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FOR LIVING BUDDHISM AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

DHARMA WORLD

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Rites for the Departed

Religions for Peace Japan

Religions for Peace was established in 1970 as an international nongovernmental organization. It obtained general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 1999. As an international network of religious communities encompassing over ninety countries, the Religions for Peace family engages in conflict resolution, humanitarian assistance, and other peace-building activities through dialogue and cooperation across religions.

Religions for Peace Japan was established in 1972 as a committee for the international issues supported by Japanese Association of Religious Organizations. Since then it has served as the national chapter of Religions for Peace.

Purpose

1. Calling on religious communities to deeply reflect on their practices, address any that are exclusionary in nature, and engage in dialogue with one another in the spirit of tolerance and understanding.
2. Facilitating multireligious collaboration in making peace initiatives.
3. Working with peace organizations in all sectors and countries to address global issues.
4. Implementing religiously based peace education and awareness-raising activities.

Activity

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First World Assembly in Kyoto, Japan, 1970

Second World Assembly in Leuven, Belgium, 1974

Third World Assembly in Princeton, the United States, 1979

Fourth World Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya, 1984

Fifth World Assembly in Melbourne, Australia, 1989

Sixth World Assembly in Rome and Riva del Garda, Italy, 1994

Seventh World Assembly in Amman, Jordan, 1999

Eighth World Assembly in Kyoto, Japan, 2006

Ninth World Assembly in Vienna, Austria, 2013

Tenth World Assembly in Lindau, Germany, 2019

Religions for Peace Japan

Different Faith, Common Action

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FEATURES: Rites for the Departed

Dharma World presents Buddhism as a practical living religion and promotes interreligious dialogue for world peace. It espouses views that emphasize the dignity of life, seeks to rediscover our inner nature and bring our lives more in accord with it, and investigates causes of human suffering. It tries to show how religious principles help solve problems in daily life and how the least application of such principles has wholesome effects on the world around us. It seeks to demonstrate truths that are fundamental to all religions, truths on which all people can act.

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Rites for the Departed

by Masashi Hashimoto

Masashi Hashimoto is the director of the Chuo Academic Research Institute of Rissho Kosei-kai in Tokyo.

Venerating ancestors and their attainment of buddhahood is inextricably linked to the perfection and the liberation of the individual.

Ancient Indian Brahmanism performed rites honoring deceased kin and blood relatives (*peta*). These are called *śrāddha* in Sanskrit and *saddha* in Pāli, and are an important part of Brahmanic family rituals. Ceremonies to make offerings to ancestors are performed three times a year, when three Brahmins are invited for treat, and rice balls (*piṇḍa*) are offered to the spirits of deceased fathers, grandfathers, and great grandfathers. In traditional Brahmanism, when a person dies, he is greeted in the vault of heaven according to the efficacy of the rituals and offerings that were made during his lifetime, in the company of Yama (the lord of the dead) and the forefathers (*pitri*), with whom the deceased is regarded as being merged. The *Jāṇussoṇi sutta* in the Pāli Canon (Aṅguttara-nikāya, vol. 5, pp. 269–273) relates that a Brahmin called Jāṇussoṇi visited the Buddha and asked him if the departed receive any benefit from the offerings made in those rituals, and if they partake of them. The Buddha did not deny this, but said that such offerings benefited only those who had been reborn in the realm of the hungry ghosts (P., *peta*; Jpn., *gaki*) among the five destinations of rebirth (the realm of the ashura is not mentioned here). They are enabled to live on by means of what their friends, relatives, and kindred send to them from this world.

On the other hand, in the East Asian cultural sphere dominated by the use of Chinese characters, the soul (Jpn., *tamashii*) as a spiritual existence is expressed by a compound of two characters (Chn., *hunpo*; Jpn., *konpaku*) meaning "soul" and "spirit." These are considered to separate when a person dies. "Soul" is the "*yang* soul" (*hun*), received from Heaven, and is understood to be an immortal existence that returns to Heaven. "Spirit" is the "*yin* soul" that is received from the earth and is thought to linger around coffins and graves, eventually either being burned out or expiring. The American anthropologist David K. Jordan, who made a study of folk religion in a Taiwanese village, reported the view held by villagers that *hun* "continue life in the realm of the shades, a ghostly sphere, invisible to mortals, yet interpenetrating the world of the living in time and space. Their existence can be comfortable if they are well provided by their descendants with food offerings, clothing, housing, and above all with money." This is why Chinese communities around the world offer sumptuous clothing, large quantities of paper money and food, and paper houses of great complexity at funerals, the Ghost (Yulanpen) Festival, and other occasions. Failure to do so causes the spirits of the dead to gradually transform into ghosts (Chn., *gui*) that bring trouble to the living.

Similarly, Japanese folklore understands that the spirits of the dead are initially polluted and unruly. Gradually, as they pass back and forth between this world and the next, receiving offerings from relatives near and far, they shed their pollution and individuality, and, becoming purified, merge with all the family and village ancestral spirits. Having now become ancestral spirits without any individual personality, they visit this world at particular times to watch over their descendants and the villagers as a whole.

As we have seen in the *Jāṇussoṇi sutta*, Buddhism also recognized a realm of hungry ghosts (*peta*) that could interact with the human world. Although this *sutta* does not say much about hungry ghosts, the *Petavatthu* in the Khuddaka-nikāya, as if by compensation, contains fifty-one stories about their relief. Such relief does not take the form of making offerings directly to the hungry ghosts, but rather of making them to recipients such as monks (bhikkhus). The merits of such actions are then directed to the hungry ghosts.

In Buddhism, the principles of the theory of karma—that meritorious acts result in good and evil acts result in suffering—are (1) the inevitable effects of karmic causes, and (2) receiving upon oneself the reward or retribution of one's own acts. However, there are two ways

these may be breached: mitigating karmic obstacles through repentance and transferring merit from the one performing the good action to another (Skt., *pariṇāmanā* < *pari-√ṇam*). The basic meaning of *pariṇāmanā* (Jpn., *ekō*) is "turn" or "convert," that is, to turn the merit of one's own good actions toward one's own enlightenment (buddhahood), or to turn it to benefit others toward their enlightenment. However, there was another word in the early Buddhist Canon meaning the transference of one's own merit to others, derived from *ā-√diś* (*ud-√diś*, *anv-ā-√diś*). According to Dr. Hajime Sakurabe, this word means "to direct the merit of one's good actions for the benefit of another." Dr. Akira Fujimoto, in his study of the *Petavatthu*, translates it as "designate."

A naked women—a hungry ghost—said to merchants who pitied her, "What is given by your hand into mine does not help me. Give it to this lay disciple of the enlightened Buddha. Having dressed him, transfer the merit to me. By doing so you will give me what I want." As soon as the merchants had done so, the "fruit" immediately materialized, as she appeared before them clad in beautiful clothes (*Petavatthu* 10). What is common to all stories about the hungry ghosts is that they cannot enjoy the food, drink, and clothing directly offered to them by human beings. An elder among the Arhats was no exception. In order to bring relief to his blood relatives, he had the alms collected by his twelve followers given to him to make a meal for the Sangha, and the shreds of cloth picked out from a rubbish heap converted into a garment and offered to the Sangha. He then designated the merit of these actions to his relatives (*Petavatthu* 27). This seems to reflect a sort of hierarchy in Buddhism—the offering being made to the Sangha or someone of higher status than the donor. According to Dr. Fujimoto, they all nonetheless fall into the category of principle (2) above: that a person's actions bring about corresponding results. What brings the donor the reward for his or her offering is not the physical donation itself but the intention (*cetanā*) for good that rises in the mind of the donor. The hungry ghost feels gratitude (*anumodanā*) that the donor has designated him or her as recipient. In other words, it gains comfort through the good karma in its own mind, rejoicing in the good actions of the other, and so attains relief from hunger and thirst. The hungry ghost also praises the donor who has designated the offering not simply for the karmic connection but as the cause of its relief. According to the Sutra of the Original Vow of the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha (Jpn., *Jizō bosatsu hongankyō*) forebears receive one-seventh of the merit from offerings and the donor receives the remaining six-sevenths. The *Petavatthu* says that both receive the full amount of merit for the offering, with no reduction at all.

The statue of the Eternal Original Buddha enshrined at the Great Sacred Hall of Rissho Kosei-kai in Tokyo.

The Sōkaimyō—the symbol of faith received by members of Rissho Kosei-kai overseas (very slightly different from the Japanese version)—states as its purpose "bringing mutual awakening to the families and ancestors of both husband and wife through the bodhisattva way." The subject of the Sōkaimyō is understood to be the ancestors of both maternal and paternal families, as well as members of both families presently living. I have already looked at the implications of the "mutual nature" of the two. According to "Nyukai no tebiki" (A guide for new members) in the January 1954 issue of *Kosei*, one's ancestors are the shape of one's previous life, and their veneration is itself the key to knowing the happenings in the past that explain one's present state. Among our forebears, there would have been those who performed both good and unwholesome actions. We direct merit toward them by passing along the merits of the good actions amassed by our innumerable forebears and accumulating them, and dealing with the guilt over unwholesome actions by living a life based upon the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. In other words, we reflect and repent through practice of the bodhisattva way, and make an offering of our unremitting effort to attain the perfection of character to the Eternal Original Buddha (*kuon honbutsu*), its recipient, and designate the merit gained from it to be transferred to our ancestors. Venerating ancestors and their attainment of buddhahood is inextricably linked to the perfection and the liberation of the individual.

There was once a senior minister of Rissho Kosei-kai who, dedicated to the liberation of others, was famous for his mastery of *musubi* (guidance). Based on his experience of a huge number of cases in which personal suffering was linked to ancestor veneration, he instructed that there could be no resolution unless ancestor veneration was directed and designated with pinpoint precision. Seen from the study of the *Petavatthu*, this was a way of guidance that makes good sense. ❑

FEATURES

What Happens After We Die?
Notions About the Afterlife from the US, Japan, and China
by Gordon Mathews

We in the present do not necessarily know better than people in the past; we may be afflicted by our own illusions and limitations that blind us.

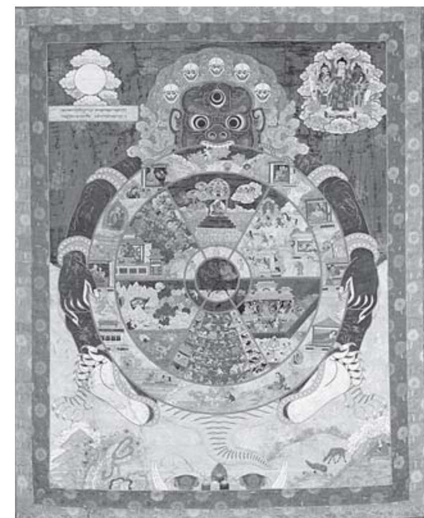
Three hundred years ago, most people in the world had a solid sense of what would happen to them when they died. If they were Christian or Muslim, they believed that heaven or hell awaited them. If they were Hindu or Buddhist, they believed that they would be reincarnated into their next life. Not everyone believed these things, of course, but most people did: the religion to which they belonged gave them a doctrine of what their lives meant beyond this world, and most people followed these doctrines without much question.

Today, however, in a range of societies from the United States to Western Europe to Japan to China, many people have turned away from the established religious teachings of their forebears. Twenty percent of American baby boomers believe in reincarnation, one survey found; and there are now more Chinese Christians than Communist Party members, scholars of Chinese religion maintain. Increasingly, the sense of life after death has become individualized, with some people believing deeply in heaven or in reincarnation, others believing deeply that there is nothing at all after we die—that we die and only vanish—and still others professing that they simply do not know. Beliefs around what happens after we die have become private: friends might not know what one another thinks will happen, and even husbands and wives may hardly ever discuss this. Today, for many people in Europe, the United States, China, and Japan, what happens after you die is socially not very important—not worth arguing about with your friends or family. This isn't always true—families with members having mixed religious beliefs may indeed argue—but by and large it is indeed true.

Why has this happened? Partly this is due to the advance of science, making religious scriptures from thousands of years ago seem less than believable to many today. More than that, though, it is because of the growth of relativism. Unlike past eras, each of us are likely to know people of various beliefs, from

Wikimedia Commons File: Francesco Botticini - The Assumption of the Virgin.jpg

The Assumption of the Virgin*, 1475–76, by Francesco Botticini shows three hierarchies and nine orders of angels, each with different characteristics. National Gallery London.*


Wikimedia Commons File: Wheel of Existence.jpg

A traditional Tibetan thangka *showing the* bhavachakra*, or wheel of life, a visual teaching aid and meditation tool symbolically representing* saṃsāra *(or cyclic existence). This* thangka *was made in Eastern Tibet and is currently housed in the Birmingham Museum of Art.*

Gordon Mathews is an emeritus professor in the Department of Anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He has written or edited a dozen books, on topics ranging from ikigai *in Japan and the United States to cultural identity and the global cultural supermarket, to Hong Kong's Chungking Mansions as a "ghetto at the center of the world." This article is based on the 2023 book he has written with Yang Yang and Miu Ying Kwong,* Life After Death Today in the United States, Japan, and China.

Christians to Buddhists to Muslims to agnostics to atheists. This diversity in different conceptions of life after death makes many of us wonder, "Who knows what happens after we die?" and makes our decision about what to believe a matter of personal choice rather than ultimate conviction: we have no basis for knowing what might be true. Today, one person believes in reincarnation while another believes in heaven and another in nothingness—just as one person likes café latte, another mint tea, and another craft beer. It can be seen as simply one more personal consumer preference.

What I have just described is what I have broadly found in my 2023 book *Life After Death Today in the United States, Japan, and China*, written with Yang Yang and Miu Ying Kwong, based on some 400 interviews with people from all walks of life, conducted over five years in these three societies. Of course, each of these societies has its own particular ways of thinking about life after death. In the United States, Christianity has lost considerable credibility over the past few years, with many people leaving the religion, but the idea of God in heaven still maintains a powerful hold. In American popular literature, bestselling books argue over whether the Christian message is true or whether God is simply a delusion. Many individual Americans have left Christian churches, which they see as overly politicized, but continue to believe in their own personal conception of God and the afterlife. Other have turned to Buddhist beliefs or New Age thought, adhering to reincarnation or belief in a collective consciousness that survives death. Many others—almost a quarter of Americans, statistics broadly show—believe in nothing at all after death, assuming that they will simply die and vanish. But even among the agnostics and atheists we interviewed, there was concern over how the United States could flourish without a common moral message uniting its citizens. As one non-believing man said, "If there's no common sense of life after death, you do wonder what social glue will hold increasingly diverse people together. What do you need for diverse people to live together in peace?"

