

# The Perfect Passage: Contemporary Buddhist Rites of Death

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## Introduction

The aim of my paper is to briefly introduce what Buddhists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Korea do and believe in, in terms of death-related matters. I will inquire into the structure and meaning of the Korean Buddhist rites of death. In this paper I shall work with the set of rituals performed on behalf of a layperson. I have divided the rituals into five temporal phases: i) near-death rites, ii) postmortem rites, iii) funeral rites, iv) transitional rites and v) memorial rites which I understand them as one complex *rite of passage* having the three phases: *separation*, *transition* and *reincorporation*.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will focus on the first four groups which cover the period of forty-nine days after death.

## A Brief History

The statement that Buddhists in the East Asia have been specialist in the death-related matters has become almost a cliché; yet it is a true and constantly revalidated statement. From a mere observation of religious life of Buddhists in today's Korea, we can see that death-related rites play a crucial role in the religious life of the laity.

In order to understand contemporary religious situation, we need to go back to the *Chosŏn* period. As the official ideology changed from Buddhism to Neo-Confucianism, most rituals, including the funeral and ancestral rites, were substituted by the Confucian *Chuja Karye* (朱子家禮, *Zhuxi's Family Rituals*). From the mid-*Chosŏn*, these rituals spread throughout the country among all classes of the society. The only domain uncovered by the Confucians and thus open for Buddhists was the afterlife.<sup>2</sup> It is not a coincidence that the belief in *Amitābha* and rebirth in his Pure Land gained popularity during this period. In the ritual sphere, the second half of *Chosŏn* era was marked by a development of 'guiding ceremonies' (遷度齋, *ch'ōndo chae*). Guiding ceremonies are believed to guide a spirit (靈駕, *yōngga*) of a deceased person from this world to a Pure Land or another 'good destination' and hence play a key role among the rites of death. The rise of the popularity of these ceremonies was reflected in systematization of Buddhist rites and as well as monastic dance and music, their important elements, in a form of several ritual manuals<sup>3</sup> in late *Chosŏn*.

The modernization of Korea and Japanese occupation brought new issues Korean Buddhists had to deal with, i.e. how to adapt to the new circumstances. In these days, among various reform

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<sup>1</sup> Here I follow van Gennep's classification: Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Chŏlseung Chin, "Pulgyo Ūirye Ūi Yōksa Wa Kujo [History and Structure of Buddhist Rituals]," *Hanguk Chonggyo Yōnggu Hoe Hoebo* 7, no. 1 (1996): 14–21.

<sup>3</sup> *Sōngmun sangūi ch'ō* 釋門喪儀抄 (1636), *Pōmeum chip* 梵音集 (1723), *Pōmūm chongbo* 梵音宗譜 (1748), *Chakpōp kwigam* 作法龜鑑 (1826).

proposals, also reformed collections of rituals appeared. One of the answers was the *Sōngmun Ŭibōm* (釋門儀範, *Rules for Buddhist Rituals*) compiled by An Chinho in 1935 which is today a standard for rituals among all the traditional Buddhist orders, namely *Chogye chong* and *T'aego chong* two biggest orders of contemporary Korean Buddhism and among their offsprings. This is an example of the inclusive and unifying character of Korean Buddhism. In terms of practice, beliefs and philosophy we see a single stream of different elements. Korean Buddhism did not produce a variety of schools or sects that would be based on different beliefs or practices. Hence we can, at least in the present, talk about Korean Buddhists rites of death in general without the need to deal with different practice among various schools and traditions. This is true for the ritual process as well. We are going to see that the rites consist of numerous elements. Despite superficial differences in actual ritual performance, the underlying structure and even the textual side of the rituals is identical for all schools or orders.

### The Framework

The rituals naturally work in the basic Buddhist cosmological setting expressed in the concept of six destinies (六道, *yukto*): hells, sphere of hungry ghosts, sphere of animals, sphere of human beings, sphere of *asuras* and heavens. The basic purpose of this ritual is to avoid the lower spheres of existence and assure the best rebirth possible or, in the best case, to realize the “nature of things”, achieve the Awakening (菩提, *pori*; skt. *Bodhi*) the ultimate goal of Buddhism and be never born again.

