

# Korean Buddhist Rituals of Death

Marek Zemánek

## 1 The Dead

### 1.1 The Spirit

Buddhist thinkers have developed several theories on the process of reincarnation.<sup>1</sup> The basic framework of Korean rituals of death is to be found in precisely articulated form in the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* (*Kusaron* 俱舍論).<sup>2</sup> The rituals function in the basic Buddhist cosmological setting expressed in the concept beginningless and endless rebirth in the six destinies (*yukto* 六道), that is, in the hells, the sphere of ghosts, the sphere of animals, the sphere of human beings, the sphere of *asuras* and heavens, and the sphere of god. The basic purpose of the rituals is to avoid the lower spheres of existence and assure the best rebirth possible or, in the best possible case, to realize the “nature of things,” that is to achieve the ultimate goal of Awakening (*pori* 菩提, Skt. *bodhi*) and be never born again. This goal is inherently present in rituals (especially in the numerous sermons for the deceased spirit). However, belief in Amitābha and his paradise-like Pure Land Sukhāvātī (*kūngnak* 極樂) overshadows the Awakening. Hence, ritual participants possibly will expect three desired outcomes for the spirit: achieving Awakening and attaining nirvana; being reborn in the Pure Land; and being reborn in a pleasant sphere. In other words, the aim of the ritual is to help the dead to arrive to a better place.

When informants were asked what they hope for the deceased, they often replied “a birth in a better place” (*poda chohūn kot*). Rebirth in the Pure Land was another frequent answer. I did not receive a single response about nirvana or Awakening, however.

Buddhism denies the existence of a permanent self that transmigrates from one body to another, and thus the question of the subject and process of reincarnation has to be answered. Vasubandhu, in his *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*, summarizes the discussion on the concept of four states of one circle of life—the four modes of being—and articulates a doctrine that has become the standard view of East Asian Mahayana Buddhists. This doctrine proposes the notion of an “intermediate state” (*chungyu* 中有, or *chungūm* 中陰, Skt. *antarābhava*), which takes place between the moment of death (*sayu* 死有) and the moment of birth or conception (*saengyu* 生有). That, which follows the moment of birth is life as we know it, (*ponyu* 本有). Death and birth are instants in time (*ch’alla* 刹那, the shortest unit of time), whereas life and the intermediate state possess duration.

Hence, for Korean Buddhists a period of time elapses between death and the moment of conception.<sup>3</sup> According to the *Abhidharmakośa*, when a person dies, he or she becomes an “intermediate being.” The Korean language possesses several terms for referring to these beings such as *kōndalbak* 健達縛, a transliteration of the Sanskrit *gandharva* (one who eats odors), *chungyu chi ryō* 中有之旅 (one traveling in the intermediate state), or *chungūm sin* 中陰身 (a body of the intermediate state).<sup>4</sup> The being passes through the intermediate state for a certain period of up to forty-nine days until it is reborn. It is important to note that this being is not identical with the

---

<sup>1</sup> In this context, I cannot omit the teaching on *pudgala*, a person not identical and not different from the five aggregates constituting an individual, proposed by the Vātsīputrīya, which was very popular in India during the time of Xuanzang’s visit. See the works of Priestly (1999) and bhikshu Thiệu Châu (1999).

<sup>2</sup> Ch. *Jushe lun*. A short title of Chinese translations of the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*. For an English version, see the English translation of de la Vallée-Poussin’s rendering of the text (Vasubandhu 1988, II:383–404).

<sup>3</sup> This teaching is a common notion in Mahayana Buddhism. In the southern tradition of Theravada the moment of birth follows the moment of death. However, Langer (2007, 82–84) has demonstrated that the teaching of *antarābhava* is prevalent even in Sri Lankan practices.

<sup>4</sup> This rendering is to be found in the *Apitan piposha lun* 阿毘曇毘婆沙論 (CBETA, T28, no. 1546, p. 152, a10-15), Buddhavarman and Daotai’s translation of the *Abhidharma-mahā-vibhāṣā-śāstra*.

deceased<sup>5</sup> and is not his or her soul; it is an entity that comes into being when the five aggregates (*oon* 五蘊, Skt. *pañca-skandha*) dissolve at the moment of death.

The *Abhidharmakośa* provides a detailed description of the *gandharva*, the intermediary state being. The *gandharva* is searching for a suitable condition for rebirth. This is partially given by her karmic predispositions; there must be at the same time present a copulating couple and the *gandharva* for the new life to begin.<sup>6</sup> A *gandharva*'s time in the intermediary state is limited to forty-nine days, and hence the notion of a forty-nine-day period after death during which rituals are performed developed. However, this forty-nine-day period is further divided into seven seven-day periods based again on an *abhidharmic* teaching which claims that if the being is not reincarnated within seven days, it dies and is reborn as a *gandharva* again. If a suitable condition is nowhere to be found by the forty-ninth day, it will be reborn in any form possible.

In Korean rituals this intermediate being is identified with or referred to as *yōngga* 靈駕 (spirit). In communal rites the *yōngga* is the main spirit or one of the main spirits. Each "spirit" bears the name of the deceased person, for example, Kim Chōlsu *yōngga*. However, any spirit that is invoked as the object of the ritual has the status of *yōngga*. Even many years after death, if the spirit is summoned for the ritual, it will be referred to as *yōngga*. The use of this term is limited to ritual contexts, and thus the informants and the ritual manuals and booklets never give this term for a spirit or for the deceased in non-ritual settings.

The concept of the intermediary period merged with the Chinese concept of the netherworld (*myōngdo* 冥途 or *myōngbu* 冥府),<sup>7</sup> which is described as the *locus* of post-mortem trials. The workings of karmic law are expressed here through the process of judgement by the ten kings.<sup>8</sup> Natural law does not drag the deceased through the intermediary state at random here. Instead, the trial is a proper legal process, in which the deeds of the deceased are judged. Here the dying and rebirth of the intermediate being is linked with the spirit being judged each week by one of the ten kings.

This concept of the netherworld may or may be not reflected in individual rituals. Some rituals include textual elements with related symbolism, such as pictures or altars, whereas some do not. However, this concept does contribute to molding ritual participants' mental frameworks. Therefore, when asked about the meaning of the rituals performed in the forty-nine-day period, some informants claimed that the ritual helps the deceased who is undergoing a trial.

Even though the *yōngga* is the central spirit of the rituals, it is not the only type of spirit involved, as we can see from the following invocation that is repeated several times in the rituals:

Oh, spirit of ○○○,  
Parents who passed away in the past,  
Masters of many lifetimes,  
Relatives of many generations,  
Younger and elder brothers, parental cousins,  
Elder sisters and younger brothers, nephews  
and nieces,  
Relatives close and distant,  
And wandering spirits inside and outside of  
this sacred space, up and down,

<sup>5</sup> It is also a different concept than the *gandharva* from the category of heavenly beings and Dharma-protectors

<sup>6</sup> The *Abhidharmakośa* features an almost Freudian notion of attraction to the opposite sex, i.e., to his future mother or her future father, and hatred towards the same sex member of the copulating couple. By the attraction, the being is dragged to the spot of coitus and a new life begins.

<sup>7</sup> For the development of the concept of the netherworld in China, see two detailed studies by Stephen Teiser (1988; 1994).

<sup>8</sup> This concept is well articulated in Chinese apocrypha such as the *Fu shuo Dizang pusa faxin yinyuan shiwang jing* 佛說地藏菩薩發心因緣十王經 (CBETA, X01, no. 20, p. 404, a3 // Z 2B:23, p. 385, a1 // R150, p. 769, a1) or the *Fu shuo yuxiu shiwang shengqi jing* 佛說預修十王生七經 (CBETA, X01, no. 21, p. 408, a4-p. 410, b3 // Z 2B:23, p. 389, a1-p. 391, b8 // R150, p. 777, a1-p. 781, b8).

Wandering spirits with a master or without,  
Lonely spirits,  
All sons of the Buddha,  
And all sorts of spirits.  
We request you to rely on the spiritual powers  
of the Buddha,  
And the helping power of the Dharma,  
Come to this fragrant altar and receive this  
offering of Dharma.