In Japan, there are many popular books on life after death, but unlike in the United States, these books generally don't preach a single answer. Rather, they ask, "*shindara do naru*?" (What happens after we die?), offering an array of possible fates for readers to choose from. The Japanese institutional equivalent of Christianity has been ancestor veneration, but it has been changing greatly in Japan. In earlier eras, ancestor veneration was based on the family line, with each household having its family altar and lineage traced through the male heir. This has been giving way, as Japanese families have fewer children. Instead, ancestor veneration has for many become a matter of personal mourning for one's lost loved ones. As one woman said, "My husband has been dead for twenty years, but I continue talking with him [at the family altar] and asking him for help. . . . It's not just that I want to meet my husband when I die. I *will* meet him, I'm sure." Many Japanese do not hold a similar belief, feeling instead that when they talk to their ancestors at the family altar or grave, their ancestors cannot really hear them. Statistics show that some 50% of Japanese believe that after death, there is nothing—only other people's memories of the deceased. All in all, if in the U.S. a sense of life after death is thought to provide collective moral guidance for life, in Japan, this is not seen as necessary; instead, life after death is thought of as a sort of moral escape. The Japanese we interviewed saw the world in the next life as a place open to their imagination—"Maybe I'll become a butterfly! That would be really wonderful!"—unlike the Japanese world in this life, with its unrelenting social pressure.

In both the United States and Japan, there has been a broad trend of people turning away from belief in life after death. In China, however, people have been turning toward belief in life after death. The Chinese Communist Party, in Chinese schools since 1949, has resolutely taught that belief in life after death is superstition, and atheism is the only correct belief. In recent decades, however, the Party has grown somewhat more tolerant of religion, and more and more Chinese have been moving away from Communist orthodoxy to instead embrace an array of faiths, from Buddhism to Christianity to Baha'i, believing in reincarnation or heaven as their ultimate fate. We found from our interviews that even some Communist Party members believe in life after death; they cannot publicly say so, given their positions, but they do

indeed privately hold that belief. In one woman's words, "Communist Party members are not allowed to be religious [but] we are allowed to follow the rituals when visiting a temple. . . . I pray there just like everybody else," without telling her Party colleagues what she really believes. The large majority of Chinese continue to believe that there is no life after death, but the numbers of those who do believe are growing. Many Chinese have found that government-taught atheism is insufficient as a basis on which to understand their lives and coming death; this is what we discovered in our research. They may feel a sense of moral loss: even though China has become affluent, they feel that the Communist Party has lost its ethical basis, and so turn to religious faith and belief in life after death for a sense of life's ultimate meaning.

Despite this return among many Chinese to a belief in life after death, in a broader sense there is a shift around the world toward non-belief in life after death, as I earlier noted. Three hundred years ago, very few people believed there was no life after death. Today, some 20–30% of people on Earth believe that there is no life after death, mostly within the more affluent countries in the world. A hundred years from now, as medical life extension—even immortality—becomes more and more viable, and life extension through AI also becomes increasingly plausible and available, traditional religious belief in life after death will no doubt become less and less adhered to in this world. Scholars have argued a great deal about secularization in recent decades, with some saying that it is inevitable and others saying that it is not inevitable and may not happen. I personally think that while in the short term, it may not happen, in the long term, it is indeed inevitable: human beings as a whole are gradually turning away from traditional religions as providing answers to the uncertainties of their lives.

Wikimedia Commons File: The Wounded Angel - Hugo Simberg.jpg

The Wounded Angel *by Hugo Simberg (1873–1917). 1902. Finnish National Gallery.*

This may be a real loss. While our research has been unable to conclusively show that people who believe in life after death are on average happier than those who do not—there are indeed in this world many unhappy believers and many happy atheists—it does seem clear that many human beings need, in times of trouble, stress, and grief, the solace that a sense of life after death can provide. However, if more and more of us in the long run cannot fully believe in what the classic religious teachings have told us about life after death, then what we can continue to do is to hope. A standard Japanese statement about *ano yo*, the other world, is that no one has ever come back from that world to tell us what it's like. No one knows. Most of the believers we interviewed in all three societies acknowledged that they were not absolutely certain in their beliefs; and the non-believers we interviewed often left some room for envisioning a world beyond this one, saying, in one man's words, "Probably there's nothing at all after death, but who knows? Possibly there is something." Physicists today are writing books about the cosmos having an infinite number of universes. These are realms far beyond what we can imagine—including at least the possibility of some form of collective or individual life after death. No one knows for sure what might happen when we die, but this is not a matter for despair but for hope. Who knows what we might find beyond the grave?

Is there life after death? Over the past century, the dominant scientific assumption has been that human beings are now increasingly moving beyond such a belief. The astronomer Carl Sagan, shortly before his premature death, wrote that "I would love to believe that when I die, I will live again. . . . But as much as I want to believe that, and despite the ancient and worldwide cultural traditions that assert an afterlife, I know of nothing to suggest that it is more than wishful thinking." By this logic, human beings are now coming to understand reality in a way that they did not in the past. Jesus, Muhammed, Buddha, the Hindu sages in their depictions of life after death, were simply victims of illusion; but now we are coming to know better. Another view, however, is that we in the present do not necessarily know better than people in the past; we may be afflicted by our own illusions and limitations that blind us. As the sociologist Peter Berger has written, "Our ancestors didn't know about particle physics, but they spoke with angels. . . . It is quite possible that in the dawn of its history the human race had an access to reality that it subsequently lost." We human beings in this contemporary age may have become imprisoned in an overly rational, scientific worldview that has caused us to become blind to spiritual realities that our ancestors were indeed able to perceive.

I don't know which of these views may be ultimately more correct. I only know that the universe has granted me life. This is true for us all—why do we exist? Why are we here? On the basis of that miracle, the gift of life, we will all encounter sooner or later the mystery of death. Perhaps it will simply be nothingness. Or perhaps it will be something far stranger and more miraculous than anything we can possibly imagine from within our lives now. I, for one, am looking forward to that experience, whatever it might bring. ❑

FEATURES

Japanese Funeral Rites: A Miracle of Life

by Masaki Matsubara

Masaki Matsubara (PhD, Asian Religions, Cornell University) has taught at the Department of Religious Studies at UC Berkeley and was a fellow at the Ho Center for Buddhist Studies at Stanford University. He is now a Contemplative Mentor in Residence in the Contemplative Studies Initiative at Brown University and also a Visiting Professor at Interfaculty Initiative in Information Studies at the University of Tokyo. He is the abbot of the Zen temple Butsumoji in Chiba Prefecture, Japan, and travels between the United States and Japan to lead seminars and retreats.

Funeral rites are very powerful because they develop one's self-cultivation or self-awareness.

In the early morning of Sunday, June 16, 2024, I landed at Haneda Airport from New York City to spend the summer in Japan. I took a taxi to my temple in Tokyo before 6 a.m. On the way, what caught my eye through the window was a cloudless sky of vivid blue. As that boundlessness and vividness penetrated me somehow, I got a feeling that something was going to happen. It was an unusual experience with a presentiment of foreboding. But, of course, there was no way I could know that my ominous premonition would prove right.

That night I received a phone call telling me that Mrs. Hatsue Takanashi had passed away at the age of 102. A voice on the phone said that she had peacefully closed her eyes surrounded by her two sons, two daughters, and seven grandchildren. As soon as I heard that deeply sad news, many of my conversations with her came and went in my mind. She was an important factor in my decision to come to America in 1999. Since then, I have been a Zen priest, a scholar of Japanese religions, and the dad of two daughters. In other words, it is not an exaggeration to say that my tremendous thanks go to her for being who I am today in America.

The next morning, Mrs. Takanashi's family members and a representative from the funeral home came to my temple and we decided on the dates for her funeral. Considering the availability of a crematorium in a busy season of the year, and also considering the hot weather, we were able to set her funeral for three days later. Traditionally, a Japanese funeral usually consists of a two-day service, the first of which is a wake (*tsuya* 通夜: a ceremony held the night before the day of the funeral for the purpose of spending the last night with the deceased). We set the date for the *tsuya* on June 19, and for the funeral (*sōgi* 葬儀) on June 20. Also, because the body of the deceased cannot be cremated for 24 hours after death, her family made an earnest request to place her body at my temple, which is her family temple (*bodaiji* 菩提寺). This is where we were hoping to keep her until the wake.

After the funeral home brought her body to my temple, she was bathed, her hair was groomed, and makeup was applied. A guardian sword, which is a small blade, was placed on her chest on top of the futon cover with the tip of the blade pointing to her feet. This guardian sword is meant to be a talisman to help the deceased safely enter nirvana—in Buddhist contexts, crossing over to the Pure Land (*jōdo* 浄土) or the Other Shore (*higan* 彼岸). She looked peaceful, beautiful, and relaxed, and it seemed to me that she was smiling. I put my palms together to express my deep gratitude from the bottom of my heart. It was in this one-way and silent (but somehow very warm) setting that she and I met and had our last conversation face-to-face. During this vigil at the temple, Mrs. Takanashi's family members cherished their last moments with her in person, privately, without others and without interruptions. This special private time was not only a time to mourn for the dead, but also a time for the remaining family members to accept the difficult reality of her death.

Approximately two hours before the *tsuya* ceremony began, Mrs. Takanashi's entire extended family gathered at the temple as instructed by the funeral director. This meeting of all of the family members turned out to be a family reunion, with a lot of nostalgic catching up going on, but in a sad setting. As the funeral director started to explain

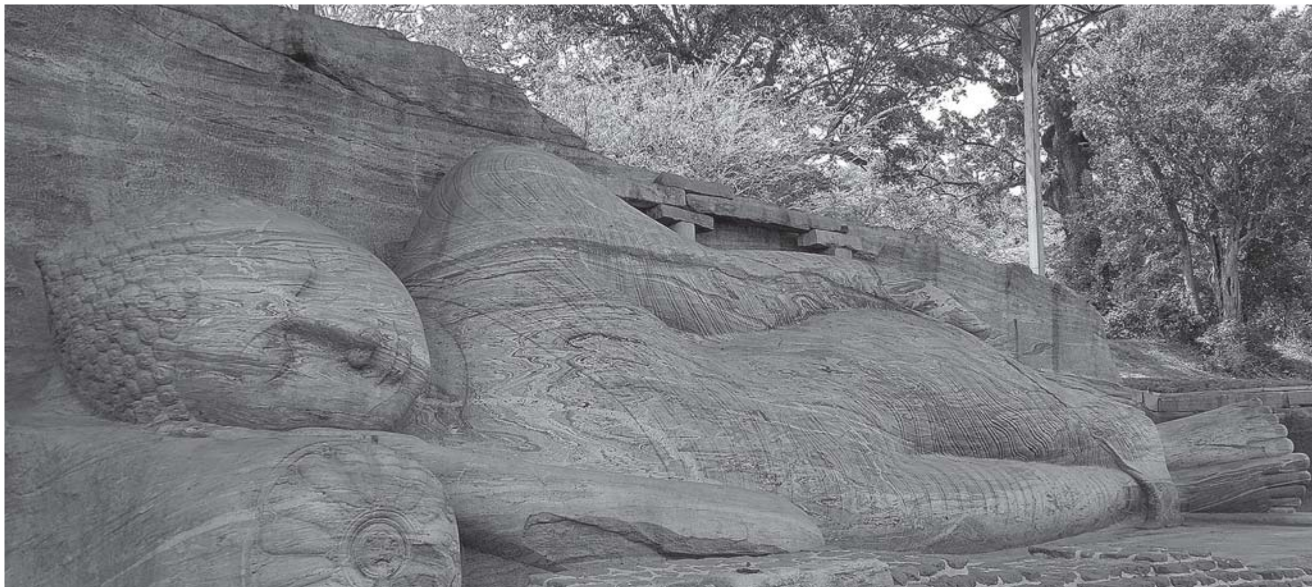


Photo: Masaki Matsubara

This reclining image, which depicts the Buddha's parinirvana, in the Gal Vihara in the ancient city Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka, is one of the largest sculptures in Southeast Asia.

to Mrs. Takanashi's sons and daughters (among them, the chief mourner was the oldest one) the flow of the ceremony in detail, they were busy greeting the other attendees. It seemed they didn't even have time to sit down together to mourn and rest before the ceremony started at 7 p.m.

After the closing of the service, food and alcohol (sake and beer) were served to the mourners who attended and helped with the service. The purpose of a *tsuya* ceremony is to express gratitude to the mourners and to remember the deceased by sharing memories. It is also an opportunity to share a last meal with the deceased. After this offering service ended, some of the family members stayed at the temple, spending the last time with the deceased; the others went home.

The sun was very strong outside on the day of the *sōgi* funeral ceremony for Mrs. Takanashi. I was introduced as the officiating priest during the opening remarks made by the funeral director, after which I entered the temple's main hall where the *sōgi* ceremony was held. As I stood in front of the ceremonial altar, my eyes met her eyes in her portrait, which was placed in the center of the altar, along with a wooden tablet where her posthumous Buddhist name was written and candles and offerings of flowers and fruit. I was ready to conduct the funeral rites. One of the features of a Japanese Rinzai Zen funeral feature is a shout (*katsu* 喝), which the officiant performs while saying a requiem for the deceased in the latter half of the funeral. It is considered to be the main ritual of the ceremony. This ritual of the shout, also considered to be "the last ritual" for the deceased, is meant to sever the deceased's bond (including attachment) to this life. In this sense, the ritual of the shout has the meaning of guiding the deceased on the right path, the path to the other world. It also plays an important role as an opportunity or moment of catharsis for the mourners attending the ceremony. After the ritual was finished, the funeral concluded with cremation of the deceased's body.

People find many different meanings behind funeral rites, from social as well as personal points of view. Some think the purpose of the rite is to send the deceased to the afterlife; others consider it a way to bid farewell to the deceased and comfort bereaved family members. In this sense, there is room to argue that funeral rites serve less as religious events than as social rituals centering on human relations. While I agree that the rite can serve both of these purposes, I contend that the Rinzai Zen funeral traditions help the dead, the remaining family members and their loved ones let go and move on.

For example, the Zen ritual of the shout is symbolic of not only severing the deceased's ties to this world but also of directing the deceased to the beyond. In this way, the ritual of the shout marks a funeral as a new beginning rather than an end and symbolizes the rite of passage in which the deceased's status is transformed from one to another. At the same time, it offers comfort, solemnity, and the opportunity of awareness to the surviving family and the attendees that the deceased has gone to the next world or the other world. In this sense, the officiating priest is a spiritual guide for both the deceased and the remaining family.

Another important point is the nature of the rite of cremation. The cremation rite reminds me of a devotional practice categorized as the "cult of the book" in the context of the Lotus Sutra. The cult of the book comprises the rituals in which sutras are enshrined and worshiped similarly to worshiping the Buddha relics enshrined in *stūpas*. Simply put, a sutra has power, and the practice is a text-centered act of reverence and devotion for the sutra in question. This cult of the book has eventually influenced the shaping of the Buddhist ritual and devotional culture of East Asia.

