

CRITICAL TERMS *for the*
STUDY OF BUDDHISM

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DEATH

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Death and death-related topics represent a burgeoning research area in Buddhist studies. Meditations on death, the mechanisms of karma and re-birth, and the doctrinal and cosmological assumptions in which they are embedded drew scholarly attention early on. As the field expanded from a chiefly philological and text-centered enterprise to include the methods of social history, anthropology, literary criticism, and other disciplines, approaches to the study of death in specific Buddhist cultures have multiplied. Recent work addresses such issues as the social dimensions of Buddhist funerary rites; Buddhist mortuary practices, including funerary art; death ritual and the construction of gender and family lineage; and the impact of modernization on Buddhist funerals. There has yet to be a detailed study of death-related discourses and practices across Buddhist cultures. Such a project would shed light, for example, on the transformations of Buddhism in different Asian settings and on patterns in its interactions

with local religion. It could also be expected to reveal just how integral death-related matters have been—doctrinally, ritually, institutionally, and socially—to Buddhist traditions.

Two interrelated issues suggest themselves as particularly illuminating angles of approach for such a study. The first is that of control. Buddhism holds out the promise of mastery over death, both in its “official” ideal of liberation from *saṃsāra* and by claims that its meditative and ritual practices—whether performed by the individuals concerned or by others on their behalf—are sufficiently powerful to intervene to soteriological advantage in the death process. This promise of control over that most mysterious and terrifying realm—death—has been a chief source of Buddhism’s attraction as a lived religion, and the perceived possession of such control has been one of its major sources of legitimation.

Legitimation is the second related issue here. The seemingly naïve question so often raised in undergraduate Buddhism courses—How do you know if someone’s really enlightened?—has in fact posed a significant problem for Buddhist traditions. Whether or not, or to what extent, any given individual has planted good roots, eradicated the defilements, and acquired liberating insight is not readily obvious to the outside observer. Historically, decisions about which persons should hold religious authority have accordingly been based on a range of outwardly visible indications, which are assumed to reflect the requisite spiritual attainments. These have included possession of special powers; certification from a recognized teacher; mastery of ascetic disciplines; scrupulous observance of monastic rule; extraordinary learning and skill in preaching or debate; or other readily observable criteria, depending upon local norms. Yet perhaps the most pervasive index of spiritual power and authority, throughout the Buddhist world, lies in a perceived mastery over death. Here is where the merit and piety of individual devotees may be proved, the power of Buddhist adepts and thaumaturges established, and the authority of particular monks—or of their specific temples, lineages, rituals, and doctrines—confirmed. This essay will first offer some general reflections on these intertwined issues of control over death and its legitimizing power, and then see how they unfold in a specific case from medieval Japan.

SPIRITUAL ATTAINMENT AND THE CONQUEST OF DEATH

While death as a biological fact is irreducible, people imagine and experience it within the framework of culturally and historically specific ways of thinking. Like other religious systems, Buddhism subsumes death within a larger existential problem, formulated in its own terms, to which it then offers itself as the solution. That problem—exemplified by the four

sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, and death—is saṃsāra, the continued round of painful rebirth driven by ignorance and craving. Pāli sources speak of death both as the end of an individual life span and as occurring at each moment, one set of circumstances passing out of existence even as another arises. In either sense, death is simply part of the law of impermanence. The difficulty, from a Buddhist perspective, is that in our blindness to the shifting, contingent nature of things, we grasp at and cling to possessions, both material and mental, in a deluded attempt to construct a fictive “self” that will be impervious to change. Since all such efforts are doomed to be frustrated, the fact of one’s own death becomes a source of suffering. In addition, the very ignorance and craving that prompt one to grasp at insubstantial possessions and satisfactions are what drive rebirth. Thus, as indicated on the wheel of becoming traditionally hung at the entrance to Buddhist monasteries, even death as the end of this life span is not a singular occasion but a recurring suffering that one must undergo repeatedly in the round of transmigration. Ontologically and experientially, death defines the saṃsāric condition.

And yet precisely because death exemplifies the problem, the sight of death can, it is said, induce in thoughtful persons the reflection and religious aspiration that lead toward a solution. In this sense, death—along with old age and sickness—is sometimes represented as one of three divine messengers (*devadūtas*) who warn of life’s brevity and of the need for moral endeavor. Failure to heed its message is the mark of delusion. Thus King Yama, ruler of the dead, addresses the evildoer brought before him:

“Did you not see among men a woman or man that had been one day dead, or two days dead, or three days dead, and had become swollen, black, and full of putridity? . . . Did it not occur to you, being a person of mature intelligence and years, ‘I also am subject to death, and in no way exempt. Come now! I will act nobly with body, voice, and mind?’” He replies, “Lord, I could not. Lord, I did not think.” (*Anguttara-nikāya*, quoted in Warren [1896] 1982, 257)

In contrast, numerous hagiographies depict right apprehension of death as a crucial turning point in the lives of exemplary Buddhists. The paradigmatic example is, of course, the Buddha-to-be, Prince Gautama, whose encounter on a pleasure outing with a corpse being borne along in a funeral procession awakens in him the resolve to renounce the world and seek liberation. The encounter with death as an occasion for awakening is also poignantly illustrated in the tale of the young mother Kisāgotamī. In her ignorance, she carries her dead child’s body about as one would a living infant and begs the Buddha for a remedy to “cure” it. He agrees, instructing her to bring him a handful of mustard seed from a house where no one has ever died. As she goes door to door in her quest, the householders in turn exclaim, “Lady, what is this that you say! The living are few, but the dead are many.” Slowly coming to realize that death

is inevitable for all, Kisāgotamī abandons her child’s body in the forest and seeks ordination (Buddhaghosa, quoted in Stryk 1968, 173–74).