This invocation invites “wandering spirits” (*kohon* 孤魂),<sup>9</sup> also translated as lonely or orphan spirits. This term originated in China and was incorporated into both the Buddhist tradition, as a part of a broader package of Chinese religious ideas, and Korean folk religious beliefs. It designates those who have died prematurely or violently (a “bad death”). Such spirits are considered dangerous and are excluded from the family ancestral cult; they roam looking for food and shelter, which they lack, as they do not have a tablet and anybody to offer them food (Nadeau 2012, 129–31). The wandering spirits are dangerous and their situation needs to be solved.

It is possible to perform rituals for multiple spirits, as is the case in group and communal ceremonies in which more than one *yǒngga* is involved. Ritual texts and commentaries, as well as ordained informants, claim that anybody can benefit from the rituals on various levels. On one hand, the rituals communicate the Buddha’s teaching, and therefore anyone who attends a ritual can hear the teaching. The ritual also activates the helping power of buddhas and bodhisattvas (*kaji* 加持), which I understand as a key element in the framework enabling ritual efficacy.

Thus, rituals feature primary and secondary spirits. Primary spirits are those, for which the ritual is performed. Patrons register these spirits and a tablet and other necessary ritual objects are created for them. Secondary spirits are all the spirits that are invited to the ritual. As we see in the quotation above, these spirits include not only the *kohon* but also the spirits of various relatives of the patrons.

The lengthy coexistence of Buddhism and native Chinese notions enriched the Buddhist concept of the afterlife with the indigenous Chinese concept of *hun* (Kor. *hon* 魂) and *po* (Kor. *paek* 魄) souls.<sup>10</sup> The former is a mental or spiritual *yang* aspect of the soul, which leaves the body after death, whereas the latter is a corporeal *yin* soul. This dualistic scheme also connects *hun* with celestial and immortal *shen* (Kor. *sin*), or “gods,” and *po* with *gui* (Kor. *kwi*, 鬼), or “ghosts that return to the earth and gradually fade away” (Harrell 1979, 521–25; Yü 1987, 384–86). The spirits referred to in the notions of *kwi*, *kohon*, and *preta* (*agwi* 餓鬼) are all characterized by being lonely, hungry and miserable. Despite the different origins and doctrinal nuances, from the ritual point of view, they are treated equally. For instance, the *hōnsik* 獻食, or “a food offering ritual,” is performed at the end of guiding ceremonies. Different sources state different objects of this ritual, which cover all three categories; however, *pretas* are most frequent.

---

<sup>9</sup> Langer (2007, 17–18) discusses the concept of *preta* in Sinhalese Buddhism and early Buddhism. On the origins of the term she remarks that it is “the past participle from the root *prañi*, *preta* (mfñ.), which literally means ‘gone away’, came to mean ‘departed, deceased, dead, a dead person’. In the course of time the term acquired another, more specialized meaning, namely, ‘the spirit of a dead person (esp. before obsequial rites are performed), a ghost, an evil being’ and ‘a newly dead’ as opposed to ‘ancestor’ ... *Preta* can be used generally to mean ‘dead’, or in a more technical sense, ‘newly dead, ghost’.” In general Buddhist cosmology, the sphere of the *pretas* is the second lowest or the worst, above the hells. The *pretas* (餓鬼) are often depicted or imagined as constantly hungry and thirsty beings. In this regard, they resemble *kohon*. Both categories represent ghosts as the counterparts of properly departed “ancestors.” See also Holt (1981, 8–12), who describes the ambivalent concept of *preta*. Despite being a separate destiny of rebirth, it often appears in various narratives as returning back to this world, namely to its relatives.

<sup>10</sup> Note that both characters include the element of *gui* 鬼, which is also an individual character denoting the spirit of the dead or a ghost.

The vernacular religious ideas of Korean folk religions mixed with further Chinese religious ideas also made important contributions to the concept of the afterlife. The *musok* concept of the afterlife is, unlike the Buddhist concept, linear. From the *musok* perspective, there is this world (*isŭng*) and the other world (*chösŭng*), where the deceased is escorted by *saja* 使者, or “messengers.” However, the general *musok* concept of spirits is in keeping with the general East Asian ancestor-ghost dichotomy.

Many scholars group notions of the deceased into two categories: benevolent ancestors and evils spirits or ghosts (Lee 1984). When people die, they can become either positive or negative spirits based on how they died and the existence or absence of offspring. Dying a “good death” and having male offspring is a condition for becoming an ancestor (*chosang* 祖上). Ancestors have male offspring who can perform the rites, so the spirit does not become a hungry ghost. However, even people who live a happy life, marry, and die a good death at an old age amongst their relatives acquire resentment (*han* 恨) during their life and in the process of dying. Resentment results from the frustration of failure in the previous life. Ancestors also have emotional attachments that draw them to the living. Therefore, they return to their descendants and cause them various hardships.

Based on the informants’ answers, I have come to understand that most often ritual patrons do not think of the rituals in terms of reincarnation, but in terms of sending the deceased to a better place, wherever it may be. From the perspective of ritual patrons, the deceased may be the newly dead or already an ancestor. Therefore, patrons may have the rituals performed to help the deceased properly depart and become an ancestor, to assure ancestors’ well-being, or to appease a perturbed ancestor.

Obviously, the objectives of ritual practice in both Korean religious traditions are identical, but it is the means and the frameworks that differ. *Mudangs* (“shamans”) claim their ritual efficacy is derived from their expertise and ability to communicate and deal with the spirits. Buddhist rituals on the other hand are rooted in a belief in compassionate assistance from all Buddhist sages and deities, who descend to the ritual space to assist. This key difference generally explains why people decide to employ a *mudang* or Buddhist clergy to perform the rituals for their deceased relatives or ancestors.

## 1.2 The Corpse

The corpse raises another set of questions to deal with. Less has to be done to describe this object, as it is present at the ritual. However, proper methods for preparing the body and subsequently disposing of it are required as death brings about problems of impurity that need to be solved. Another question that arises with the existence of the corpse is that of the relationship of the body and soul and how to separate the two.

The spirit-body duality is crucial for the structure of the rituals of death. As Hertz (2004, 29) points out, “the ideas and practices occasioned by death can be classified under three headings, according to whether they concern the body of the deceased, his soul, or the survivors.” Keeping the survivors aside, I shall discuss the meaning of the body within the rituals.

Compared to the spirit, the body poses significantly less interpretational problems. Nonetheless, Buddhist texts approach the body from several different angles, and thus we should clarify the relationships between different Buddhist notions or statements regarding the body, as they influence, among other things, the content of the ritual texts.

One such notion of the body is embedded in the doctrine of *anātman*, which deals with the pre-Buddhist idea of the eternal self, the *ātman*. This doctrine views an individual as a psychophysical complex, in which physical processes depend on the mental and mental processes on the physical. Hence there is no soul that would be inhabiting the body, but the perceived self consists of mental aspects as much as physical.

Another analysis breaks the body into four elements: earth, water, fire, and air.<sup>11</sup> However, rather than actually being substances themselves, these elements represent the qualities of physical substances. Earth is the quality of hardness or solidness, water of fluidity, fire of heat, and air of movement.

In the methods for treating corpses found in Korean rites, there are traces of the practices prescribed in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, which relays the last days of the Buddha, his death, and mortuary and funerary practices concerning his body. The Buddha states that the body of a *tathāgata* should be treated like the body of a king. Holts remarks that

Buddhist interpretations of death did not originate in an historical or cultural vacuum. Conceptions of the after-life, and the prescribed behavior relating to the dead, were modified adaptations of prevailing Brāhmanical patterns of belief. This is especially apparent when we examine the beliefs and practices of the early Buddhist laity. (Holt 1981, 1)

Apparently, there was no attempt at establishing a new funeral practice. For a buddha, who is often likened to a *cakravartin*, an ideal king, a corresponding funeral ritual is selected out of the spectrum of contemporary rituals. For other members of the community, it was analogical. It is not surprising that in the nirvana-oriented discourse of the Buddha, who was not especially partial to rituals, no particular layout for mortuary practices is present. In this context, Langer (2007, 74) asks whether we can talk about Buddhist funerals at all. Her informants, like mine, responded positively to such questions. My informants were affirmative about the Buddhist nature of their rituals, yet when asked about some details of the practice, remarks such as “oh, that is a Confucian influence” or “that comes from [the shamanist] *musok*” were quite common.