The rite of cremation, especially the presence of the cremation urn, serves as the cult of the book in terms of the

shared proclamation that the centered object itself—that is to say, the cremation urn or the scripture here—becomes the teacher; there is no need to have an officiating priest as the main teacher in the rite of cremation, and now the main teacher is the cremation urn. Given the reality that the deceased has gone, the cremation urn as the ritual object reveals its ritual transformation as a vital embodiment of a new locus of authority: the transformation that identifies the spiritual source that the deceased has been entering enlightenment in which he or she is completely free of all karma, attachment, defilements, and suffering.

The presence of the cremation urn also makes a new awareness of the same spiritual transformation in the minds of the remaining family, friends, and loved ones: the awareness that the deceased has gone and is entering the enlightened land, the Land of Ultimate Bliss (pure land), Heaven, or whatever we call it, that transcends time and space, freed from all realities. This is a critical moment of transformation where one can let go and move on. Furthermore, it is through this moment of realizing that one has to let go and move on so that one may also realize that, without exception, everything is impermanent. In Japanese Rinzai Zen Buddhism, even death is not an end but a new beginning, and therefore, the officiating priest gives guidance to the deceased in the rites of funerals. By the impermanent nature of all realities, which is the important thing to remember in times of death, one can find meaning in the funeral rites—that is, a reminder to fully appreciate the meaning of this life. I believe that to understand the meaning of death is to understand the meaning of life.

Whether from a social or personal perspective, one of the fundamental meanings of funeral rites can be found in the rite of passage that transforms one's status from one to another. What I learned from the funeral rite for Mrs. Takanashi was that it is very powerful—not simply because it is a rite of passage, but also because it develops one's self-cultivation or self-awareness. From the point of view of Rinzai Zen, it is through this self-awareness that the deceased (and we ourselves) can be saved from accepting the difficult realities of modern life. Zen master Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1769) once wrote, in *Orategama zokushū*, "It is an unparalleled ignorance to believe that one can become a Buddha without seeing into one's own nature, or that there is a Pure Land outside of one's own nature."* Hakuin teaches us that what makes us aware is nothing but ourselves and thus what saves us is nothing but ourselves. I think that funeral rites are a chance for one's self-cultivation, which is the source of inner salvation.

Photo: Masaki Matsubara

A lotus flower in bloom at Tokyo's Ryugenji, a Buddhist temple of the Rinzai sect of Japanese Buddhism.

When all the funeral events for Mrs. Takanashi ended, I talked with her family about my memories of her, including stories they had not heard before, to remember that she was gentle and kind and that she listened. She was inspiring, determined, open-minded, and global in her thinking. My memory of her will remain as something warm in me, and her energetic and positive voice will resonate in me during difficult circumstances in my life. A funeral is a sad occasion, but at the same time, this one has given me a sense of rebirth. This is a miracle. A funeral rite has the everyday power to create miracles. ❑

* Philip Yampolsky, trans., "Orategama Zokushū," in *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), p. 136.

FEATURES

The Importance of Grief Rituals in Coping with Loss

by Frank E. Eyetsemitan

In the face of modernity, some people still hold onto tradition, and may not change their grief rituals because tradition influences how they perceive themselves.

Rituals are pre-determined acts that are repetitive and formal. They may be verbal or non-verbal with little room for dilution or substitution. For example, as rituals, the prayers offered before a meal cannot be substituted with the prayers said after a meal. However, in exercise of agency, humans can make changes to rituals to suit their purpose (Moran, 2017).

Rituals have meaning to the people performing them, and the meaning may be personal or a reflection of a group to which the individual belongs (e.g., a culture, a family, or a religion). Without meaning, a ritual becomes a random act. For example, in African culture during a ceremony, to spill a drink on the floor before guests take a sip is to seek the blessings of ancestors. However, in another culture, without this belief system, this act becomes a random behavior and a waste of resources.

Researchers believe that humans are averse to situations that lack structure. Therefore, people are likely to impose meaning to a situation that makes no sense to them. To many individuals, death defies structure and poses a challenge to their comprehension. Death creates anxiety that requires that people be reassured (Neimeyer and Harris, 2023). When a death occurs, rituals help to impose a structure in the following ways: a) to ease the transition from living to the afterlife; and b) to cope with the grief that accompanies this transition. A study from which bereaved individuals were asked to reflect on past rituals or were assigned new rituals reported a reduction in the grief experience of the participants. Also, these bereaved individuals experienced a sense of control over their loss (Norton and Gino, 2014). Other studies with bereaved Catholics who attended church regularly and recited the rosary reported a faster recovery process from grief when compared to those who did not (Ahler and Tamney, 1964). Also, through rituals, Turkish women were able to gain control over their loss (Aksor-Efe, Erdur-Baker, and Servaty-Seib, 2018). Taiwan is a society where the word "death" is taboo. Yet, through rituals as well, Taiwanese women were able to gain control over the loss of their stillborn babies. Additionally, they were able to mention the word "death" and avoid parental guilt (Tseng, Hsu, Hsieh, and Cheng, 2018).

As mentioned earlier, rituals could be acquired from being a member of a family or a culture. Rituals are effectively acquired through observational learning (e.g., Rogoff, Moore, Najafi, and Dexter, 2007). In observing (or modeling) significant individuals like parents, children are able to develop a sense of identity within their family or culture (e.g., Miller and Goodnow, 1995). However, observational learning (or modeling) would require attention; storage and recall of information; and the motivation to put into action and replicate that which has been observed. So, this may not apply to everyone.

Grief Rituals as Verbal or Non-Verbal Acts

Around the world, grief rituals can be verbal or non-verbal acts. To researcher Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, rituals have either *expressive* or *symbolic* elements to them (Radcliffe-Brown, 2014). Grief rituals include taking care of the remains of the deceased and helping the decedent with the transition to an afterlife. These grief rituals would vary from culture to culture, by the age of the deceased, or based on the decedent loved ones' resources (Reeves, 2011).

In African-American culture, the deceased is ushered into another life through chanting, singing, and praying (Baloyi, 2014). In Jamaican culture, the emotional expression of grief includes dizziness, fainting, and wailing to demonstrate one's closeness to the deceased (McIlwain, 2001). In Nigeria, the Yoruba men use drumming in grief rituals. The drum rhythms for washing the body are different from those for lowering the body into the grave (Lund, 2017). Drumming is a non-verbal act and replaces verbal expression in a culture in which grief by men, unlike women, is limited in the use of words. Haitians believe that the decedent's spirit does not depart the world of the living to its final resting place until the ninth

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night. Thus, leading up to the ninth day, prayers are said each day.

Grief rituals are also influenced by religious beliefs. Latinos are predominantly Catholic, and during funerals, the rosary is recited by family and friends. After funerals, the rosary is also recited for the forgiveness of the decedent's sins, each day for nine days (Diaz-Cabello, 2004).

Grief rituals should be appropriately done. Across cultures, many people believe that in the afterlife the deceased has supernatural powers that could cause harm to the living, if displeased (e.g., Spellman, 2014).

Grief Rituals Are Based on the Decedent's Age

In most cultures, grief rituals for young children are different from those of older persons. Culturally and biologically, children are considered relatively too young to die and their death is viewed as an "off-time" loss. Also, children are perceived as innocent. Puerto Ricans, for example, dress their deceased children in white, which signifies the children's innocence and purity. Also, deceased children's faces are painted like angels (Parkes, Luangani, and Young, 2015). Latinos believe that the nine-day prayers for the forgiveness of sin for adults should not extend to children because of their innocence (Brooten, Youngblut, Charles, et al., 2016). Furthermore, the deceased adult's age, whether young-old or old-old, would determine the type of ritual that is appropriate. For example, Chinese mourners wear white or black and red outfits as a sign of happiness in the funeral of a deceased person who has lived a long life, and whose death is regarded as an "on-time" loss.

Generally, grief rituals do reflect a perceived understanding of an afterlife, based on the construction of the world of the living. Thus, the deceased in the afterlife continues on in their worldly roles and activities. In the world of the living, adult roles and activities are different from those of children. Unlike children, adults engage in work roles and in marital/long-term relationships. In the burial of a deceased adult, therefore, traditional Estonians include in the casket work tools such as knives, needles, whetstones, and fire steels (Heapost, 2007). In Italy's Cemetery of the Babies (or *La Necropoli dei Bambini*), reports suggest that children are buried with play items and pet animals.

Grief Rituals Are Influenced by Beliefs about the Location and Abilities of the Deceased in the Afterlife

From conducting a focus group study of bereaved persons from different cultures, researcher Sandra Lobar and colleagues (Lobar, Youngblut, and Brooten, 2006) note that grief rituals are influenced by beliefs about what becomes of the deceased in the afterlife. Around the world, generally people have afterlife beliefs about the decedent, based on religious teachings or traditionally held understandings about the afterlife. These beliefs include the perceived *location* of the deceased and the perceived *abilities* of the deceased in the afterlife.

Grief rituals are based on perceived location of the deceased in the afterlife

For example, Christians believe that in the afterlife the deceased is located either in heaven or in hell. Based on this belief, a grief ritual would include the participation of a Christian clergy to affirm the departed person's new location (usually heaven). The grief ritual might include readings from John 14:2–3 in the Bible, in which Jesus makes the promise to his followers that heaven will be their dwelling place after death. Muslims also believe in a heavenly place called "paradise," and this would be reflected in the eulogy for the deceased. Buddhism believes in rebirth, as does Hinduism, and grief rituals would reflect this as well. African traditional religion believes that departed ancestors are domiciled in the earth. This is reflected in prayers and libations poured to the ground in reverence to departed ancestors during special occasions.

Grief rituals are based on beliefs about the abilities of the deceased in the afterlife

After death, the deceased is believed to take on a spirit persona. Spirits are believed to have supernatural powers that humans cannot wield in bodily form because they are unseen, ubiquitous, and not limited in time and space. Spirits are also believed to dwell in non-humans, such as animals and trees. When visiting the world of the living, spirits can take on the form of a bird or a butterfly (e.g., Loorits, 1949). Spirits are believed to inhabit inanimate objects such as mirrors as well. After a death,

in several cultures, mirrors are covered because the dead person's spirit is believed to inhabit a mirror, and seeing yourself in a mirror could make you join the deceased in death.

The supernatural powers of spirits are believed to be used for good or for bad. Therefore, the general human response to the perceived supernatural powers of deceased spirits is either *avoidance or embracement/consultation*.

Avoidance grief rituals

These would include acts that discourage interactions with the spirit of the deceased. These acts are meant to send a message that the spirit of the deceased is unwelcome in the world of the living. For example, the following avoidance grief rituals are practiced by traditional Estonians: place the soap/bath whisk used to wash the decedent's body in the coffin; pour water that is used to wash the decedent's body at a place nobody goes; fumigate the room where the dead body was kept; and avoid saying the name of the deceased during the mourning period (Heapost, 2007).

Embracement/consultation grief rituals

These are the opposite of avoidance grief rituals. Here, the spirit of the deceased is welcomed to the world of the living. This spirit is believed to be the guide and protector of the living (Simpson, 1980). For example, within three days following a funeral, the Chinese expect the spirit of their deceased loved one to visit them.

Embracement rituals include consultation with the spirit of the deceased. For example, the Bible in 1 Samuel 28:3–25 states that Saul, the first king of Israel, was concerned about the war he was going to wage with the Philistines. So he approached a female sorcerer known as the Witch of Endor, who then conjured up the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel to find out about the outcome of the war. The spirit of Samuel, which Saul himself identified, stated that the Philistines would defeat the Israeli army and that Saul and his three sons would be killed in the war.

Consultation with the spirit of the deceased occurs in contemporary times as well. In the United States, Denise Richards, an American actress and television personality, sought the help of a median to connect her to the spirit of her deceased mother. Also, Brett Eldridge, an American country music singer, asked a medium to connect him to the spirit of his deceased grandfather. George Clooney, another American celebrity, requested a medium to connect him with the spirit of a departed friend. From a survey of 18,607 people drawn from the United States and thirteen European countries, 25% of the participants reported having sought an encounter with the spirit of the dead (Haraldsson and Houtkooper, 1991).

Grief rituals can be proactive or retroactive

Grief rituals can be done *proactively*, to precede an imminent death. For example, among Catholics, in preparation for heaven, the *last rites* are administered to a dying person. Also, Chinese Buddhists believe that a dying person's final thoughts are important. Thus, the recitation of a Sutra (statement of beliefs) helps the dying person to stay focused on the prospects of a good rebirth. Hindus believe that it is important to face death with a clear mind. Therefore, mind-altering medications such as narcotics are discouraged, as these could adversely influence the rebirth process (Sharma et al., 2013). Hinduism also stresses the importance of completing unfinished businesses prior to death in order to improve a dying person's chances for a good rebirth. Unfinished business includes doing good deeds, offering apology, reconciling differences with others, and distributing belongings to heirs and charities (e.g., Firth, 2005).

Alternatively, rituals can be done *retroactively*, if not performed at the appropriate time. Researcher Shirley Firth (2005) narrates a situation that involved a Hindu family that could not administer the last rites to their loved one before doctors switched off her life-support machine. Generations later, this Hindu family performed those rites to seek penance, before engaging in any social activities such as family weddings. According to researchers Shen Qin and Yan Xia (2015), Chinese practitioners of Taoism believe that in order to experience peace and balance, the ritual of voicing appreciation to or righting wrongs with the deceased is never too late.

Grief Rituals Are Reflected in Body-Disposal Methods

As stated above, rituals as verbal or non-verbal acts have meaning. There are verbal or non-verbal meanings attached to various body-disposal methods. Cremation is a common practice among people who believe in rebirth. As a body disposal method, therefore, cremation hastens the release of the spirit of the deceased for rebirth. On the contrary, whole-body burial is common among Christian believers of bodily resurrection. Also, donation of organs or the entire body to science is common among people who see themselves as continuing their lives through others.

Grief Rituals: Tradition versus Modernity

Due to several factors, a society would experience changes over time. These factors, among others, are socio-economic and shift with generational values. As a society experiences changes, so do grief rituals. In the United States, for example, due in part to economic factors, cremation is becoming a popular means of body disposal (National Cremation, 2015). In 2020, the cost of cremation was between $800 and $3,000 (depending on the area). This amount was about one-third or less the cost of whole-body burial, at $9,135. By 2040, in the United States, cremation is projected to account for 78.7% of all bodily disposal methods (https://www.nfda.org/news/statistics).

However, apart from economic factors, there are other reasons that account for this increased interest in cremation. For example, green cremation (also known as bio-cremation or water cremation) is the choice of people who care about the environment. And these are mostly the younger generation. Here, the corpse is placed in a water solution of potassium hydroxide, which reduces the body to the bones; and the bones are then pulverized into ashes and given to the family.

