

## Introduction

### Buddhist Insights Into the Great Matter of Death

Just before he passed away in 1959 at the age of 120, the illustrious Chinese monk Xuyun wrote three *gāthās*. The first reads:

Taking pity upon ants a shrimp jumps not into the water;  
To benefit watery beings throw my ashes in the river.  
If they accept this last offering of my body,  
I hope they will win *Bodhi* and labour for salvation. (Xuyun et al. 1988, 209)

The first line refers to Xuyun's decision to stay in mainland China to benefit others rather than to escape after the communist takeover, though he was mercilessly beaten and left for dead at the age of 112 (Xuyun 1988, xiv, 138–143).<sup>1</sup> In the next three lines Xuyun teaches the uselessness of the body after death and expresses his wish to benefit others even after death by offering his ashes to living beings. The lines of the *gatha* recall Xuyun's earlier reflections on death, "The Song of the Skin Bag," written when he was 19 years old (Xuyun 1988, 214–219). The "skin bag" refers to the human body—a bag of filthy, disgusting substances disguised by a covering of skin.

Xuyun's second *gāthā* also begins with an exhortation on death:

I urge my Dharma friends to think  
Deeply and with care about  
The karma of birth and death. (Xuyun 1988, 209)

While reaffirming the basic Buddhist teachings on the three trainings (wisdom, meditation, and discipline) and the four marks of existence (impurity, suffering, impermanence, selflessness), he alludes to a nondual enlightened state:

Suddenly you awaken and perceive  
Clearly that all is like dew and lightning,  
You realize that in the absolute  
Myriads of things have the same substance,

The created and the uncreated  
Are like water and its waves. (Xuyun 1988, 210)

The analogy of waves in the water is frequently used in Buddhist texts to illustrate the relationship of thoughts to the mind. Just as waves arise from the ocean but are not the ocean, deluded thoughts arise in the mind but are not the nature of the mind. Here, the analogy is used to illustrate the relationship of the created and uncreated, phenomena and emptiness. From an orthodox Buddhist point of view, however, the assertion that the “myriads of things” are all of the same substance is an unjustified leap. In a similar way, the Chinese extend Yogācāra thought beyond its original boundaries, expanding the concept of *ālayavijñāna* from an individuated to a universal consciousness. This tendency toward universalism and the collapsing of dualities (reality and appearance, existence and nonexistence, life and death) that is characteristic of Chinese Buddhism, is commensurate with, and an outgrowth of, the Chinese preference for nondualist or, as Angus Graham and Roger Ames put it, “correlative” thinking (Graham, 1986; Hall and Ames 1995).

### Trees in Winter

Death, as a process of continual transformation, is a common theme in both ancient Chinese and traditional Buddhist thought. Roger Ames illustrates this theme with words from the *Zhuangzi*:

For one who realizes the enjoyments of Heaven...  
life is traveling with Heaven, and...  
death is the transformation of things. (Ames 1998, 65; cf. Graham 1981, 260)

Chinese and Buddhist thought concur that death and disintegration are emblematic of the process of continual transformation that characterizes not only the human condition but also all objects, animate or inanimate. Death is not merely the final stage of life; all living things are in a process of constant reconfiguration, naturally and continuously arising and perishing. Instead of perceiving death as a final terminus, living and dying are processes that are integrally linked.

Both Buddhists and ancient Chinese thinkers agree that change is the nature of things; but they articulate the nature of change, including disintegration and death, differently. Buddhists explain the nature of change in serial or cyclical terms, proceeding from moment to moment, and lifetime to lifetime. For living beings, the impermanence of all living things signifies and epitomizes the process of repeated birth and death. Chinese thinkers in early times, on the other hand, explain change in terms of an all-encompassing creative process of vital energies or “psychophysical stuff” (Ames and Hall 2001, 33–34). Whereas Buddhist cosmology is activated by the dynamics of karma (actions and consequences), “*qi* cosmology” is activated by *yin/yang* dynamics. Whereas Buddhists neatly demarcate animate and inanimate objects, with sentient beings reborn only as sentient beings, the *Zhuangzi* refers to a person transformed into a rat’s liver or an Excalibur sword. Despite a shared appreciation of the momentary nature of the flow of life in Daoist and Buddhist cosmologies, the analytical Buddhist descriptions of phenomena and causality stand in contrast to the more fluid and amorphous Chinese views of transformation.

Chinese rituals for propitiating the ancestors did not cease after Buddhist theories of rebirth were introduced, but continued unabated, taking new forms. Buddhist memorial services are traditionally held during the forty-nine-day intermediate state between death and rebirth, as described in the *Comprehensive History of Buddhism in China* (Ch. *Fozu tongji*) by Zhipan (ca. 1220–1275), the *Saptadaśabhūmikaśāstra*, and other texts (T 49, no. 2035, 320c; T 30, no. 1575, 282a; Ch’ên 1973, 53). However, even though the dead are believed to take rebirth within forty-nine days, in Chinese Buddhist circles services often continue to be held one hundred days, one year, and three years after death, in deference to pre-Buddhist Chinese custom. This custom has its origins in the three-year mourning period traditionally observed as repayment for the parents’ care during the first three years of childhood. Kenneth Chen speculates that Buddhists hoped to counter charges of their lack of filial piety by observing these funerary customs (Ch’ên 1973, 53). But the practice of paying respect and making offerings to the ancestors presupposes that the ancestors maintain their identity as members of the descendants’ families for at least seven generations after death. The dead are thought to retain their clan identities in specific locations and to have the ability to exercise influence on the living for at least seven generations. In contrast to Chinese ancestral beliefs and practices, in the Buddhist schema the deceased do not take rebirth

in specific clans or families but typically assume different identities in the six realms of existence in each successive rebirth. How did the Chinese reconcile the contradictions among these different belief systems?

