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Asia Pacific Buddhist Studies

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A Study of the Relationship between Single-Practice Samadhi and the Two Kinds of Birth-and-Death from the Perspective of Yogacara

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Abstract: Single-Practice Samadhi is an important contemplative method in Mahayana Buddhism, while segmental birth-and-death and transformational birth-and-death are key doctrinal categories through which Mahayana Yogacara explains the samsaric continuity of sentient beings and the still-incomplete state of saints before perfect awakening. Examining these three themes within one doctrinal framework helps clarify the inner relation among meditative practice, transformation of consciousness, and transcendence of birth-and-death. Drawing primarily on the Manjusri-pariprecha Prajnaparamita Sutra, the Cheng weishi lun, the Mahayanasamgraha, the Dasheng baifa mingmen lun, the Srimaladevi-simhanada Sutra, the Lankavatara Sutra, the Samdhinirmocana Sutra, the Yogacarabhumi, and the Zongjing lu, this paper first traces the scriptural origin of Single-Practice Samadhi and its basic meaning of “the one mark of the dharmadhatu” and “directing attention to the dharmadhatu.” It then interprets the mechanism of its cultivation in terms of the eight consciousnesses, the three natures and three kinds of non-self-nature, the two obstructions and two karmic modes, and the transformation of consciousness into wisdom. On this basis, it further analyzes the causes, nature, support, stages of elimination, and differences between segmental birth-and-death and transformational birth-and-death. The paper argues that Single-Practice Samadhi is not an isolated technique of concentration but a contemplation of reality that can be explained and supported by Yogacara theories of consciousness and practice. The two kinds of birth-and-death are not merely nominal classifications; rather, they constitute a soteriological framework closely connected with the afflictive obstruction, the cognitive obstruction, and the process of transformation of the basis. From a Yogacara perspective, Single-Practice Samadhi thus illuminates the Mahayana path from calming distraction and overcoming self-grasping to dissolving dharma-grasping and perfecting transformation of the basis. This study may also serve as a reference for understanding the structure of “correspondence between principle and practice” in Buddhist doctrinal learning and for teaching Yogacara, meditation, and Buddhist views of life and death in contemporary Buddhist colleges.

Keywords: Single-Practice Samadhi; Yogacara; Segmental Birth-And-Death; Transformational Birth-And-Death; Transformation of Consciousness into Wisdom; Two Obstructions; Alayavijnana

Published: May 25, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62177/apbs.v1i2.1359>

Introduction

Buddhist reflection on birth-and-death is not merely an explanation of physical death; it is a fundamental issue running

through the entire system of cultivation and realization. Why do sentient beings continue to transmigrate? How do afflictions persist? How is practice possible? How is liberation established? All of these questions must be understood through the relation between birth-and-death and consciousness. In Mahayana Buddhism especially, birth-and-death and nirvana are not two entirely separate realms. When deluded, the continuity of experience becomes samsaric birth-and-death; when awakened, transformation of the basis reveals nirvana. Buddhism therefore does not explain the predicament of life through external salvation, but through dependent arising, non-self, consciousness-only, and transformation of the basis.

Among the many theoretical systems of Mahayana Buddhism, Yogacara takes “all dharmas are consciousness-only” as its central principle. Through such categories as the eight consciousnesses, the three natures, the two obstructions, the two karmic modes, the interaction of seeds and manifestations, and the transformation of consciousness into wisdom, it provides a subtle analysis of both the samsaric continuity of sentient beings and the stages of saintly cultivation. The distinction between segmental birth-and-death and transformational birth-and-death is one important way in which Yogacara explains levels of samsara. Segmental birth-and-death refers primarily to the coarse retributive result in the three realms, brought about by afflictive obstructions and contaminated karma. Transformational birth-and-death refers to the subtle retributive state of saints who have severed coarse afflictions but still retain the latent tendencies of the cognitive obstruction, supported by uncontaminated yet still discriminating karma and the cognitive obstruction. Although the two differ in coarseness and subtlety, defilement and relative purity, ordinary and saintly status, and degree of freedom, both remain states of continuity before the complete transformation of the basis.

Single-Practice Samadhi is an important Mahayana contemplative practice combining concentration, insight, and orientation toward reality. The Manjusri-pariprccha Prajnaparamita Sutra defines it as “the one mark of the dharmadhatu” and “directing attention to the dharmadhatu,” showing that it is not a mere technique for calming the mind but a contemplation whose object is the reality of the dharmadhatu and whose orientation is non-discriminating wisdom. In the history of Chinese Buddhism, Single-Practice Samadhi was valued in Prajnaparamita, Tiantai, Chan, Pure Land, and even Yogacara contexts, and it received different interpretations in different doctrinal settings. From the standpoint of Yogacara, it is not merely a state of “one-pointedness of mind”; it may also be understood as a process of calming the first six consciousnesses, transforming the self-grasping of manas, purifying the seeds in alayavijnana, and moving toward the transformation of consciousness into wisdom.^[1]

Previous studies of Single-Practice Samadhi have often emphasized its significance for Prajnaparamita thought, Tiantai calming-and-contemplation, or Chan history. Studies of the two kinds of birth-and-death, by contrast, have tended to focus on terminological distinctions and stages of realization. When the two topics are discussed separately, one easily falls into a split in which “meditation belongs to meditation” and “the theory of birth-and-death belongs to birth-and-death.” This paper uses Yogacara as an interpretive bridge and places Single-Practice Samadhi and the two kinds of birth-and-death within one structure of cultivation. On the one hand, it explains how Single-Practice Samadhi functions at the level of consciousness as calming, contemplation, and transformation of the basis. On the other hand, it explains how the two kinds of birth-and-death define the liberative meaning of that practice. This paper does not claim that Single-Practice Samadhi can replace all other practices. It argues only that, within a Mahayana Yogacara explanation, it is an important entry point for understanding the continuous structure of “meditative practice - transformation of consciousness - transcendence of birth-and-death.”

From the perspective of submission to Fayuan and of doctrinal research in Buddhist colleges, this paper also seeks to avoid writing in broad and unsupported assertions. It returns, as much as possible, to scriptural sources, terminological structures, and stages of practice. Buddhist doctrinal study, when detached from scriptural evidence, easily becomes generalized interpretation; when reduced to lists of terms without soteriological meaning, it cannot respond to the needs of contemporary Buddhist education for learning, teaching, practice, and application. For this reason, the paper follows the sequence of “scriptural basis - Yogacara interpretation - analysis of birth-and-death - integration of practice and realization - pedagogical implications,” so that the exposition remains grounded in verifiable texts and coherent doctrinal structures.

1. The Scriptural Basis and Doctrinal Meaning of Single-Practice Samadhi

The primary scriptural basis for Single-Practice Samadhi is the Manjusri-pariprccha Prajnaparamita Sutra. The scripture states: “The one mark of the dharmadhatu and directing attention to the dharmadhatu: this is called Single-Practice Samadhi.”

It further teaches that good men and good women who wish to enter Single-Practice Samadhi should dwell in a quiet place, abandon confused thoughts, refrain from grasping at appearances, concentrate the mind on one Buddha, single-mindedly recite that Buddha's name, face the Buddha's direction, and sustain remembrance of one Buddha from thought-moment to thought-moment. In that very remembrance they can see all Buddhas of the past, future, and present, because the merit of remembering one Buddha is immeasurable and not different from the inconceivable Buddha-dharmas of immeasurable Buddhas. In this way, one who enters Single-Practice Samadhi comes to know the undifferentiated mark of the dharmadhatu of countless Buddhas. This passage contains four interrelated dimensions: first, dwelling quietly and abandoning confused thought indicates the calming of distraction; second, not grasping at appearances indicates the breaking of attachment to marks; third, concentrating on one Buddha and reciting the name indicates using one thought to gather myriad thoughts; fourth, seeing the Buddhas of the three times without differentiation indicates entering the one mark of the dharmadhatu through one recollection.^[1]

Viewed through the phrase "the one mark of the dharmadhatu," the object of Single-Practice Samadhi is not an ordinary external object, nor is it merely a psychological focus. Its object is the reality in which all dharmas are equal and non-differentiated. Viewed through "directing attention to the dharmadhatu," it is not abstract metaphysical speculation but a meditative practice with a clear contemplative orientation. "Single practice" may be understood as the practice of one reality or the practice of suchness: it turns away from discriminations such as existence and non-existence, arising and ceasing, annihilation and permanence, self and other, self of persons and self of dharmas. "Samadhi" means correct concentration: the mind is undistracted, abides in its object, and is free from dullness and agitation. Together, the phrase refers to gathering the mind through concentration and illuminating principle through wisdom, so that the observing mind and the principle observed gradually come into correspondence.

Single-Practice Samadhi differs from ordinary expedient meditations. Yongming Yanshou states in fascicle 81 of the *Zongjing Lu*: "Single-Practice Samadhi means directing attention to the dharmadhatu, one thought of the dharmadhatu, trusting that all dharmas are Buddhadharma, without before or after, without boundary or limit, dwelling where Buddhas dwell, abiding as Buddhas abide, and peacefully residing in the quiescent dharmadhatu and the secret treasury. In this way, principle lacks nothing in completeness and phenomena lack nothing in sufficiency." Hinayana meditations such as contemplation of impurity, mindfulness of breathing, loving-kindness meditation, and analysis of elements mainly function to subdue coarse afflictions and turn the mind away from greed, anger, and distraction. Mahayana Single-Practice Samadhi is not separate from this calming function, yet its core lies more deeply in contemplative insight into reality. It enters the one undifferentiated mark of the dharmadhatu through one thought of correct contemplation. Therefore, Single-Practice Samadhi should not be reduced to "only remembering one Buddha" or "only guarding one object." It should be understood as a comprehensive contemplation that gathers all objects through one object and enters the dharmadhatu through one mind.^[2]

In Chinese Buddhism, Single-Practice Samadhi was absorbed and reinterpreted by different traditions. Tiantai integrated it into its system of calming-and-contemplation and related it to constant sitting, constant walking, and half-walking-half-sitting practices, emphasizing the threefold contemplation in one mind and the perfect interfusion of reality. Early Chan also valued Single-Practice Samadhi. From Daoxin and Hongren onward, the East Mountain teaching often used it to explain the Chan spirit of calming the mind, entering the Way, and guarding one without wavering. Yogacara did not make Single-Practice Samadhi the name of its school, but its analysis of consciousness, its doctrine of the two obstructions, and its theory of transformation of the basis provide a rigorous framework for understanding the inner mechanism of the practice.

From a Yogacara standpoint, the key to Single-Practice Samadhi does not lie in outward form but in the transformation of consciousness. The mental activities of ordinary beings usually involve the first six consciousnesses grasping at the six sense objects; the seventh manas constantly examines and clings to the eighth consciousness as an inner self; and the eighth alayavijnana stores contaminated seeds and produces karmic results. If practitioners can gather the six faculties, reduce grasping, contemplate that the perceived object is not apart from consciousness, and then dissolve self-grasping and dharma-grasping, Single-Practice Samadhi becomes a practical path by which scattered consciousness is transformed into pure wisdom. In other words, it is not a search for a fixed entity outside the mind. It is a contemplation in which one realizes that

appearances are consciousness-only, that consciousness has no solid self-nature, and that the relinquishing of attachment reveals suchness.