In the face of modernity, however, some people still hold onto tradition, and these individuals may not change their grief rituals because tradition influences how they perceive themselves. To embrace modernity for them is to lose a sense of who they are. Again, grief rituals are meant to serve two purposes: a) to aid with the transition from living to the afterlife and b) to help survivors cope with the grief that accompanies this transition. Whereas a change in grief rituals to align with modernity may help the bereaved to cope with their grief, this may not work well for the deceased with the transition to the afterlife. For example, would cremation (influenced by modern values) help the deceased with a transition to the afterlife, if the decedent's preference is for whole-body burial? Would it be better to please the bereaved or the deceased who in spirit form is able to engage the world of the living with supernatural powers—a belief held by many? This author provides a new perspective on this issue and more in his books: Eyetsemitan, F. (2022), *The Deceased-focused approach to grief: An alternative model*, Springer Nature Switzerland; and Eyetsemitan, F. (2023), *Verstorbenen-fokussierte Trauerbewältigung: Ein alternativer Ansatz* (German Edition), Springer Nature Switzerland. ❑

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FEATURES

Death Rites and Our Relationship with the Dead

by Douglas J. Davies

Rituals change at the public and cultural level, just as individual awareness changes over time.

Introduction and Background

The death of the body is a universal fact, but the way it is physically treated carries many forms and interpretations uniting physical and philosophical-religious aspects of our human condition. Worldwide, cremation and burial are the commonest forms of funeral rites, though they are often interpreted in different ways. For many Indian-originating traditions, including Hindu and Buddhist, the life force is widely believed to leave the physical body and undergo a variety of post-death experiences before assuming new bodily forms or ultimately attaining its own freedom and release from worldly constraints. In this, cremation provides an appropriate mode of ritual-symbolism marking the end of one physical existence while leaving open any account of the ultimate destiny of the life force. The Middle Eastern traditions that generated Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, tend to prefer burial, linking it in ritual-symbolic terms with a future, miracle-like, resurrection of a transformed body.

However, ethical issues frequently frame these traditions, as in an ultimate scheme of karma or in divine judgment of the moral life lived on earth. Zoroastrians provide their own ancient tradition pinpointing moral judgment, and so did the ancient Egyptians. In social scientific terms, the facts of life described by anthropology in reciprocity or gift theory stress ideas of mutual obligation that make social-cultural existence possible. This is reflected in religious traditions in which ideas of merit or demerit, flowing from good and bad behavior, influence a person's status in life and in the afterlife. A few traditions also embrace a less transactional approach to life, merit, and post-mortem identity through ideas of compassion, grace, and love. I detail all these themes in my Christianity-focused *Theology of Death* (2008) and more comparatively in *Death, Ritual, and Belief* (2017) which also includes accounts of local traditions dealing with spirits and the ancestors. From these familiar accounts of formal funeral and memorial rituals, I will now sketch a variety of factors complementing and extending them. This includes both imaginative and economic resources, dreams and family resemblances between the living and the dead, bonding with "ancestral" traditions, digital innovations affecting death, and the nature of human personhood.

Imagination, Money, and Memory

It is easy to highlight this imaginative creativity when we think of the beliefs and philosophical schemes developed by the great religious traditions of the world to frame the identity and destiny of the dead while also creating an account of the meaning of life for the living. Rooted in our human capacity for survival and its associated emotion of hope, imagination constitutes both its own internal resource for life and external, communal, accounts of existence. Cultural narratives exist as dynamic sources available for adoption by individuals as they develop their own view of the world. Such narratives come to life through rituals, ceremonies,

Wikimedia Commons File: Jakub Schikaneder - All Souls' Day.jpg

All Souls' Day *by J. Schikaneder in 1888. This oil painting shows an elderly woman praying after placing a wreath upon the tombstone of her loved one.*

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festivals, myths, doctrines, and ethical codes, but the degree to which their values are embodied varies according to personal circumstances, temperament, and the availability of physical and economic resources.

Scholarly links with the dead

In many cultures, religious elites and ritual specialists manage the ways in which people relate to their dead, with monks and priests funded, thus allowing time to study, meditate, and engage in practices not easily available to the laity. Money influences both the religious life and the relationship between the living and the dead. Literacy, scholarship, and extensive interpretations of texts link devotees with their intellectual, philosophical, and religious founders and reformers. In Christianity, for example, early Christian leaders and saints are venerated by Orthodox and Catholic traditions and are often associated with prayers for the dead and their well-being in the afterlife. Apart from customary funerals, many Protestants largely oppose ritual relationships with "the dead," but still focus on historical leaders such as Luther and Calvin and their theological interpretations of doctrine. Such "schools" partly resemble what happens in "secular" traditions of literature, philosophy, and science. Our relationship with the dead reveals just such a variety of interactions with past leaders, teachings, and customs, whether for Buddhists and Hindus or Jews, Christians, and Muslims. In most religious traditions the rich financially resource impressive tombs and funeral sites, with ritual leaders also praying for the dead to assist their spiritual progress in their afterlife. The poor and socially insignificant frequently pass unmarked upon.

Cultural and personal alignments with the dead

Despite enormous cultural changes over the millennia, kinship and the bonding of family members remains significant. Some theories of grief focus on both attachment and loss, and in recent decades also on the maintenance of "continuing bonds" between the living and the dead reflect these relationships. Practically speaking, most societies have long understood links with ancestors through family or community shrines and festive memorial days, whether in the well-known Mexican Day of the Dead and its folk-Catholic Christianity or in local Buddhist traditions of Nepal, with rites inviting the departed to return to the earth and receive veneration and be asked for gifts. Ancestral lineages often serve to legitimize political and economic authority and inheritance, as in coronation rites. In the UK, for example, the tombs of dead monarchs often lie alongside their living descendants, as at St George's Chapel, Windsor. Similarly, links with key cultural, scientific, and military figures play a large part in the architecture of Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral in London, visited by millions of tourists each year. However, if wealth or family size decreases, burial sites become expensive and tombs become impossible to sustain, as in parts of contemporary Japan, where cremation and new forms of caring for the dead may be undertaken by specialist Buddhist monks and monasteries. Political attitudes also influence funeral practice as when the new People's Republic of China encouraged cremation as a practice involving less financial expenditure on funerals.

Rituals of Transformation

Anthropologists and sociologists have documented relationships between the living and the dead through ritual practices that transform the status of the dead. The early twentieth-century French anthropologist Robert Hertz created his theory of "double burial," while the Dutch scholar Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage provided its own grammar of discourse on status change. Hertz pinpointed societies where a dead body was quickly buried and, only after its flesh had decayed during what he called the "wet" stage, could the bones—now in a dry stage—be taken and be ritually turned into the ancestors (Douglas Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief* [London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2017]). This wet-dry transformation of body into bones was something I used to analyze for funerals in the UK, where cremation rapidly turned the "wet" body into the "dry" cremated remains that provide an opportunity for the living to relate to their dead in new ways. Sometimes people place cremated remains in locations of deep personal significance between themselves

Photo: Reuters / AFLO

A candle is placed at the spot where the ashes of the late Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu were laid to rest at the Saint George's Cathedral in Cape Town, South Africa, on January 13, 2022.

and the dead, some keeping them at home. The major Christian traditions of Protestants and Catholics that had practiced burial for more than a thousand years only slowly came to accept cremation, but still objected to not burying cremated remains or including ashes in jewelry or even in ink used for tattoos on a relative's body. Such behaviors raise the question of personal identity and links with the dead. Today's environmental and ecological concerns raise new issues of, for example, dissolving the dead in alkaline hydrolysis, a practice already in use in parts of the US, and soon to emerge in western Europe, too. Recent years witnessed the famous Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu having such a funeral.

Personhood—Simple and Complicated

As for issues of identity, cognitive science and theories of embodiment now demonstrate the human brain's relationship with the entire body, while social science speaks of extended relations of that brain-body unity with others in society. Our personal-private thoughts not only extend "outwards" to our relationship with parents, siblings, partners, offspring, and our dead, but also "inwards" to our deeply personal emotions and memory. And this is where death rites become significant. Van Gennep, for example, spoke sociologically of a threefold scheme of rites of passage involving separation from one's social status as a living person, an interim period or liminal phase as a corpse, to a final status as, say, an ancestor. In that he closely resembled Hertz's approach mentioned above, which also recognized that funeral processes allow for emotional changes in the bereaved. Through ritual and the passage of time, people change in their own relationship with their dead. Temple and household shrines, as well as photographs, link the living and the dead and in some psychological sense continue to influence the living as, for example, in dreams and sometimes in aspects of physical appearance and behavior reminding us of our dead. I want to approach this question in a very particular way that some may find helpful, but others will find difficult because much depends on what we think a "person" is.

Dividuality, Not Individuality

The basis of my argument involves a disagreement with the widely shared Western attitude to the "self" as a relatively isolated individual living amongst other similar individuals, all serving the purpose of capitalist and neoliberal societies where market forces exploit the individual as a consumer of goods. This perspective influences many parts of the world. It easily isolates people, fosters a sense of loneliness, and echoes postmodern approaches to life that tend to work against widely shared narratives of community meaning. Links with the dead, by contrast, foster a narrative sense of shared identity. Accordingly, my disagreement emerges from the anthropological idea of dividual or complex personhood that stresses the bonds between people and the way in which each of us is made up of the many relationships in and through which we live. Dividual personhood provides a firm theoretical approach to the "continuing bonds" theories of grief that otherwise lack a theoretical foundation (Douglas Davies, "Dividual identity in grief theories, palliative and bereavement care," *Palliative Care and Social Practice*, 2020. Vol. 14: 1–12, doi 10.1177/2632352420921867). Dividuality also fosters a fruitful approach to dreams and moments of "resemblance."

Dreams, narrative, memory, and digital death

When, for example, I dream about my dead mother or father, what is happening? In the history of religions, some would speak of the dead coming to visit the living, but I want to think more in terms of their presence as an ongoing constituent part of my own personhood. My prior life experience of and with those parents has generated an internal resource of images and emotional tones, providing part of the symbolic knowledge embedded in my own sense of personhood, they are part of my "memory."

My memory is itself a most dynamic and complex phenomenon that can, for example, be thought of as a form of narrative created as a dynamic foundation of and for my life, and for my engaging with the dead. The narrative nature of human beings is profoundly important in general (Angus Fletcher, *Wonderworks: Literary Invention and*

the Science of Stories [Swift Press, 2021]) and especially in relation to the dead. Funeral rites serve to relocate the dead in the ongoing story of a group and mark their movement to formal ancestral settings. The dramatic rise of photography, visual and audio recordings all create new forms of "memory," and it's already the case that artificial intelligence is providing avatar representations of the dead who can be made to "appear" as living agents capable of limited forms of conversation with the living. Digital ancestors can now enliven narratives of relationship, as increasing studies of Digital Death make clear (D. R. Christensen and J. Sumiala, "Digital Death: Transforming Rituals, History and the Afterlife," *Social Sciences* 13, No. 7:346, 2024, https://doi.org/10.2290/socsci13070346). In my contribution to Christensen and Sumiala's edited collection of research drawn from our shared Digital Death Project (Douglas Davies, "Afterword: Play, Personhood, and Digital Mortality"), I pinpointed the case of the deceased teenager Carlo Acutis who is on the path to becoming a "Saint of the Internet" in the Catholic Church. His curated body, visible in constant live streaming from a church in Assisi, offers an excellent example of traditional Catholic piety focused on the embodiment of holy people, and of the contemporary use of the internet in linking the living and the dead.

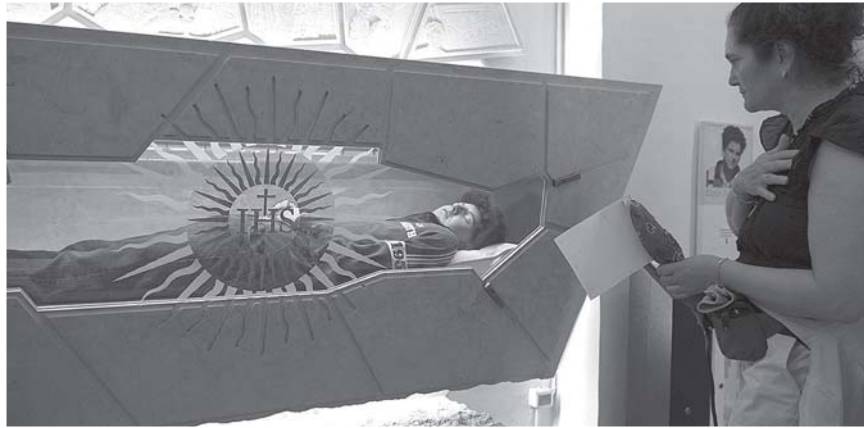
Photo: Reuters / AFLO

A woman at the tomb of Carlo Acutis, who died of leukemia in 2006 aged 15, on May 26, 2024, in the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Assisi, Italy. Pope Francis has cleared the way for Acutis to be the first saint of the millennial generation.

Here, perhaps, digital capabilities resemble dreams, albeit with a greater degree of conscious motivation. Still, the "unconscious" triggering of dreams that our brains produce of their own accord, free from any digital preparation, can assist the living. Research indicates that—especially in moments of pressure, crisis, or even joy—some who approach their death speak of ancestors or other figures coming to visit them to offer comfort and hope (Allan Kellehear, *Visitors at the End of Life* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2020]). Dreams form one relationship with the dead, even though many modern societies do not know what to do with such experiences and marginalize them, perhaps because of an excess of individualism that alienates the mutual mental presence of our kin.

And what of family resemblances? It is interesting that the very phrase "family resemblance" has been used by some philosophers to speak of the similarity between ideas, and it is a well-known idea in ordinary life when a child is said to resemble his or her kin. But resemblance has also been pointed out as something that you and I may experience when we see in ourselves something that reminds us of our dead parents. We develop a certain aspect of appearance or of saying certain things that immediately link us with them.

One interesting aspect of resemblance developed in Tibetan Buddhist culture concerns the re-birth of a dead Lama, notably the Dalai Lama, under the nature of a compassionate consciousness. On a broader scale, perhaps, there are many who sense a relationship with a former teacher and know how shared ideas, teachings, and practices live on in their own life. I discussed this in "Mourning Academic Mentors and Mentees" in *The Meaning of Mourning: Perspectives on Death, Loss, and Grief* (Mikolaj Slawkowski-Rode, ed. [Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, 2020], pp. 149–170). It was remarkable to find that the present Dalai Lama had read this book and expressed its value to the publishers, speaking of the death of one who had cared for him since childhood and at whose death, he said, "I felt I'd lost the rock I'd been leaning on. Then it occurred to me that instead of spending time in sadness it would be better trying to fulfil his wishes with enthusiasm and determination" (December 16, 2022. Personal communication from the editor).