The sources on early funeral practice tend to be more descriptive than prescriptive. Nevertheless, as we learn from Schopen’s study (1997) of the *vinaya* texts of the Mūlasarvāstivāda school, cremation was the preferred method of disposal. If no wood was available, throwing the body into a river was prescribed. If no river was nearby, then inhumation was an option. If digging was not possible, then laying the corpse on the ground and covering it with wood and grass was possible. These texts codified the four forms of disposal, which became the standard in Buddhist funeral practice.<sup>12</sup>

The *vinaya* texts also prescribe certain purification rites, as contact with a corpse is polluting. Again, this practice seems to be derived from pre-Buddhist beliefs. In the section of *vinaya* quoted by Schopen (218), the rules are loosened; only the monks who have touched a corpse must bath and wash their robes, whereas the rest only have to wash their hands and feet.

The second, and more important, source of the hybrid Buddhō-Confucian ritual practice is the Confucian text on rituals of passage, *Zhu Xi’s Family Rituals*. We do not know how the interaction between these two traditions—the Buddhist and Confucian—started and evolved at the earlier stage, nor do we know how they merged into the form we find in the Chosŏn texts. The *Sōngmun karye ch’o* 釋門家禮抄, or *A Commentary to Buddhist Family Rituals*, and the *Sōngmun sangüi ch’o* 釋門喪儀抄), or *A Commentary to Buddhist Funerary Rituals*, two seventeenth-century texts, attempted to reconcile Buddhist funeral practice with the ritual practice that was enforced throughout society. Buddhist elements were then embedded or inserted into Confucian mortuary and funerary practices, as we know them today.

---

<sup>11</sup> This notion is found in numerous Buddhist texts. For instance, see the Chinese version of the *Dharmapada* (Pa. *Dhammapada*) *Faju jing* 法句經 (CBETA, T04, no. 210, p. 574, a15-16), which states that the physical aspect is created by the four elements whereas the mental aspect consists of the four remaining *skandhas* or aggregates. This text also includes chapters that are not present in the Pāli. The text also elaborates on the concept of death vis-à-vis the notions of spirits, claiming that despite the death of the body, the spirit *shen* does not die.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, Daoxuan’s abhidarmic text, influential in East Asia, *Sifen lu shanfan buque xingshi chao* 四分律刪繁補闕行事鈔. (CBETA, T40, no. 1804, p. 145, b20-29), discusses and prescribes these four types.

With the knowledge on the attitude of early Buddhism, we can reevaluate our preunderstanding and expectations vis-à-vis contemporary rites. In the light of weakly prescribed funerary practices and minimalistic requirements, the openness towards indigenous funeral practices and the ability to incorporate them into the Buddhist ritual system, seems as a logical consequence.

## 2 The Structure and Typology of the Rituals

Buddhist rituals of death have developed into today's complex system covering the period from the time before actual death until the forty-ninth day after death when the spirit of the deceased is supposed to be reborn in its new destination. However, as discussed above, the spirit never leaves and is present in one form or another and hence the ritual practice never ceases; or eventually ceases after several generations. Rituals include not only funeral and mortuary practices but also preparation for death, complex ceremonies guiding the spirit to a better place, and memorial services. The broad category of rituals of death can be further divided into subcategories based on their content, meaning, ritual activity, and temporal and spatial position. Based on these criteria and the emic concept of the ritual stages, I have proposed a typology of rituals and structured this section accordingly.

Buddhist ritual practice is grafted on to traditional Korean mortuary and funerary practices (*sangjerye* 喪祭禮). For the sake of convenience, we can call the latter "Confucian," even though such practice is not purely Confucian because it includes general Sinitic as well as Korean elements. In any case, the rituals are based on *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals* (*Chuja karye* 朱子家禮), a ritual manual propagated by the Neo-Confucian establishment of the Chosŏn.

Essentially two types of relationships between these practices exist. Either Buddhist rites inserted in Confucian practice or Confucian rites are modified to include Buddhist components. We can call the former an "alternating model" and the latter a "simultaneous model." In this chapter, I shall follow the Buddhist line of the rituals.<sup>13</sup> Where suitable, I will show examples from history to illustrate that some notions or practices can be viewed as continuous streams in practice despite the changing religious and ritual milieu.

### 2.1 Deathbed Rituals

The moment of death is important in both the Buddhist and Confucian tradition. Traditionally, the family met at the deathbed to be present at the moment of death. For Buddhists, however, rituals begin earlier, as it is advised to perform some rituals even before the actual death.

Buddhism stresses the importance of the state of consciousness at the moment of death (Kor. *myŏngjong si* 命終時) because the last state of consciousness immediately before death determines the state of consciousness right after it. The understanding of the moment of death as an opportune point in time for achieving a better rebirth has shaped deathbed rituals. These practices are generally supposed to help the dying achieve a calm state of mind and proper focus, namely on Buddhist values, before departing. If possible, a monk is summoned to the deathbed to perform the rites. The initial rites usually contain taking refuge in the Three Jewels and chanting the *Heart Sutra*.

#### 2.1.1 Ordination

An important deathbed practice is ordination. The rite is referred to as either *bestowing precepts* (*sugye* 授戒) or *receiving precepts* (*sugye* 受戒), terms which reflect the active role of a celebrant or the passive role of the ordinand, respectively. Hence the Korean *sugye* is today a general term that can be rendered as *precept rite*. Ordination has become a stable element in the rituals of death in East Asia and may be present in different stages of a given ritual process, depending on the tradition. For example, it may also take place during mortuary practices.

---

<sup>13</sup> For Confucian rituals, see following studies (Lee 1984; Janelli and Janelli 1992; Deuchler 1992, 2015).

Since the time of the Buddha, ordination has been the most important rite of passage in the Sangha, the Buddhist community. This act marks one's departure from the secular world as well as one's acceptance into the community of monks and nuns. Tonsure and the precept rite are key elements of the ordination ritual sequence. The Buddhist Sangha does not only consist of ordained members; alongside monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen complete the community. Hence the term *precept rite*, in addition to referring to the monastic precepts, is used for a Buddhist layperson receiving the five basic precepts, which are identical to the first five precepts of the ordained. The five precepts are usually accepted along with the Three Refuges—that is, the Buddha as the founder of the religion; the Dharma, his teaching; and the Sangha, the community of his followers—in the form of a ritual. In the first part of the precept rite the Three Refuge precepts (*su sam kwiüi kye* 授三歸依戒) are bestowed in a verbal expression of the genuineness of one's mind being set towards the Three Jewels. Then the five precepts are accepted (Taehan pulgyo chogyejong 2013, 404–6). The person accepts the lay precepts and does not become a monk or nun before death.

In contemporary Korean deathbed practices, the precept rite plays the central role and the act of accepting the rules takes the form of a pledge (*söyak*) to follow the Buddha's teachings (Taehan pulgyo chogyejong 2011, 34). This twofold precept-bestowal rite is performed even on people who have received the lay precepts during their lifetime. The precept rite usually follows the “taking Three Refuges” formula, the standard opening formula of Buddhist rituals. As Harvey (2012, 244–45) notes, “The ‘refuges’ remind the Buddhist of calm, wise, spiritual people and states of mind, and so help engender these states. The value [...] is denoted by the fact that they are also known as the *Tiratana* [*sambo* 三寶, Skt. *triratna*] or ‘three jewels’: spiritual treasures of supreme worth.”

After the lay ordination is completed, it is followed by reciting the name of the Amitābha Buddha, a prayer for rebirth in the Western Paradise of Sukhāvātī, and reciting the four great vows, the first and the last of which play the role of opening and closing formulae in most Buddhist rites. During the rite, a five-colored cord is bound to an index finger of the dying person and the opposite end is connected to a hand of Amitābha, whose likeness is carved in a small altar. This symbolizes the compassionate divine helping power (*kap'i* 加被) of Amitābha descending on the dying person. Bestowing the precepts is supposed to direct the mind towards the Three Jewels. When the person dies, the body is supposed to be left undisturbed for one or two hours so the spirit can leave the body.

The Koryŏ sources on the earliest history of Buddhism in Korea, the *Samguk yusa* and *Samguk sagi* chronicles, generally state that rulers, their spouses, and relatives were ordained in the latter days of their lives. Besides this form of lay devotion, which is expressed by being ordained past one's productive age, in the *Samguk yusa* there is evidence of ordination as a deathbed practice. In an introductory section of the chapter on King Chinhŭng (r. 534–576), who was a great supporter of Buddhism, one reads that the king at the time of death shaved his head and dressed in a “sacerdotal robe” (Kor. *pöb'üi* 法衣) (CBETA, T49, no. 2039, p. 967, c29).