Precisely because of its potential to engender aspiration for the way, Buddhaghosa, the fifth-century Indian Buddhist monk and scholar, includes “meditation on death”—along with the meditation on friendliness toward all beings—as one of two meditations that can beneficially be practiced by persons of all temperaments (*Visuddhimagga* 3: 57–59). Various “death meditations” are found throughout the Buddhist world, aimed at undercutting worldly attachments, promoting zeal in practice, and preparing one for life’s end. Such meditations range from simple reflection on the inevitability of death and the uncertainty of its timing, to the elaborate Tibetan tantric “death simulations,” in which the adept rehearses in meditation the physiological processes of dissolution. Best known in the southern Buddhist tradition, the contemplation of actual corpses in charnel grounds (or more recently, in morgues or photographs), though technically belonging to the category of meditations for engendering aversion to the body (*asubha-bhāvanā*), in effect becomes a powerful form of death meditation (Boisvert 1996).

If recognition of death is the first step toward liberation, then mastery of death is the mark of one who has achieved it. The Buddha’s conquest of Māra on the night of his enlightenment represents his victory, not only over temptation, but over death, which is Māra’s domain. “Opened for those who hear are the doors of the Deathless,” he declares, when the deity Brahmā implores him to teach (*Majjhima nikāya* 1: 169; Horner 1954, 213). So fully is the Buddha’s great awakening equated with mastery over death that his own death is depicted as a virtual reenactment of it, as he ascends and descends with perfect mental control through the levels of meditative absorption before entering final nirvāṇa. Other great Buddhist masters have been represented as not “dead” but deep in meditation. The Buddha’s disciple Mahākāśyapa is said to be in meditation on Mt. Kukkuṭapāda, awaiting Maitreya’s advent; so is the Japanese Shingon master Kūkai (774–835) in his mausoleum on Mt. Kōya.

In fact, one finds a broad tendency across Buddhist traditions to conflate the death of enlightened persons with spiritual attainment, or more precisely, to depict their exit from the world, not as “death” at all but as its conquest. In such cases, even the word *death* is rarely used but is replaced by some special term indicating an escape from the cycle of rebirth, such as “nirvāṇa without remainder” or “going to the pure land.” Alternatively, the disappearance of such individuals may be seen as a “skillful means” designed to awaken others. Patrul Rinpoche, in discussing “the impermanence of holy beings,” says of Marpa, Milarepa, and other great teachers, not that they died, but that, “in the end, they all chose to demonstrate that everything is impermanent” (Patrul Rinpoche 1994, 43). East Asian theorists posited two distinct modes of rebirth: the saṃsāric

cycle undergone by the unawakened, driven by ignorance and craving (in Japanese, *bundan shōji*), and the voluntary rebirth of the bodhisattva, who by the power of his compassionate vows is reborn at will in whatever form will be efficacious in benefiting others (*benmyaku shōji*). Strictly speaking, “death” is a problem of the unenlightened; awakened persons have this process under control.

This distinction—between awakening and delusion—has also been mapped onto the deceased’s remains. Another staple of Buddhist hagiography is that the body of such-and-such an eminent monk or devout layperson emitted sweet fragrance or did not decompose. Such accounts are not limited to Buddhism’s premodern past: The *New York Times* recently reported that the body of the Russian lama Dashi-Dorzho Itigilov (d. 1927) was exhumed some thirty years after his death and found to be “still in the lotus position, still perfectly intact, having defied nature’s imperative to decay” (Myers 2002). Even when subjected to extensive mortuary treatment, the bodies of Buddhist sages and adepts behave differently than do those of ordinary people. Again, the Buddha provides the paradigmatic example; his body is said to have produced jewel-like relics (Sanskrit *śarīra*) in the crematory fire, as have the bodies of many subsequent saints and devotees. In his study of the medieval Chinese practice of mummifying by dry-lacquer technique the bodies of deceased abbots of Chan monasteries and enshrining them in the patriarchs’ hall, Robert Sharf notes, “It would seem that a successful mummification was rare and difficult to achieve, and required the cooperation of the corporeal remains of the deceased. Thus, even in the case of a lacquered mummy, the transformation of the cadaver into an imperishable icon could be construed as evidence of spiritual attainment” (Sharf 1992, 24). As several recent studies have shown, such remains were believed to retain the charisma of the original living person and could respond to prayers, and, in the case of relics, even multiply and move of their own volition (Trainor 1992; Schopen 1998). The remains of the Buddhist “special dead,” in short, behave in a manner quite opposite to the inertness and decay that one expects from an ordinary cadaver—instantiating, as it were, the equation of enlightenment with mastery over death.

THE DEATH PROCESS: STRATEGIES OF CONTROL

Only those with extraordinary powers can “see” causality operating across past, present, and future; the ordinary practitioner must take it on faith, as it were, that meritorious deeds really do lead, after death, to better rebirth, or to freedom from rebirth altogether. Hence the importance to Buddhist cultures of those individuals who, voluntarily or otherwise, “die” and then return to life, reporting that the cosmology is true; that evil

really is punished in nightmarish realms; and that the prayers and offerings of the living do indeed both build merit for themselves and alleviate the sufferings of the deceased. Accounts of such afterworld journeys often gain credibility from the very detailed information they purport to relay about persons known to their hearers. “[I saw that] Aga, the daughter-in-law of the Gyaten family of T’hromt’hog, was in that fordless brown river of the dead, suffering unimaginable pain. This was the end result of her having offered unclean tea to gatherings of many monks. I sang the mani mantra, and Tara saved her, pulling her out of the turbulent brown flood with a beribboned arrow” (Drolma 1995, 41; see also Pommaret 1997). The immense authority accruing to the *delog* (*’das log*) of Tibet and similar “returnees” from the dead in other cultures lies precisely in their apparent validation of Buddhist cosmological, ritual, and moral structures.