Conclusion

That is a good point to conclude this effort to expand our approach through ideas of personhood and identity in some unfamiliar ways. Rituals change at the public and cultural level, just as individual awareness changes over time. In the above, I have been aware of my lack of expert knowledge on the complexity of Buddhist approaches to personhood, consciousness, and ritual practice, but I hope that at least some of my reflections may prove of shared interest. ❑

Acknowledgements

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FEATURES

Ritual and Resiliency in the Unprecedented Times of the COVID Pandemic

by Natasha L. Mikles

The period of COVID-19 will hopefully be a lesson on the important role funerary and other death rituals have in healing.

Grief and death are fundamental to being human. Based on archaeological evidence, we know our early hominid ancestors were practicing burials for the dead as early as 120,000 years ago. While the details of the rituals surrounding these burials remain unknown to us, the careful placement of the bodies and the inclusion of grave items underscore a communal expression of grief over a member's passing.

From our earliest ancestors through today, therefore, funerary rituals have remained a central element to our mourning. However, COVID-19 fundamentally disrupted our grief rituals. During the pandemic, our time was measured not just in hours and days, but in the ever-increasing death counts that scrolled across the bottom of news screens. To date, over 7 million people have died from the novel coronavirus. According to a study published in *The Lancet*, global life expectancy fell by 1.6 years between 2019 and 2020 and remains depressed today. Across the world, funeral homes, cemeteries, and crematoriums became overwhelmed trying to care for the influx of the dead, leading to the widespread deployment of national disaster preparations, including refrigerated trucks for storing bodies, emergency guardsmen, and disaster-relief medical staff.

But this confrontation with death was not the only trauma faced during the pandemic. COVID-19 halted the funerary rituals that have been central to human grief for hundreds of thousands of years—victims to the public health measures many governments put in place to prevent further infection. While our funerary rituals have become more diverse in recent years, gathering together with friends and family to honor and remember the departed remains a central component of virtually all rituals surrounding death. But during the pandemic, in many cases, those grieving their dead loved ones were unable to gather together and mourn. Families and friends of the departed lost the opportunity to collectively express their grief and heal from their loss.

The fundamental need for grief and funerary rituals—and the trauma caused by their absence—transcended religious boundaries. As a scholar of religious rituals surrounding death, I began interviewing Americans during the pandemic about their experiences of grieving. The United States remains one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world, and the people I spoke with reflected that diversity. I interviewed Indian-American Sikhs, Native American Christians, Egyptian and Pakistani-American Muslims, Texan Jews, African-American veterans, Catholic widowers mourning Jewish wives, Chinese immigrant Buddhists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Bahá'í community organizers, Episcopal bishops, Chinese-American Evangelicals, Hindu meditation leaders, Parsi Zoroastrian ritual specialists, and a whole host of individuals expressing other religious and ethnic identities. Virtually everyone I spoke with agreed that the experience of funerary rites during the pandemic was unfulfilling. If turning to religious rituals in the face of death transcends religious differences, so too did the experience of unfulfilled grief when those rituals could not be performed.

The COVID-19 period, therefore, served as an important case study in thinking about what makes rituals successful. At a time when those grieving a COVID death felt that the traditional funerary ceremonies from their religious traditions no longer worked, many tried to innovate and create their own rituals. But without the widespread recognition of a larger community and that community's public acknowledgment of their pain, such rituals often proved ineffective. It was only when such innovation was combined with the support of a larger community that new grieving rituals became effective for combatting grief. In considering this insight, I will highlight the voices from my conversations below to explore the experience of grief during the pandemic. These words from the traumatic COVID-19 period remain powerful beacons of human emotion in a time of crisis.

The Failure of COVID Funerals

Virtually everyone I spoke with described the COVID-period funerary rituals as

Natasha L. Mikles is an assistant professor at Texas State University, where she teaches courses in the Religious Studies program on Buddhism, Chinese Religions, and comparative ideas of hell and death. Her most recent book, Shattered Grief: How the Pandemic Transformed the Spirituality of Death in America *(Columbia University Press, 2024) examines the diverse ways that COVID-19 changed how Americans approach, understand, and mourn death. Her current research project examines the important role the Tibetan Gesar epic and other popular narratives play in Buddhist doctrinal thinking and identity.*

unfulfilling. Everyone has an idea about how a funeral is going to progress, but when churches and temples were closed during the pandemic and gathering sizes limited to ten or fewer, the bereaved were forced to organize funerals for loved ones that did not resemble the ones they had imagined. A pastor at an American Baptist Church in Houston, Texas explained that many of his parishioners were unsatisfied. "*You have this expectation for what a service should be and who should be there because you have been going to funerals your whole life. But the rhythm of grieving was disrupted and so many of the families I worked with felt that. You expect your loved one's funeral to look a certain way; you expect sympathy and comfort to look a certain way, and it just doesn't.*"

This particular insight was reflected in my interview with Yoon Tae,* a Korean American man who had to organize his father's funeral after the latter's death from COVID-19. He described looking out onto the small crowd gathered there and feeling as if he had let his father down: "*We had to limit attendance for everyone's health and safety. When I got up to give the eulogy, it was really heartbreaking. I was able to look out at this small gathering of people and know that it would have been a packed room if it weren't for COVID. I felt like my father deserved better.*" Indeed, for many of those who lost loved ones during COVID-19, this disconnect made the virtual funeral feel unreal. Another bereaved individual explained to me, "*I knew my grandmother would pass away sometime, but I always imagined I would be there; I never imagined I would be watching it virtually on Facebook. It felt like a parody of a funeral.*"

Beyond the fact that our grieving and gathering looked different, important religious aspects of the rituals were often unable to be performed during the COVID period. Sabila is a Pakistani American woman living in New Jersey. She described how the influx of dead in her area made it impossible to follow the Muslim practice of quick burials: "*In the Muslim tradition, we're supposed to bury our dead right away, but the funeral homes were so crowded in April 2020 that we were told it would be at least two weeks until they could bury my father. For us, this was simply another trauma.*" While a cousin was eventually able to find a Muslim organization able to take care of her father's body, it was almost an hour away and family members were not allowed to attend the burial. Sabila described watching her father's ceremony virtually on her computer as a "*horror for our family*" and stated that she might never feel whole again. Sabila's pain was echoed in my conversation with Julia, a Filipino American Catholic woman mourning the death of her younger brother John:

> *The worst part of the funeral—I guess there were so many worst parts of it—but the worst part I am thinking of right now is that we can usually stand close by when they lower the casket into the ground. However, because of COVID restrictions, we had to stand more than ten feet away. I just remember my mom crying out "Bye, John! Bye, John!" As they lowered the casket into the ground from so far away. He was developmentally challenged, so we had been next to him for every moment of his life—except this one; it was a crushing blow.*

Julia and Sabila's experiences speak to the ways in which the alienation from traditional religious rituals in a time of crisis further traumatized those grieving a COVID-19 death.

Invented Rituals in a Disinterested Nation

While many individuals were unable to perform fulfilling grieving rituals during the COVID-19 period, the need for such rituals did not go away, nor did human ingenuity. Reflecting this fundamental need for ritual, some people I spoke with tried to invent new grief rituals when they were unable to perform traditional ones. Amanda, an Apache Indian woman who identifies as Christian, lost her mother to COVID-19 in January 2021. She explained that she was prohibited from performing certain important religious rituals expected within Apache culture due to COVID-19 restrictions:

> *In my Apache Indian culture, you are supposed to mourn by cutting your arms and hair with an ancestral knife. The blood flowing down is meant to symbolize your loss and grief and how*

important this person was to you. I spoke with my elders and they said I shouldn't do that unless I was living on the reservation [and surrounded by my larger tribal community], as people might misunderstand it and react to it poorly. What I ended up doing was getting a very large tattoo; if I can't cut myself, I can at least bleed somewhere else. It stretches across my shoulder. But it doesn't really feel like enough; it doesn't atone.

When unable to join with her cultural community, Amanda attempted to create a novel grieving ritual. Despite these efforts, however, this invented ritual proved ineffective in ameliorating her grief.

Amanda's experience reveals what is lost when those surrounding a loved one do not share or otherwise ignore the grief of the bereaved. It is common to imagine that ritual is used to express an internal feeling and, therefore, inventing a ritual for oneself functions in ways similar to performing a more traditional ritual. However, scholars of ritual like Adam Seligman, Catherine M. Bell, and others highlight ritual as activity, which actually *shapes* feeling itself through its performance as part of a larger community. One's invented ritual, therefore, requires the scaffolding of community involvement to nurture feeling and create a community-recognized identity as a mourner.

If one is unable to perform a ritual with wider community support and acknowledgment, one's grief remains unabated. Reverend Rich Andre, who at the time of our conversation was associate pastor at St. Austin Catholic Church in Austin, Texas, hypothesized that it was a lack of community or national recognition that made rituals—even invented ones—ineffective during the pandemic:

We have not grieved as a nation; we have not acknowledged these deaths. This was made so much worse by the political situation, where there was a real effort to downplay how many people were suffering. It stopped us from having any type of public grieving. There is a really strong denial of what is happening and wanting to deal with it.

Without public recognition of their pain or acknowledgment of invented rituals, the period of COVID-19 left many Americans stuck in a transitional phase of grief—one where they were neither recognized as mourners nor absolved of the responsibility to be one. Human ingenuity could invent meaningful rituals, but these were only successful at ameliorating grief when performed in the context of a larger community.

Innovation in Crisis Supported by Communities

While the examples above demonstrate the difficulty of grieving during COVID-19, when religious traditions innovated with mechanisms to reflect the support of a larger community, fulfilling death rites could be created. In my interview with Venerable Jue Ji, who leads the Fo Guang Shan Xiang Yun Buddhist temple in Austin, Texas, she noted how she and the other nuns who lead the temple had to quickly make dramatic changes at the start of the pandemic:

Before COVID-19, we monastics would go to their house for chanting when a person was near death or right after they passed away. We would chant the Buddhist scriptures and the holy name of the Buddha so that they would get good karma and have a good rebirth. Normally, these moments are very touching, as the whole community can share their condolences. But during COVID, we couldn't do that when a community member passed away. I told the daughter of one person who died that I would do the chanting for her father via Zoom and give Dharma blessings directly to the dying person. Even though I was not there in person, he was able to put his palms together and receive the blessing at the end, which made his family feel better.

Acknowledging both that rituals must change in the COVID period, but also that creating connection with a larger community was necessary for a successful ritual, Ven. Jue Ji and the Buddhist nuns she leads were able to innovate and create funerary rituals that many in her community found compelling.

Ven. Jue Ji later described that the innovative rituals created for COVID could be used not only to connect the dying to their local Buddhist community but also to reflect transnational Buddhist support. When a loved one would die overseas, Buddhist family members would usually travel home to perform important death rituals; however, the pandemic paused such travel for several years. As a result, individuals had to work closely with Ven. Jue Ji during the COVID pandemic to arrange for such rituals while they remained in America:

The family members of people in our communities who live in Asian countries—Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore—many of them passed away from COVID. One gentleman just recently, his father and mother died of COVID in Beijing. He can't fly back to China, and was just so heartbroken. Even though he wasn't a close member of our [Buddhist] temple, we were able to do 49 days of chanting service for his parents in Beijing. We believe that no matter where they live in the world, the chanting service and reciting the Buddha's name will transfer the merit to the deceased.

The experience of Venerable Jue Ji and the Austin Fo Guang Shan Buddhist temple demonstrates that the new funerary rituals created during the pandemic

became most effective when they existed in a scaffolding of support from local religious and cultural communities.

Concluding Thoughts

The advent of COVID-19 was not the first time the world faced a deadly pandemic that disrupted our grieving rituals. Scholars like myself have seen comparisons in the 1918–1919 flu epidemic and the early years of the HIV/AIDS crisis, in which the traditional rituals surrounding death were also unable to proceed as anticipated. COVID-19 is just another pandemic in the long line of human struggles, and it will certainly not be the last pandemic we face. But, for many, the inability to perform traditional grieving rituals and the lack of community support in inventing new ones produced trauma that will have lasting effects worldwide. Martha B. Heymann, a certified grief coach and end-of-life doula based in Corpus Christi, Texas, works closely with those dying and their families to arrange a peaceful transition. In her estimation, "*I anticipate there's going to be a lot of trauma coming out of this [COVID] period—just the trauma of rituals and feelings and goodbyes not able to be fulfilled, not able to be spoken*."

The period of COVID-19 will hopefully be a lesson on the important role funerary and other death rituals have in healing—and the trauma that results when they cannot be adequately performed. If being human fundamentally involves the experience of death, grief, and loss, then religious communities have important roles in supporting rituals to address that pain, as well as in creating innovative responses to a novel environment. While such rituals will certainly continue to change and transform, they remain an important reminder of our humanity in the face of death. ❑

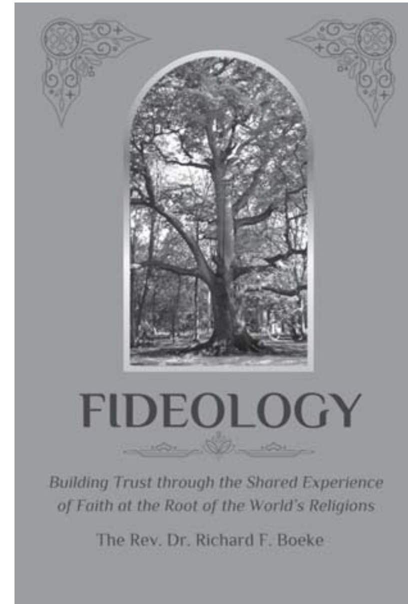
* The bereaved are referred to by their first name alone or not specifically named to respect the privacy of their grief.

New book by Rev. Dr. Richard F. Boeke illuminates the key to furthering interfaith discourse

Fideology: Building Trust through the Shared Experience of Faith at the Root of the World's Religions

The Rev. Dr. Richard F. Boeke, who was instrumental in facilitating the membership of Risso Kosei-kai in the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), has published a new book, *Fideology: Building Trust through the Shared Experience of Faith at the Root of the World's Religions*.

Fideology refers to "faith as trust." The word, coined by Dr. Boeke, is from the same Greek root as *fidelity*, *confidence*, and *bona fide*. Richard credits his graduate school teacher, Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and friend and mentor Huston Smith, along with many other faith leaders, with much of the inspiration for the book.



Fideology affirms that it is possible to build trust without the necessity of a common theology. Such trust-building between nations and religions is essential to overcoming the present clash of civilizations. According to Dr. Boeke, we need not just a "global ethic," but the practice of a global virtue: TRUST.

Dr. Boeke, a Unitarian Minister, has been a pioneer in the interfaith movement since the 1950s. Holding graduate degrees from both Yale Divinity School and Columbia University, and a Doctor of Divinity from Pacific School of Religion, he has studied with some of the leading theologians of the twentieth century, from Wilfred Cantwell Smith to Huston Smith—the latter with whom he enjoyed a long friendship. Fate smiled upon his life journey to sow seeds of peace and experience a sense of oneness, leading him to real-life encounters with everyone from Pope Pius XII to Jomo Kenyatta, Malcolm X, Erik Erickson, Charles Schultz, and Nancy Pelosi, as well as lasting friendships with Shinto priests, Muslim imams, and Sikhs. He was instrumental in furthering the mission of IARF, and received the 2018 IARF Distinguished Service Award.