Volume five of the *Samguk yusa* describes a corresponding practice in the slightly obscure story of Sabok, a venerated Buddhist master of Silla, who buries his mother with the help of his friend Wŏnhyo (617–686):

One day his [Sabok's] mother died. At that time Wonhyo was abbot of Goseonsa. When Wonhyo saw the boy [Sabok] he greeted him with decorum, but the boy did not reciprocate his greeting. He just asked “You and I once loaded scriptures onto a cow, but now it has died. How about holding the burial together?” Wonhyo said “Agreed” and accompanied him to his house. He let Wonhyo hold an uposadha and bestow the precepts, and before the corpse he intoned:

“Do not get born – for death is painful; Do not die – for birth is painful”

The boy said, “Your words are cumbersome.” Outdoing him, he said, “Both death and life are painful, Alas.” The two gentlemen rode back to the eastern foot of Hwallisan. Wonhyo said: “Burying the tiger of wisdom in the forest of wisdom – isn't that appropriate?” (Whitfield, 2012, pp. 543–544)

Here one encounters the precept-bestowal<sup>14</sup> ceremony as a part of the ritual. Then a very brief sermon for the spirit is uttered. This narrative relays a most dense expression of Buddhist teaching. There is a general tendency in ritual texts for sermons to consist of the very core teachings of Buddhism—or in other words, there is a tendency to summarize the gist of the Buddha’s teaching through the use of keywords that refer to broader concepts. Here, the utterance stresses pain, or suffering, (*ko* 苦, Skt. *duḥkha*), which, along with impermanence and a lack of inherent identity, is one of the three marks of existence. Suffering is the starting point of Buddhist teaching; it is expressed in the first Noble Truth expounded in the *Sutra of the Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma* and as such it is the basic premise for Buddhist practice. Death and rebirth are synonyms for the endless circle of rebirth. The Sanskrit term *samsāra* is rendered into the Chinese as birth and death (*saengsa* 生死). Understanding this basic condition of human existence then allows one to set out on the Buddhist path towards liberation.

The text continues in a rather symbolic way. The two carry the body to a forest for burial. Sabok composes a poem important for understanding the symbolism of funeral practices:

In days of yore the Buddha Śakyamuni [sic]  
Entered nirvāṇa between the śāla trees  
Today we also have someone like that  
Who wishes to enter the vast world of the lotus flower store.

Having spoken, he pulled out a reed stalk. Beneath it there was a world-sphere, a bright and clear void. With its seven-jeweled balustrades and lavishly decorated buildings, it hardly resembled the human world. The boy carried the corpse on his back and together they entered [this world]. The earth then suddenly closed [over them]. Wonhyo returned. (Whitfield, 2012, pp. 544–545)

The first two lines point to the death of the Buddha, who passed away between two *śāla* trees. Buddha himself was cremated, and this story, instead of featuring cremation, features the *śāla* tree, a reference to Buddha’s death and his final entrance into the *parinirvāṇa*. Instead of depicting an actual funeral, the story continues with a mysterious opening of the ground, into which Sabok descends, carrying his mother’s corpse on his back. He enters another world, apparently the “lotus flower store” (*yōnhwa chang kye* 蓮華藏界), which may stand for the paradise of either the Buddha Vairocana or Amitābha. Again, there is a connection with Pure Land beliefs.

### 2.1.2 The Precepts of Impermanence

Usually, the early stages of the ritual sequence treat the corpse and the spirit simultaneously because a strong connection between the two is still perceived, as is a sense of their identity. Once the corpse has been prepared for the funeral during the shrouding rites, spirit-oriented rites tend to take place separately. Upon examining the textual or verbal aspects of these rites, among supplications and the reading of sutras (such as the *Amitābha Sūtra*, or the *Diamond Sutra*), mantras, and *dhāraṇīs*, one finds texts of various lengths that serve as sermons for the spirit. These texts educate the spirit about basic Buddhist teachings. A popular text in today’s practice, *The Precepts of Impermanence* (*Musang kye* 無常戒), addresses the spirit and expounds basic teachings such as karmic law, suffering, impermanence, rebirth in Amitābha’s paradise, the “twelve links of dependent

---

<sup>14</sup> The wording of the original text is quite ambiguous. It is unclear whether the bestowing of precepts is related to Wōnhyo and his preparation for the funeral rite, Sabok, or the deceased mother. Upoṣadha, which is mentioned in the same sentence, is a meeting that takes place on the new and full moon, or on the four other days of the month when the monastic rules are recited and monks confess their sins. Alternatively, this term may, in the context of the chapter, simply refer to purification. I believe that the use of the character for bestowing precepts (Kor. *su* 授) implies that Wōnhyo is bestowing the precepts on the deceased mother.



arising” (*sibi inyōn* 十二因緣, Skt. *dvādaśa-astanga pratīyasamutpāda*), and so on. These practices are based on the rationale that the intermediate state, which begins with the moment of death, is a period very suitable for achieving Awakening as we have seen above. Hearing the basic Buddhist teachings may thus awaken the spirit and help to achieve nirvana and never be born again:

The Precepts of Impermanence,  
Are the gate<sup>15</sup> leading to nirvana  
It is a ship of compassion, which crosses the sea of suffering.  
Therefore  
All buddhas,  
By the means of the precepts,  
Achieved nirvana.  
All sentient beings  
By the means of the precepts,  
Cross the sea of suffering.

Now, Oh, spirit of ○○○!  
[You will] surpass your faculties and their objects  
And the consciousness will clearly appear.  
[You are] receiving Buddha’s highest pure precepts,  
Is it not fortunate?

Now, Oh, spirit of ○○○!  
With the conflagration at the end of the age,<sup>16</sup>  
The trichiliocosm will collapse entirely.

Mount Meru and the great sea  
Will be obliterated completely.  
How could this body,  
[Of] birth, aging, sickness, death,  
[And] miserable suffering,  
Differ?

Now, Oh, spirit of ○○○!  
[Your] hair, nails and teeth  
Skin, flesh, muscles, bones,  
Marrow, brains, and [bodily] filth,  
All return to earth.

Saliva, tears, pus, blood,  
Body fluids, phlegm, vitality, urine and feces,  
All return to water.

Warm energy returns to fire,  
Motion returns to wind,  
The four elements are separated.  
Where is [your] body which died today?

Oh, spirit of ○○○!  
The [body consisting of] four elements is mere designation,<sup>17</sup>  
There is no reason for the sorrow of parting.

---

<sup>15</sup> *yomon* 要門, a gate in the sense of a method leading to a spiritual goal.

<sup>16</sup> *kōphwa* 劫火; The conflagration in the *kalpa* of destruction that consumes the physical universe.

<sup>17</sup> *hōga* 虛假; existing in name only.

[In] you, from beginningless time  
Until today,  
Ignorance [i] is the condition for the [ii] fabrications,  
Fabrications are the condition for [iii] consciousness,  
Consciousness is the condition for [iv] name-and-form,  
Name-and-form is the condition for [v] sixfold sense bases,  
The sixfold sense bases are the condition for [vi] contact,  
Contact is the condition for [vii] feeling,  
Feeling is the condition for [viii] craving,  
Craving is the condition for [ix] clinging,  
Clinging is the condition for [x] becoming,  
Becoming is the condition for [xi] birth,  
Birth is the condition for [xii] aging-and-death and the miserable suffering.

When<sup>18</sup> ignorance is extinguished, then fabrications are extinguished,  
When fabrications are extinguished, then consciousness is extinguished,  
When consciousness is extinguished, then name-and-form is extinguished,  
When name-and-form is extinguished, then sixfold sense bases are extinguished,  
When the sixfold sense bases are extinguished, then contact is extinguished,  
When contact is extinguished, then feeling is extinguished,  
When feeling is extinguished, then craving is extinguished,  
When craving is extinguished, then clinging is extinguished,  
When clinging is extinguished, then becoming is extinguished,  
When becoming is extinguished, then birth is extinguished,  
When birth is extinguished, then aging-and-death and the miserable suffering are extinguished.

All phenomena are from the beginning  
Always having the characteristics of extinction.  
If a Buddhist follows the path,  
Becomes a buddha in the next life.

