

Buddhism and the Incorruptible Body



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Within hours of a person's death their body begins to deteriorate. The first sign is the swelling of the abdomen as gasses build up in the stomach. Soon the cells break down and putrefaction sets in producing a foul odour. Depending on the external temperature and the presence of insects or scavengers, within two or three days' no one would like to touch, go near, or even want to see a corpse. But for at least 2000 years it has been observed that some corpses remain uncorrupted when they would be expected to go through the normal process of decay and disintegration. Occasionally, bodies that were examined years, sometimes even centuries, after they were buried or entombed have been found to be astonishingly well-preserved. In China in 1971 a noblewoman who died in 163 BC was found so perfectly preserved in her tomb that her skin was still soft and moist and her limbs could still be moved in the normal way. Further, the body had an odour but not an unpleasant one. Scientists believe that the fact that the tomb was airtight and contained a very specific amount of humidity allowed for the corpse's extraordinary state of preservation. Several other cases like this are known.

But apart from this, the bodies of individuals believed to have been particularly holy and which were buried or entombed in a normal manner, have sometimes been found to be uncorrupted too. Some saints of the Catholic Church such as St. Bernadette, Padre Pio and Pope John XXIII are examples of this. In such cases the claim is that the non-corruption is a special favour from God. Buddhism, mainly Mahayana Buddhism, has a long and well-documented tradition of monks and nuns believed to have been arahats, bodhisattvas or just very saintly whose bodies have defied corruption also.

In medieval China and Japan, a practiced called Sokushinbutsu developed in which ascetic monks would retreat into the mountains and eat only pine needles, tree resins and nuts so that gradually their bodies had no fat in them at all. Then, after years of such meditation and austerities, when they felt they were about to die they would sit in a meditation posture until the end came. The result was that their bodies would remain uncorrupted. Similar practices evolved in Tibet. Recently the preserved body of the famous Chinese meditation monk Master Ci Xian who lived a 1000 years ago underwent extensive scientific testing. The body had been kept in a temple for centuries, then in the 1960s it was hidden for fear that the communists would destroy it, and it has only recently been brought to light again. CT scans, x-rays and tissue analysis, etc. revealed that the body had all its internal organs and although the muscle tissue was dry there was no evidence that any artificial means had been used to preserve it. And further, it showed none of the characteristic signs of the decay that should normally begin on the second or third days after death. How and why the body remained uncorrupted, the scientists said, was difficult to explain. Another example of this would be the body of the Cambodian Monk Venerable Phor Pian who had lived in Thailand for some years. Last year his tomb had to be moved to make way for new constructions. When the tomb was opened his body was found to be miraculously uncorrupted, it had even maintained the smiling countenance the monk was known for during his life.

It must be pointed out that not all cases thought to be miraculous incorruptibility actually are, some are possibly fraudulent. A temple in Ko Samui in southern Thailand has the body of a monk who was revered by the locals for his supposed magical powers and who died in 1973 while meditating, or so it is said. But his body looks very likely that it has undergone an artificial preservation process specifically so it could be put on display, probably for commercial considerations. In its glass case it has become a must-see for tourists from the nearby beach resort, and the temple has become very commercial; a rather undignified situation. And exactly why this long dead monk would need the pair of sun glasses she is wearing has not been explained.

So far no comprehensive scientific research has been done to find out how miraculous incorruptibility occurs. No religious institutions in Europe have allowed scientists to examine the bodies of the various saints they have so only theories can be given. The Christian explanation is that God or various divine beings are responsible for it. The problem with this is that science has no direct access to divinities. Another theory is that certain mental states can have an influence on material substances, an explanation which would fit well with Buddhism. However, how does science test and measure holiness? So for the time being at least, miraculous incorruptibility remains a mystery.

While all genuine cases of miraculous incorruptibility are very interesting from a scientific and perhaps from an anthological point of view, how does it fit with Buddhist doctrine? Before the Buddha passed into final

Nirvana he said it would be appropriate to intern the remains of a universal statesman (*cakkavati*), a fully awakened Buddha, a silent Buddha (*paccekabuddha*) or a disciple of a Buddha, in a *cetiya*. It should be kept in mind that at the Buddha's time *cetiyas* were earthen mounds, not what are called *cetiyas* or stupas today. He also said that after his passing his body should be cremated, and his disciples followed his wishes. As a result, cremation became the preferred way of disposing of corpses in most Buddhist countries. This was not for any doctrinal reason but because Buddhists felt it worthy to emulate the Buddha in important and even in minor matters; how a body is disposed of after death being a minor matter from the perspective of the Dhamma.

While relic worship became a popular practice at a very early period, it is worth remembering that the Buddha described his own body as "dirty." By this he did not mean that he neglected normal standards of hygiene but only that his body, like all bodies, was temporal, constantly producing impurities and subject to decay. Further, the Buddha once said to his monks, "Inherit my Dhamma, do not inherit material things" and of course body parts, i.e. relics, would qualify as material things. This being the case, it could be argued that the practice of preserving corpses, of worshiping even apparently miraculously uncorrupted ones, and putting them on display, would be meaningless or even inappropriate from a Buddhist point of view. Whatever prevents a corpse from decaying (apart from embalming), it almost certainly has something to do with the state of the person's consciousness, not anything about their body; it would be a by-product of psychological development, not physical specialness. But as happens all too often in religion, people pay more attention to the finger pointing to the moon rather than the moon itself, or in this case, to the body rather than the mind.