The basic framework of the rites is to be found already in the *abhidharmic* literature. Another important Buddhist concept manifested in the rituals is the ‘intermediate state’ (中有, *chungyu* or 中陰, *chungŭm*; skt. *antarābhava*) which takes place between the death (死有, *sayu*) and rebirth (生有, *saengyu*) which is followed by life (本有, *ponyu*). This concept of four states is summarized in *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* (俱舍論)<sup>4</sup> and is a common feature of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In other words, for Korean Buddhists there is a period of time between the moment of death and the moment of conception. According to *Abhidharmakośa*, when a person dies, he or she becomes an ‘intermediate being (中有之旅, *chungyu chi ryō*, skt. *gandharva*)’ which passes through the intermediate state for a certain period up to 49 days until it is reborn. In the rituals this intermediate being is identified with or referred to as *yōngga* (靈駕, spirit). This concept had been interwoven in various beliefs during the development of Buddhism in China. The intermediate state has been understood as a trial which the spirit has to undergo every seven days before the ten king-judges (十王, *siwang*) which is another

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<sup>4</sup> Vasubandhu. *Apidamo Jushe Lun* (阿毘達磨俱舍論) T29,198a-204b and Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* (Berkeley, Calif: Asian Humanities Press, 1988), 383–404.

important belief which is manifested in the rites.

Because the Awakening and *Nirvāṇa* is an ultimate goal and hence almost impossible to reach, and because we are in Mahāyana Buddhism, there are Buddhas and bodhisattvas ready to help. The central belief is the faith in the Pure Land of *Amitābha* (極樂, skt. *Sukhāvātī*). The most accented and visually presented goal of the ritual practices is the rebirth in the Pure Land of *Amitābha* (極樂往生, *kūngnak wangsang*).

## The Structure

Let us turn to the structure of the rituals itself. The structure I am going to introduce is an ideal procedure performed in a case of a lay believer of the *Chogye* order. Naturally, some segments can be omitted or simplified as dying is a process which does not follow human plans. However, I suggest that in such case the elements are not omitted from the structure, only remain unexpressed.

### i) Near-death rites

The series of rituals, which I suggest should be understood as stages of one ritual transition, begin with the preliminary stage, the death-bed practices. Buddhism stresses the importance of the state of consciousness at the moment of death (命終時, *myōngjong si*) because the last state of consciousness right before death determines the state of consciousness right after it.

If possible a monk is summoned to the death-bed to perform the rites. The rituals usually contain taking refuge in Three Jewels, chanting of the Heart sutra, lay ordination (授戒), sermon, reciting the name of the *Amitābha Buddha*, prayer for rebirth in the Western Paradise *Sukhāvātī* and reciting the four great vows. The first and the last play in most Buddhist rites the role of opening and closing formulae. During the rite a five-coloured cord is bound to an index finger of the dying person and the opposite end is connected to a hand of *Amitābha*, who is carved in a small altar. This symbolizes the divine helping power (加被, *kapi*) of *Amitābha* descending on the dying person. Bestowing the precepts (授戒, *sugye*) is supposed to direct the mind towards the Three Jewels. When the person dies, the body is supposed to be left undisturbed for one or two hours so the spirit can leave the body.

### ii) Postmortem rites

The moment of death is a beginning of a series of rites that correspond to the separation stage of the *passage*. The separation takes place at several levels: body-spirit, living-dead, family member-the deceased, family-mourners. The death of a person marks the beginning of a 49-day mourning period. Because the *yōngga* has departed the body, there is a set of rituals concerning the *yōngga* and a set of rituals dealing with the corpse.