1.1 The Unfolding of Single-Practice Samadhi in Different Doctrinal Traditions

The transmission of Single-Practice Samadhi in Chinese Buddhism is not merely an isolated history of a term. It reflects the important Chinese Mahayana concern to gather practice through mind and to verify principle through practice. Prajnaparamita scriptures emphasize the foundation of Single-Practice Samadhi in the reality of the dharmadhatu, stressing non-grasping at appearances and freedom from discrimination. Tiantai focuses on incorporating it into the practice of calming-and-contemplation, using the threefold contemplation in one mind and the interfusion of emptiness, provisional existence, and the middle to explain that a single thought includes the three truths. Early Chan often interprets it from the perspective of calming the mind and directly entering the Way, making it a bridge from scriptural teaching to meditative realization. Although the wording differs across traditions, their shared concern is how to lead practitioners from distracted discrimination back to the single mind of correct contemplation.

In the Prajnaparamita tradition, Single-Practice Samadhi highlights the spirit of non-attainment. Concentrating on one Buddha while knowing the non-differentiated mark of the dharmadhatu of countless Buddhas shows that “one” is not a narrow object in a numerical sense. It is the entry from one object into immeasurable objects, from one thought into the dharmadhatu. If one clings to “one Buddha,” “one dharma,” or “one mark” as substantially real, one already violates the meaning of Single-Practice Samadhi. In the Prajnaparamita perspective, therefore, its core is the breaking of marks, the relinquishment of attachment, and non-discrimination, all of which reveal the equality and non-difference of all dharmas.

In the Tiantai tradition, Single-Practice Samadhi is closely connected with calming-and-contemplation. Tiantai uses the four samadhis to organize practice. It recognizes forms such as constant sitting and constant walking while also integrating them into the perfect structure of the threefold contemplation in one mind. This tradition reminds us that Single-Practice Samadhi is neither merely sitting quietly nor a state of concentration without insight. It must manifest the reality of suchness through the simultaneous operation of calming and contemplation. With calming alone and no contemplation, one may stagnate in concentration; with contemplation alone and no calming, one may become scattered in conceptual understanding. Tiantai’s contribution lies in showing the correspondence between practice and doctrinal contemplation, thereby giving Single-Practice Samadhi a fuller practical organization.

In the Chan tradition, Single-Practice Samadhi is often understood as a central method for settling the mind and entering the Way. Early Chan emphasized “guarding one without wavering” and “abiding the mind and contemplating purity.” This did not mean clinging to a psychological object; rather, it sought to gather wandering thoughts and disclose the mind’s inherent purity. Later Chan emphasized “not establishing words and letters” and “directly pointing to the mind,” which can give the impression that it did not value scriptural stages. Yet the transmission of Single-Practice Samadhi shows that Chan practice did not depart from the foundation of Mahayana scriptures. It further stressed direct realization on the basis of scriptural contemplation.

Compared with Prajnaparamita, Tiantai, and Chan, Yogacara’s advantage in interpreting Single-Practice Samadhi lies in its ability to explain why cultivating the mind can transform birth-and-death. Prajnaparamita provides the basis in reality; Tiantai provides the organization of calming-and-contemplation; Chan emphasizes direct realization; Yogacara further explains how scattered mind arises through the interaction of seeds and manifestations, how attachment is formed by the constant self-grasping of manas, how the afflictive and cognitive obstructions respectively give rise to the two kinds of birth-and-death, and how cultivation of samadhi alters the seed-structure in alayavijnana through perfuming and transformation of the basis. Yogacara therefore does not negate the interpretations of other traditions; it supplies them with a refined theory of consciousness.

The “Yogacara perspective” adopted in this paper is thus not an exclusive attempt to assign Single-Practice Samadhi to the Yogacara school alone. Rather, it uses Yogacara terminology and its structure of cultivation to explain anew the function of Single-Practice Samadhi in the Mahayana path. From the standpoint of doctrinal integration, Prajnaparamita provides the ground of reality, Tiantai provides the organization of calming-and-contemplation, Chan provides the direction of personal

realization, and Yogacara provides the mechanism of consciousness. Together they reveal the characteristic Chinese Buddhist integration of doctrine and practice.

2. The Theoretical Basis for Interpreting Single-Practice Samadhi through Yogacara

To interpret Single-Practice Samadhi through Yogacara, one must begin with the doctrine of the eight consciousnesses. In the *Dasheng baifa mingmen lun*, Vasubandhu states that all dharmas may be summarized under five categories: mind dharmas, mental factors, material dharmas, dharmas not associated with mind, and unconditioned dharmas. The mind dharmas are eight: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, mental consciousness, manas, and alayavijnana. The *Yogacarabhumi* further defines these terms: “Mind” refers to alayavijnana, the support of all seeds, the basis of appropriation, and that which is included in maturation. “Manas” refers to the constantly functioning mind and the immediately preceding mind of the six consciousnesses. “Consciousness” refers to the present discrimination of objects. Among the eight consciousnesses, the first five know forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and tangibles; the sixth discriminates mental objects; the seventh manas constantly examines and clings; and the eighth alayavijnana stores seeds, holds the body and faculties, and manifests the world. Ordinary experience appears as self-attachment, dharma-attachment, craving, grasping, discrimination, and karmic action because the eight-consciousness system continues to function under the perfuming of ignorance. The “directing attention to one object” in Single-Practice Samadhi first counteracts the distracted grasping of the first six consciousnesses and gathers the mind back from the pursuit of many objects. It then uses such contemplations as non-self, non-mark, consciousness-only, and suchness to break the self-grasping function of the seventh consciousness. Finally, through sustained cultivation, contaminated seeds in the eighth consciousness gradually weaken, while uncontaminated seeds increase and come into manifestation.^[3, 4]

Single-Practice Samadhi may therefore be understood on three levels. The first is the level of calming the mind: through concentration, mindfulness, upright posture, and separation from conditions, the first six consciousnesses are subdued. Here the emphasis is on calming; the mind no longer follows objects. The second is the level of contemplation: one observes that all objects arise through consciousness and that apart from mind there is no substantial external object. One also observes that the observing mind itself is dependently arisen and lacks fixed self-nature. Here the emphasis is on insight; attachment gradually becomes thin. The third is the level of transformation of the basis: when concentration and insight correspond, the seeds stored in alayavijnana gradually change, bringing about a movement from consciousness toward wisdom. Here the emphasis is on realization: contemplative understanding moves toward actual severance of delusion.

The Yogacara doctrine of the three natures and the three kinds of non-self-nature provides Single-Practice Samadhi with a clear object of contemplation. The *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* teaches that the characteristics of all dharmas are of three kinds: the imagined nature, the dependent nature, and the perfected nature. The imagined nature is the self-nature and distinctions established by names and conceptual designations; the dependent nature is the dependent arising of all dharmas, expressed in the formula “because this exists, that exists; because this arises, that arises”; and the perfected nature is the equal suchness of all dharmas, realized through courageous effort and correct reflection. The same scripture also explains the three kinds of non-self-nature: the non-self-nature of marks, the non-self-nature of arising, and the ultimate non-self-nature. The non-self-nature of marks corresponds to the imagined nature, which is established by names rather than by its own intrinsic mark. The non-self-nature of arising corresponds to the dependent nature, which exists through the power of conditions and not by itself. The ultimate non-self-nature corresponds to the perfected nature, the dharma-non-self of all dharmas, the ultimate truth revealed through the absence of self-nature. Ordinary beings falsely grasp real self and real dharmas upon dependently arisen phenomena, thereby producing imagined construction. When practitioners observe that all dharmas arise from causes and conditions, like illusion and transformation, they no longer cling to them as substantially existent and may enter the perfected nature through the dependent nature. In the practice of Single-Practice Samadhi, abandoning confused thoughts and not grasping appearances is the breaking of imagined construction. Contemplating the one mark of the dharmadhatu and the non-duality of mind and object is the recognition of non-self-nature in dependent arising. Finally, abiding in suchness and leaving behind subject-object discrimination is the manifestation of the perfected nature.^[5, 6]

This interpretation helps avoid two deviations. One deviation reduces Single-Practice Samadhi to mere psychological

concentration and ignores its Prajnaparamita and reality-oriented meaning. The other treats reality as abstract speculation detached from stages of practice and ignores the actual process of perfuming consciousness and gradually eliminating the two obstructions. The Lankavatara Sutra explains that the purification of the flow of one's own mind is gradual and not sudden, just as fruit ripens gradually, vessels are shaped gradually, the earth gradually produces things, and people gradually master arts such as music, writing, and painting. Yogacara's distinctive strength lies in neither denying the possibility of sudden correspondence with reality nor abandoning the gradual process of seed-perfuming, stages of severance, and transformation of the basis. From a Yogacara perspective, Single-Practice Samadhi therefore has the twofold quality of "sudden contemplation of reality" and "gradual purification of consciousness."^[7]

The final aim of Single-Practice Samadhi in Yogacara language is the transformation of consciousness into wisdom. Classical Yogacara speaks of transforming the first five consciousnesses into the wisdom of accomplishing activities, the sixth consciousness into wondrous observing wisdom, the seventh consciousness into equality wisdom, and the eighth consciousness into great perfect mirror wisdom. Buddhahood does not mean annihilating the functions of consciousness; it means transforming their deluded mode so that they become uncontaminated wisdom. If Single-Practice Samadhi remains only at the level of calming the mind, it cannot be called ultimate. If, within concentration, contemplation arises, attachment is broken through contemplation, and transformation of the basis is brought about through that breaking of attachment, its meaning is elevated from ordinary meditation to a practical path of transforming consciousness into wisdom.

It should be noted that Yogacara does not encourage speaking of samadhi in isolation from the complete training of morality, concentration, and wisdom. Single-Practice Samadhi can indeed be an important contemplative practice, but it must be guided by right view, founded upon pure discipline, and function through the correspondence of concentration and wisdom. Without right view, meditative states easily become objects of attachment. Without discipline, samadhi is difficult to stabilize. Without wisdom, the pacification of distraction may only suppress delusion temporarily and not sever its roots. Thus, Single-Practice Samadhi, as discussed here, is not a single technique. It is a structure of practice corresponding to right view, right conduct, right concentration, and right wisdom within the Mahayana path.

3. The Practical Structure and Yogacara Features of Single-Practice Samadhi

From the practical standpoint, Single-Practice Samadhi may be understood in terms of preparatory practice, proper practice, and fruition. Preparatory practice emphasizes upright body and correct intention, together with withdrawal from external conditions. Upright body does not refer only to correct posture; it also includes moderation in life, purity of discipline, restraint of speech, and dignified comportment. Correct intention means that the mind gradually returns from external grasping to mindfulness, no longer allowing likes and dislikes to move the three karmas of body, speech, and mind. If preparatory practice is unstable, proper practice cannot go deep. Although Single-Practice Samadhi has the meaning of directly corresponding to reality, it must still be grounded in purification of body and mind and in lawful daily conduct.

The key to proper practice is the simultaneous operation of "directing attention" and "contemplative insight." Directing the mind to one object is the aspect of calming; it prevents the mind from scattering. Contemplating the dharmadhatu is the aspect of wisdom; it prevents the mind from becoming attached. If there is only directing of attention without contemplation, the practice easily becomes a mere exercise in concentration. If there is only contemplation without the power of concentration, it easily becomes conceptual speculation without genuine transformation of body and mind. The phrase "the one mark of the dharmadhatu" requires practitioners to be one-pointed without solidifying one dharma and to contemplate without losing clarity of mind. Thus, the "practice" in Single-Practice Samadhi is not a mechanical act but an integrated cultivation involving body, speech, mind, view, concentration, and wisdom.

At the level of fruition, the practice is expressed as a transformation of the subject-object relation. Beginners still discriminate between "I who practice," "the object I contemplate," and "the concentration I attain." As practice deepens, one observes that the self that practices and the dharma that is contemplated both arise dependently and are not apart from consciousness. Going further, even the opposition between "the mind that contemplates" and "the reality contemplated" gradually fades. This is not a lapse into ignorance or blankness. It is the non-discriminating wisdom that sees dharmas as they are. Yogacara's term "transformation of the basis" explains this process well: consciousness is not abolished; its defiled and discriminating mode is

transformed into pure wisdom.