Once the afterlife has been ethicized in this way, then all good practices for ordinary times take on a dimension of preparation for death, ensuring that it will mediate the best possible future rebirth. Merit accumulation during life is perhaps the most basic of Buddhist strategies for directing the death process to one’s advantage. At the same time, the moment of death itself has been understood as a potent liminal juncture when an individual’s own meditative powers—or proper ritual performed on his or her behalf—can exert a salvific influence far surpassing that of good practices conducted at ordinary times. Buddhists hope to die well, not only to appropriate mimetically the ideal death that is the sure sign of an awakened person—although that logic plays a role—but because the liminality of death itself is thought to offer an unparalleled opportunity for liberation.

While the degree of emphasis varies from one tradition to another, Buddhism along with other Indian religions has generally stressed the power of an individual’s last thought to condition the next rebirth. Pāli sources attest to the practice of a monk, or fellow lay devotees, visiting laypersons on their deathbed to encourage them in wholesome reflections (*Majjhima nikāya* 3:258–61; *Samyutta-nikāya* 5:408–10). In the Pure Land traditions of East Asia, specific deathbed practices were developed to enable the dying to visualize the buddha Amitābha and focus their last thoughts upon him; by producing even ten successive thoughts of Amitābha at the end, it was believed, even an evil person could eradicate the sins of eight billion *kalpas* (*kalpa* being a vast period of time) and escape *saṃsāra*, achieving birth in Amitābha’s pure land (Stevenson 1995). According to the Unexcelled Yoga Tantra (*amuttarayogatantra*), at the moment of death, the “mind of clear light,” the most subtle form of consciousness, surfaces, and the trained yogin can use his death to access that consciousness, immediately achieving liberation (Lopez 1997).

Belief in the soteriological efficacy of practices for the time of death led, in some cases, to the development of techniques for predicting when

death would arrive and thus enabling more effective preparation. In medieval Japan, monks of the Tendai and Zen schools transmitted a secret method, couched in verses attributed to Bodhidharma, for knowing the time of one's death (Faure 1991, 184–87). Among Tibetan tantric adepts, divining the approach of death—through signs involving bodily processes, dreams, and other portents—became an elaborate science (Karma Lingpa, in Mullin 1998, 129–48; Germano 1997, 461–66). Also vital in the deathbed context are the rites performed by specialists for the dying person, to assist his or her transit to a favorable rebirth or exit from samsāra altogether. Such practices seem to have begun fairly early on, at least in a monastic context; the vinaya (monastic code) of the Mūla-sarvāstivādins specifies that the fellows of a dying monk should for his sake “perform worship to the three precious things” so that he will not fall into an evil realm (Schopen 1995, 495). Rites to assist the dying range from simple support at the deathbed, such as chanting together with the dying person or exhorting him or her in wholesome thoughts, to highly specialized intervention on the individual's behalf by a qualified ritualist. A striking instance of the latter is the consciousness transference (*'pho ba*) practiced in the Tibetan context, by which the adept, trained in recognizing the precisely appropriate moment in the process of dissolution, is said to be able literally to relocate consciousness—his own, or that of another dying person—from the present body to a pure land (Patrul Rinpoche 1994, 351–65; Tsechokling Yeshe Gyaltzen, in Mullin 1998, 171–87).

Closely linked to practices for the dying are those aimed at guiding the newly deceased through an interim period, leading either to the next rebirth or, in some cases, to liberation from rebirth. Buddhist concepts of an interim existence (*antarābhava*) between death and conception may have drawn on Vedic and Upanishadic cosmological elements, assimilating them to a Buddhist interpretive scheme (Cuevas 1996). Among *abhidharma* (“higher dharma,” or advanced doctrinal studies) philosophers, the exact nature of interim-existence was debated, and some schools, notably the Theravāda, rejected it altogether (Wayman 1974; Kritzer 2000). Doctrinally, theories of the “in-between” were elaborated to answer philosophical questions about how mechanisms of causal continuity operate between lifetimes without the support of a permanent soul or other metaphysical substrate. From a ritual perspective, however, such theories served to extend the liminality of the death moment, opening a prolonged window of opportunity during which ritual performance and merit transference by the living could positively influence the fate of the deceased. Though explanations vary, notions of a forty-nine-day interim period gained wide currency throughout Buddhist Asia. Not coincidentally, this is the same length of time that the Buddha is said to have passed absorbed in meditation following his awakening.

What happened to the deceased during this interval, and what the living should do to aid them, has been variously imagined, often drawing on local religious culture. In China, notions of the interim state were expressed from about the tenth century onward as a “purgatorial” period in which the dead were judged in succession by ten kings, who meted out appropriate rewards and punishments and assigned the dead to their next rebirth. The cosmology of the Ten Kings represented a fusion of Buddhist notions of karmic retribution and merit transference with Chinese bureaucratic and legal procedures (Teiser 1994). Tibetan visions of the interim state (*bar do*), with its overpowering lights, sounds, and manifestations of compassionate and wrathful deities, have been introduced to the West through the so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The history of the highly complex Tibetan rites for guiding the deceased through the *bar do* and its numerous opportunities to realize liberation—or, failing that, favorable rebirth—is now drawing increasing scholarly attention (Cuevas 2003). Notions that the dead traverse an interim state have also been closely linked to Buddhist funerary and mortuary practices, and to rites for placating unhappy ghosts.