All phenomena are impermanent,  
This is the law of arising and ceasing,  
When arising and passing are extinguished,  
Extinction is pleasant.

I take refuge in the precepts of the Buddha  
I take refuge in the precepts of the Dharma  
I take refuge in the precepts of the Saṃgha

*Namu* Ratnaketu Tathāgata of the past,  
Worthy of Respect,  
Correctly Enlightened,  
Perfected in Wisdom and Action, Well-Gone,  
Knower of the Secular World,  
Unsurpassed, Tamer, Teacher of Gods and Men, World-Honored One

Oh, spirit!  
Now you will take off  
The leaking husk [of your body consisting of] the five aggregates,  
The consciousness will clearly appear,  
[You are] receiving Buddha's highest pure precepts,  
How could it not be pleasant?

---

<sup>18</sup> 逆觀, the reverse order of apprehending the twelve limbs.

You are going to be reborn according to your wish  
In a celestial palace or a buddha's land.  
It is joyful, it is joyful!

Like Bodhidharma, who came from the west, whose mind was the most splendid  
Purify your mind, which is the original home,  
The marvelous essence, extremely quiet, has no basis.  
The truth is manifested in mountains, rivers, and the whole earth.

## 2.2 Post-Mortem Rituals

The moment of death is the beginning of a series of rites that correspond to the separation stage of the passage. The separation takes place at several levels: body-spirit, living-dead, family member-the deceased, family-mourners. The death of a person marks the beginning of a forty-nine-day mourning period. The day of the death is counted as day one. Because the *yōngga* has departed the body, there is a set of rituals concerning the *yōngga* and a set of rituals dealing with the corpse. The separation of the body and the spirit is expressed also by the creation of a tablet, which will be representing the deceased for remaining rituals in the sequence. The rituals of this ritual sequence are proper “mortuary rituals,” and today they are performed in a mortuary (*pinso* 殯所). Traditionally, these rituals were performed at home and *pinso* refers to the place where the corpse lay with an altar established in front of it. Today, hospitals and funeral homes have special rooms prepared for this practice.

Buddhist and non-Buddhist *pinso* altar differ by the paraphernalia used. For instance, Buddhist altar should include banners with names of the Amitābha Buddha and bodhisattva Ilhwang. The other objects are identical for all *pinso* altars, i.e., candles, incense and food offering. The altar layout follows the prescription of *Chuja karye*, the Buddhist element is added by the employment of banners.

If we say that the deceased is understood as either the spirit or the corpse throughout the ritual, we should ask, how they are represented. The former is rather unproblematic, as the corpse-related rites are performed in a relative vicinity of the corpse, i.e., in the same room, neighboring room etc. When the corpse is not present or even not visible, i.e., placed behind a folding screen, a tablet is used. A tablet is written when the *pinso* is being established. It contains the deceased's name, place of family origin and a title; it may also include a Dharma-name. A photograph of the deceased is used along the tablet. However, the role of the tablet is most important, i.e., when carried around, the tablet will be carried by the more important person in the mourners' hierarchy. In addition to the tablet and the picture, the spirit may be also represented by white paper figurines (*chōn* 錢) of 40–50 cm in height and 15 cm in width, which usually hang from a wooden stand (*chōn tae* 錢臺). The origin of this practice is unknown. The name of the figurine is especially confusing because *chōn* refers to coin money. According to *Pulgyo ūisik kangnon II* (209), an annotated ritual manual, *chōn* is not a symbol or representation of the deceased, but a place for the spirit to rest during the ritual. The figurines are used only in the guiding ceremonies where, they are placed on the spirit altar.

### 2.2.1 *Sidarim*: A Sermon for the Spirit

*Yōngga*-focused rituals begin with setting up an altar for the *sidarim* 尸陀林 rite. The term *sidarim* is a transliteration of the Sanskrit *śītavana*, “a place for exposing corpses,” that is, a cemetery. However, in Korean Buddhism this term refers to a “last sermon”<sup>19</sup> for the deceased. For this rite, an altar with banners, a tablet, a photograph of the deceased, and offerings is set up. Unlike in Confucianism, Buddhist tablets representing the deceased can be made without relationship to placing

---

<sup>19</sup> It is a formulation found in publications for lay Buddhists. The deceased here is considered “psychophysical unity”, as the sermon is the last for the deceased person, not the first for the spirit.

the corpse into a coffin. This rite is understood not only as a sending-off of the *yōngga* but also as a means for transforming the emotions of the mourners. Buddhists should keep quiet during the rituals, for loud crying and weeping may distract the *yōngga*, cause attachment in it, and thus cause rebirth in bad conditions. This Buddhist belief goes against the Confucian tradition of loud weeping. As I have directly observed and the informants told me, traditional weeping wins over the Buddhist suggestion to be quiet. The informants were mostly not aware of the Buddhist view.

When the *pinso* altar is set up, buddhas and bodhisattvas are worshipped first. Then, again, an ordination rite is performed and *Musang kye* is chanted to the *yōngga*. The newly entered intermediate state is a period very suitable for achieving Awakening, and thus hearing the basic Buddhist teaching may awaken the *yōngga*, so she or he would be never reborn again. Then the *Amitābha Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra* or another popular text is chanted.

### 2.2.2 *Yōmsūp*: Shrouding

Beside *yōngga*-oriented rites, there is a set of rituals concerning the corpse: cleaning the body and face, shaving, and dressing. This procedure practically follows the traditional Confucian form of the *Chuja Karye*, although a Buddhist dimension has been added to it. Each stage of rites concerning the body is accompanied with a short sermon in the form of chanting of verses containing the Buddha's teaching. The sermons address the spirit, however, the monks are oriented towards the corpse.

First, the Amitābha Buddha, Bodhisattvas Avalokitêśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, and Bodhisattva Illowang are called upon. Then the spirit is invoked, followed by a short teaching concerning Amitābha and a prayer for rebirth in Amitābha's paradise. Then, the *Musang kye* is performed. Next, each step in preparing the corpse—cutting the hair, washing the body, washing the hands, washing the feet, dressing (underwear, outer clothes), binding the body, and inserting the body into the coffin—is accompanied by a teaching for the spirit. Each step is somehow semantically related to the performed activity. For example, the sections concerned with “washing” are about afflictions, *kleśas*, and so forth. However, despite the chants being relatively slow, it is necessary to wait for the morticians to finish each step. In some cases, monks perform popular texts instead of mere waiting.<sup>20</sup>

During the ritual sequence, following verses are chanted.

#### 2.2.2.1 *Haircutting*

Oh, spirit...!

[When we are] born, where do we come from? [When we] die, where do we go?

Birth is like a floating cloud that appears [in the sky],

Death is like a floating cloud that disappears.

A floating cloud has no substance.

Death and birth, coming and going are the same,

Only one thing<sup>21</sup> is always manifested,

Perfectly quiet and does not follow birth and death.

Oh, spirit...!

Again, do you realize what is this one perfectly quiet thing?

Wiped out by fire, shaken by wind, when the heaven and earth are destroyed,[It] alone remains in the white cloud.

<sup>20</sup> During my fieldwork, I have accompanied an informant nun and we went to a distant temple to see a monk and learn about rituals from him, and to receive some ritual texts both for me and for the nun. The nun asked him about some details of the post-mortem rites. One of the topic discussed was this *ad hoc* filling. “Well, of course you finish much earlier than the morticians, so just insert *namu amit'abul* chant, *Pōpsōng ke*, and so on.” (Zemánek 2015b, sec. 9.14)

<sup>21</sup> *Ilmul* 一物, a reference to the original mind or thusness.

And now, with shaving [your] head, you ended ignorance.  
How could the ten afflictions appear again?  
The white floating cloud is blocking the entrance into a valley.  
How many birds lost the way back to their nests?

### 2.2.2.2 *Bathing*

And now, oh, spirit...!  
If people want to know a buddha-sphere  
They have to purify their mind as an empty space,  
Distance themselves from delusive conceptualization and biases,  
Direct their mind towards the unobstructed [state].

Oh, spirit...!  
Have you purified your mind  
As an empty space?  
If not yet,  
Now listen!

The nature of correct awakening  
Is present in everyone, from the buddhas  
To the ordinary beings of six destinies.  
It is present in every atom  
And manifested in all things.  
It does not wait for practice and perfection,  
And is perfectly clear and enormously bright.