The book is part personal faith journey, part autobiography, part resources for liturgical services, and part scholarly discourse. This compilation is a document of a remarkable life's work, weaving the personal, the political, and the spiritual into a tapestry of tribute to world peace. It captures critical moments in the discourse surrounding interfaith work over the last century.

The book is available as an e-book (Kindle) or paperback on Amazon, https://a.co/d/eSTw1Gr.
Copies of the paperback book may also be purchased from the author directly: Email: r.boeke16@gmail.com.

Interreligious Peacebuilding in Wartime: Finding Hope and Justice

by Mohammed Abu-Nimer

The Niwano Peace Foundation awarded the forty-first Niwano Peace Prize to Dr. Mohammed Abu-Nimer, in recognition of his lifelong commitment to peace and interfaith dialogue. The award ceremony took place on May 14, 2024, at the International House of Japan, Tokyo. The recipient's address follows.

Al Salam Alikum and Warm Greetings,

Dear honorable guests and our honorable host Dr. Hiroshi Niwano, the Chairperson of the Niwano Peace Foundation.

I am honored and humbled by the Niwano Peace Prize Committee selection and your endorsement of me as the 41st Niwano Peace Prize holder. It is with great honor and humility that I accept this prize for the year 2024.

By receiving this award, I am recognizing the thousands of peacemakers I have worked and collaborated with around the world, especially in Sri Lanka, Mindanao, Palestine, Nigeria, the Arab region, Europe and the United States, and many others where I worked on interreligious peacebuilding. This award is to recognize all our work together. On a personal level, Ilham Nasser, my life partner and my children, are the one who also deserve recognition for their patience and consistent support of my work and career.

"When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy."
—Jalaluddin Rumi*

I start my greetings to you all with Al Salam Alikum, "Peace Be Upon You," which is the most common greeting among Muslims and Arabic speakers in general. The term peace or Salam is used on a daily basis in Muslim prayers. Like many other cultures and societies, the term and desire to have peace is not strange to Muslims.

I have been raised with a family narrative of seeking peace and mediating conflicts. I lived in a very ethnically and religiously diverse community that coexisted peacefully, until certain governmental policies and internal sectarian dynamics tore it apart in 1978. During those events, I was a teenager, and I realized that if we do not understand and respect our differences, we will not be able to celebrate our commonalities. I have carried this lesson with me since then, and for the past 40 years of my work.

The ethos of the Niwano Peace Prize—supporting peace through interreligious dialogue and cooperation—is a core part of my personal and professional commitment for the past 40 years. Having worked in many violent conflict areas, I have witnessed the destruction that wars can bring on the lives of innocent civilians and on our environment. Establishing a path for peace and justice through faith is certainly a challenging mission that not many people are willing to take. However, in our current global reality, supporting this through interfaith dialogue is much needed to counter the consistent manipulation of religious identity and symbols by certain politicians and religious actors to justify wars and violence against the "other."

I believe that supporting narratives and discourses of peace and justice through interfaith peacebuilding should be an integral part of the mission of politicians, religious leaders, and institutions involved in peacebuilding. Such a mission can effectively confront the weaponization of religious identities, which has caused a great deal of suffering among humans throughout history, and unfortunately this continues today.

Across many conflict situations around the globe, we face similar dynamics, in which the majority of people are caught in a cycle of violence that perpetuates injustice and deprives them and others of the basic rights of freedom and security. Spirituality and interfaith solidarity have offered many peacemakers a path to break away from the cycles of revenge and dehumanization of the other.

We (humans) are still struggling to learn from the wisdom of our great peacemakers, such as Martin Luther King Jr., the Dalai Lama, Mahatma Gandhi, and Abdul Ghaffar "Badshah" Khan, who adopted faith-based nonviolent and

Professor Mohammed Abu-Nimer delivers his address during the presentation ceremony on May 14, 2024, at the International House of Japan, Tokyo.

peacemaking philosophies and strategies. Yet here we are in 2024, failing to learn the basic lesson that militarization and weaponization will not solve deep-rooted conflicts, such as the current Israeli-Palestinian and Ukraine-Russia wars. On the contrary, they are creating more religious, ethnic, racial, and national divides between people and leaving no winners.

Our way to further advance and promote genuine peace on all levels (global, national, local, and interpersonal) is by returning to the basic values of common humanity, equality, compassion, empathy, witnessing truth, deeper listening, and understanding each other's pain and needs. Integrating this basic principle of peacemaking in our education, media, art, and all other cultural and political agencies is a crucial step toward the prevention of further structural and social forms of violence. It is the cornerstone of building local, national, and global cultures of peace.

Although receiving this honor is a happy and joyful occasion, and I much appreciate the acknowledgement and recognition of the Niwano Peace Foundation, I must speak up about the recent mass killing and genocidal campaign carried out by Israeli military and settler forces in Gaza and the West Bank. The Palestinian people have been subject to displacement and denial of the human right to live in freedom and dignity. The Israeli government, endorsed by the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, and several other governments, have used starvation to ethnically cleanse Palestinians from Gaza. The scale of destruction is unprecedented in this conflict and in many other conflicts around the world. The Israeli military has destroyed two-thirds of Gaza's homes, schools, and universities, which as a result have been declared uninhabitable. Over one thousand mosques have been destroyed. Even during Ramadan, Muslims in Gaza could not find places to worship or even food. The killing of thirty-two thousand people, of which two-thirds are women and children, with over eighty thousand injured, has left everyone in the region wondering about the value of international law or international treaties—and even the roles and functions of the UN—if they are unable to provide basic protection for Palestinian civilians.

I am also aware of and stand against the killing of Israeli Jewish civilians on October 7 and I stand against holding any hostages, be they Palestinian, Israeli, or foreign.

This war has illustrated the influence and power of the military industries around the world, especially in Europe and the US. It also revealed the extent and scale of anti-Arab/Palestinian racism and the deep islamophobia in such societies and around the world. The hate speech and dehumanization against Palestinians and Muslims became more visible in the social media and traditional media that supported this genocidal war.

Yes, we live in a dark age and in a period where a genocide is being live-streamed like a reality show, except it does not have a happy ending for the Palestinian people of Gaza and elsewhere.

It is hard to sustain faith in humanity when you see starving children and airplanes dropping little food on the heads of Gazans as if the war were caused by an earthquake or tsunami.

In these past six months, like many other peacemakers who are committed to justice and nonviolent resistance, I have struggled and felt the pain, helplessness, and hopelessness of many people around the world who wanted to stop the war but could not persuade their politicians or influence decision makers to intervene. I have been in many organizations and communities that struggle to deal with the genocidal campaign on Gaza.

Despite this cruel reality, I still believe that we peacemakers ought to be extra active and invest more intensive efforts to stand up against the atrocities and hate speech that are carried in the name of self-defense, or to fulfill certain false messianic religious prophecies of destruction and expulsion.

Unfortunately not all those who define themselves as peacemakers speak up or stand up against oppression. They also join the silent and are in some cases complacent. Many interfaith dialogue and interreligious peacemaking initiatives affected by the conflict have become silent. Their silence is the toughest for me and many other colleagues who expected solidarity and human compassion instead of silence or the "neutrality" of the conflict resolvers.

In his poem, Rumi has also guided us to seek hope to escape and avoid darkness:

"If you are seeking, seek us with joy
For we live in the kingdom of joy.
Do not give your heart to anything else
But to the love of those who are clear joy,
Do not stray into the neighborhood of despair.
For there are hopes: they are real, they exist—
Do not go in the direction of darkness—
I tell you: suns exist."

Leading the first training series on capacity building for school counselors in Jordan for integrating forgiveness and reconciliation values and skills as part of their daily work with students and staff (2023). This is the result of twelve years of researching and capacity building by the Salam Institute in the Arab region to introduce forgiveness and reconciliation in school systems.

On the other hand, this conflict has also brought hope and a spirit of resilience to many interreligious peacemakers who have appreciated and taken part in the global solidarity for justice for Palestine. Globally, millions of people have spoken up and firmly stood and protested in the streets every week. Also, courageous people of faith and their constituencies have advocated for justice and an immediate ceasefire. Social media outlets have transmitted billions of messages and images of solidarity. We've seen human creativity producing words and images in support of humanity.

This wave of creative protest and solidarity has renewed my belief in humanity and in our capacity to reiterate our faith and beliefs to restore our common humanity. No matter how small our actions are, their cumulative effect is significant in the lives of those who are in need of our assistance and sympathy. I saw a simple drawing calling for a ceasefire by a young American artist being circulated among Palestinians and their solidarity movement.

The hope for peace, freedom and dignity for Palestinians and all indigenous people, and all human beings who feel oppression and injustice was rekindled by the interfaith and interreligious agencies who have stood their ground in the past six months. So I felt that I must recognize them in this award ceremony.

I have been working on interreligious peacebuilding with five principles that I would like to reiterate here. They have helped me and others in sustaining our energy for peace during these hard times:

1. Recognizing and celebrating the beauty of human diversity
2. Bringing the heart into the process of building peace and solving conflicts
3. Standing for the marginalized and voiceless anywhere and everywhere
4. Promoting the art of imagining peace in the darkest moments
5. Making space in our work for spirituality and faith to do their magic in unlocking the poisoned hearts

Finally, allow me to again acknowledge that the commitment of the Niwano Peace Foundation in supporting peace work around the world and insisting on peaceful means in achieving our visions and needs is a source of hope and encouragement, too. I am grateful for your recognition and support. It inspires me to further continue and invest in supporting peacebuilding within and across religious and national divides.

Allow me to finish with a poem by the Sufi master Ibn Arabi about the beauty of religious diversity:

A garden amidst fires!
My heart has become receptive of every form:
it is a pasture for gazelles, a monastery for Christian monks,
a temple for idols, the Ka'bah of the pilgrim,
the tables of the Torah, and the book of the Qur'an.
I follow the religion of love. Wherever its camel mounts turn,
that is my religion and my faith.

Al Salam Alikum
Sincerely

Prof. Mohammed Abu-Nimer,
Professor and Chair of Said Abdul Aziz for Peace and Conflict Resolution,
American University & Salam Institute for Peace and Justice, President ❑

* Coleman Barks' translations, *The Essential Rumi, The Book of Love, and The Big Red Book.*

What Is the Place of Emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) in Rissho Kosei-kai Buddhism? Part One: Emptiness and the Lotus Sutra

by Dominick Scarangello

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The Lotus Sutra tells us that the emptiness of things is precisely why there is the prospect of universal buddhahood—the teaching of the One Vehicle that all beings have the capacity to become buddhas.

I. Introduction

One of the questions about Rissho Kosei-kai's Buddhism I've often been asked is the place of emptiness in its teachings and practice. "Emptiness," or *śūnyatā* in Sanskrit, is a concept that is often encountered in Buddhism, particularly those traditions of Tibet, Northeast Asia, and Vietnam. "Realizing" or "awakening" to the "emptiness" of all things is said to be a critical point on the path to buddhahood, especially in the Perfection of Wisdom family of Buddhist sutras and their commentaries. Many people encounter the concept of emptiness in the Heart Sutra, perhaps the most famous and well-known Buddhist text, which declares the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara's awakening to be the "emptiness" of the constituents that make up the human being, and furthermore that "Form is itself emptiness; emptiness is itself form." The sutra tells us that this awakening frees one from all suffering and distress. The importance of realizing emptiness on the Buddhist path is also reinforced in popular types of Buddhist meditation, in which ascertaining the emptiness of self and other, or "nonduality," is taught to be the key to freeing oneself from anxiety and worry and improving the quality of one's life by severing attachments and obsessions. Emptiness is the reality of things in our world, and discerning this would seem to be an important (if not primary) goal of Buddhist practice.

People who explore Rissho Kosei-kai Buddhism discover, often to their surprise, that emptiness is not a primary topic in Rissho Kosei-kai teachings, and that realizing emptiness doesn't seem to have the same priority in practice as it does in other types of Buddhism they have experienced. Given what they may have learned from other sources about Buddhism or studied with other Buddhist groups, this contrast can be puzzling, and prompts the question "Where is emptiness in Rissho Kosei-kai?" This is a question that will require some consideration to answer. First, since Rissho Kosei-kai's teachings and practices reflect the strong influence of the Lotus Sutra, understanding the place of emptiness in Rissho Kosei-kai teachings and practices should begin with apprehending the role of emptiness in the Lotus Sutra, which I think is sorely misunderstood. Although the text offers no explanations or philosophical exegeses of emptiness, emptiness of all things is an integral but hidden element of what the text teaches, most notably the notion of universal buddhahood as the "One Vehicle" in the first half of the sutra, and the "eternal life" of the Buddha in the second half of the sutra.

Realizing emptiness is a latent component within both of the spiritual insights that the sutra teaches people to attain: recognizing the potential to become a buddha within oneself and others, and fathoming the eternal life of the Buddha—realizing all phenomena as the omnipresence of all-pervading truth. To use a metaphor, emptiness is "under the hood," like the engine of a car, which is not visible from the outside but nevertheless the driving force of the automobile. This is certainly an audacious claim, but the Lotus Sutra is nothing less than a bold religious text. Once we understand the role of emptiness in the Lotus Sutra, we'll be in a much better position to discuss the place of realizing emptiness in Rissho Kosei-kai teachings and practices.

First, however, we'll have to gain a sense of just exactly what this strange Buddhist notion of "emptiness" means. Accordingly, I will explore the question of the place of emptiness in Rissho

Kosei-kai Buddhism over several installments of this column. This time, I will consider what "emptiness" means in Buddhism and look at the role of emptiness in the first half of the Lotus Sutra, with particular attention to its concept of the "One Vehicle"—the potential of all sentient beings to become buddhas. Next time, we'll look at the place of emptiness in the latter half of the Lotus Sutra, and then in the third installment, we'll explore the specific role of emptiness in the framework of Rissho Kosei-kai teachings and practice.

II. What Is "Emptiness"?

What is "emptiness"? Now, this is a huge question! Because of the diversity of Buddhism, "emptiness" has been understood in many different ways, and we could spend the rest of the essay considering this question alone. I will take the most basic approach, looking at emptiness in the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras, where it is an important focus, and the related Mādhyamaka philosophical school, which synthesized the concept of emptiness in the Perfection of Wisdom sutras and greatly influenced how Buddhists understood emptiness. And finally, we'll consider a more contemporary take from the late Thich Nhat Hanh.