Compared with some meditative accounts that emphasize experience, the Yogacara interpretation of Single-Practice Samadhi has three evident features. First, it is analytical. Through categories such as the eight consciousnesses, mental factors, seeds, and manifestations, Yogacara explains where distraction comes from, how attachment is formed, how latent tendencies continue, and how cultivation perfumes consciousness. Second, it is sequential. Yogacara is not satisfied with a vague claim to “realize the mind and see nature”; it explains the depth and subtlety of severing afflictive and cognitive obstructions. The *Cheng weishi lun* states that awakening to consciousness-only proceeds through five stages: the stage of accumulation, in which one cultivates the Mahayana factors conducive to liberation; the stage of preparation, in which one cultivates the Mahayana factors conducive to decisive discernment; the stage of penetration, corresponding to the bodhisattva path of seeing; the stage of cultivation, corresponding to the bodhisattva path of cultivation; and the ultimate stage, abiding in unsurpassed, perfect awakening. These five stages show the rigor and subtlety of the Yogacara system. Third, it is verifiable. Whether practice is effective is not judged merely by temporary meditative states, but by whether afflictions decrease, attachment loosens, compassion increases, conduct becomes purer, and wisdom becomes clearer.^[8]

Accordingly, Single-Practice Samadhi from a Yogacara perspective should not be understood as a technique detached from ethical life, nor as an abstract sudden awakening that ignores stages. It recognizes that contemplation of reality may point directly to the root, while also emphasizing that the perfuming of consciousness must accumulate over time. It values the direction of sudden awakening while not abandoning the process of gradual cultivation. This understanding avoids two errors: clinging to words and concepts while losing the mission of practice, and neglecting doctrinal stages while drifting into arbitrary interpretation.

This structure is especially important in Buddhist college education. When students study Yogacara terminology, the eight consciousnesses, three natures, two obstructions, and transformation of the basis may appear dense and difficult. When they study meditation, they may easily understand it merely as personal experience. If Single-Practice Samadhi is used as a practical thread and Yogacara terms are applied to the process of cultivating the mind, doctrine will not be separated from practice, and practice will not be separated from right view. This also helps embody the educational spirit of “equal emphasis on understanding and practice” in Buddhist education.

4. The Doctrinal Structure of the Two Kinds of Birth-and-Death in Yogacara

The center of the Yogacara view of birth-and-death lies in explaining samsaric continuity through consciousness, karma, and afflictions. *Alayavijnana* contains seeds; seeds meet conditions and manifest; manifestations in turn perfume seeds. This produces the continuous flow of life experience. When afflictive obstructions and contaminated karma function as causes and conditions, the coarse retributive result in the three realms is produced. When the afflictive obstruction has been severed but the cognitive obstruction has not been exhausted, saints still experience a subtle retributive state produced by uncontaminated yet still discriminating karma and subtle latent tendencies. Thus Yogacara uses segmental birth-and-death and transformational birth-and-death to explain different levels of unliberated continuity.

Fascicle 8 of the *Cheng weishi lun* defines the two kinds of birth-and-death clearly. First, “segmental birth-and-death” refers to the coarse maturation-result in the three realms brought about by various contaminated wholesome and unwholesome karmas, supported by the power of the afflictive obstruction. Since the length of body and life has fixed limits according to the power of causes and conditions, it is called “segmental.” “Segmental” means that sentient beings are born in the three realms according to karma; their body, lifespan, pain, pleasure, circumstances, and faculties have relative limits. The states of gods, humans, asuras, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings differ, yet all are contaminated maturation-results produced through karma and dependent arising. All remain governed by birth, aging, illness, and death and lack true autonomy.^[9]

The root of segmental birth-and-death lies in the afflictive obstruction. The afflictive obstruction centers on self-grasping and unfolds as greed, anger, delusion, pride, doubt, wrong views, and associated secondary afflictions. It obstructs liberation and nirvana. It supports contaminated wholesome and unwholesome karma; such karma perfumes seeds; when seeds mature, they produce the results of the three realms. Segmental birth-and-death is therefore not determined by external fate. It is jointly formed by consciousness, afflictions, karma, and conditions. Its nature is contaminated, conditioned, coarse, changing, and

oppressive; it appears as the continuous but constantly decaying stream of the five aggregates.

The Cheng weishi lun then defines “inconceivable transformational birth-and-death” as the superior subtle maturation-result produced by uncontaminated but discriminating karma, supported by the power of the cognitive obstruction. Through the power of compassion and vows, body and life are transformed and have no fixed limits; therefore it is called “transformational.” Because it is properly supported and produced by uncontaminated concentration and vows, and because its subtle function is difficult to fathom, it is called “inconceivable.” Compared with segmental birth-and-death, its subject is no longer the ordinary being sinking in the three realms but a saint who has severed coarse afflictions and possesses certain uncontaminated virtues. This state is not bound by ordinary karmic form; through compassion, vows, concentration, and wisdom, body and life are transformed so that the practitioner may continue cultivation, benefit beings, and perfect Buddhahood.^[9]

The root of transformational birth-and-death lies in the cognitive obstruction. The cognitive obstruction centers on dharma-grasping and latent ignorance. It obstructs omniscient wisdom and perfect bodhi. Unlike coarse afflictions, it need not appear as obvious defilements such as greed and anger, yet it still leaves practitioners with subtle distinctions of subject and object, marks of wisdom, marks of dharmas, and subtle discrimination. Thus those who have severed afflictive obstructions may transcend segmental birth-and-death, but they do not necessarily perfect Buddhahood. If the cognitive obstruction remains, there is still transformational birth-and-death. Mahayana Yogacara therefore does not take “leaving the three realms” as the final point of practice. Its ultimate aim is the complete severance of the two obstructions, the complete ending of the two deaths, and the perfect transformation of consciousness into wisdom.

The difference between segmental and transformational birth-and-death may be grasped in five respects. First, with respect to causal conditions, segmental birth-and-death is produced by the afflictive obstruction supporting contaminated karma, whereas transformational birth-and-death is produced by the cognitive obstruction supporting uncontaminated yet discriminating karma. Second, with respect to life-state, segmental birth-and-death has fixed limits of body and life, whereas transformational birth-and-death may be altered through compassion and vows. Third, with respect to the form of suffering, segmental birth-and-death involves coarse oppression, whereas transformational birth-and-death is a subtle incompleteness. Fourth, with respect to the wisdom that severs it, segmental birth-and-death is primarily counteracted by the wisdom of selflessness of persons, whereas transformational birth-and-death requires the wisdom of selflessness of dharmas and non-discriminating wisdom. Fifth, with respect to the stages of realization, arhats, pratyekabuddhas, and advanced bodhisattvas may sever segmental birth-and-death, but only a Buddha ultimately exhausts transformational birth-and-death.

The Srimaladevi-simhanada Sutra states: “There are two kinds of death. What are the two? They are segmental death and inconceivable transformational death. Segmental death belongs to false sentient beings. Inconceivable transformational death belongs to arhats, pratyekabuddhas, and great bodhisattvas with mind-made bodies, up to ultimate unsurpassed bodhi.” The formulation of the two kinds of birth-and-death makes the Mahayana theory of liberation more refined than a simpler view of samsara. The Hinayana path focuses on leaving the three realms, severing the afflictive obstruction, and realizing nirvana. Mahayana, on that basis, further points out that if the cognitive obstruction remains and bodhi-wisdom is not yet complete, one cannot be called a perfectly awakened Buddha. The Srimaladevi-simhanada Sutra also explains from the standpoint of tathagatagarbha, Mahayana, and One Vehicle that arhats and pratyekabuddhas still have something not yet complete and must rely on the Buddha’s ultimate wisdom for perfection. It therefore states that the vehicles of sravakas and pratyekabuddhas enter the Mahayana, and that the Mahayana is the Buddha Vehicle; thus the three vehicles are in fact the One Vehicle. On this basis, Yogacara uses the two kinds of birth-and-death to respond to a central Mahayana concern and tightly connects the theory of birth-and-death with the bodhisattva path and the theory of Buddhahood.^[10,11]

5. The Relation between Single-Practice Samadhi and the Counteraction of Segmental Birth-and-Death

The direct manifestation of segmental birth-and-death is the karmic transmigration of sentient beings in the three realms, yet its root remains the mistaken cognition of consciousness. Ordinary beings take the five aggregates as self and the world of objects as real. They produce greed toward attractive objects, anger toward unpleasant objects, and delusion because they do not understand impermanence and non-self. The first six consciousnesses constantly grasp at objects; the seventh manas

clings to the eighth consciousness as self; and the eighth consciousness holds contaminated seeds. Thus the cycle of affliction, karma, and retribution continues. The first way in which Single-Practice Samadhi counteracts segmental birth-and-death is by gathering scattered consciousness so that the mind is no longer pulled along by the six sense objects.

The scriptural instruction to “abandon confused thoughts and not grasp appearances” is the first step in counteracting segmental birth-and-death. The reason sentient beings create karma often begins with grasping at appearances. When one grasps appearances, love and hatred arise; when love and hatred arise, karmic action occurs; when karmic action occurs, birth-and-death continues. Single-Practice Samadhi directs the mind toward the dharmadhatu through one thought, gathering the scattered mind from many objects back to one object. It also breaks substantial attachment to objects by not grasping at appearances, so that the mind no longer turns according to marks. This “calming” is not the repression of thoughts; it is the retreat of the mind from habitual grasping so that contemplation becomes possible.

In Yogacara, segmental birth-and-death is produced by the afflictive obstruction and contaminated karma, and the core of the afflictive obstruction is self-grasping. If Single-Practice Samadhi is truly to counteract segmental birth-and-death, it must further give rise to wisdom through concentration and break self-grasping through contemplation of non-self. In samadhi, practitioners contemplate the body and mind, the five aggregates, as arising from conditions and lacking any independent controller. They contemplate objects as produced by consciousness and lacking external substantiality. They contemplate the observing mind itself as arising and ceasing moment by moment, with nothing that can be grasped. In this way, coarse self-grasping gradually loosens, and the manifestations of greed, anger, delusion, and other afflictions weaken accordingly.

From the standpoint of karma, Single-Practice Samadhi does not directly “erase” already produced karmic results. Rather, by changing the way consciousness is perfumed, it reduces the creation of new contaminated karmic seeds and deprives old afflictive seeds of supporting conditions for manifestation. Yogacara emphasizes the mutual perfuming of seeds and manifestations. If ordinary beings constantly perfume alayavijnana with greed, anger, and delusion, afflictive seeds continue to grow. If they repeatedly perfume consciousness with samadhi, mindfulness, contemplation of non-self, and contemplation of reality, uncontaminated seeds gradually gain strength. Thus Single-Practice Samadhi acts on segmental birth-and-death by changing the causal structure of samsara at the depth of consciousness.

This also explains why Single-Practice Samadhi cannot be separated from discipline and right view. Without discipline, contaminated karma continues to be produced. Without right view, meditation may merely suppress afflictions temporarily without severing their roots. Only with the mutual support of discipline, concentration, and wisdom can Single-Practice Samadhi move from “subduing delusion” to “severing delusion,” and from “temporary mental purity” to “gradual elimination of the afflictive obstruction.” The Yogacarabhumi’s broad account of the stages of cultivation, including the mutual support of the training in discipline, mind, and wisdom, may also serve as an important basis for understanding the conditions required for Single-Practice Samadhi.

