PHIL 490: Special Problems – Buddhism and Death
Spring 2024 – Dr. Sabrina Starnaman
Tuesdays, 3-5:30pm

In the West our ideas about death, dying, and the meaning of life are dominated by notions from the Abrahamic faiths. In this class, we will explore these important topics from a Buddhist perspective. What does death of the body mean in a religion that sees the liberation from cycles of rebirth as the state to work toward and aspire to? How do Buddhists treat and honor their dead? How does The Tibetan Book of the Dead guide the dying and the living? What happens to Buddhist souls after death? What is the bardo and what are we supposed to do there? Which realms after death are those to avoid and which are auspicious? What do Buddhists who don’t believe in reincarnation believe?

This course will also study phenomena like Tukdam, when highly evolved Tibetan Buddhist practitioners die while meditating and continue to meditate after death with color in their faces, supple bodies, retaining a little residual heat for days after death; the practice of encasing the mummified bodies of venerable teachers inside golden statues, allowing their students to continue to practice at their feet; and the six realms of existence—Human, Animal, Hell, Heaven, Hungry Ghost, and Jealous God Realm—to which souls are sent according to Buddhist doctrine, but also are used by psychologists and Buddhist teachers alike to describe the mental and emotional states we move through daily.

Left: A self-mummified Chinese monk, dead for a thousand years, sits inside a golden statue.  

Above: Pretas or hungry ghosts exist in one of the six realms of cyclic existence. Hungry Ghosts are tortured by their never-ending hunger and thirst.  
https://www.lionsroar.com/what-are-hungry-ghosts/