### *Shaking the bell.*

Have you seen it? Have you heard it?  
If you have clearly seen it and distinctly heard it,  
What is it then?  
Buddha's face is as clear as the full moon,  
Or the beams of a thousand suns.  
Now, the black dirt of deception and delusion is washed away,  
And you have obtained the indestructible diamond body.  
Pure Dharma body does not have inside and outside,  
[Despite] going and coming, life and death; *thusness* is eternal.

### 2.2.2.3 *Handwashing*

Oh, spirit...!  
Oh, spirit...!  
[Despite] coming, there is nothing that comes.  
Like a moon reflected in a thousand rivers.  
[Despite] going, there is nothing that goes.  
As a clear space and forms of all worlds.

Oh, spirit!  
The four elements are disintegrating like in a dream  
The six data-fields, mind, and consciousness are fundamentally empty.  
If you want to know the place where the buddhas and patriarchs is reflected,  
The sun is setting on the west mountain; the moon is rising in the east.  
Now, your hands are washed,  
If you grasp the principle clearly,  
The teaching of the buddhas of the ten directions will be in your hand, clear as a day.  
If you carefully look at the blue mountain, there is not a tiny tree,  
There is a great man<sup>22</sup> hanging on a cliff losing his grip.

---

<sup>22</sup> 大丈夫, a sage, a bodhisattva, i.e., a follower of Mahayana.

#### 2.2.2.4 *Feet-washing*

Oh, spirit...!  
At the time of birth, it does not follow birth,  
Being magnificent, at the time of death, it does not follow death.  
Birth and death, going and coming do not interfere.  
The essence is magnificent and is in front of the eyes.  
Now, your feet are washed, all practices<sup>23</sup> are completed,  
Raise and step on the Dharma cloud,<sup>24</sup>  
If you, with single pointed mind, return to the [state] without false thoughts,<sup>25</sup>  
[You can make] the great step, pass [the world of] Vairocana towards the highest [nirvana].

#### 2.2.2.5 *Dressing the Undergarment*

Oh, spirit...!  
When the four elements form [the body],  
The spiritual luminosity does not form accordingly,  
When the four elements dissolve, the spiritual luminosity.  
Birth and death, forming and dissolving are like illusory flowers,  
Where are enmity, friendship, and the past karma now?  
Even if searched for, they are nowhere to be found.  
Calm and without obstacles, like an empty space.

Oh, spirit...!  
In all worlds all things have mysterious essence,  
Every single thing is the head of the household.  
Now, your undergarment is dressed,  
Clean and protecting the gates of the faculties<sup>26</sup>  
[With the] adornments of shame<sup>27</sup>  
[You will] achieve Awakening.  
If you, through language, realize the origin,  
Then the spirit of the original self will shine through the six data-fields.

#### 2.2.2.6 *Dressing the Clothes*

Oh, newly deceased spirit...!  
At the time of coming, what is that which is coming?  
At the time of going, what is that which is going?  
At the time of coming, and at the time of going there originally is no thing.  
If you want to know where the bright thusness is,  
[You have to] pass through ten thousand miles of the blue sky with white clouds.  
And now, you are dressed with clothes,  
Protecting [you] from the taint of the phenomena.  
Like Tathāgata practiced patience,  
I will always do the same.  
When our master met Dīpaṃkara Buddha,  
He became Kṣāntivādin ṛṣi<sup>28</sup> for many eons.

#### 2.2.2.7 *Capping*

Oh, newly deceased spirit...!  
Seeing and hearing are like an illusion,  
The three worlds are like an illusory flower.

---

<sup>23</sup> 萬行, all disciplines or modes of salvation

<sup>24</sup> 法雲, Buddhism as a fertilizing cloud

<sup>25</sup> 無念, literally, no-thought, absence of false thoughts based on false discrimination.

<sup>26</sup> The openings of the six faculties to the senses, through which desire enters.

<sup>27</sup> 慚愧, shame for one's faults.

<sup>28</sup> A reference to the Buddha's former rebirths.

[When] the pollution is completely extinguished and complete purity realized,  
Purity is extremely luminous and permeating  
Silently and luminously filling the empty space.  
[If you] look at the eons of [the existence of the] world  
It is like a thing [seen] in a dream.  
Now, your cap is put on  
The top of your head.  
Samādhi of the Heroic March  
Was achieved by thousands of saints,  
If you do not regress in Dharma practices of the causal stage,  
In the end, you will achieve the perfect and subtle Awakening without any doubt.

### 2.2.2.8 *Proper Seating*

Oh, newly deceased spirit...!  
The brightness of the spirit shines solitarily,  
[You have] surpassed the faculties and their objects

The completely manifested essence is eternal  
Indifferent to letters  
The true nature [of the mind] is unpolluted,  
Perfect as it is.  
Once distanced from false objects  
It is the *dharmakāya*.

The monks are either present close to the corpse and wait for each step to begin, or if they perform outside, somebody informs them about the progress of the shrouding. In the cases I have observed or studied, there were two professional morticians performing the shrouding sequence assisted by a relative. Two monks were performing the chants. The mourners were standing outside the shrouding room, separated by a glass wall, loudly weeping. They were let in twice, before and after the actual binding of the body. They wept, embraced the body, expressed their insufficiency in filial duties, and apologized to the deceased parent.<sup>29</sup> Some female mourners had to be dragged out by force so the morticians would be able to continue.

The second entrance of the mourners corresponds with the inserting of the corpse into the coffin, i.e., they entered when the body was bound in a cocoon-like shape on the shrouding table and a wooden coffin was prepared opened next to the table. The Buddhist nature of the rite was accented by colorful paper stripes with the swastika (*man*卍) symbol, which were inserted into the knots of the hemp shrouding stripes.

After that, the dressed body was put in a coffin, while the name of Amitâbha was chanted. We can see that the separation of body and spirit, as manifested in the rites, is not particularly clear and that there is still a link between the corpse and the spirit. The moment of death is the beginning of a series of rites that correspond to the separation stage of the passage.

## 2.3 Funerary Rituals

### 2.3.1 Funeral

The funeral itself is preceded by transferring the body from the house, mortuary, or funeral home to the place of the funeral or cremation. Each step, or more precisely every transition (leaving the building, loading, unloading, etc.), is marked by a short rite as well.

Based on accounts of the Buddha's funeral, which became a model for Buddhist funerals, Buddhists traditionally favor cremation (Kor. *tabi* 荼毘, Skt. *dhyāpita*; or Kor. *hwajang* 火葬). The

<sup>29</sup> Again, *Chuja karye* is very prescriptive on this matter, the texts describes exactly the position and direction how each mourner should approach the body etc.

term *tabi* is used more for the cremation of monks, while *hwajang* is generally reserved for laity and performed in crematoriums. However, the ritual sequence of these rituals is derived from *tabi*; it is a simplified form. The manuals for Buddhist rituals compiled during the Chosŏn era, as well as those from the early twentieth century contain detailed descriptions of these rites; *tabi* is an important topic in them. In contemporary Korean practice, burial and cremation are the most common methods; contemporary Buddhist manuals include texts for both types of rituals.

The ashes of cremated laypeople are usually enshrined in stupa-like tombs or columbaries associated with temples. This opens the question of the secondary funeral discussed by Hertz and others. Both *tabi* and *hwajang* have a twofold structure of cremation followed by the further disposal of the remains. In the case of ordinary people, the ashes are collected and placed in an urn. In the case of important monks, a distinction is made between the ashes and relics (*sari* 舍利). The latter are allegedly miraculous stones resembling precious stones, pearls, or small stones. These relics are enshrined in stūpas, whereas the ashes are buried. We can therefore find both graves and stūpas of famous monks. Ordinary people's urns are enshrined either in columbaria or in outdoor urn graves. The symbolism of such graves is often taken from the stupas, i.e., even the urn graves of lay Buddhists are of the stupa shape. However, such stupas usually house multiple urns. Both urn graves and columbaria are often part of a temple.

Let us again return to some historical examples. The *Samguk yusa* mentions the funeral methods of kings and queens, the majority of which were buried in tombs (*myo* 墓, or *nŭng* 陵). Some rulers, namely King Hyosŏng, Queen Chinsŏng, King Hyogong, and King Kyŏngmyŏng, were cremated (*hwajang*). Cremation proper—that is, *tabi*—is mentioned only once, in the case of the famous monk Chajang (590–658), who introduced *vinaya*, monastic discipline, to Korea. After cremation, his bones were buried in a cavern.