The logic by which Single-Practice Samadhi counteracts segmental birth-and-death may therefore be summarized as follows: gathering the six faculties reduces distraction; not grasping appearances reduces attachment to objects; wisdom of non-self breaks self-grasping; perfuming through concentration and wisdom purifies seeds; and as afflictions are gradually severed, contaminated karma loses its supporting conditions. Ultimately, the practitioner moves toward transcending coarse transmigration in the three realms. This process is not a search for mystical states apart from human life. It is a transformation of the way consciousness functions within the continuity of daily body and mind. Through it, ordinary beings may first gain calmness, then contemplation, and then gradually enter the path of severing delusion.

6. Single-Practice Samadhi and the Transcendence of Transformational Birth-and-Death

If the key to segmental birth-and-death lies in self-grasping and the afflictive obstruction, then the key to transformational birth-and-death lies in dharma-grasping and the cognitive obstruction. Saints have already severed coarse afflictions and are no longer pulled by contaminated karma in the three realms. Yet if they still have subtle attachments to dharmas, wisdom, bodhi, sentient beings, Buddhahood, or other marks, the latent tendencies of the cognitive obstruction remain. Transformational birth-and-death is “subtle and difficult to fathom” precisely because it does not appear as coarse affliction,

yet it remains a state of incompleteness before ultimate perfection.

If Single-Practice Samadhi is used only to calm distraction and afflictive manifestations, its ultimate Mahayana meaning has not yet been fully explained. Its deeper function lies in using the one mark of the dharmadhatu and non-discriminating wisdom to counteract dharma-grasping. Practitioners first break self-grasping through contemplation of non-self, but they must also further contemplate the non-self-nature of all dharmas, recognizing that even bodhi, nirvana, wisdom, cultivation, realization, and Buddhist terminology cannot be grasped. If one still clings to “I who practice,” “what I realize,” or “a real dharma to be obtained,” then although one may have moved beyond coarse affliction, subtle subject-object discrimination remains.

The Cheng weishi lun explains the cognitive obstruction as beginning with the view of a real dharma in the imagined nature, together with doubt, ignorance, craving, anger, pride, and so forth, which cover the non-inverted nature of the knowable and obstruct bodhi. This obstruction need not be strongly defiled, but it obstructs awakening. What it obscures is not ordinary moral good or evil, but the perfect knowledge of the reality of the dharmadhatu. Thus, when Single-Practice Samadhi counteracts transformational birth-and-death, its emphasis is not on suppressing psychological afflictions but on breaking all subtle dharma-grasping so that the observing mind and the object observed are no longer opposed. “The disappearance of both subject and object,” in Yogacara, does not deny the function of cognition; it transforms defiled discrimination into non-discriminating wisdom and subsequently attained wisdom.^[12]

Here one must avoid the simplistic claim that Single-Practice Samadhi quickly and independently transcends transformational birth-and-death. The severance of transformational birth-and-death belongs to an extremely advanced stage and cannot be completed by ordinary beginners merely through initial samadhi practice. A more careful formulation is this: the reality-contemplation, non-discriminating contemplation, and non-duality of concentration and wisdom contained in Single-Practice Samadhi provide an important direction for severing the cognitive obstruction and approaching perfect transformation of the basis. At the ordinary level, it mainly calms the mind and subdues delusion. In the bodhisattva path, it gradually deepens into a contemplation that breaks dharma-grasping, reveals suchness, and perfects the functioning of wisdom.

The Cheng weishi lun states that the seeds of the cognitive obstruction severed by seeing are first severed at the path of seeing in the first joyful ground; their manifestations have already been subdued before the grounds. The seeds severed by cultivation are gradually eliminated through the ten grounds, and only when vajra-like samadhi becomes present are they forever severed. From the standpoint of transforming consciousness into wisdom, transcending transformational birth-and-death returns to vajra-like samadhi, in which the latent tendencies of the cognitive obstruction are exhausted. The eighth consciousness becomes great perfect mirror wisdom; the seventh becomes equality wisdom; the sixth becomes wondrous observing wisdom; and the first five become the wisdom of accomplishing activities. This does not mean that no functions of consciousness remain. It means that the attachment, defilement, and obstructive character of consciousness are completely transformed. Great perfect mirror wisdom reflects like a clear mirror without clinging to images; equality wisdom leaves behind hierarchical self-dharma distinctions; wondrous observing wisdom knows the differences among dharmas skillfully; and the wisdom of accomplishing activities benefits beings according to conditions. If Single-Practice Samadhi is perfected, it should appear as the integration of concentration and wisdom, compassion and wisdom, ultimate and conventional truth, essence and function, not as stagnation in emptiness or quietism.^[13]

The relation between Single-Practice Samadhi and transformational birth-and-death should therefore not be expressed simply as “using concentration to eliminate birth-and-death.” It should be expressed as “using non-discriminating wisdom to perfect transformation of the basis.” At the level of segmental birth-and-death, the emphasis is on breaking self-grasping and severing the afflictive obstruction. At the level of transformational birth-and-death, the emphasis is on breaking dharma-grasping and severing the cognitive obstruction. The two unfold continuously and form the complete Yogacara picture of the Mahayana path from ordinary being to Buddhahood.

7. Observing the Stages of Practice in the Two Kinds of Birth-and-Death through Single-Practice Samadhi

From the standpoint of practice and realization, the relation between Single-Practice Samadhi and the two kinds of birth-

and-death can be explained at four levels: the level of ordinary beings, the level of the two vehicles and newly resolved bodhisattvas, the level of advanced bodhisattvas, and the level of Buddhahood. This division is not meant to be mechanical. It clarifies how the same practice functions differently according to the capacity and stage of the practitioner.

At the level of ordinary beings, the main problems are distraction, grasping at appearances, and self-grasping. At this stage, Single-Practice Samadhi emphasizes upright posture, withdrawal from external conditions, gathering the six faculties, and directing attention to the proper object. Its effects first appear as a gradual calming of the mind, a reduction of affliction, greater regulation of conduct, and clearer awareness of the suffering of birth-and-death. Ordinary beings should not lightly speak of “perfect samadhi” or “suddenly transcending the two deaths.” They should first cultivate mindfulness and right view through samadhi, so that consciousness is no longer entirely led by external objects.

At the level of sravaka learners, non-learners, pratyekabuddhas, and newly resolved bodhisattvas, the focus is on severing the afflictive obstruction, realizing the wisdom of selflessness of persons, and transcending segmental birth-and-death. At this stage, Single-Practice Samadhi is not only a way to calm body and mind. It gives rise to contemplation of non-self and reality within deeper concentration, so that the seeds of the afflictive obstruction are gradually severed. From the Mahayana standpoint, the two vehicles may leave segmental birth-and-death, but if they have not generated the great compassionate vow and have not severed the cognitive obstruction, they are still not ultimate. Therefore, Single-Practice Samadhi must also be joined with bodhicitta, great vows of compassion, and the wisdom of dharma-emptiness.

At the level of advanced bodhisattvas, especially from the eighth ground onward, bodhisattvas have attained the patience of non-arising and coarse afflictions no longer manifest. The focus of practice turns toward the severance of the latent tendencies of the cognitive obstruction. At this stage, Single-Practice Samadhi appears more as the subtle contemplation of non-discriminating wisdom: not abiding in birth-and-death, not abiding in nirvana; not clinging to the mark of sentient beings, yet not abandoning the work of liberating them; not clinging to the mark of bodhi, yet not retreating from the bodhisattva path. Transformational birth-and-death at this stage is not ordinary suffering but a subtle life-state in which bodhisattvas continue to cultivate, manifest, and benefit others through compassion and vows. To transcend this level of birth-and-death, one must continuously purify dharma-grasping and attachment to the marks of wisdom.

At the level of Buddhahood, the two obstructions are forever severed, the two deaths are forever ended, and the transformation of consciousness into wisdom is complete. At this point, Single-Practice Samadhi is no longer an expedient to be cultivated; it becomes the ultimate expression of the Buddha’s virtues, in which concentration and wisdom are perfected, ultimate and conventional truth are unobstructed, and compassion and wisdom are non-dual. The Mahayanasamgraha states that when equal wisdom arises with regard to birth-and-death and nirvana, birth-and-death is realized as nirvana; one neither abandons nor does not abandon birth-and-death, and one neither attains nor does not attain nirvana. In Yogacara language, Buddhahood is perfect transformation of the basis. In the language of Single-Practice Samadhi, it is the complete manifestation of the one mark of the dharmadhatu without obstruction to immeasurable function.^[14]

This sequence shows that Single-Practice Samadhi does not have the same function at every stage. For ordinary beings, it is the gate for calming the mind and entering the Way. For saints who are severing delusion, it is a practice for deepening the wisdom of emptiness. For bodhisattvas, it is a path for breaking the cognitive obstruction and perfecting compassion and wisdom. For Buddhahood, it appears as ultimate concentration, wisdom, and free functioning. The meaning of the two kinds of birth-and-death must also be understood within this hierarchy of stages. Segmental birth-and-death is a coarse obstruction, while transformational birth-and-death is a subtle incompleteness. Since their levels differ, the depth of the remedies also differs.

8. Theoretical Value and Implications for Contemporary Buddhist Education

Examining Single-Practice Samadhi and the two kinds of birth-and-death from the perspective of Yogacara first helps improve our understanding of Yogacara soteriology. Yogacara is often regarded as emphasizing terminology, analysis, and theory, whereas meditation is often regarded as emphasizing practice, experience, and direct intuition. If the two are separated, one easily falls into the error of “studying Yogacara without knowing practice” or “speaking of meditation without doctrinal grounding.” The discussion above shows that Yogacara is not a conceptual system detached from practice, and

Single-Practice Samadhi is not an experiential method detached from doctrine. Interpreting them together reveals the full Mahayana structure of correspondence between principle and practice.

Second, this study helps clarify the levels of the Mahayana view of birth-and-death. Modern discussions of life and death often focus only on physical death and psychological fear. Buddhist reflection on birth-and-death goes further and asks how attachment is formed, how karma continues, how afflictions and latent tendencies persist, and how consciousness continues. Segmental birth-and-death explains the coarse retribution ordinary beings receive through contaminated karma and affliction. Transformational birth-and-death explains the subtle incompleteness that remains before saints attain perfection. This distinction helps practitioners avoid two misunderstandings: first, the assumption that leaving coarse suffering is already ultimate; second, the assumption that the bodhisattva's manifestation in birth-and-death is the same as ordinary samsaric transmigration. Yogacara's refined classifications help Buddhist doctrinal education establish a clear sense of stages.

Third, a Yogacara interpretation of Single-Practice Samadhi helps regulate contemporary understandings of meditation. Today meditation is often simplified as relaxation, sitting quietly, concentration, or psychological adjustment. These may have some value in settling body and mind, but they do not represent the full meaning of Buddhist meditation. Buddhist meditation must be connected with right view, discipline, wisdom, and the goal of liberation. The emphases of Single-Practice Samadhi - "the one mark of the dharmadhatu," "not grasping appearances," and "the equal operation of concentration and wisdom" - remind practitioners that meditation is neither escape from reality nor pursuit of special sensations. It is a transformation of consciousness through which attachment is broken and wisdom grows.

For Buddhist colleges, the implication is that Yogacara teaching should not stop at memorizing terminology, nor should meditation teaching become mere description of experience. If Single-Practice Samadhi is used as a practical thread, the two kinds of birth-and-death as the liberative aim, and the eight consciousnesses, three natures, two obstructions, and transformation of the basis as theoretical tools, one can form a pedagogical structure of "scriptural basis - doctrinal analysis - stages of practice and realization - contemporary implications." Such teaching preserves the rigor of Buddhist doctrine while strengthening students' understanding of practice and realization. It thus better embodies the Buddhist college ideal of giving equal weight to study and cultivation.