Emptiness, or *śūnyatā* in Sanskrit, is most closely associated with Mahāyāna Buddhism, but the origins of the concept go back to the earliest layers of the Buddhist tradition. The word "empty" (*śūnya*) may have derived from the root *śvi*, which means "to swell," coming to mean "empty" because something that swells is thought to be hollow inside, and India mathematicians used the word *śūnya* to indicate the concept of zero (Nagao 1991, 209). In the early layers of Pali scriptures the notion that something is "empty" appears in discussions of the lack of an independent and inherently existing self in things, including within the five aggregates—the constituents that make up the living being. In the *Mahasuññata Sutta*, in the collection of the Middle Length Discourses, the Buddha teaches "internal emptiness," the emptiness of the sense faculties, "external emptiness," the emptiness of the objects of the sense faculties, and the emptiness of both—the emptiness, or absence of an inherent, independently existing self, of both the subject and the object. "Abiding in emptiness" is to live in a state without grasping the sense of inherent existence within oneself or the external world (Sakabe 1974, 364–65; for the text of this sutra see Bhikku Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi 1995, 971–78).

In Mahāyāna texts, especially the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, which began circulating in the first century BCE, emptiness becomes a primary concern of doctrine and practice. Emptiness in the Perfection of Wisdom is far more thoroughgoing, negating the notion of fixed essences in any phenomenon. While earlier Buddhism saw the person or thing as devoid of independent, inherent existence, Buddhists held that the most minute components of existence, a group of seventy-five dharmas, or "elements," had intrinsic, unique natures, or *svabhāva*. These Buddhist "elements" included phenomena that we normally consider emotions or experiences, such as anger or faith. The Perfection of Wisdom sutras thoroughly reject this notion, holding that everything, all the way down, is "empty," changeable, and ephemeral, and emphasize the relativity and relationality of conceptions and views as well. These sutras provide a series of similes and metaphors for the emptiness of things, saying that all phenomena exist like dreams, mirages, space, reflections in water, echoes, shadows, dew drops, bubbles, lighting, and so forth (Gethin 1998, 237). What the Wisdom sutras also do is to incorporate this realization into the Buddhist path in a new way. Seeing the emptiness of things is the perfection of wisdom—the last of six practices that bodhisattvas cultivate—and this realization also facilitates the bodhisattva's ability to compassionately act in the world freely and without the obstructions of attachments or conceptionality. Thus, for Mahāyāna the realization of emptiness becomes a crucial turning point on the Buddhist path, and in Mahāyāna forms of *vipaśyanā*, or analytical meditation, the goal for the practitioners is the realization of emptiness.

The Buddhist exegete Nāgārjuna (approx. 2nd century CE) and his later followers in the Mādhyamaka ("middle way") Buddhist philosophical school synthesized the ideas of the Perfection of Wisdom literature into a coherent system of thought that strongly influenced later Buddhists. Nāgārjuna clarified emptiness as the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination—that anything arisen from causes and conditions was "empty," and thus absent any inherent independent existence or nature, a middle way between the extremes of "eternalism," on the one hand, and "annihilationism" on the other (ibid., 237). But since any view is relative and never final, Nāgārjuna even applied the concept of emptiness to itself, arguing that emptiness was not a thing or an existent, and despite emptiness being the truth of the way things exist, he avoided reifying emptiness into an Absolute (ibid., 239–40).

Notwithstanding the Mādhyamaka's reticence to reify emptiness, according to Nagao, the negation of emptiness also implies an affirmation—the fact that seeing emptiness is seeing the reality of things. He notes that when the sutras discuss emptiness, they often use paradoxical and absurd expressions that contain both negations and affirmations, often first with the presentation of a negation, followed by the negation of the negation. He gives the example of a statement that appears in the sutras: "A bodhisattva is not a

bodhisattva and that is why there is a bodhisattva." The first half of the sentence is the negation of emptiness, but the second is an affirmation indicating that emptiness, just as it is, is being. This implied affirmation, rejected or often denied in Mādhyamaka's systemization of the teachings, was developed by the Yogācāra, or "Consciousness Only" school of Buddhist philosophy, who saw the Mādhyamaka approach as an overnegation. Nagao observes that this group equated emptiness with various notions of an Absolute, including "suchness" (*tathatā*), the "limit of reality" (*bhūta-koṭi*), ultimate truth (*paramārtha*), and dharma realm, or "dharma element" (*dharma-dhātu*) (Nagao 1991, 215–16). However, when discussing Buddhism in East Asia, it should be noted that understandings of emptiness were often influenced by the *Da Zhidu lun* (Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom), which despite being in the Mādhyamaka tradition, uses many of these same affirmative terms for the Absolute, and does not hold to the same uncompromising avoidance of positive statements and affirmative language to talk about ultimate reality. Attributed to Nāgārjuna, some scholars hold that it may be a partial composition of the Lotus Sutra translator Kumarajiva (344–409/413).

Since the concept of buddha nature plays a central role in Rissho Kosei-kai teachings and practice, we should take a moment to consider the relationship of emptiness to buddha nature. This has been a much-debated issue within Buddhism, even up to the present day. The concept of buddha nature has provided a great challenge to Buddhist exegetes, especially those that emphasize the primacy of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras or take the Mādhyamaka perspective, because the sutras that specifically teach buddha nature often describe it as concrete and inherent, or even as a fully awakened buddha within living beings. One of the most famous sutras that teaches buddha nature—the Mahāyāna version of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, famous for declaring that "All beings without exception possess buddha nature"—describes buddha nature as ever abiding, pure, truly existent, virtuous, discernable, true, and affirmable (Tagami 2015, 82). It also describes buddha nature as the true self. If so, the concept of buddha nature would seem to contradict dependent origination and run counter to the thoroughgoing notion of emptiness held by the Mādhyamaka, in which emptiness even negates itself as the "emptiness of emptiness." However, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* also paradoxically indicates that buddha nature is dependent origination by identifying it with the twelve links of dependent origination (twelve causes and conditions) and the wisdom to which its contemplation gives rise:

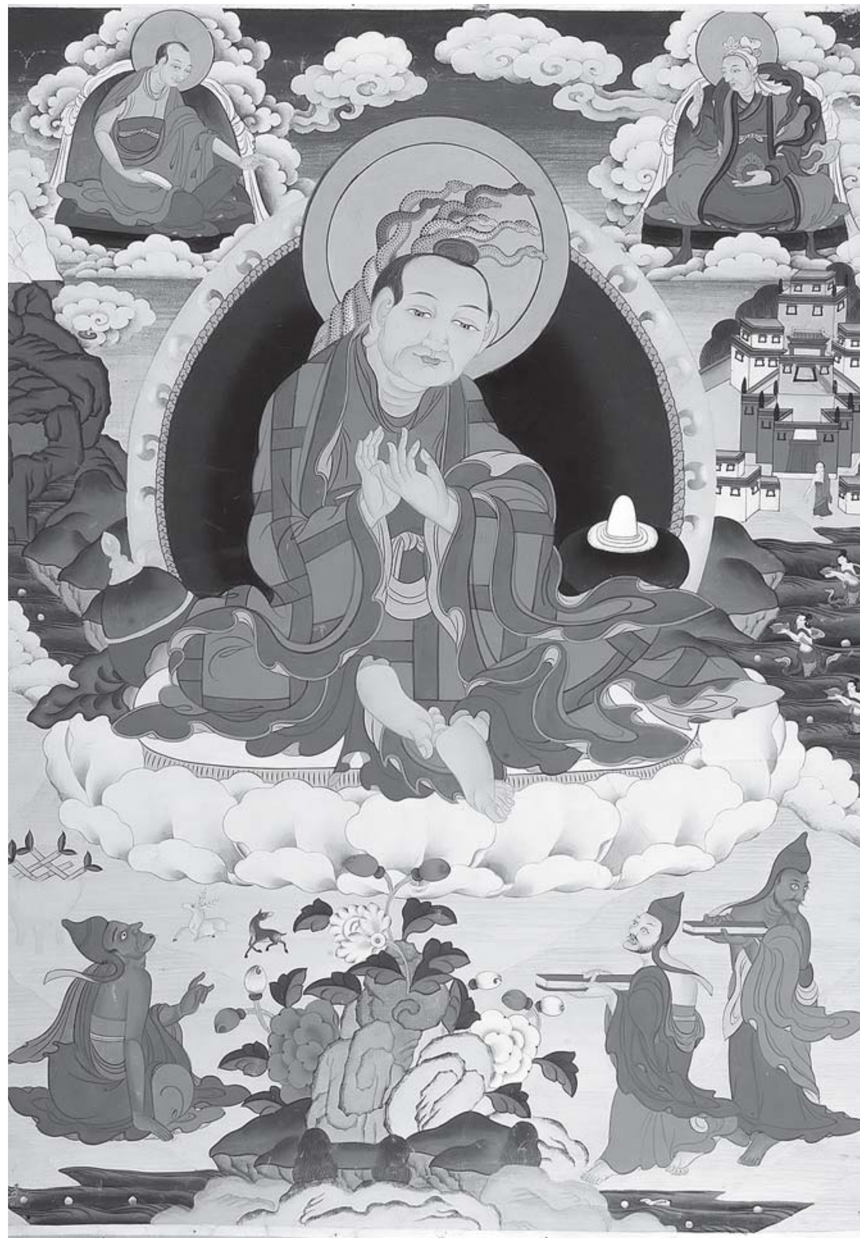
Photo: ALBUM / AFLO

Nagarjuna. *Nineteenth century. The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia.*

> And furthermore, my good children, there are two types of views that sentient beings give rise to: the first is

the view of permanence, and the second is the view of annihilation. These two views are not called the Middle Way. The Middle Way is neither permanence nor annihilation. Neither permanence nor annihilation is the wisdom of observing the twelve links of dependent origination. This wisdom of observation is called the buddha nature. [. , ,] Good children, the wisdom that observes the twelve links of dependent origination is the seed of Supreme Perfect Awakening. For this reason, the twelve links of dependent origination are called buddha nature. (T12.374.524c–524a)

Passages like this, while still puzzling, provide the basis for reconciling buddha nature with emptiness. Over time Buddhist exegetes proposed various solutions, some of which understand emptiness in the case of buddha nature to be emptiness of defilement and delusion, but in some way not-empty of the qualities of a buddha. Other solutions took buddha nature to mean the luminous and pure character of consciousness itself—references to which, while infrequent, can be found in the early layers of Buddhist sources. Another perspective understands buddha nature as a way of talking about emptiness in a kataphatic way—articulating what can be positively said about the sacred using affirmative language, including metaphors and imagery. This is basically how it is understood in dGe lugs pa sect, led by the Dalai Lama (Williams 2009, 113). Another solution was to see buddha nature as the ultimate reality and true middle way that transcends but includes the provisional existence of phenomena in the moment with the ephemerality of its emptiness. We can think of this as the "negation of the negation" of emptiness, of which Nagao writes.

A contemporary understanding of emptiness that captures both the negation of emptiness and the possibility of grasping it affirmatively is that of the late Thich Nhat Hanh. For him, it is important to ascertain exactly what things are empty of. Phenomena is not "nothingness," "nonbeing," or "non-existence," but the absence of one specific thing: "empty of a separate self." That is to say, empty of a self separate from everything else in existence (Hanh, 30). Basing himself in causation and the principle of dependent origination, Thich Nhat Hanh explained that we exist through our relationality with every other thing—a kind of endless regression of causal relationships that constitute our existence. This is his concept of "interbeing." We "inter-are." And because we are empty of a separate self—which is to say, we have no separate independent existence—this means that we are "full of everything" (Hanh, 33). One exercise he used in order to get his students to realize this was by asking them to see what was within a leaf or piece of paper precisely because it was "empty":

> Everything—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat, and even consciousness—is in that sheet of paper. Everything coexists with it. (Hanh, the other shore, 29)

What the teaching of emptiness means is that no single substance is the basis of reality, but that reality is essentially relationality, and because everything exists relationally, nothing has a fixed identity or nature. This is how the leaf or piece of paper, in Thich Nhat Hanh's understanding, is "full" of everything: its existence is an entire cosmos of intersecting causes and conditions. Sometimes Thich Nhat Hanh referred to this as a thing's "ultimate dimension."

Thich Nhat Hanh's affirmative understanding of emptiness is a good jumping-off point for exploring the place of emptiness in the Lotus Sutra, to which we now turn.

III. Emptiness in the First Half of the Lotus Sutra

In the view of Gene Reeves, translator of what is perhaps the most popular English version of the Lotus Sutra, the Lotus Sutra is not much concerned with the concept of emptiness (Reeves 2010, 190). Certainly, in contrast to the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, we do not find any extended discourses on emptiness in the Lotus Sutra. In fact, we find what appears to be a criticism of preoccupation with emptiness. This admonition comes in the form of a self-criticism enunciated by the Buddha's disciple Shariputra in the beginning of chapter 3:

> "When the World-Honored One [Shakyamuni Buddha], knowing my mind,
> Uprooted my wrong ideas by expounding nirvana,
> I rid myself completely of distorted views
> And attained realization of the teaching of emptiness.
> In my innermost heart, I then told myself,
> 'I have attained extinguishment.'
> But I have now become aware
> That this is not true extinguishment."
> (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 86–87)

Shariputra was content with his realization of emptiness, which allowed him to see through his distorted views about reality and abandon them, but he wrongly assumed that this was "true extinguishment." In other words, the sutra is warning that realizing emptiness falls short of the ultimate goal of practice. To be clear, the text is recognizing that awakening to emptiness allows one to eliminate their "distorted views," that is to say, learned ideas and conceptions about the world that do not accord with its reality. Shariputra's fault was to assume that such a realization was the terminus of learning.

The Lotus Sutra's admonition to not mistake the realization of emptiness for the ultimate goal of practice appears again in chapter 4, in a similar self-criticism by the four great disciples Subhuti, Maha-Katyayana, Maha-Kashyapa, and Maha-Maudgalyayana.

> "We, the leaders of the sangha, are worn with years. Believing that we had already attained nirvana and that there was nowhere further for us to go, we did not go on to pursue Supreme Perfect Awakening. Since long ago, the World-Honored One has been teaching the Dharma, and all the while we have sat in our places, our bodies growing tired and inert, and our thoughts intent only upon emptiness, the absence of all attributes, and nonproduction." (Ibid., 121)

Here too, the disciples reproach themselves for stopping at the realization of emptiness and refraining from pushing further onward to a higher realization. The four specify in somewhat greater detail what they mistakenly took as the highest awakening: "the absence of attributes," and "nonproduction." The cognition of emptiness is a great leveler. Seen from the standpoint of emptiness, all things become as if the same; since they are all characterized by emptiness, their uniqueness and differentiation vanish. From the standpoint of emptiness, things are "nonproduced" because they don't come into existence *ex nihilo*, from nothing. All things arise from causes and conditions, and thus, instead of something coming into existence for the first time, any existence is better understood as a new combination or coming together of things. Nothing ever arises or extinguishes in an ultimate sense, but only changes form. We can think of this as something like the law of the conservation of mass in chemical reactions. Mass is neither created nor destroyed, as the materials in the reaction only change form.

