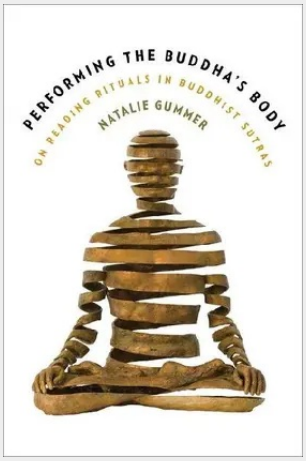
Gummer

Performing the Buddha's Body

On Reading Rituals in Buddhist Sutras



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Texts such as the Lotus Sutra and the Sutra of Utmost Golden Radiance claim to be the true body of the Buddha. Whenever people preach, hear, memorize, or study them, the Buddha’s body speaks and acts through the bodies of others. These sutras use corporeal metaphors for the ritual substance and power of the Buddha’s verbal body. It is food or fire that cooks those who consume and are consumed by it; it is seminal fluid and womb, engendering and gestating the future body of a buddha; and it is the ritual-poetic essence of kingship, infusing listeners and speakers with a buddha’s sovereign power. Yet these sutras are typically read and studied purely as doctrinal works. Performing the Buddha’s Body proposes and demonstrates a new method for reading Buddhist sutras, built on a dialogue between South Asian ritual frameworks and contemporary notions of performance. Natalie Gummer understands sutras as poetic rituals for transmitting buddhahood through embodied performance, preserving the Buddha’s life essence and enabling him to speak and act in the world anew whenever his teachings are uttered. She also considers the broader questions that the Lotus Sutra and the Sutra of Utmost Golden Radiance raise regarding scholarly reading practices and the new possibilities that they reveal. Performing the Buddha’s Body illuminates not only the complex performativity of Mahayana sutras but also their potential to speak to and act in the present.

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