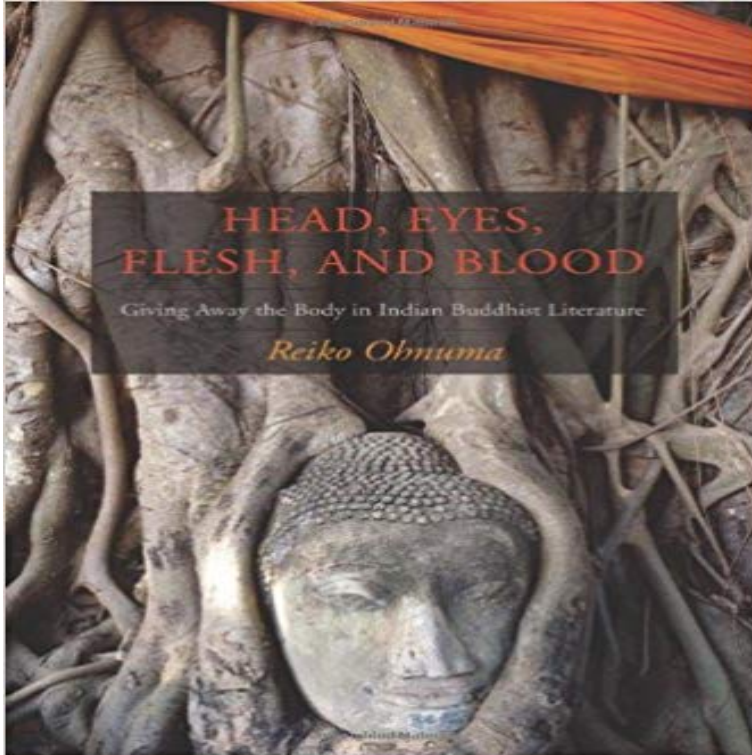


Head, Eyes, Flesh, Blood: Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood: Giving Away the Body in Indian Buddhist Literature



Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood is the first comprehensive study of a central narrative theme in premodern South Asian Buddhist literature: the Buddhas bodily self-sacrifice during his previous lives as a bodhisattva. Conducting close readings of stories from Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, and Tibetan literature written between the third century BCE and the late medieval period, Reiko Ohnuma argues that this theme has had a major impact on the development of Buddhist philosophy and culture. Whether he takes the form of king, prince, ascetic, elephant, hare, serpent, or god, the bodhisattva repeatedly gives his body or parts of his flesh to others. He leaps into fires, drowns himself in the ocean, rips out his tusks, gouges out his eyes, and lets mosquitoes drink from his blood, always out of selflessness and compassion and to achieve the highest state of Buddhahood. Ohnuma places these stories into a discrete subgenre of South Asian Buddhist literature and approaches them like case studies, analyzing their plots, characterizations, and rhetoric. She then relates the theme of the Buddhas bodily self-sacrifice to major conceptual discourses in the history of Buddhism and South Asian religions, such as the categories of the gift, the body (both ordinary and extraordinary), kingship, sacrifice, ritual offering, and death. Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood reveals a very sophisticated and influential perception of the body in South Asian Buddhist literature and highlights the way in which these stories have provided an important cultural resource for Buddhists. Combined with her rich and careful translations of classic texts, Ohnuma introduces a whole new understanding of a vital concept in Buddhists studies.

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