These are critical passages of the Lotus Sutra, and we must read them carefully. They are not a rejection of the teaching of emptiness. The notion of emptiness as the way things exist is not being critiqued. What is being criticized is taking the realization of emptiness as the consummate awakening and the final goal of the path, and perhaps taking emptiness's partial negation of phenomena too broadly in a way that numbs one's ability to be sensitive to the suffering in the world and undermines one's aspirations to take proactive steps to eliminate suffering. If we explore the sutra carefully, we will discover that "emptiness" appears as many as twenty-seven times in Kumarajiva's translation of the Lotus Sutra, and in at least one place the text refers to emptiness as "ultimate reality," literally, the "true attribute" or characteristic of things, (Chn., *shixiang*; Jpn., *jissō* 実相; see Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 246). We can also find several passages in the text that urge us to practice in pursuit of the realization of emptiness. The text is very explicit in chapter 14, where it says that great bodhisattvas must perceive all things as emptiness (ibid., 246). In passages such as these, meditating on the emptiness of things is a way of seeing the equality or equanimity therein, overcoming attachments, and allowing the bodhisattva to engage deeply in the work of leading and helping others. Perhaps the most well-known example of the sutra's discussion of seeing the emptiness of all things is in chapter 10, which teaches that the practitioner of the Lotus Sutra must bring together compassion, forbearance, and the realization of the emptiness of all things (see Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 213).

While I would agree that the Lotus Sutra does not provide any philosophical discourses on emptiness, to say that the Lotus Sutra is unconcerned with emptiness is an overstatement. Emptiness is very much in the Lotus Sutra, but we just don't easily see it. In fact, I would argue that emptiness is very important for two of the Lotus Sutra's central teachings: the assertion of universal buddhahood known as the One Vehicle (or alternatively the One Buddha Vehicle) in chapter 2, and its declaration of the "eternal life" of the Buddha in chapter 16. Both of these teachings are predicated on the emptiness of all things. In the first case, universal buddhahood, or the One Vehicle, is the practical soteriological implication of emptiness. It is precisely because of the emptiness of all things that all beings possess the potential to become buddhas. Perhaps because we are accustomed to speaking of the "One Vehicle" and "buddha nature," we miss the fact that from the standpoint of the Lotus Sutra what we are talking about is emptiness, but in a positive, kataphatic way. But this would also seem to be a step beyond the realization of emptiness that the Buddha's shravaka disciples already had, because they could not perceive the potential for buddhahood in themselves or other people that emptiness entails.

Emptiness as the Universal Potential for Buddhahood.

Kumarajiva's translation of the Lotus Sutra, the *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華経, which became the basis for the Lotus Sutra tradition in East Asia now practiced by people around the world, tells us that the emptiness of things is precisely why there is the prospect of universal buddhahood—the teaching of the One Vehicle that all beings have the capacity to become buddhas. This critical statement comes near the end of chapter 2:

> "The buddhas, the most honored of beings,
> Know that since all things are ever without fixed nature,
> The seeds of buddhahood sprout from proper conditions.
> Therefore, they expound the One Vehicle." (Ibid., 77)

This is a very short and easily overlooked passage, but it has been crucial to Lotus Sutra traditions, long considered one of the sutra's most important portions. Here, the sutra speaks of emptiness as the absence of any fixed nature in things, literally "no nature" or *wuxing* 無性 in Chinese. "No-nature" is the assertion of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras and the Mādhyamaka that nothing has an inherent, fixed, or unchanging nature. Why? Because all things arise, exist, and change in dependence upon other things. In other words, their existence is relational, not substantial. For us sentient beings, this means that none of us is locked into any permanent state of the heart and mind or moral status. Who we are is not set in stone. And it is precisely because of this that we can change—that we can become buddhas (the teaching of the One Vehicle). This passage is critically important because even though the sutra insists repeatedly that all sentient beings can become buddhas, this is perhaps the only place where the sutra gives us any indication of *why* all people can become buddhas. The sutra appears to be saying that the cause of buddhahood is "no nature"—emptiness. In other words, if we talk about this capacity as "buddha nature," then the equation we arrive at is affirmative, paradoxical assertion that "no-nature" is "buddha nature"! And this is why, then, we can become buddhas given the proper conditions. In other words, becoming a buddha is the workings of dependent origination.

There is another reason that increases the importance of this passage that is also not readily apparent. In his translation, Kumarajiva, an expert in the Perfection of Wisdom sutras and Mādhyamaka thought, may have already reconciled the emptiness of phenomena and the affirmative assertions of buddha nature discourse for us. Let me explain: In some of the extant Sanskrit versions of the text, admittedly all centuries later than the root text that Kumarajiva translated (and which we do not have), this "non-nature of dharmas" reads literally as "the nature of dharmas is 'luminous' or 'radiant' (Skt., *prabhāsvara*)" (See Ueki 2008, 120–21). This is very much the kind of statement seen in the sutras that teach buddha nature and is rarely found in the Perfection of Wisdom literature, with the exception of the Eight-Thousand Line Perfection of Wisdom Sutra, where it is part of the explanation of the emptiness of the mind (Fujita 1988). Nevertheless, if Kumarajiva's root text read as above (we can't be entirely sure), then it means he understood this assertion of luminous purity common in buddha nature texts as emptiness, as I discussed above.

In any case, this passage in Kumarajiva's Lotus Sutra establishes the understanding that takes the universal capacity for buddhahood as a practical soteriological consequence of emptiness, and because of this, becoming a buddha is an issue of dependent origination—having the proper conditions. I think this is also consistent with the parables, metaphors, and analogies that follow, illustrating the teaching of the One Vehicle.

As Japanese scholar Kōtatsu Fujita explains:

> What could this kind of doctrinal thought (the Lotus Sutra's One Vehicle) possibly be based on? According to the general ideas of Mahayana Buddhism, it is none other than "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*). It must be said that only through the concept of the nondiscrimination of emptiness is it possible to both severely criticize and simultaneously encompass the teachings of the various schools of early Buddhism. (Fujita 1969, 396)

It is not the goal of the Lotus Sutra to present a rigorously systemized theory of emptiness, but instead essentially to expound emptiness as the One Vehicle. "It can be concluded that the One Vehicle is nothing other than the practical expression of the concept of emptiness" (ibid., 399). The One Vehicle is the pragmatic implication of "no nature"—in accord with dependent origination, we can become buddhas with the "proper conditions." "Proper conditions" suggests skillful means—the appropriate teachings and guidance from the Buddha, and of course our sincerely diligent practice. Given this, the reason why the Lotus Sutra spends so much time lauding skillful means, so much so that it confuses Shariputra in chapter 2, should become clear. Because the capacity for buddhahood is the absence of any fixed nature, attaining buddhahood is possible, but it is entirely dependent on the proper conditions—skillful means. Hence, in its early chapters, the sutra stresses the paramount importance of skillful means.

For this reason, when we rephrase the Lotus Sutra's One Vehicle and notion of all living beings as future buddhas with the term "buddha nature," what we are doing is realizing "no-nature" as "buddha nature." This may be a difficult paradox for people, because we usually think of buddha nature in a positive sense, as a presence of virtues rather than an absence, or, at the very least, of limitless potentiality. However, I think what the sutra does with its notion of the One Vehicle is see the absence of one thing—fixed nature—as the potentiality for everything else, which reminds us of Thich Nhat Hanh's understanding of emptiness. How can a "nothing" be a "something?" Try to think of it like this: potential implies an openness. A bumper crop starts with an empty field ready to accept seeds, and the utility of a cup is the void within it, which makes it able to receive and hold liquid. The usefulness of a sheet of paper comes from the fact that it is blank. We must never forget that "emptiness" is not "nothingness" but a specific kind of void: an absence of

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Universal Gateway, *chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra in 1257. A handscroll painting by the calligrapher Sugawara Mitsushige, active in the mid-thirteenth century.*

unchangeability, and conversely, this implies unlimited potentiality.

I think we can go further here. The absence of any fixed nature, of any inherent and independent existence, is because we come into existence through myriad causes and conditions. If we were to try to count all of these factors, it would prove impossible because ultimately every event and phenomenon in the universe plays a part in our existence—if not directly, then indirectly. Thus, as Thich Nhat Hanh explained, we are "full of" everything else in existence. Our existence is relational—"interbeing," as Hanh called it. Thus, emptiness means that we are the world. For these reasons I must disagree with Gene Reeves. Yes, the Lotus Sutra is not concerned with giving us any detailed discourses about emptiness, but the One Vehicle's assertion of universal buddhahood is fully predicated on and a practical soteriological consequence of the truth of emptiness. So is the critical importance of skillful means, of having the "proper conditions" to become buddhas.

The Lotus Sutra's Metaphors and Similes for the Realization of the One Vehicle—Dependent Origination at Work through the Proper Conditions

In the following chapters of the Lotus Sutra, "no nature-as-buddha nature" is portrayed in increasingly kataphatic terms, but for the most part, it follows the understanding of universal buddhahood established in chapter 2: that the fundamental potentiality we have is manifested through a process of the proper conditions, that is, attaining buddhahood is a function of dependent origination. In the parable of chapter 4, "Faith and Understanding," the potential is the poor son's ability to overcome his lack of self-confidence and grow in capacity and wisdom, which is likened to an aptitude inherited from one's parents. His self-doubt and low self-esteem are not immutable. The "proper conditions" are the rich man's (i.e., the Buddha's) skillful development of the poor man's potential by giving him progressively more challenging tasks and responsibilities, as well as showing him fatherly love and concern. The inherited capacity for buddhahood would seem to be a reified thing, but since this is asserted for all sentient beings, it is a consequence of life itself. In chapter 5, "The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs," the absence of fixed natures are the capacities for the various plants to grow and blossom. The "proper condition" is the great cloud (the Buddha) that provides nourishing and refreshing rainwater. The analogy in chapter 10, "Teachers of the Dharma," perhaps comes closest to reifying the potential for buddhahood—here as thirst-quenching subterranean waters that a parched inhabitant of a high plateau digs for. The proper conditions are the perseverance of the prospector as a metaphor for diligent practice, but also the way in which indications of the goal—the increasing moistness of the soil—encourage the man to dig ever deeper.

In chapter 8's Parable of the Gem in the Robe, a wealthy man slips a priceless precious gem into the hem of his drunk friend's robe. The gem is often interpreted as a metaphor for buddha nature, but here too, the sutra makes it clear that this capacity for awakening is a function of dependent origination, and nothing like the inherent, fully awakened buddha within the mind of the sentient being that we sometimes see described in buddha nature sutras. First, as the sutra explains through the voice of Ajnata-Kaundinya, the gem is not a physical thing, but actually their forgotten aspiration to become buddhas, which was planted within them by the Buddha, from whom they had received the teachings many lifetimes in

the past. The gem represents the "seeds of goodness" planted by the Buddha. In other words, the gem itself is actually the result of the proper conditions—skillful means—provided by the Buddha. And, now again in the present, it is the proper conditions—the assurance of buddhahood received from Shakyamuni Buddha—that cause them to rediscover this capacity for buddhahood. Second, the sutra oddly tells us that the drunk man is guided to exchange the gem for whatever he needs. He does not keep the gem. The value of the gem is not inherent but relational—its worth is only realized when he exchanges it for other things. Here too, the kataphatic discourse of the sutra is faithful to its explanation of the One Vehicle—that because living beings are without any fixed nature, the buddhas know they can attain buddahood if provided the proper conditions—skillful means. Therefore, they teach the One Vehicle.

IV. Emptiness and Buddha Nature

Let me close with a challenging thought: If perceiving the potential of oneself and others to become buddhas—that is, seeing the limitless capacity of oneself and others for transformation, growth, and self-perfection—is seeing the "everything else" that remains after negating the notion of any "fixed nature," then seeing buddha nature would essentially entail being aware of "emptiness." While it is well-known that the Lotus Sutra itself doesn't actually use the word "buddha nature," it has long been asserted that seeing this potentiality for buddhahood in others is the same as seeing "buddha nature." As the *Commentary on the Lotus Sutra*, perhaps the oldest extant commentary on the Lotus Sutra, describes, when in chapter 20 Bodhisattva Never Unworthy of Respect (also translated as "Never Disparaging") reveres everyone he meets as a future buddha, he is revering their buddha nature (Abbott 2013, 141). If this is so, and the capacity for buddhahood—buddha nature—is the consequence of no-fixed nature, then seeing buddha nature would include seeing "no-fixed nature"—in other words, the realization of emptiness would be, ipso facto, integral to awakening to buddha nature. The sutra itself provides indications of this interpretation when Shakyamuni Buddha gives assurances of buddhahood to his various disciples, beginning with Shariputra, after they have awakened to their capacity to become buddhas. I strongly suspect that the context for this pattern in the sutra were common explanations of the path of practice, which held that disciples receive detailed prophecies of buddhdahood from the Buddha upon reaching several milestones of practice, including realizing the emptiness of all things. Here in the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni's bestowal of assurances of buddhahood upon the disciples who awakened to the universal capacity for buddhahood suggests that realizing emptiness is part of, or, contained within the realization of the potential for buddhahood. But I think this would be no simple intellectual grasp or conceptual understanding of buddha nature, but a transformative insight. In the words of Shariputra: "For today I know that I am truly a child of the Buddha, born from the words of the Buddha and come to life through his Dharma. Indeed, I have attained my share of the Buddha Dharma" (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 85).

In following installments, we'll take a look at the second half of the Lotus Sutra and then proceed to consider the place of emptiness in the teaching and practices of Rissho Kosei-kai. ❑

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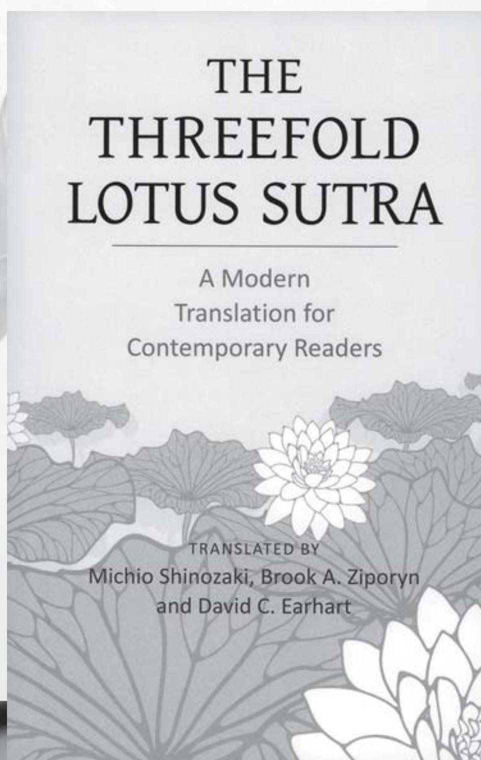

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