DEATH AND THE RITUAL SPECIALIST

One constant found in Buddhist death-related practices is the prominence of the clergy. To be sure, the laity have often had avenues for directly benefiting the dead themselves, by offering prayers, by copying or reciting sūtras, or by commissioning Buddhist steles, images, or even mortuary temples. But rites for the deceased have usually been considered most efficacious when performed by those purified by ascetic and moral disciplines or by the power of meditative and ritual practice—that is, monks and also other Buddhist adepts and thaumaturges. Thus when Nandasena tries to give food and clothing directly to his deceased wife, who has fallen into the realm of hungry ghosts, she tells him: “What is given by your hand into mine does not profit me. But as regards the monks, who are abounding in the moral precepts, free from passion, and learned, / Regale them with food and drink and transfer to me the benefit of the gift. Then I shall be happy, blest in the fulfillment of all desires” (*Petavatthu*, quoted in Holt 1981, 13). Maudgalyāyana (Chinese Mulian; Japanese Mokuren), the disciple of the Buddha most accomplished in occult powers, makes the same discovery: food that he himself sends magically to his mother in the *preta* realm bursts into flames and scorches her, but his offerings to the community of monks at the end of the rains retreat at once alleviate her suffering. Maudgalyāyana's legend provided the basis, across East Asia, for large-scale annual festivals and memorial observances held to benefit the deceased and cement the ties of mutual obligation and exchange between Buddhist clergy and laity (Teiser 1988). As John Holt has

suggested, the monk is best qualified to mediate offerings of the living for the dead, because he himself is “dead” to the world and embraces a way of life aimed at transcending birth and death (Holt 1981, 19–20).

By a related logic, especially in East Asia, Buddhist rites for the dying and deceased have frequently employed the symbolism of monastic ordination. In the Chan monasteries of China during the Song period (960–1279), precept recitations were conducted as part of monks’ funeral observances. “The performance of this ceremony is particularly noteworthy,” writes William Bodiford, “because it demonstrates that Chinese Ch’an monks also linked the power of the Buddhist precepts to the future salvation of the deceased” (Bodiford 1993, 188–89). In Japan in the Heian period (794–1185), “deathbed tonsure” was practiced among nobles of the court, in the belief that dying as a monk or nun would positively effect one’s postmortem state. The representation of death, properly ritualized, as a form of ordination probably reached its apogee in late medieval and early modern Japan, with the adaptation of Chan-style monastic funerals for the laity. These funerals, many of whose forms persist to this day, entailed posthumous ordination of the deceased and conferral of a posthumous precept name. Such practices were thought to pacify the potentially dangerous and polluted spirits of the dead and dispatch them to the realm of enlightenment. They invested Zen priests with immense ritual authority, promoted the spread of Zen among all social classes, and were eventually adopted by other Buddhist schools as well (Bodiford 1993, 185–208; Williams 2005, 38–58).

Buddhist funerary ritual of this kind in effect collapses the distinction, outlined above, between the “enlightened” death of spiritually cultivated individuals and the samsaric death of ordinary people. By the power of the ritual performance—whether it derives from the officiant’s personal attainments, from the authority of his school or lineage, or from the ritual itself—the dying or deceased person is said to be effectively removed from samsāra and established in an enlightened realm. This understanding accords well with anthropological models, drawing on the work of Robert Hertz ([1907] 1960), that see funerals as effecting a separation of the dead from living, their purification and transition, and finally, their reincorporation into a new order of the deceased.

Services for the dying and the dead have everywhere constituted a major social role of Buddhist ritualists—monks and also other “unofficial” yogins and adepts—and have provided a chief economic base for Buddhist institutions. The religious legitimation that they entail must in many cases have been self-perpetuating: monks perform death rites because they are the most qualified; at the same time, simply being in the position of presiding at funerary and mortuary rites confers its own authority. Such observations are not intended to deny that death rites may often be performed in the most exemplary spirit of compassion, or that

they provide solace for their sponsors, who, in arranging for them, know that they have done for the deceased all that could be done. This latter point is strikingly evident, for example, in contemporary Buddhist funerals in Japan. Despite the rise of a thriving secular funeral industry, the presence of a priest to recite sūtras—however perfunctory his performance or how tenuous, even nonexistent, his relationship to the deceased—is still deemed indispensable by many.

PREPARING FOR DEATH IN MEDIEVAL JAPAN .

To further illustrate the issues of perceived control over the death process and the religious legitimation it confers, let us turn now to a work exemplifying several of the points adumbrated above: the *Ichigo taiyō himitsu shū* (Esoteric collection of essentials for a lifetime), a set of deathbed ritual instructions attributed to the Japanese monk Kakuban (1095–1143), revered as the founder of the Shingi (“new doctrine”) school of esoteric Buddhism. This work was written at a time of increasing private aristocratic sponsorship of esoteric ritual for both worldly and transcendent aims, as well as a mounting concern, among monastics and educated laypersons, with dying in a state of right mindfulness. Some brief background will help place it in context.

