunity for Buddhist praxis to validate experiences of ambiguous loss from within Buddhist communities. Secondly, there is the potential for social transformation because of these practices, as recognition of disappearances and culturally based actions in response are acted on by populations. Broadly speaking, religious rituals can complement the work of humanitarian organizations from a direct, community-based position among those experiencing conflict or displacement by processing trauma and spreading awareness.

This article has been, in many ways, an overview of the groundwork. Further research is clearly needed on this topical area, and many reading will have begun to consider the variety of ways in which Buddhism can provide a doctrinal basis for legitimizing these ritual practices for the Missing and their families. Examples of Buddhist communities responding to disappearances extend beyond the case studies here. Buddhist groups in various countries will have developed unique and creative ways to support the families of the Missing, and it is worth pursuing these further. Rather than turning to textual sources to institutionalize these practices, I hope that sharing knowledge of such rituals will identify common elements, to be developed further in aiding the work of humanitarian organizations to prepare for addressing missing people in conflict-related displacement.

Abbreviations

AN Aṅguttara Nikāya, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya*, Wisdom, 2012.

DN Dīgha Nikāya, translated by Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*, Wisdom, 1995.

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