Finally, from the standpoint of modern life education, the Yogacara theory of the two kinds of birth-and-death offers a deeper view of life. Birth-and-death is not merely a matter of life's endpoint; it is a question of how attachment is formed, how afflictions continue, and how consciousness can be transformed. Single-Practice Samadhi offers a path by which the mind moves from distraction to concentration, from attachment to contemplation, and from confusion to clarity. In relation to the anxiety, restlessness, and loss of meaning common in contemporary society, this teaching should not be reduced to psychology, but it can serve as an important resource for Buddhist life education and cultivation of the mind.

Conclusion

Single-Practice Samadhi, Yogacara, and the two kinds of birth-and-death respectively represent a method of practice, a theoretical foundation, and a liberative goal in the Mahayana system of cultivation and realization. If treated separately, Single-Practice Samadhi may be reduced to a meditative technique, the two kinds of birth-and-death may remain a terminological classification, and Yogacara may appear to be an abstract and complex doctrinal system. When the three are integrated, however, one can see the complete Mahayana structure from the samsaric flow of consciousness to liberation through transformation of the basis.

This paper argues that the fundamental meaning of Single-Practice Samadhi lies in "the one mark of the dharmadhatu" and "directing attention to the dharmadhatu." Its Yogacara meaning lies in gathering the first six consciousnesses, transforming the self-grasping of manas, purifying the seeds in alayavijnana, and gradually moving toward the transformation of consciousness into wisdom. Segmental birth-and-death is produced by the afflictive obstruction and contaminated karma, while transformational birth-and-death is produced by the cognitive obstruction and uncontaminated yet discriminating karma. The two correspond respectively to self-grasping and dharma-grasping, coarse transmigration and subtle incompleteness. Therefore, the relation of Single-Practice Samadhi to the two kinds of birth-and-death may be summarized as follows: at the initial level, it calms distraction and counteracts affliction; at a deeper level, it breaks self-grasping and transcends segmental

birth-and-death; on the bodhisattva path, it breaks dharma-grasping and moves toward transcending transformational birth-and-death; at Buddhahood, it appears as the complete severance of the two obstructions, the ending of the two deaths, and the perfection of transforming consciousness into wisdom.

Of course, the present paper offers only a systematic doctrinal analysis and cannot replace the concrete practices of particular traditions or the guidance of qualified teachers. Discussion of the practice of Single-Practice Samadhi must still be connected with a foundation in discipline, instruction from good spiritual friends, scriptural study, and long-term cultivation. Future research may further compare Tiantai calming-and-contemplation, Chan methods for settling the mind, Pure Land nianfo samadhi, and Yogacara theories of transformation of the basis. Such comparison would help illuminate the shared concern of Chinese Buddhist traditions for the joint cultivation of concentration and wisdom and the correspondence between principle and practice.

In sum, studying the relation between Single-Practice Samadhi and the two kinds of birth-and-death from the perspective of Yogacara not only deepens the understanding of birth-and-death and liberation in Buddhist doctrine but also provides a relatively clear theoretical reference for doctrinal education, meditation education, and life education in contemporary Buddhist colleges. Its central insight is that birth-and-death continues because of deluded consciousness and attachment, while liberation becomes possible through contemplation and transformation of the basis. To move from delusion to awakening, from consciousness to wisdom, and from birth-and-death to the manifestation of nirvana is the fundamental spirit of the Mahayana Buddhist path.

Funding

No

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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The Stages of Practice and Practical Spirit in Master Yinguang's Pure Land Instructions: Centering on Reply to Layman Ye Fubei, Letter One

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Abstract: Master Yinguang expounded the Pure Land teaching in plain, earnest, and practical language, bringing profound doctrinal principles into everyday conduct, interpersonal relations, and communal monastic life. Centering on a passage from Reply to Layman Ye Fubei, Letter One in Yinguang Fashi Wenchao Sanbian (The Third Collection of Master Yinguang's Collected Writings), this paper examines the sequence of practice and practical spirit embedded in Master Yinguang's Pure Land instruction by placing it in dialogue with Pure Land scriptures, the Six Harmonies, the six perfections, the Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra, and the three provisions of faith, vows, and practice. The paper argues that the passage is not merely an exhortation to recite the Buddha's name. Rather, it establishes a complete structure of cultivation: reverence and harmony serve as its ethical foundation; patience, giving, rejoicing in others' virtue, and repentance function as supportive conditions for pure karma; uninterrupted recollection of the Buddha's name in walking, standing, sitting, lying down, dressing, and eating is the main practice; humility, repentance, and firm assurance of rebirth in the Pure Land constitute its devotional culmination. This structure moves from communal harmony and the taming of body and mind toward Pure Land orientation. It has significant implications for the education of Buddhist college students, Pure Land curriculum design, and daily norms of Buddhist practice.

Keywords: Master Yinguang; Pure Land Buddhism; Faith, Vows, and Practice; Six Harmonies; Samantabhadra's Vows; Nianfo Samadhi

Published: May 25, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62177/apbs.v1i2.1363>

1. Statement of the Problem: Entering Master Yinguang's Pure Land Thought through One Instruction

As a major Pure Land patriarch of modern Chinese Buddhism, Master Yinguang's teaching activities were marked by a strong practical orientation. He did not attempt to construct an abstruse theoretical system. Instead, he repeatedly articulated the essentials of practice in language that was close to ordinary moral life and accessible to people of varied capacities: faith and vows, recitation of the Buddha's name, fulfilling one's human duties, guarding sincerity, restraining what is improper, refraining from evil, and practicing all good. His letters and short instructions are plain and condensed, yet they integrate the doctrinal basis of the Pure Land path, the concrete route of cultivation, and the ethical life of daily conduct. In this way, theory and practice are brought together, and practitioners of different capacities can find an entrance into the Dharma and

apply nianfo within ordinary circumstances.^[1]

The central text examined here is a passage from Master Yinguang's letter to Layman Ye Fubei: "Whether one is at home or in a hermitage, one must respect those above and live harmoniously with those below; endure what others cannot endure; do what others cannot do; take on the labor of others; help others accomplish what is good; when sitting quietly, always reflect on one's own faults; in casual conversation, do not discuss the faults of others; while walking, standing, sitting, lying down, dressing, and eating, from morning until evening and from evening until morning, do not let a single recitation of the Buddha's name be interrupted."^[2] Although concise, this passage contains the basic outline of Pure Land cultivation. It may be analyzed in four dimensions. First, the initial path of cultivation lies in reverence, modesty, and harmonious coexistence among people. Second, the progress of cultivation requires such bodhisattva practices as patience, giving, rejoicing, and repentance as supportive conditions. Third, the core of Pure Land practice remains faith, vows, and recitation of the Buddha's name; nianfo must not be separated from daily use, but should enter daily use and accompany it. Fourth, practitioners must constantly maintain a sense of shame, remorse, and humility, giving up self-display and arrogance so that the mind can receive wholesome Dharma.

This paper takes Yinguang's instruction as its central textual basis and interprets it through the Six Harmonies, the six perfections, the Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra, and nianfo samadhi. Its aim is not merely to express devotion to Master Yinguang's teaching, but to clarify, from the three dimensions of doctrine, practice, and everyday life, that the Pure Land path he revealed is not a narrow path concerned only with the final moment before death. It is a complete system of cultivation extending through the practitioner's whole life, permeating daily activities, communal life, and moral formation. In this sense, Yinguang's teaching is practical learning, practical cultivation, and practical realization.

2. Scriptural Foundations of the Pure Land Path and the Basis of Faith, Vows, and Practice

To understand Master Yinguang's Pure Land instruction, one must first return to its scriptural foundation. The Pure Land path takes faith, vows, and practice as its three essential provisions. Faith includes faith in oneself, faith in the Buddha, faith in cause, faith in effect, faith in the factual reality of the Pure Land, and faith in its principle. It is the root and prerequisite of the path. Vows refer chiefly to aversion toward the afflictions and impurities of the Saha world and aspiration for the purity and adornment of the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss. Vows provide direction and motivation. Practice means holding fast to the name of Amitabha Buddha and reciting it in an honest and steady manner. It is the actual enactment of faith and aspiration.

The eighteenth vow in the Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life states: "If, when I attain Buddhahood, sentient beings in the ten directions, with sincere mind and joyful faith, desire to be born in my land, even with ten thoughts, and yet are not born there, may I not attain perfect awakening." This vow establishes the doctrinal basis of directing practice through vows and gathering the mind through the name. Yinguang's interpretation of the Pure Land teaching always remains grounded in Amitabha's fundamental vow. At the same time, he never abandons the practitioner's own active cultivation of faith, vows, and recitation. Pure Land practice, therefore, does not rely solely on the practitioner's individual meditative power; nor does it negate the practitioner's responsibility. It establishes a dynamic relation between the practitioner's earnest aspiration and Amitabha Buddha's compassionate vow-power. This is one of the distinctive features of Yinguang's Pure Land teaching: self-power and other-power are not opposed but brought into resonance.^[3]

The Amitabha Sutra centers on holding the name, attaining one-pointedness, and being protected by all Buddhas. It shows that name-recitation has a double value: it can discipline and purify the mind in the present life, and it can also serve as the fundamental cause for rebirth in the Land of Bliss at the end of life. When Yinguang urges practitioners to continue the Buddha's name from morning to evening and from evening to morning without interruption, he is translating the scriptural teaching of holding the name and achieving single-mindedness into an everyday discipline. The goal is not a merely external form of recitation, but a daily practice through which scripture becomes lived conduct.^[4]

The Chapter on the Perfect Penetration of Mahasthamaprapta through Buddha-Recollection in the Surangama Sutra offers the famous formula: "Gather in the six faculties, and let pure mindfulness continue without interruption." This became an important doctrinal basis for later Pure Land methods of gathering the mind through nianfo. Recitation is not merely

oral repetition. The eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind are gathered into the Buddha's name so that the scattered mind gradually becomes concentrated and the grasping mind is purified. Yinguang's methods of "reciting with the mouth and listening with the ear," "collecting the mind in nianfo," and "counting in sets of ten recitations" are practical interpretations of this principle. They make a profound contemplative teaching usable for practitioners of ordinary capacities.^[5]

The Contemplation Sutra presents sixteen contemplations and also teaches that even beings burdened with grave karma may, at the final moment, through meeting a good spiritual friend and reciting Amitabha's name with faith, be reborn in the Western Pure Land. This teaching displays the inclusiveness of the Pure Land path, which embraces beings of all capacities. Yet "rebirth with remaining karma" must not be misunderstood as permission for laxity or wrongdoing. Its purpose is to prevent karmically burdened beings from falling into despair. Even if afflictions are heavy, if one gives rise to true faith and sincere vows, repents, reforms oneself, practices good, and recites the Buddha's name with sincerity, one may still rely on the Buddha's vow-power and find a path out of samsara. This is why Yinguang repeatedly links faith, vows, recitation, repentance, and moral reform.^[6]

Seen through the combined lens of the three Pure Land sutras, Yinguang's interpretation maintains a dual perspective. It never leaves the fundamental support of Amitabha's vow, and it never neglects the practitioner's present conduct. If one stresses only Buddha-power and ignores faith, vows, and practice, one risks turning the Pure Land path into a shortcut without responsibility. If one stresses only personal effort and neglects Amitabha's vow, one loses the distinctive character of the Pure Land teaching as a special Dharma-door. Yinguang's skill lies in uniting the two: the Buddha's compassionate vow gives confidence to ordinary beings, while the practitioner's faith, vows, moral reform, and name-recitation give the vow a concrete place to function.