Medieval Japanese interest in ritualized deathbed practice is usually traced to a treatise by the monk Genshin (942–1017) called *Ōjōyōshū* (Essentials of birth in the pure land), which sets forth the forms of practice, including deathbed rites, for achieving birth after death in the pure land of the buddha Amida (Sanskrit Amitābha) (Dobbins 1999). Amida’s realm, “Utmost Bliss” (Sanskrit Sukhāvati; Japanese Gokuraku), was said to lie outside samsāra altogether; to be born in Amida’s pure land (*ōjō*) was to escape deluded rebirth once and for all and to never again regress on the path of enlightenment. In this treatise, Genshin drew on the work of Chinese predecessors to explain how the dying should be cared for and encouraged in their last reflections. Dying monks are to be removed from their accustomed lodgings to a separate “Hall of Impermanence,” where the sight of familiar possessions will not give rise to attachment. There a buddha image should be enshrined, with a five-colored pennant tied at one end to its hand; the dying monk is to hold the other end and thus visualize being drawn into the pure land. Flowers should be scattered and incense burned. Persons who have been drinking wine or eating meat or the five pungent roots should be denied access, lest they disturb the dying person’s reflections. Those in attendance are to help the dying person contemplate Amida Buddha’s form, especially his radiant, all-embracing light, and visualize his welcoming descent (*raigō*), together with his attendant bodhisattvas, to guide the dying person to the pure land. Above all, they are to assist him in completing the final “ten *nenbutsu*”—ten

consecutive thoughts of the Buddha or invocations of his name, in the formula “namu-Amida-butsu”—deemed necessary for birth in the pure land.

Genshin’s prescriptions, and the ideal of a death with right mindfulness, were soon adapted to the specific practices and soteric visions of other Buddhist traditions. Shingon masters such as Kakuban adopted the deathbed *nenbutsu* but reinterpreted “birth in the pure land” to mean, in the deepest sense, a liberative realization in one’s last moments of unity with the cosmic Buddha Dainichi (Sanskrit Mahāvairocana). Teachers of the newly emergent Zen school, though often represented as sublimely indifferent to the afterlife, understood well the power of one’s final acts to confirm one’s spiritual attainments. Spontaneous composition of a death poem, as a proof of one’s insight, was especially valued in Zen monastic circles, as was heroic posture at the time of death (Faure 1991, 187–91). Dōgen (1200–1253) asserted that the power of seated Zen meditation would enable one to “die sitting, die standing” (*Fukan zazengi*).

Laypeople, too, sought to die in a state of right mindfulness. Instrumental in the spread of this ideal was the proliferation of *ōjōden*, literally, “accounts of birth in the pure land” (Kotas 1987). *Ōjōden* collections included biographies of monks, nuns, and lay men and women of a range of social classes who were believed to have reached Amida’s realm. Typically, *ōjōden* describe the last hours of the individual concerned and thus served as models for what a death with right mindfulness was supposed to look like. The subjects of these accounts are never surprised by death. They foresee it to the day or even to the hour and announce it to disciples or family members. They bathe, put on clean clothes, and sit straight in the posture of meditation or lie down in the “nirvāṇa position,” facing west with their head to the north. In most cases, the liberative nature of their death is demonstrated by appropriate signs. Strange music or unearthly fragrance is detected in the death chamber, or five-colored clouds gather in the west, all signs that Amida’s welcoming descent has occurred. Or, the bodies of the deceased do not decay but exude fragrance, or retain the posture of meditation even in the crematory fires. Relatives and close associates, at times even strangers, have dreams revealing their birth in Amida’s pure land. It is open to question how many people actually did manage to die in so exemplary a fashion. Nonetheless, these hagiographical depictions helped both to establish and to disseminate a normative ideal about how one ought to die, an ideal especially widespread in monastic and aristocratic circles. Court diaries from the eleventh and twelfth centuries onward tell of individuals who died holding cords tied to the hand of a Buddha image, or who had a religious advisor in attendance to assist them in their dying hours. The same sources also inform us that surviving family members or associates sought and indeed found auspicious signs of *ōjō* in the death of their contemporaries.

The ideal of right mindfulness at the last moment aimed at utilizing the liminal nature of the death process to achieve liberation. Yet at the same time, it created new problems. Bringing the mind to bear on the Buddha in one’s final moments is no easy achievement, especially for those without training in meditation; one may be distracted by fear or by physical pain, or, in many cases, not even conscious. Anxieties about whether one would indeed be able to focus one’s thoughts at the end were also exacerbated by a growing sense that death’s liminal potency could cut both ways: if right mindfulness at death enabled even a sinful person to achieve the pure land, then, by the same logic, failure to achieve right mindfulness could send the most dedicated practitioner plunging down into the evil realms. Such anxieties were expressed (if not generated) by tales that circulated about the dangers of stray desultory thoughts at the end. In one such story, a devout monk, contrary to all expectation, does not achieve the pure land but is reborn a snake—simply because, even while chanting his last *nenbutsu*, he happens to notice his vinegar jar on the shelf and dies wondering who will inherit it (*Konjaku monogatari sbū* 20:23).