The *yōngga* focused rituals begin with a setting up of an altar for the *Sidarim* (尸陀林) rite. The term *Sidarim* is a transliteration of Sanskrit *Śītavana* a place for exposing corpses i.e. cemetery. However, the meaning in Korean Buddhism is a ‘last sermon’ for the deceased. For this rite, an altar with banners, a tablet and a photograph along with offerings is set up. Unlike in Confucianism Buddhist tablet representing the deceased can be made without relationship to placing the corpse into a coffin. This rite is understood not only as a sending off the *yōngga* but also as a way transformation of the emotions of the mourners. Buddhists should rather be quiet during the rituals, as a loud crying and weeping may distract the *yōngga*, cause attachment in her and thus cause rebirth in bad conditions.

When the altar is set up, a worship of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is performed first. Then *Musang gye* (無常戒, “Precepts of Impermanence”), a gist of Buddhist teachings in a form of a chant is delivered to the *yōngga*. As the ‘intermediate state’ is a period very suitable for achieving awakening, hearing of the basic Buddhist teaching may awaken the *yōngga*, so she or he would be never reborn again. Then chanting of the *Amitābha sutra* or the *Diamond sutra* is performed.

Beside the *yōngga* oriented rites there is a set of rituals concerning the corpse: cleaning the body and face, shaving and dressing. This procedure practically follows the traditional form of *Chuja Karye*, however a Buddhist dimension is added to it. Each stage is accompanied with a short sermon in a form of chanting of phrases containing Buddha’s teaching. However, these sermons are aimed at the *yōngga*, not at the body. After that the dressed body is put in a coffin accompanied with chanting of the name of Amitābha. Hence we can see that the separation of the body and spirit, as manifested in the rites, is not that clear and that there is still a link between the corpse and the spirit. The moment of death is a beginning of a series of rites that correspond to the *separation stage* of the *passage*.

### iii) Funeral rites

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

Traditionally Buddhists favor cremation (火葬, *hwajang*) as the form of funeral (荼毘, *tabi*, skt. *jhāpeti*). The manuals of Buddhists rituals compiled during the *Chosŏn* era as well as those of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century contain detailed description of these rites in a pompous way. However, nowadays this form of cremation is performed only in case of important monks. In case of laity cremation is performed in crematoriums. There is a simplified form the ritual performed there.

The tablet with the name of the deceased represents the *yōngga* and is present during all rituals. After the funeral, on the same day, the tablet along with the picture is moved from to the main hall of the temple where the guiding rites will be held for the 49 days. The ritual has two parts, a worship of the ‘upper altar (上壇, *sangdang*)’, i.e. the altar area enshrining the Buddha, and prayers

requesting the rebirth in the Pure Land; and of a ceremony aimed at the ‘lower altar’, the altar of the *yǒngga*. This part consists of ‘bestowing food’ (施食, *sisik*) and an ‘enshrining formula.’ Either with the funeral or with the tablet moved to the temple, the separation period is over. The mourners are certainly within the state of mourning and even the *yǒngga* is departed from the body wandering throughout the ‘intermediate state’.

#### iv) Transition rites

On the seventh day after the death a first of the seven guiding rituals begin. This series is so called *Sasipku chae* (四十九齋, 49-day ceremony) and sometimes *Ch’ilch’il jae* (七七齋). There are three forms of the ritual: *Sangju kwongong chae* (常住勸供齋, Ritual of [the buddhas and bōdhisattvas who are always present]), *Yǒngsan chae* (靈山齋, Ritual of the Vulture Peak), *Siwang kakpae chae* (十王 各拜齋, Ritual of Worship of the Ten Kings). In contemporary Korea, *49 chae* is used as an equivalent for *Sangju kwongong chae*. In other words the ritual which will be performed as a ‘guiding ceremony’ for *yǒngga* of a lay Buddhist is *Sangju kwongong chae*. *Yǒngsan chae* is a big open-air ceremony with music and dances being an enactment of the scene of Buddha’s sermon at the Vulture Peak when the Buddha preached the Lotus Sutra.<sup>5</sup> The ceremony even found its way on the list of UNESCO. By mere observation these two ritual ceremonies look like two utterly different rituals. However the meaning, content and core texts are identical. *Siwang kakpae chae* follows the structure of the former but includes elements related to the belief in ten kings and the trial. Practically, beside the upper and lower altar there is an altar of the ten kings and corresponding sutras employed. The *49 chae* has a following structure:

1) *Siryōn* (侍輦, attending to a palanquin), is performed at the gate of the temple and, the main propriety here is a palanquin (*kama*). The palanquin contains the *Innowang posal* (引路王菩薩, the bodhisattva ‘Guiding King’) a *psychopomp*, a Charon-like figure, who helps the *yǒngga* to cross to the Pure Land. The goal of the next part 2) *Taeryōng* (對靈, meeting the spirit), is to invite and greet the *yǒngga*. The object of this part of the ritual is the lower altar. The spirit is greeted, invoked and is offered a simple food offering; then the spirit is comforted by a sermon where the spirit is informed about the basic teaching. Then a symbolic bath 3) *Kwanyok* (灌浴) takes place. The bad karma of the spirit is washed away. For this rite a special ‘altar-bathroom’ (*kwanyok t’ang*) in form of a folding screen is established. Inside are proprieties such as paper clothes (to be burned later), fragrant water in a basin, soup, toothbrush, toothpaste, set of clothes etc. The bathing is accompanied with various *dhāraṇīs*, mantras and *mudrā*. Then 4) *Sangdan kwōngong* (上檀勸供), i.e. offering to the Buddhas

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<sup>5</sup> T’onggu Kang, *Pulgyo Sangje Munhwa Yōngu [A Study of Buddhist Funeral Culture]* (Sōul: Taehan pulgyo chogyae chong p’ogyo yōngusil, 2008), 70.

and bodhisattvas and 5) *Chungdan kwōngong* (中檀勸供) offering to the deities take place. Special offering is done to *Amitābha* and *Kṣitigarbha*. Then the *yōngga* becomes the main object when performing the 6) *Kwanūm sisik* (觀音施食) which is “*che* (祭) within *chae* (齋)”, i.e. a memorial service within the funeral rite. The mourners offer food while the monks explain the teachings to the *yōngga*. If we briefly summarize the symbolical level of this ritual we see that virtually all important deities of Buddhism and especially those having a relationship to death are summoned to help the *yōngga*.

The ritual is repeated for seven times on every seventh day according to the order above. On the last, 49<sup>th</sup> day a finale, which I believe can be understood as a reincorporating stage. The *yōngga* is sent to a new rebirth, the proprieties representing it are burn and the mourning period ends.

When the *Kwanūm sisik* is over, the *yōngga* is sent off during the 7) *Pongsong* (奉送, sending off) rite. Then, the mourners bow to the tablet and picture and take it out from the hall. Also a part of offerings is collected. The 8) *Sodae ūsik* (燒臺儀式, burning ceremony) is the final stage, when all participants move to a furnace which is located somewhere in the temple compound. There the tablet and picture and other things, such as clothes of the deceased are burned. Then the participants eat the offerings together. This is called *Pōpsik* (法食).

In this ritual, the performers (monks and mourners) join forces in order to help the spirit to safely pass through the transition, the intermediate state, to a good destination. The finale of this stage marks the end of the mourning and thus corresponds to the *reincorporation*. The mourners return back to their lives and the *yōngga* is reincarnated. The *yōngga* as well as the mourners symbolically passed through the three stages of the *rite of passage*.

## Conclusion

From the brief introduction above we could see that the Korean Buddhist rituals of death absorbed virtually all significant death-related elements that have developed both inside and outside the Buddhist tradition. As all Korean Buddhist orders of today grew up from the same roots, they perform the same rites. Therefore we cannot see diversity among the Buddhist schools or sects but we can discover variety of beliefs and practices within the Buddhist rituals. Indian *Abhidarmic* views are wrapped in beliefs in the Pure Land, postmortem judgment, beliefs in *Ksitigarbha* bodhisattva etc. Moreover, funeral rites are the area where we can witness tantric practices such as use of mantras, dharanis and mudras which do not flourish in otherwise *Sōn*-oriented Korean Buddhism. And of course Confucian and indigenous Korean elements are to be seen in the ritual too. We could see how the ritual transforms the participant and helps them to move through the mourning period.

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