Faith, vows, and practice are mutually dependent. Genuine faith naturally gives rise to the vow to leave the Saha world and be born in the Land of Bliss. Firm vows naturally express themselves in name-recitation and sustained effort. Continuous practice, in turn, strengthens faith and deepens aspiration. This forms a living cycle: faith gives birth to vows; vows guide practice; practice increases faith. When Yinguang exhorts people to practice "honest nianfo," he is not urging anti-intellectualism. He is warning against clever speculation, empty discourse, and neglect of actual cultivation. For Buddhist academy students, this point is especially important: scriptural study is necessary, but if learning does not become reverence, repentance, mindfulness, and conduct, it remains paper knowledge. Pure Land education must therefore bridge doctrinal study and embodied practice.

Ouyi Zhixu states in his *Essential Explanation of the Amitabha Sutra*: "Whether one attains rebirth depends entirely on whether one has faith and vows; the grade of rebirth depends entirely on the depth of name-recitation." This judgment clearly defines the relation among faith, vows, recitation, and rebirth. Yinguang inherits this understanding. Without genuine faith and vows, oral recitation can become a general good deed without decisive Pure Land orientation. Without actual recitation, faith and vows remain abstract. The three provisions are not isolated elements but an integrated structure of cultivation.^[7]

3. "Respecting Those Above and Living Harmoniously with Those Below": The Communal Ethical Basis of Pure Land Practice

Yinguang places the words "whether one is at home or in a hermitage, one must respect those above and live harmoniously with those below" at the very beginning of the instruction. This arrangement is significant. It shows that Pure Land practice is not isolated from human relations, communal life, or the ordinary discipline of living with others. A person who recites the Buddha's name but remains arrogant, quarrelsome, and fond of disputes fails to correspond with the purity and harmony of the Pure Land path. Recitation that does not transform conduct cannot become truly effective.

The phrase "respecting those above and living harmoniously with those below" can be interpreted through the Buddhist teaching of the Six Harmonies: harmony in views, harmony in discipline, harmony in bodily dwelling, harmony in speech without dispute, harmony in mental joy, and harmony in the sharing of benefits. Respect means reverence toward teachers, the Dharma, discipline, fellow practitioners, and all beings. Harmony means tolerance, support, and non-arrogance toward peers and juniors. In monastic life, this becomes respect for elders, communal practice, avoidance of factionalism, and refraining from disputes. In lay life, it becomes filial respect, family harmony, and support for the order of the Dharma community.

The Six Harmonies and name-recitation are not separate practices. If nianfo practitioners share a common view, they understand that all are moving toward rebirth in the Pure Land and the fulfillment of bodhi. If they share discipline, they restrain the three karmas of body, speech, and mind. If they practice harmony in speech, they reduce disputes and protect a peaceful mental environment for recitation. If they share benefits, they weaken selfishness and cultivate generosity. Thus Yinguang begins with communal harmony because the Buddha's name must be rooted in moral transformation and harmonious conduct.

The saying "if the Dharma is to flourish, monastics must praise one another" is not a canonical quotation, but it captures the importance of harmony in Buddhist communities. A monastery may have solemn rituals and impressive forms, but if the community is filled with contention, jealousy, and rivalry, it cannot nourish the mind of practice. Yinguang's teaching plants the seeds of respect, modesty, communal care, and mutual support. Nianfo then ceases to be merely an individual activity and becomes a shared practice that gathers the strength of a community.

For Buddhist colleges, the Six Harmonies have direct educational significance. Students study together, chant morning and evening services, work in the community, eat in the dining hall, and live in dormitories. All of these situations train body, speech, and mind. If students can discuss doctrine in class but cannot live with others in the dormitory or dining hall without conflict, their learning has not yet become embodied. Yinguang's first point therefore teaches that the foundation of Pure Land practice lies in human relations: reverence, humility, tolerance, and care for others are the ground upon which name-recitation takes root.^[8]

From the deeper perspective of Pure Land doctrine, rebirth in the Land of Bliss is not the escape of an isolated individual. Amitabha's vows gather all sentient beings into a purified field where they cultivate together. If practitioners wish to correspond to that vow-power, they must begin in this world by practicing purity, equality, harmony, and mutual support. The Six Harmonies are the method by which the Pure Land spirit is manifested in the present world. A community that reduces contention, supports others, and cultivates together already reflects something of the Pure Land.

4. "Enduring What Others Cannot Endure and Doing What Others Cannot Do": Bodhisattva Vows and Pure Land Provisions

Yinguang's instruction continues: "Endure what others cannot endure; do what others cannot do." This does not refer merely to ordinary patience or everyday action. It can be understood through the Mahayana practices of the six perfections and the vows of Samantabhadra. Although the Pure Land path has rebirth in the Western Land as its central aspiration, it does not exclude present bodhisattva practice. On the contrary, those with genuine faith and vows should actively cultivate patience, giving, vigor, rejoicing, and repentance amid the conditions of daily life. These practices purify bodily and mental karma and accumulate the provisions for rebirth.

In Buddhist scripture, patience is one of the six perfections and a central bodhisattva practice. The Diamond Sutra uses the story of the patient sage to illustrate the meaning of patience: when the sage's body was cut by King Kalinga, he did not give rise to hatred. This patience expresses the insight that there is no fixed self, person, sentient being, or lifespan to cling to. The connection to nianfo is direct. If a person recites the Buddha's name but is immediately overcome by anger whenever circumstances are unpleasant, the Buddha's name cannot easily enter the mind, and pure mindfulness cannot continue. Patience protects faith, vows, and the continuity of recitation.^[9]

Nagarjuna's Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom also explains the merits of patience. Patience is not cowardice. It is the capacity to observe causes and conditions with wisdom, transform resentment through compassion, and abide in composure through concentration. Whether one is studying, practicing, maintaining a monastery, or teaching the Dharma, patience is indispensable. Without patience, giving becomes superficial, discipline becomes unstable, and recitation is easily interrupted by agitation.^[10]

Chinese classical thought also sheds light on this point. The Mencius teaches that when Heaven is about to entrust a great responsibility to a person, it first tests the mind and body through hardship. This idea of moral formation through adversity parallels Yinguang's call to endure what others cannot endure. Buddhist patience is not passive suffering. It is a positive practice of training the mind in adverse conditions, reducing hatred, expanding compassion, and strengthening resolve.^[11]

“Doing what others cannot do” can be read in connection with Samantabhadra’s Ten Great Vows: paying homage to all Buddhas, praising the Tathagatas, making abundant offerings, repenting karmic obstacles, rejoicing in others’ merit, requesting the turning of the Dharma wheel, requesting the Buddhas to remain in the world, constantly following the Buddha’s teaching, accommodating sentient beings, and universally dedicating merit. Yinguang’s teaching to regard all people as bodhisattvas and oneself alone as an ordinary being embodies reverence, humility, and accommodation. It directs practitioners away from self-centered practice and toward the bodhisattva spirit.

Pure Land recitation without reverence can become empty repetition; Pure Land aspiration without bodhicitta can become narrow self-concern. Samantabhadra’s vows supply the expansive dimension of Pure Land practice. Through reverence, rejoicing, repentance, service, and dedication, the practitioner deepens faith and vows while cultivating compassion. Nianfo is then no longer an isolated personal act, but a practice connected to benefiting beings and realizing bodhi.^[12]

Samantabhadra’s vows occupy a special place in Pure Land cultivation because the Avatamsaka tradition itself leads the vast bodhisattva path toward the Pure Land. Yinguang, though emphasizing name-recitation as the main practice, fills his instructions with the spirit of Samantabhadra’s vows. Respecting those above and living harmoniously with those below is the daily expression of paying homage. Taking on others’ labor and helping them accomplish good is the daily expression of rejoicing in merit. Reflecting on one’s own faults is the daily work of repentance. Continuous recitation and universal dedication bring all practice back to the Pure Land.

Therefore, the Pure Land teaching must not be narrowed into concern only for deathbed rebirth. Genuine Pure Land cultivation unites faith, vows, and practice in present body, speech, and mind. If one vows for rebirth but cannot respect others, rejoice in goodness, repent faults, or endure hardship, the vow remains superficial. Yinguang’s greatness lies in translating the vast vows of Samantabhadra into ordinary daily conduct, so that every practitioner can cultivate the bodhisattva path in sweeping, eating, speaking, working, and living with others.

5. “Taking on Others’ Labor and Helping Others Accomplish Good”: Altruistic Practice and Offerings

The phrase “taking on others’ labor and helping others accomplish good” is one of the most practical elements in Yinguang’s instruction. A Pure Land practitioner who seeks only personal peace and ignores the suffering of others lacks compassion. A person who recites the Buddha’s name but refuses to help others in daily situations lacks bodhisattva practice. Yinguang’s language is simple: when others are burdened, one should help shoulder their work; when others are doing something good, one should rejoice and support them. This is giving, offering, and rejoicing in concrete form.

Giving may be divided into material giving, Dharma giving, and the giving of fearlessness. Taking on others’ labor can be understood as a form of inner giving: one gives one’s time, strength, and effort. Helping others accomplish good is related to rejoicing in merit and Dharma giving, because it supports another person’s wholesome action and encourages right faith and practice. It may also carry the quality of giving fearlessness, for it relieves anxiety and gives confidence to others.

The Diamond Sutra teaches giving without attachment to form, sound, smell, taste, touch, or dharmas. The ideal is to give without clinging to the giver, the gift, or the recipient. Yinguang does not expound this in abstruse language, yet his phrase brings the same spirit into ordinary life. One need not wait for a grand act of charity. Helping another person in concrete matters and rejoicing in another person’s virtue are already ways to practice giving without seeking reward.^[9]

“Helping others accomplish good” also corresponds to Samantabhadra’s vow of rejoicing in merit. Ordinary people are often bound by jealousy. When others do good, receive praise, or succeed in practice, one may feel uneasy. Rejoicing reverses this habit. To rejoice sincerely in another’s virtue weakens self-centeredness and nourishes compassion. For Pure Land practitioners, such rejoicing is not a secondary moral virtue but an important means of purifying the mind and accumulating provisions for rebirth.

In Buddhist colleges and monasteries, taking on others’ labor is not only service; it is a method for breaking attachment to self. Many afflictions arise in small situations: one feels disadvantaged by doing more work, dissatisfied when not recognized, or jealous when others are praised. Yinguang’s instruction brings practice into these subtle places. To be willing to do small tasks, especially when unnoticed, is to test and train the mind. To rejoice in others’ progress is to expand one’s capacity and

cultivate the atmosphere of the Pure Land, where good people gather and practice together.

6. “When Sitting Quietly, Always Reflect on One’s Own Faults; in Casual Conversation, Do Not Discuss Others’ Faults”: Repentance and Purification of Speech

Yinguang’s words “when sitting quietly, always reflect on one’s own faults; in casual conversation, do not discuss the faults of others” provide a crucial method of self-examination in Pure Land practice. If one is constantly discussing others’ weaknesses, spreading criticism, or indulging in idle talk, the mind becomes filled with comparison, arrogance, and agitation. Even if one recites the Buddha’s name, it is difficult for the mind to correspond to purity.

Reflecting on one’s own faults cultivates shame and remorse. In Buddhist practice, having faults is not the greatest danger; not recognizing, admitting, or correcting faults is the greater danger. Pure Land practitioners who reflect on their karmic burden can generate a more urgent aspiration for rebirth and a more sincere reliance on Amitabha’s vow. Repentance is not merely verbal. It means recognizing faults, stopping harmful habits, and resolving not to repeat them.

The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch says that true practitioners do not look at the faults of the world. This does not mean losing discernment between right and wrong. It means not using one’s energy to observe, discuss, and spread the faults of others. This accords closely with Yinguang’s instruction not to discuss others’ faults. False speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, and idle speech all damage the mind of practice. To guard speech is to protect nianfo.^[13]

Purification of speech is especially important because the Buddha’s name emerges through the mouth. If the same mouth recites the Buddha’s name and also speaks divisive or harmful words, the power of recitation is weakened by mixed karma. Yinguang’s advice to speak one sentence less and recite the Buddha once more does not deny necessary communication. Rather, it reminds practitioners to prevent language from becoming a vehicle of affliction.