The response that emerged from the monastic community was to superimpose another layer of ritual control over a person’s last moments, above and beyond his or her own deathbed practice. Thus we see an increasing emphasis on the soteriological value of dying in the company of a *chishiki*, or ritual specialist, who could negotiate on one’s behalf the dangers of the liminal last moments. The term *chishiki*, or properly, *zenchishiki* (Sanskrit *kalyāṇamitra*), literally “good friend,” broadly denotes a teacher in Buddhist practice or someone who encourages another in the way. In various contexts, it has assumed additional, more specific meanings, including that of someone who attends the dying and aids them in their deathbed practice. Genshin’s *Ōjōyōshū* had introduced the recommendation of the Chinese Pure Land teacher Daochuo (562–645) that three to five people of like mind should make a pact in advance to assist one another at the time of death. Over time, however, representations of the *chishiki* in medieval Japan shifted from a mere fellow practitioner who would encourage one’s deathbed contemplation to a ritual specialist able to assume full control of the death process if one’s own concentration should falter. Kakuban’s “esoteric collection” is particularly significant in that it is the first extant text explicitly to address this shift.

The *Ichigo taiyō himitsu shū* is a prescriptive text; here again, one cannot automatically assume that large numbers of people actually died in the highly ritualized manner that Kakuban suggests. To have—as he recommends—several *chishiki* in attendance for “one day, two days, seven days, or until death transpires” would have ruled out the possibility of such a rite for many people on economic grounds alone. Nonetheless, medieval sources suggest that, from Kakuban’s time, a growing number of individuals, both clerics and laity, availed themselves in their last

hours of the services of monks or other adepts known for their ritual powers.

KAKUBAN'S "ESOTERIC COLLECTION"
FOR THE TIME OF DEATH

Now let us briefly consider some portions of Kakuban's "esoteric collection." The text opens with strong claims for the efficacy of its recommended procedures.

Birth in the pure land in any of the nine levels depends on right mindfulness at the time of death. Those who seek buddhahood should master this mindfulness, for escape from saṃsāra can be found only in this [final] moment. . . . By correct procedures at the time of death, even monks and nuns who have violated the precepts can achieve birth in the pure land; so too can lay men and women who have done evil. How much more so, those [monastics] of wisdom who uphold the precepts, and lay men and women of virtue! (Miyasaka 1989, 1:157)

Kakuban first addresses the importance of correct judgment about whether or not one's present illness will be fatal, an implicit acknowledgment that—unlike the idealized subjects of *ōjōden* biographies—the practitioner will very likely not know in advance when death is coming. If the illness is not terminal, the sick person should offer prayers, seek medical treatment, and do everything possible to prolong life—not out of attachment to the body, but to strengthen his or her connection to the true vehicle. Should one determine, however, through astrological readings or other forms of divination, that death is imminent, one should at once abandon all other matters and prepare for the end by abiding in right mindfulness. When the illness has advanced to the point where eating and drinking become difficult and medicine has no effect, one should leave his present dwelling and move to a "cloister of impermanence," or—if no such separate place is available—strictly observe the renunciate spirit underlying this injunction. One who stays physically in his present dwelling is likely to remain mentally attached to the realm of birth and death. At this point, a will should already have been made; one should now take leave of family and close associates and entrust oneself solely to the three to five *chishiki* with whom one has made prior arrangement. If one has not done so already, the tonsure should be taken. The move to a place apart physically enacts the mind of renunciation: "It [the change of venue] represents abandoning the defiled Sahā world and achieving birth in the pure land of utmost bliss. . . . It is like the prince [Siddhārtha] leaving [his father's] palace to ascend the peak of the five wisdoms, or the great teacher [Kūkai] entering meditation and obtaining the ghee of the three mysteries." Now is the time to "leave the household life" in both body and mind (Miyasaka 1989, 1:159).

In the "cloister of impermanence," the dying person should be made to lie down facing west and hold one end of either a pennant or five-colored cords tied to the hand of a buddha image. The cords are to have been prepared in advance, under the supervision of someone who has received esoteric initiation. The image may represent whatever buddha or bodhisattva has been that individual's accustomed *honzon*, or personal object of worship. It may face east, toward the dying person (symbolizing the Buddha's welcoming descent to greet the dying), or it may face west (symbolizing the Buddha's leading the dying person to the pure land). Incense should be burned continually. If the dying person has made a particular vow to that effect, Kakuban says, he or she should be allowed to die sitting up, in the posture of meditation. Otherwise, it is best simply to follow the example of Śākyamuni Buddha, who entered nirvāṇa lying with his head to the north, facing west. The dying person should fix his eyes on the buddha image, place his palms together, and take up the five-colored cords. By forming the *mudrā* associated with that particular buddha or bodhisattva, chanting that deity's mantra, and performing the associated contemplation, he completes the three mysteries of body, speech, and mind, a sign that he is certain to achieve birth in the pure land. As long as he maintains this posture, the *chishiki* are not to admonish him. But if there is some barrier to this practice, it may mean that his mind is distracted.

Kakuban also addresses the specific roles of the attendant *chishiki*. The first should be "a person of wisdom and aspiration for the way," and the dying person "should look upon him as the bodhisattva Kannon [Sanskrit Avalokiteśvara] come to lead him to the pure land" (Miyasaka 1989, 1:173). This individual should sit close by, to the west and slightly south of the dying person, in approximate line with that person's navel, and chant the *nenbutsu* in harmony with the dying person. A second *chishiki*, this one a person of many years' accumulated practice, should stand to the east and slightly north, at an approximate level with the dying person's head. His task, an apotropaic one, is to offer prayers to the wrathful protector deity Fudō Myōō (Acalanātha) and continually recite Fudō's mantra. In this way, malign spirits and other evil influences that might disturb the dying person's thoughts will be banished. This recommendation reflects a growing notion that the liminal quality of the last moment made it not only an ideal opportunity for liberation, but a potentially dangerous juncture when possessing spirits or demonic manifestations might seek to gain advantage. Such perceived dangers argued powerfully for the presence at one's deathbed of a ritual specialist possessing exorcistic capabilities. A third *chishiki* should take up his station to the north; he should chant in a soft or loud voice, following the inclination of the dying person. Others may be on hand for whatever may be necessary. At specific cadences in the chanting, all should join in at the same pitch. This maṇḍala-like

arrangement of the deathbed scene constitutes “the form of death ritual for those who seek the five [buddha] wisdoms” (ibid., 1:173).