The *Samguk yusa* pays special attention to unusual forms of burial. Especially noteworthy is the cosmological and soteriological meaning of the placement of Queen Sŏndŏk's tomb. The queen ordered to be buried in one of the Buddhist heavens, the Heaven of Thirty-Three Gods (Kor. *Torich'on* 忉利天) located on the top of Mount Meru, the axis mundi of the Buddhist cosmos, where, among others, the god Indra resides. King Munmu (626–681) later ordered a temple dedicated to a lower heaven be built below the queen's tomb. In doing so he was recreating a part of the Buddhist cosmos in Korea, a frequent practice in Silla (R. D. McBride 2008; Zemánek 2014b). In the following text, the royalty links the symbolism of the queen's grave with rebirth in a heaven other than a Pure Land:

The queen was still in good health and confided to her courtiers, saying “As I will die on such and such day of such and such month in such and such year, please bury me on Torich'on. [...] The courtiers, not knowing the location of such a place, asked where it was. The queen replied, “It is south of Wolf Mountain.” When the date came, the queen, as she had predicted, died, and the courtiers buried her south of Wolf Mountain. More than ten years later King Munmu (661–681) constructed Four Deva Kings Monastery below the queen's tomb. According to Buddhist scriptures, above the heaven of the four heavenly guardians are the heavens of the Thirty-three Devas. (Lee & De Bary, 1997, p. 62)

King Munmu's funeral was also remarkable, for he, after cremation, was buried on a rock in the East Sea, where he would be reborn as a dragon to protect the country. The only account analogical to the category of forest funeral can be found at the end of the cycle describing the practices of divining one's karmic standing, which were established in Silla by monk Chinp'yo in the mid-eighth century. The *Samguk yusa* cites Chinp'yo's biography copied from a late-twelfth-century stele that includes a description of the end of his life. He passed away on a rock and his corpse was left there by his disciples, who only performed offering rites (Kor. *kongyang* 供養). Later his bones were collected and enshrined in an urn.



Such cosmological symbolism is used in contemporary context too. The columbaria or graves are linked with the soteriological concepts. For instance, the temple columbaria are often built as a part of a hall where Amitâbha is enshrined. The urns are hence enshrined directly in the Amitâbha's Pure Land.

### 2.3.2 Enshrining of the Tablet

The tablet with the name of the deceased represents the *yǒngga* and is present during all rituals. After the funeral, but on the same day, the tablet along with a picture of the deceased is moved to the main hall of the temple where the guiding ceremonies are performed for forty-nine days. The enshrining ritual has two parts: worship of the "upper altar" (*sangdang* 上檀), that is, the altar area enshrining the Buddha, accompanied by prayers requesting rebirth in the Pure Land; and a ceremony focused on the "lower altar," the altar of the *yǒngga*. This part consists of the *sisik* 施食, or "bestowing food," a ritual sequence during which the spirit is invoked and explained the teachings by the monks, while the patrons feed it.

In my opinion, the separation period of the threefold passage ends with either the funeral or the transfer of the tablet to the temple. The mourners are certainly in a state of mourning, which will last for the next forty-four days, and the *yǒngga* has departed from the body and is wandering throughout the intermediate state. From now, only the spirit, in the intermediate state will be the object of the rituals.

## 2.4 Transition Rituals and Memorial Rituals

Transition rituals may resemble mortuary rituals as they share common features and structure, i.e., the spirit is summoned, ritually purified, sent away, and all temporary ritual paraphernalia are burned. Naturally, there are significant differences in their temporal and spatial aspects, and the emic terminology tends to differ. In other words, both transitional and mortuary rituals address the spirit, but whereas mortuary rituals are performed in the relative proximity of the body, transitional rituals are performed separately, in the temple. The term associated with these rites is *chae* 齋 (sometimes written as 齋).

*Chae* has a complex meaning within the context of Buddhist rituals. It denotes different kinds of practices performed on different occasions. It can mean *uposadha*, a sort of purification ritual, especially one of fasting. On the other hand, it is also used for the ritualized noontime meal of the laity as well as for a ritual feast. It is also a general term for complex religious ceremonies.

In contemporary Korea, transitional rites fall under the category of guiding ceremonies (*chǒndo chae* 遷度齋), which are also performed on special dates and holidays, as well as ad hoc for a practically unlimited number of people. The *chae* ceremonies that are a part of the standard series of the rites of death for one person are one type within the *chǒndo chae* category, or rather one usage of a general *chǒndo chae* ritual type.

Guiding ceremonies can be understood as "universal tools of salvation"; they are believed to be capable of resolving almost any spirit-related issue. Hence, if a person dies and the spirit is in the intermediate state, then it can be summoned to the ritual, which should help the spirit reach a better destination. If there is a spirit of a person who died a long time ago, and the ritual patron is convinced that the ritual should be performed in order to ease the spirit's situation, then the same ritual will be performed.

The series of seven transitional rites begins on the seventh day after death,<sup>30</sup> and the rites are repeated seven times every seventh day to cover the forty-nine-day period. This series is known as the *Sasipku chae* 四十九齋 (the forty-nine-day ceremony) or *Ch'ilch'il chae* 七七齋 (the seven-seven ceremony). In contemporary Korea, the form and size of the ceremony may differ significantly and

---

<sup>30</sup> The day of death is the day 1; hence, if the person dies on Monday, the first ritual will be performed on Sunday.

range from a rather small indoor ceremony performed by two monks (or even one) to a vast outdoor ceremony with ritual music, dance, and rich and colorful ritual proprieties, with dozens of monks performing the ceremony.

Before discussing the ceremonies further, let us again return to the historical sources to see the meanings these rituals had in Korean history. In the *Samguk yusa* the term *chae* refers to large religious ceremonies and festivals, as well as to ceremonies for the deceased. The most informative chapter is that on Master Wölmyōng (?–?), who lived during the reign of King Kyōngdōk of Silla (r. 742–765). The chapter consists of several stories from Wölmyōng’s life. Despite its brevity, this chapter introduces several issues that are present in contemporary practice as well. For the present topic, the narrative of Wölmyōng’s performance of a ritual for his deceased sister, upon the occasion of which he composes a poem, is the most significant. The following quote begins with a brief description of a *chae* ceremony, including the use of paper money. The wind blowing towards the west is a reference to Amitābha’s Pure Land.

Earlier, Wölmyōng had had an abstinence ceremony [齋] performed in memory of his sister. When a sudden gust of wind blew the paper money away to the [west],<sup>31</sup> he composed a song:

On the hard road of life and death  
That is near our land,  
You went, afraid,  
Without words.

We know not where we go,  
Leaves blown, scattered,  
Though fallen from the same tree,  
By the first winds of autumn.

Abide, Sister, perfect your ways,  
Until we meet in the Pure Land. (Lee & De Bary, 1997, pp. 112–113)

The story provides information on the ritual practice at that time. Paper money was used for the rite, and the content of the poem again relays information about belief in Amitābha. When the text is viewed in the context of the first poem, the issue of ritual language is touched upon. The chapter on Wölmyōng begins with a nearing calamity when two suns appear in the sky and a skilled monk is needed to ritually drive this phenomenon away. Wölmyōng appears and expresses his will to perform a ritual; he informs the king that he is not versed in Sanskrit but that he can compose a song in the vernacular. The king agrees and Wölmyōng composes the poem. The same situation reoccurs with the song for his deceased sister. The fact that he uses *hyangga* instead of a Chinese or Sanskrit formula shows a tendency prevalent in the rites: there are codified texts written and performed in classical Chinese with mantras in Sanskrit, but there is a strong tendency to substitute them with Korean translations.

On a structural level, there is another intriguing similarity between ancient and modern practices. In the *hyangga* Wölmyōng talks to his sister and bids her farewell. In today’s ritual the moment when the deceased is actually sent away has become quite flexible and is open to change and reinterpretation. There is a certain element of bricolage to it. In this part of the ritual, temples try to be innovative and include new elements or elements from different contexts, such as dances or writing letters to the deceased. Identically, Wölmyōng breaches codified ritual form and uses his own invention for the sake of direct communication with the deceased. Korean rituals of death appear to have a similar level of openness towards change and invention in both ancient times and today.