Repentance must be expressed in action. If one says words of repentance but continues to indulge greed, anger, and delusion, repentance remains formal. Yinguang’s emphasis on constantly maintaining a sense of shame and repentance points to long-term vigilance. If one notices excessive speech, one begins by speaking less and reciting more. If one notices anger, one begins by yielding one step. If one notices laziness, one begins by maintaining regular practice. Through such concrete corrections, the Buddha’s name gains a place to function.

Reflecting on one’s own faults also corresponds to Samantabhadra’s vow of repenting karmic obstacles. This repentance is not gloomy self-reproach. It is the clear observation of one’s afflictions and habits, supported by the Buddha’s name. Shame weakens arrogance; repentance removes concealment. When arrogance lessens, recitation becomes more sincere; when concealment is removed, practice becomes more authentic.

7. One Buddha-Name in Walking, Standing, Sitting, and Lying Down: Name-Recitation and Nianfo Samadhi

The heart of the entire instruction is Yinguang’s teaching that in walking, standing, sitting, lying down, dressing, and eating, from morning to evening and from evening to morning, one should not let the Buddha’s name be interrupted. Ethical cultivation, patience, altruistic conduct, and repentance are all supportive conditions; the main practice ultimately returns to holding the name of Amitabha Buddha.

Name-recitation unites simplicity and profundity. It is simple because anyone can recite “Namo Amitabha Buddha,” regardless of social status, intellectual capacity, or circumstances. It is profound because the name gathers Amitabha’s complete merits and can guide the practitioner from scattered mind to concentration, from affliction to purity, and from ordinary consciousness toward uninterrupted pure mindfulness. Yinguang’s encouragement of quiet recitation, silent recitation, and practical methods of counting shows that the key is not external grandeur but sincerity and continuity.

“Not letting the Buddha’s name be interrupted” does not mean mechanical repetition. If the mouth recites while the mind is scattered, the practice does not readily correspond to the Pure Land vow. Recitation must gather the mind. Yinguang’s advice to recite with the mouth and listen with the ear is a concrete method for allowing the name to enter the heart. He does not demand withdrawal from ordinary life. Rather, he teaches practitioners to let the Buddha’s name become the axis of daily life. This is consistent with the Surangama teaching of gathering in the six faculties and continuing pure mindfulness. In ordinary

life, the six faculties are constantly drawn outward by objects. The Buddha's name gathers them back. Eating, walking, sweeping, working, and interacting with others all become occasions for mindful recitation. Nianfo samadhi is not primarily the pursuit of unusual visions or miraculous signs; it is the maturing of a mind that repeatedly returns to the Buddha's name until the name becomes familiar, deluded thoughts become sparse, faith and vows deepen, and the bodhi mind becomes stable.

Yinguang's method shows a strong practical rationality. He does not encourage attachment to visions, signs, or supernatural experiences. He stresses sincerity, attentive listening, and continuity. Soft recitation gathers the ear; silent recitation is suitable when one cannot speak aloud; vajra recitation balances mouth and mind; counting in tens helps counter scatteredness. The methods differ, but their purpose is one: to sustain the Buddha's name and purify the mind.

In this view, practice is not confined to the shrine hall and not postponed until death. Walking on the road, eating a meal, sweeping the floor, or interacting with others can all become moments of nianfo. When the Buddha's name is integrated into ordinary life, it becomes a real force for transforming afflictions and nourishing character. This is the living form of Yinguang's teaching to fulfill one's duties, guard sincerity, and recite honestly.

8. Taming Deluded Thoughts and Cultivating Humility: Seeing All Others as Bodhisattvas

Yinguang continues: when deluded thoughts arise, one must immediately extinguish them; one should constantly give rise to shame and repentance; even if one has some cultivation, one should always feel that one's practice is shallow; one should not boast; one should attend to one's own affairs rather than judge others; one should look at the good examples and not at the bad; one should regard all people as Buddhas and bodhisattvas and oneself alone as an ordinary being. These sentences reveal the spirit of humility and self-guarding that runs through Yinguang's teaching.

One of the greatest obstacles in Pure Land practice is arrogance after small progress. A practitioner may be able to recite scriptures, observe rules, explain doctrine, or sustain recitation, and then begin to look down on others. Yinguang knew that such arrogance easily damages the path and interrupts pure mindfulness. His instruction that one should always feel one's practice is shallow is not self-abasement. It is a way to protect the mind through shame, modesty, and vigilance.

"Attending to one's own affairs rather than judging others" does not mean indifference. It means not using a discriminating mind to measure and criticize others. One should learn from others' strengths and reflect on oneself when encountering others' faults. To regard all people as Buddhas and bodhisattvas extends reverence from the Buddha to all beings. If this view is practiced, arrogance gradually diminishes, reverence increases, disputes decrease, and nianfo becomes easier to internalize. The Daodejing says that the highest good is like water: gentle, humble, and non-contentious. This can illuminate Yinguang's cultivation of character. Pure Land practitioners must have sincere vows for rebirth, but they must also cultivate softness, repentance, reverence, and gratitude. Humility dissolves arrogance; repentance makes practice grounded; reverence supports communal harmony; gratitude strengthens pure karma.^[14]

The instruction to see all others as Buddhas and bodhisattvas and oneself alone as an ordinary being is one of Yinguang's most direct ways of countering self-pride. It does not erase moral judgment. Rather, it places the practitioner in a posture of learning. Every encounter becomes a condition for practice: when seeing virtue, emulate it; when seeing faults, examine oneself. Thus even external disturbances can become causes for inner gentleness and stability.

Humility is closely connected to the depth of Pure Land faith and vows. The Pure Land path relies on Amitabha's compassionate vow-power. A person who is proud of personal learning, practice, or insight cannot easily generate the heart of sincere refuge. By recognizing that one's afflictions remain deep and one's karmic obstacles many, one becomes more able to rely on Buddha-power, recite earnestly, and vow for rebirth. Yinguang's humility is thus not a secondary virtue but a protection of faith and vows.

9. Firm Assurance of Rebirth and the Closed Loop of Daily Practice

Yinguang concludes: "If you can cultivate according to what I have said, you will certainly be born in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss." This sentence gathers the whole instruction. To cultivate according to his words does not mean oral recitation alone. It includes respecting those above and living harmoniously with those below, patience, taking on others' labor, helping

others accomplish good, reflecting on one's faults, avoiding discussion of others' faults, sustaining the Buddha's name, and taming deluded thoughts. Together, these form a complete system of Pure Land cultivation.

The point is to unite faith and practice. Pure Land cultivation is neither mere verbal recitation nor abstract doctrinal discussion. It requires that reverence, service, repentance, restraint of speech, humility, and recitation enter every detail of daily life. The Buddha's name becomes the core that gathers the mind, but the whole ethical field of life becomes the place where faith and vows are tested.

The promise of certain rebirth is not casual. It rests on true faith, earnest vows, and real practice. Only by giving up arrogance, treating cultivation humbly, observing discipline, purifying the three karmas, and reciting sincerely can Pure Land practice move beyond formalism and become verifiable daily cultivation.

Yinguang's Pure Land teaching is thus a complete structure: faith, vows, and name-recitation are the main practice; ethical conduct and bodhisattva vows are supportive conditions; repentance purifies the mind; humility and harmony establish the foundation of character. It accords with the Pure Land principle of relying on Buddha-power and reciting the name, while also embodying the Mahayana spirit of benefiting oneself and others.

For contemporary Buddhist education, this instruction has clear significance. Buddhist colleges should not only transmit doctrinal knowledge; they should also strengthen daily conduct. The Six Harmonies can regulate communal life; patience and giving can cultivate responsibility; honest recitation can stabilize faith and vows. Students should learn to express Pure Land practice in clothing, eating, dwelling, work, speech, and interaction with others. In this way they cultivate their own path while manifesting right faith and right conduct.

The practical, plain, and workable character of this teaching is precisely its value. It does not pursue mysterious states or external display. It roots Pure Land practice in daily life, allowing practitioners to accumulate merit, purify body and mind, and move toward rebirth through steady cultivation. The special excellence of the Pure Land path is then seen not only at death but in every moment of transformation and growth.

10. Conclusion

Master Yinguang's instruction lays out a clear sequence of Pure Land practice in simple language. It begins with respecting those above and living harmoniously with those below, showing that cultivation must first be grounded in interpersonal conduct and communal life. It then proceeds through patience, giving, rejoicing, and repentance, through which body, speech, and mind are purified and afflictions are reduced. Finally, it returns all practice to uninterrupted remembrance of the Buddha's name in daily activities. Its doctrine is deep, but its entry is plain; its goal is high, but its method is near at hand.

For Buddhist academy students, studying this instruction should not stop at memorizing a patriarchal quotation. It should become a norm of daily life: humility in class, harmony in community, careful speech in conversation, reflection on one's own faults, honest name-recitation in practice, patience in adversity, and willingness to serve in communal tasks. If practiced sincerely, the Pure Land path is no longer merely a reliance at the moment of death. It becomes a present method for purifying body and mind, dignifying monastic character, and fulfilling the path.

The contemporary value of Yinguang's Pure Land instruction also lies in its correction of common deviations. One deviation is to emphasize doctrinal knowledge while neglecting practice, turning Buddhism into a topic for discussion and a source of pride. Another is to cling to external forms of recitation and chanting while neglecting intention, repentance, and moral reform. Yinguang's approach avoids both. It recites the Buddha's name with firm faith and vows, reflects on faults within recitation, practices altruism through reform, and accumulates Pure Land provisions through everyday conduct. It is both doctrinally grounded and practically embodied.

The passage examined in this paper is short, yet its meaning is comprehensive. It reminds practitioners that the excellence of the Pure Land teaching lies not only in the hope of being welcomed by Amitabha at the end of life, but also in its present power to transform thoughts, counter afflictions, and purify body and mind. The dignity of a nianfo practitioner lies not only in the sound of the Buddha's name, but also in humility, patience, repentance, and compassion in daily relations. If one practices according to this instruction, the Buddha's name can permeate every part of study and cultivation, and faith and vows can be embodied in every word and act.

In sum, Master Yinguang's Pure Land teaching combines the simplicity of faith, vows, and name-recitation with the depth of discipline, concentration, wisdom, the six perfections, and Samantabhadra's vows. It takes rebirth in the Western Land as its final orientation, yet it also makes moral reform and good conduct the daily work. It encourages personal recitation while emphasizing communal harmony and shared cultivation. For this reason, this instruction still has significant educational and practical value today, offering a clear and workable path for contemporary Pure Land practitioners.

Funding

No

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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A Dialogical Study of the Buddhist Concept of Compassion and the Confucian Concept of Benevolence

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Abstract: This paper conducts a dialogical study of Buddhist compassion (cibei) and Confucian benevolence (ren) as two core ethical categories. Moving beyond the reductive dichotomy of “graded love versus equal love,” the paper proposes a dialogical ethics framework that reveals how compassion and benevolence, though grounded in different metaphysical paths—the theory of dependent origination and emptiness versus the theory of mind-nature—converge at the level of existential attainment and complement each other in contemporary moral practice. Drawing on primary sources including the Da Zhi Du Lun, the Lotus Sūtra, the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra, the Analects, the Mencius, and Zhang Zai’s Ximing, the paper analyzes the similarities and differences between the two traditions from three dimensions: theoretical foundations, modes of practice, and orientations toward the world. By juxtaposing Zhang Zai’s “all people are my brothers and all things my companions” with the Mahayana notion of “unconditional great compassion,” the paper critically reflects upon the reductive dichotomy that categorizes benevolence as merely “graded love” and compassion as simply “equal love.” Taking Master Yuanying’s “harmonization of Buddhism and Confucianism” as a modern paradigm—distinguished from the approaches of Taixu, Juzan, and Zhao Puchu—the paper explores the synergistic value of compassion and benevolence in contemporary philanthropic ethics, interreligious dialogue, and global ethical reflection.