The most desirable thing, Kakuban writes, is for the dying person to pass quietly away, as though entering meditation. Unlike earlier works of deathbed instruction, however, his “esoteric collection” specifies what should be done if that doesn’t happen—if the dying person should wander mentally, become delirious with pain, or fall unconscious. In such a case, Kakuban says, the *chishiki* are to observe the dying person’s breathing carefully and match their breathing to his, chanting the *nenbutsu* together on the outbreath, substituting their chanted *nenbutsu* for his. They are to continue this “for one day, two days, seven days, or until the death transpires. . . . You [the *chishiki*] should be resolved to continue chanting together until the last outbreath.” In that way, the person’s sins can be extinguished, because the Buddha’s original vow will exert its salvific power, working in response to the invocation of his name. Moreover, the *chishiki* should visualize their *nenbutsu*, chanted on the outbreath, as the six Sanskrit letters “na-mo-a-mi-ta-buḥ,” entering the dying person’s mouth with the inbreath, transforming into six sun disks, and dispelling with their light the darkness of the dying person’s sins produced by the six sense faculties. Kakuban observes: “If one could maintain right thoughts [at the last moment], what need would there be for a *chishiki*? But should wrong or [even merely] neutral thoughts arise, at that time, the *chishiki* can [help the dying person and] save him from the suffering [that would otherwise result]” (Miyasaka 1989, 1:173–74).

But this is not the end of the *chishiki*’s task. In his concluding instructions, Kakuban cites from the esoteric Chinese scripture *Shoubu guojiezhu tuokuoni jing* (Sūtra of the *dhāraṇī* for protecting the ruler of the realm) a passage detailing fifteen signs that dying persons will fall into the hells (such as crying aloud, urinating or defecating without awareness, refusing to open the eyes, foul breath, or lying facedown); eight signs of their falling into the realm of hungry ghosts (such as burning with fever or suffering from hunger or thirst); and five signs presaging a descent into the bestial realm (such as contorting of the hands and feet, foaming at the mouth, or sweating from the entire body) (*Taishō* no. 997, 19:574a). He then recommends a number of esoteric rites that the *chishiki* should immediately perform on the dying or newly dead person’s behalf, should that person have manifested any of these signs. For example, if there are corporeal indications of a descent into the hells, the *chishiki* must quickly perform the rites of the Buddha Eye or Golden Wheel, or of the bodhisattvas Shō Kannon or Jizō; or he may recite the esoteric scripture *Rishukyō*, the names of the fifty-three buddhas, the *dhāraṇī* of the Augustly Victorious or of the Jeweled Casket, or the Mantra of Radiant Light, or the “Bodhisattva Preaching” chapter of the *Flower Garland Sūtra*, or the *Lotus Sūtra*, and so forth. Other rites are similarly recommended should

indications appear that the dying person will fall into the realms of animals or hungry ghosts. Kakuban requests of his disciples that such rites be carried out in his own case, should some inauspicious sign appear at the time of his death. “Whether out of filiality and loyalty, or in the spirit of compassion, make haste to perform those practices that will plant good roots, quickly conferring [upon me] the fruit of liberating wisdom. . . . Should you thus save me and enable to me to attain the way, I will in turn lead you [to enlightenment] without fail” (Miyasaka 1989, 1:174–76).

Though clearly belonging to a particular school (Shingon) and embedded in the concerns of a specific historical period (medieval Japan), Kakuban’s “esoteric collection” participates in the larger themes of control and legitimation that figure in Buddhist approaches to death cross-culturally. The last moment is assumed to be a juncture of immense potency, transcending ordinary moral causality; thus “even men and women who have done evil” can potentially escape *samsāra* at this time. Prognostication is recommended to gauge the crucial moment’s approach, and all efforts are bent toward maximizing its liberative possibilities. The instructions that the dying bid farewell to relatives and relocate to a separate place—along with the comparison of this move to the Buddha-to-be leaving the palace or Kūkai entering perpetual *samādhi* (state of deep contemplation)—homologize death to monastic renunciation and to meditation, so that dying itself becomes construed not as a perpetuating of *samsāra* but as a liberative act. The manner of the individual’s death, including both his posture and the corporeal signs manifested by his dying, are considered indices to his spiritual condition: as long as he continues chanting, properly holds the cords, and forms the appropriate mudrā, he is assumed to be in a state of right mindfulness; on the contrary, a loss of physical control or other unseemly disturbance of his person points to mental distraction and even to an inauspicious rebirth. Here, as in the larger Buddhist tradition, death at once constitutes an opportunity for spiritual progress and also reveals the spiritual level one has achieved.

Most noteworthy in Kakuban’s text is the emergence of the *chishiki* as a ritual specialist, in command of esoteric techniques of visualization and breath meditation, mantras, and apotropaic rites and spells, who by his powers can successfully guide the dying person through the liminal juncture of death when that person is no longer able to exercise control. There is no question about the authority in which the *chishiki* should be held: the dying person is to regard him as no less than Kannon, the right-hand attendant of Amida Buddha. At the same time, the *chishiki* is expected to exercise the compassion proper to one more advanced in practice and understanding. A good death—that is, one in which the ritual forms have been fulfilled—would testify not only to the liberation of the deceased person, but also to the *chishiki*’s personal

attainments and expertise and to the efficacy of the rites transmitted by his lineage.