---

<sup>31</sup> In the otherwise beautiful translation of this chapter, *west* in the original is mistranslated as *south*.

### 2.4.1 *Sasipku chae* and Guiding Ceremonies

The series of ceremonies is known as *sasipku chae* (the forty-nine-ninth ceremony 四十九齋) and sometimes *ch'ilch'iljae* 七七齋. The terminology can be confusing because sometimes the terms refer to the final ceremony on the last day or to the whole series of seven rituals. There are three basic forms of the ceremony: the *sangju kwōngong chae* 常住勸供齋 (Ritual of [the buddhas and bodhisattvas] who are always present), *yōngsan chae* 靈山齋 (Ritual of the Vulture Peak), and *siwang kakpae chae* 十王各拜齋 (Ritual of worship of the ten Kings). In contemporary Korea, *sasipku chae* is used as an equivalent for *Sangju kwōngong chae*. In other words, the ritual performed as a “guiding ceremony” for the *yōngga* of a lay Buddhist is *Sangju kwōngong chae*. A *yōngsan chae* is a large open-air ceremony with music and dances that allegedly seeks to enact the scene of the Buddha’s sermon at Vulture Peak, where the Buddha preached the *Lotus Sutra*. The *siwang kakpae chae* follows the structure of the former but includes elements related to belief in the ten kings and the trial. Beside the upper and lower altar there is an altar of the ten kings and corresponding sutras, i.e. sutras related to the ten kings and Kṣitigarbha are employed.

A standard, or rather ideal, guiding ceremony has the following structure:

1) *Siryōn* 侍輦 (attending to a palanquin) is performed at the gate of the temple; the main propriety here is a palanquin (*kama*). The palanquin is a carriage for Buddhas and bodhisattvas, namely Illowang posal 引路王菩薩 (the Bodhisattva Guiding King), a psychopomp, a Charon-like figure, who helps the *yōngga* to cross to the Pure Land. The rite also establishes the ritual space, as the guiding spirits are summoned to protect it. The ritual space is also established by the means of procession and circumambulation. The first part of this ritual sequence is performed in front of the gate. Then, a procession is formed and the participants move from the periphery of the ritual space to its center, where the rest of the ceremony is performed.

The goal of the next part, 2) the *taeryōng* 對靈 (meeting the spirit), is to invite and greet the *yōngga*. The focus of this part of the ceremony is the lower altar, i.e., the altar of the *yōngga*. The spirit is greeted, invoked, and made a simple food offering; then the spirit is educated by a sermon where the spirit is informed about the basic Buddhist notions. Then a symbolic bath, 3) the *kwanyok* 灌浴, takes place. For this rite a special “bathing altar” (*kwanyok tang*) in the form of a folding screen is established. Inside are items such as paper clothes (to be burned later during the ritual sequence), fragrant water in a basin, soap, a toothbrush, toothpaste, a set of clothes, and so forth. The monks and nuns perform various dhāraṇīs, mantras, and mudrā during the ritual bathing.

Then follows the 4) *sangdan kwōngong* 上檀勸供, that is, offerings to the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and the 5) *chungdan kwōngong* 中檀勸供, that is, offerings to the deities. Special offerings are made to Amitābha and Kṣitigarbha, the two death-related deities. Then the *yōngga* becomes the main object, when the 6) *kwanūm sisik* 觀音施食 is performed. The mourners offer food and tea, while the monks explain the teachings to the *yōngga*. Virtually all the important deities in Buddhism and especially those related to death are summoned to help the *yōngga*.

When the *kwanūm sisik* is over, the *yōngga* is sent off during the 7) *pongsong* 奉送 (sending off) rite. Then, the mourners bow to the tablet and the photograph, and take them out from the hall. Also, some of the food offerings are collected. The 8) *sodae ūisik* 燒臺儀式 (burning ceremony) is the final stage, when all participants move to a furnace that is located somewhere in the temple compound. There, the tablet, picture, and other items, such as the clothes of the deceased and some clothes of the participants, are burned. In the instances I have documented, the mourners burned their mourning clothes used during the rituals. Men, who wore suits, burned the shirts.

The food offering collected after the *sisik* is offered to the wandering spirits and hungry ghosts. Then the participants move to the temple dining room to eat the offerings together. This is called *Pōpsik* (法食). The rest of the offerings used throughout the ritual, namely fruit and rice-cakes, is given to the patrons who carry it back home.

The ceremonies performed on the first six weeks of the series, usually contain only the sections worshipping the buddhas and the *sisik*, larger versions may also include *taeryōng* and *kwanyōk*. However, the last, furnace rite, is usually performed only at the end of forty-nine day period.

In this ceremony, the performers (monks and mourners) join forces in order to help the spirit to safely pass through the transition, the intermediate state, to a good destination. The finale of this stage marks the end of the mourning and thus corresponds to the *reincorporation*. The mourners return back to their lives and the *yōngga* is, from the Buddhist perspective reincarnated, but from the perspective of the informants, it becomes an ancestor. It will be an object of ancestor memorial rites performed home (*chesa*) or in the temple. The *yōngga* as well as the mourners symbolically passed through the three stages of the *rite of passage*.

### Bibliography

- Deuchler, Martina. 1992. *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology*. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 36. Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University : Distributed by Harvard University Press.
- . 2015. *Under the Ancestors' Eyes: Kinship, Status, and Locality in Premodern Korea*. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Harrell, Stevan. 1979. "The Concept of Soul in Chinese Folk Religion." *The Journal of Asian Studies*.
- Harvey, Peter. 2012. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*. 2nd edition. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hertz, Robert. 2004. *Death and the Right Hand*. Translated by Rodney Needham and Claudia Needham. Reprinted. Religion, Rites and Ceremonies, in 5 volumes ; 4. London: Routledge.
- Holt, John C. 1981. "Assisting the Dead by Venerating the Living: Merit Transfer in the Early Buddhist Tradition." *Numen*.
- Janelli, Roger L., and Dawnhee Yim Janelli. 1992. *Ancestor Worship and Korean Society*. Kindle Edition. Stanford University Press.
- Langer, Rita. 2007. *Buddhist Rituals of Death and Rebirth: Contemporary Sri Lankan Practice and Its Origins*. Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism. London ; New York: Routledge.
- Lee, Kwang Kyu. 1984. "The Concept of Ancestors and Ancestor Worship in Korea." *Asian Folklore Studies* 43 (2): 199–214.
- McBride, Richard D. 2008. *Domesticating the Dharma: Buddhist Cults and the Hwaōm Synthesis in Silla Korea*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Nadeau, Randall L., ed. 2012. *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Chinese Religions*. 1st ed. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Priestly, Leonard C. D. C. 1999. *Pudgalavāda Buddhism: The Reality of the Indeterminate Self*. Toronto: University of Toronto Centre for South Asian Studies.
- Schopen, Gregory. 1997. "On Avoiding Ghosts and Social Censure." In *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*, 204–5. University of Hawaii Press.
- Taehan pulgyo chogyejong, ed. 2011. *Pulgyo Sangjerye Annae: Chaega Sindo Rŭl Wihan Sangnye Wa Cherye Chinaenŭn Pŏp [Information on Buddhist Funeral and Mortuary Rites: Ways of Performing Funeral and Mortuary Rituals for Lay Believers]*. 1–p'an ed. Sŏul: Chogyejong ch'ulp'ansa.
- . 2013. *Pulgyo sangyong ūrye chip [A collection of common Buddhist rituals]*. Sŏul: Chogyejong ch'ulp'ansa.
- Thiận Châu. 1999. *The Literature of the Personalists of Early Buddhism*. Translated by Sara Boin-Webb. 1st Indian ed. Buddhist Tradition Series, v. 39. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.
- Vasubandhu. 1988. *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*. Translated by Pruden, Leo M. Vol. II. 4 vols. Berkeley, Calif: Asian Humanities Press.
- Yü, Ying-Shih. 1987. "'O Soul, Come Back!' A Study in The Changing Conceptions of The Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47 (2): 363–95. doi:10.2307/2719187.
- Zemánek, Marek. 2014. "Symbolická Eliminace Časoprostorové Separace v Kronice Samguk Jusa." In *Tradice a Proměny: Mýtus, Historie a Fikce v Asii*, edited by David Labus and Miriam Löwensteinová, Varia, 48–64. Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy.
- . 2015. "Field Notes 2015b."