Just as in India, a central question for Buddhists in China during the early period of transmission was how to explain moral accountability and the ripening of karma in light of the doctrine of no-self (*anātman*). In his commentary to the *Saddharmapundarīka Sūtra* (*Lotus Sūtra*), Daosheng (ca. 360–434) attempted to resolve the apparent contradictions between the Buddha’s teachings on selflessness (*anātman*), the notion of an inherent Buddha nature, and the notion of true self (*zhenè*). His solution was to interpret non-self and the true self as “two sides of a single reality” (Kim 1990, 36). The term “true self” is problematic in the Indian Buddhist context, however, for it implies something truly existent, that is, something other than either the conventional appearance or ultimate emptiness of phenomena. Daosheng’s non-dual approach to the self as the convergence of no-self and true self proved inadequate to account for conventional realities. Chinese Buddhist history is replete with examples of attempts to resolve the self/non-self-contradiction.

A tendency to posit a transcendent self, however subtle, became apparent in Buddhism as it developed in China. Although problems of translation were at least partly at fault, the doctrine of a storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) gained a far greater following than, for example, the deconstructionist views of Nāgārjuna as interpreted by Chandrakīrti. The concept of *ālayavijñāna* provides a convenient solution to perennial questions such as: If consciousness is transitory and insubstantial, what continues from life to life? If there is no foundational consciousness, what serves as a repository for the imprints of actions from life to life?

Another key concept that presents a possible solution to these questions is Buddha nature (*foxing*), lit., womb or embryo of Buddhahood (*tathāgatagarbha*). Chinese Buddhist scholars do not speak with one voice on the nature of the *tathāgatagarbha*, however. The *tathāgatagarbha* is conceived by some to be an unconditioned or “unconditional” awareness equivalent to Buddhahood. Others regard it as the potential for Buddhahood, as commonly asserted in Indian Mahāyāna. Still others conceive it to be both the potential for awakening and the resultant awakened state. According to Indian Madhyamika thinkers and their Tibetan exegetes, *tathāgatagarbha* is the incipient cause or “embryo”—the potential to achieve enlightenment—whereas Buddhahood is the manifest

result—the ultimate achievement of enlightenment. In this line of thinking, the *tathāgatagarbha* can be either a potentiality or the result of that potentiality, but not both. A seed cannot simultaneously be its own result. From the etymology of the term, the Madhyamika school concludes that the *tathāgatagarbha* is an as-yet-unmanifest potentiality, not an actualized result. The *tathāgatagarbha* as the potentiality for awakening possessed by each sentient being exists both in life and after death. If *tathāgatagarbha* understood to be an awakened being, it does not exist after death because fully awakened beings do not take rebirth.

Over a span of fifteen centuries, Pure Land doctrine became the dominant expression of Buddhist belief and practice in China. Most monasteries integrate both Chan and Pure Land traditions; even the large public Chan monasteries had Pure Land halls for reciting the name of Amitābha Buddha. Repeating the name of Amitābha is the core of religious practice for millions of followers in China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and their cultural diasporas to the present day. The name of Amitābha (Ch. *namo Amituo fo*) is on the lips of housewives, grandmothers, and school children, even emblazoned on taxis and looped on their sound systems, throughout the Chinese diaspora. Clearly, here is a worldview and practice that is meaningful for millions of people, taking its place among myriad interpretations of Buddhist thought and practice.

The articles included in this special issue examine death and dying from diverse Buddhist perspectives. Ernest B. Brewster starts the conversation with “What Dies? Xuanzang on the Temporality of Physical and Mental Functionality,” in which he explores the concept of an intermediate state (*antarābhava*) as understood by the Tang Dynasty scholar monk Xuanzang. He argues that “Xuanzang played a major role in dispelling the notion of a crypto-Brāhmanical soul or spiritual substance” and was largely effective in his efforts “to banish the soul from Chinese Buddhism.” In my article, “Death, Identity, and Awakening in Chinese Buddhist Doctrinal Traditions,” I explore Chinese adaptations of Indian Buddhist understandings of death, identity, and the afterlife as seen through the matrix of earlier Chinese beliefs and practices. Acknowledging that pre-existing framework, it traces the interpretations of Buddhist thought that subsequently developed in East Asia, especially as illustrated by the Pure Land School. In the next article, Edward Arnold shifts our focus to Tibet and the work of the renowned scholar practitioner Losang Drakpa (Lama Tsongkhapa, 1357–1419) on the topic of death. The study examines Tsongkhapa’s philosophical views on the integration of *sūtra*

and *tantra*, and the ways in which he embodies the practices of *lam rim* (the graduated path to enlightenment) in conjunction with unexcelled *yogatantra*. In the final article of this collection, Varvara Chatzisaava explores “The Great Tibetan Funerary Tradition: Tibetan Deathscapes in Past, Present, Future.” After surveying Tibet’s funerary culture from ancient times until the present, she explores uniquely Tibetan practices and methods of disposing of the dead such as sky burial, ritual practices such as *chö* (“cutting through”), mummies, relics, self-immolation, the rainbow body, and, recently under People’s Republic of China control, the desecration of the dead.

Placed side by side, often framed in comparative perspective, the following articles provide insights, raise questions, and stimulate thinking on arguably the most urgent question of the human condition.

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## Notes

- 1 Such excesses occurred long before the Cultural Revolution began and continue still.

## Abbreviations

T Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新修大藏經. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎, Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭, et al. 1924–1932. 85 vols. Tōkyō: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai 大正一切經刊刻會 (CBETA version). Citations are indicated by the text number, followed by volume, page, register (a, b, or c), and line number(s).

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