INTERNAL CRITICISMS

While Buddhist strategies for exerting control over death have been pervasive, this is not to say that all Buddhists have uncritically accepted them. For examples of dissenting voices, let us turn again to medieval Japan and consider a few opinions raised in opposition to the sort of elaborate scripting of the last moment that Kakuban recommends. The Shingon monk Kakukai (1142–1223), who lived somewhat after Kakuban, seems to have regarded the very notion of attempting to exert control over one's post-mortem fate as an instance of the pernicious self-attachment that Buddhism seeks to remedy. One who is truly awakened to the emptiness of the dharmas, says Kakukai, "cannot be attached to [Maitreya's] Heaven of Satisfaction, nor to [Amida's pure land of] Utmost Bliss. . . . If we simply purify the mind, we shall not feel pain even if we were to assume the forms of such [lowly] creatures as dragons and *yakṣas*. . . . Regardless of transmigration, we shall suffer no discomfort" (*Kakukai Hōkyō hōgo*, in Morrell 1987, 99–100, slightly modified). This stance led Kakukai also to criticize the practice of relying in one's last hours on a *zenchishiki*, whose thoughts might not accord with one's own: "I think it quite splendid to die as did the likes of [the recluse] Gochi-bō, abiding in a correct state of mind with his final moments unknown to any others" (*ibid.*, 100). The said Gochi-bō's last moments are indeed unrecorded anywhere. We may thus assume that Kakukai, in valorizing this private death, was willing to sacrifice the legitimation conferred by a more elaborately ritualized death that is witnessed and supervised.

Eisai (a.k.a. Yo'sai, 1141–1215), who helped establish Zen in Japan, reports that when traveling in Song China, he inquired of a Chan monk in Mingzhou about the authenticity of the verses setting forth "Bodhi-dharma's [method] for knowing the time of death" and was told that they must be the deluded production of an inferior or diabolical mind: "In our school, going and coming, birth and death, are equal from the outset," the monk declared, thus implying, in a manner similar to Kakukai, that the person awakened to the originally undifferentiated nature of things has no reason to be concerned about death in the first place (*Kōzen gokoku ron 2, Taishō* no. 2543, 80:10a). Medieval Japanese Tendai and Zen literature abounds in rhetoric to the effect that "birth and death are the wondrous functions of the one mind," or that, for the enlightened person, "there is no *nirvāṇa* to seek and no birth and death to abhor." While such rhetoric theoretically denies the problem of death by subsuming it within a nondual cosmic scheme, it has rarely translated into a rejection of death-related practices. Here, however, in Eisai's narrative, it is deployed against the practice of predicting the time of death's arrival.

Shinran (1173–1262), founder of Jōdō Shinshū, the True Pure Land sect, explicitly rejected deathbed practice as antithetical to his conviction that birth in the pure land is achieved only in utterly abandoning all egoistic reliance on one's own efforts and entrusting oneself wholly to the compassionate "Other Power" of Amida. For Shinran, salvation occurs not at death, but at that moment when, abandoning self-effort, one is seized by Amida's compassion, never to be let go, and faith arises in one's heart. Thus he wrote, "When faith is established, one's attainment of the pure land is also established; there is no need for the deathbed rites that prepare one for Amida's coming" (*Mattōshō* 1). In the medieval Shin tradition, one does in fact see a considerable muting of the widespread emphasis on deathbed ritual, and to this day, Shin funerals are explained in terms that do not involve concepts of merit transference or other elements of "self-power."

All these criticisms have in common a rejection of certain specified efforts to direct one's death to soteriological advantage. One might question whether this is in fact a rejection *in toto* of the ideal of achieving mastery over death, or whether it merely relinquishes one mode of control—prognosticatory or deathbed rites—to assert another, namely, the negation of death's significance within a larger soteriological resolution, such as insight into nonduality or the utter abandonment of oneself to Amida's compassion. Certainly such criticisms did little to dislodge the dominant paradigm of a good death as an index to spiritual status. Rather, individuals said to possess such insight or faith have been depicted as displaying an innate, spontaneous mastery over death, without deliberate attempts to manipulate it. Even Shinran's official hagiography says that, at the end, "he lay down on his right side with his head to the north, facing west, and breathed his last, chanting the *nenbutsu*" (*Godenshō* 2:6).

Internal criticisms reveal that, however well entrenched, Buddhist strategies for control over death were never monolithic. At the same time, however, it is useful to note just what is being contested and what is not. The oppositional voices cited above do not in fact seriously challenge the assumptions in which traditional Buddhist death practices were rooted: those of a holistic universe in which outer forms mirror inner realities; where human moral and ritual activity influences cosmic processes; and where the practices of the living can benefit the dead. Thus they differ qualitatively from more recent criticisms of death ritual that have sprung up in association with Buddhist modernism. These latter critiques—expressed in condemnations of elaborate and costly Buddhist funerals as "empty ritual" or in such statements as "Buddhism should be about how to live, not how to die"—grow out of very different epistemological assumptions than those underlying traditional death-related practices. Whether the promise of control over death will continue to exert its attraction and play its legitimating role in the Buddhism of the future

remains to be seen; historically, its significance to the tradition is hard to overstate.

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