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Public lecture



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(University of San Diego)

# Outcaste Awakening

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17:30

Seminar room 1

of the

Department of South Asian,  
Tibetan and Buddhist Studies,

University Campus, Spitalgasse 2, Hof  
2.7, 1090 Vienna

Corpse Meditation and  
Cremation-Ground  
Asceticism  
in Ancient India

The practices of the *śmāśānika*, or cremation ground ascetic, were recognized as canonical within the Buddhist tradition at least as early as fifth century CE, when they are found in the *Visuddhimagga*.

However, recent scholarship has suggested that these practices did not begin within a specifically Buddhist, or even sectarian, milieu but rather within a "magical" substratum of South Asian religious practice. Among the *śmāśānika* repertoire is the hyper-soteriological practice of *aśubhabhāvanā*, or meditation on decomposing corpses. This fast-track approach to the realization of the Buddhist truth of impermanence is situated rhetorically at the center of the Buddhist soteriological tradition in texts such as the *Visuddhimagga*, but its locus in the cremation ground suggests we should look outside of an orthogenetic explanation.

In this presentation, I will be arguing that the practice of *aśubhabhāvanā*—like other *śmāśānika* practices—emerged not in the Buddhist monastery, but within the outcaste milieu of the ancient Indian death economy.



*Dr. Nicholas Witkowski is Assistant Professor at the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego*

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