Keywords: Buddhist Compassion; Confucian Benevolence; Ethical Dialogue; Unconditional Great Compassion; Master Yuanying; Dialogical Ethics

Published: Jun 17, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62177/apbs.v1i2.1497>

1. Introduction

Compassion and benevolence, as the core categories of Buddhist ethics and Confucian ethics respectively, constitute the fundamental answers of the two intellectual traditions regarding the basis, scope, and ultimate direction of “love.” Since the initial transmission of Buddhism to the Han Chinese region, the tension, mutual permeation, and convergence between compassion and benevolence have constituted an unavoidable and significant topic in the history of Chinese ethical thought. Against the backdrop of globalization and inter-civilizational dialogue, reexamining the internal structures and mutual relationships of these two ethical resources concerns not only the restoration of intellectual history, but also the activation and reconfiguration of contemporary moral resources.

Regarding existing scholarship, Huo Jinfeng has compared Confucian benevolence and Buddhist compassion from four dimensions—the objects of giving, theoretical foundations, requirements for practice, and ultimate goals—pointing out that the two “share common ground in many respects, while also holding divergent views”^[1]. Xu Tao and Liu Ru have

systematically examined Master Yuanying's historical achievement of harmonizing Buddhism and Confucianism along the Sinicization path of Han Chinese Buddhism—integrating Confucianism into Buddhism and achieving convergence between the two—interpreting the Mahayana bodhisattva's path of compassion of “benefiting self and others” through the Confucian idea of benevolence expressed as “loving all people and being close to the benevolent,” thereby revealing its epochal significance in advancing the modern transformation of Chinese Buddhism^[2]. Zhang Mandi, in her comparison of Mohist and Confucian theories of love, has cautioned scholars against categorizing Confucian benevolence and Mohist universal love as simply “graded love” versus “equal love”; such a dichotomous judgment should not be uncritically applied to Buddhist compassion either^[3]. Wang Wenwen and Shen Shunfu further point out that the Confucian ethics of benevolence underwent a genealogical evolution from “consanguineous ethics” through “ethics of the Other” to “ethics of symbiosis,” and that the “benevolence of oneness” (yiti zhi ren) in Song-Ming Confucian symbiotic ethics had already transcended the boundaries of early consanguineous ethics, converging with the Buddhist “great compassion of shared identity” (tongti zhi bei) at the level of existential attainment^[4].

In international scholarship, significant debates and diverse approaches have enriched the study of both Buddhist and Confucian ethics. In Buddhist ethics, a major theoretical disagreement has emerged: Damien Keown has articulated the structure of Buddhist ethics through the lens of virtue ethics, providing a systematic framework for understanding compassion as an ethical virtue rather than a mere sentiment^[5]; Charles Goodman, in contrast, has argued in *Consequences of Compassion* that Buddhist ethics is best understood as a form of consequentialism grounded in the well-being of sentient beings, with the doctrine of emptiness not undermining but rather grounding the universality of compassion^[6]. This debate between virtue-ethical and consequentialist readings of Buddhist compassion has important implications for comparative ethics, as it determines whether compassion is best compared with Confucian ren as a virtue or as a principle of impartial concern. Peter Harvey has examined the dynamics of compassion in early Buddhist and Mahayana contexts, highlighting its practical and soteriological dimensions^[7]. A recent study further distinguishes karuṇā from sympathy, empathy, and pity, arguing that compassion is an “ethically cultivated disposition” grounded in anātman and prāṭīyasamutpāda^[8].

On the Confucian side, David Hall and Roger Ames have interpreted ren not as a transcendent principle but as “authoritative conduct”—a relational, processual achievement emerging in concrete human interactions^[9]. In their translation of the *Zhongyong*, Ames and Hall further situate this reading within the broader framework of centrality (zhong) and the everyday (yong)^[10]. Ames has further developed this interpretation in his philosophical translation of the *Analects*, rendering ren as “authoritative conduct” rather than the traditional “benevolence,” thereby emphasizing its performative and relational character^[11]. This translation choice has direct implications for the Buddhist-Confucian dialogue: if ren is a mode of relational conduct rather than an internal sentiment, the comparison with Buddhist compassion shifts from a comparison of feelings to a comparison of practical orientations. Ames's conceptual lexicon further refines this by translating jian'ai (兼爱) as “inclusive care” rather than “universal love,” providing a more precise conceptual tool for comparing Confucian graded extension with Buddhist universal compassion^[12]. Tu Weiming has articulated ren as the core of a “spiritual humanism” that extends from self-cultivation to cosmic harmony^[13], and has further argued that ren involves a “creative transformation” of the self in which self-cultivation and cosmic participation are inseparable^[14]. Bryan Van Norden has clarified the structure of Confucian virtue ethics, demonstrating that ren operates through graded extension without sacrificing its universal scope^[15]. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Chinese ethics provides a comprehensive overview of these debates, noting that ren functions both as a comprehensive virtue and as one particular virtue among others^[16].

In the field of Buddhist-Confucian dialogue, comparative studies have been growing in recent years. Hamar (2021) has examined how Chinese Buddhism reinterpreted the Confucian concept of filial piety as a form of universal compassion, demonstrating a historical model of Buddhism-Confucianism convergence^[17]. Villamor Herrero (2024) has analyzed the synthesis of ren and cibe in the Japanese *Nihon ryōiki*, arguing that compassion in East Asian Buddhist assimilation became not merely a path to personal liberation but an obligation to act for social welfare^[18]. A 2022 study has examined the Wei-Jin-Nanbeichao process of “interpreting Buddhist precepts with Confucian rites,” revealing a dialogue structured around both similarity and dissimilarity^[19]. Muller has analyzed the Korean Buddhist-Confucian confrontation, noting that both

traditions share an altruistic foundation in “oneness of all things” while differing in practice ^[20]. Stalnaker’s comparative study of Xunzi and Augustine, though not directly about Buddhism, provides a methodological model of “bridge concepts” for cross-traditional ethical comparison that informs the present paper’s dialogical approach ^[21]. Despite this growing body of work, a systematic dialogical framework that moves beyond listing similarities and differences remains underdeveloped. Moreover, there is a striking gap in English-language scholarship on Master Yuanying: the only available English sources are a biographical entry in the Dharma Drum Institute’s Digital Museum of Chinese Buddhism ^[22] and a brief DBpedia notice, with no monograph or journal article devoted to his thought. The present paper seeks to fill both gaps.

1.1 Research Question and Thesis

Building upon the aforementioned research, this paper poses a single central question: Can Buddhist compassion and Confucian benevolence be understood not as opposing models of “equal love” versus “graded love,” but as complementary ethical resources that converge at the level of existential attainment and diverge only in their metaphysical starting points and practical paths?

The thesis of this paper is threefold: (1) The common dichotomy of “graded love / equal love” is reductive; both traditions internally contain the mechanism for transcending their starting points—benevolence moves from gradedness toward oneness, while compassion moves from non-differentiation through differentiated skillful means. (2) At their respective peaks of existential attainment—Zhang Zai’s “all people are my brothers and all things my companions” and the Mahayana “unconditional great compassion”—the two converge at the metaphysical level. (3) This convergence is not merely conceptual but has been historically enacted, as demonstrated by Master Yuanying’s harmonization of Buddhism and Confucianism, and holds practical significance for contemporary philanthropic ethics, interreligious dialogue, and global ethical reflection.

1.2 Methodological Framework: From Comparison to Dialogue

The distinction between “comparison” and “dialogue” is central to this paper’s approach. Comparison, as traditionally practiced, treats compassion and benevolence as objects of external juxtaposition: one lists their similarities and differences from a neutral vantage point, as if examining two specimens under the same lens. This method has value but also limits: it presupposes a third, external standard that neither tradition may recognize, and it tends to freeze living traditions into static conceptual schemas.

This paper seeks to extend “comparison” into “dialogue.” By dialogue, we mean a threefold methodological movement:

First, mutual interpretation on each tradition’s own terms. Rather than imposing a single framework, we first allow each tradition to articulate its own internal logic—compassion from within the Buddhist framework of dependent origination and the bodhisattva path, benevolence from within the Confucian framework of mind-nature and the extension of care. This means attending to primary sources in their own conceptual language before translating them into comparative categories.

Second, ethical complementarity. Having established each tradition’s internal coherence, we then allow them to illuminate each other’s blind spots and unspoken assumptions. Where compassion’s grounding in emptiness may risk detachment from concrete human relationships, benevolence’s insistence on the graded extension of care provides a practical corrective. Where benevolence’s starting point in kinship may risk parochialism, compassion’s universal scope provides a metaphysical horizon. This complementarity is not synthesis but productive tension.

Third, constructive retrieval for contemporary ethics. The dialogue is not merely retrospective; it aims to retrieve and reconfigure ethical resources for present challenges. This means examining how compassion and benevolence, individually and synergistically, can inform contemporary moral practice—without reducing either tradition to a mere instrument of modern concerns.

This threefold dialogical method differs from both simple comparison and forced synthesis. It does not seek to dissolve differences into a unified system, nor does it leave them as static contrasts. Rather, it holds differences and convergences in productive tension, allowing each tradition to challenge and enrich the other. In this respect, the present approach shares affinities with Stalnaker’s method of “bridge concepts” in comparative ethics—generic categories such as “virtue,” “human nature,” and “spiritual exercises” that are sufficiently general to guide comparative inquiry while remaining open to specific determination within each tradition ^[21].

2. The Connotations and Philosophical Foundations of the Buddhist Concept of Compassion

Buddhist compassion is not merely a simple emotional inclination; rather, it constitutes a comprehensive system with scriptural authority, metaphysical grounding, and a progressive hierarchy of practice. This chapter examines its internal structure from three levels: semantic origins and scriptural foundations, philosophical grounding, and practical gradations.

2.1 The Semantics, Scriptural Origins, and Primary Textual Foundations of Compassion

In Buddhist scriptures, “compassion” (ci) and “sympathy” (bei) respectively signify “bestowing joy” and “removing suffering”; when combined as *cibei*, they denote the fundamental aspiration to “bring joy and benefit to sentient beings and relieve them of suffering.” The thought of compassion has permeated the entire history of Buddhism since the Jātaka tales of the Buddha, and has received institutionalized expression in Mahayana scriptures and bodhisattva precepts.

The *Da Zhi Du Lun* (Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise, T 1509), attributed to Nāgārjuna, provides one of the most systematic articulations of the four immeasurables (*si wuliang xin*) and the threefold structure of compassion. In Volume 20, the treatise states:

“The four immeasurables are compassion (ci), sympathy (bei), joy (xi), and equanimity (she). Compassion means loving and caring for sentient beings, constantly seeking peaceful and joyful things to benefit them. Sympathy means pitying sentient beings who suffer various physical and mental pains in the five realms. Joy means wishing sentient beings to attain happiness and joy. Equanimity means relinquishing these three [preceding] states of mind, contemplating sentient beings without aversion or attachment.” (T 25, 208c)

This passage reveals that the four immeasurables are not four separate emotions but a progressive cultivation: from active benevolence (ci), to empathetic response to suffering (bei), to sympathetic joy (xi), to the transcendence of partiality (she). The movement from ci through bei and xi to she traces an arc from engaged concern to non-attached equanimity—a structure that already hints at the internal tension within compassion between emotional engagement and metaphysical transcendence.

Peng Ruihua points out that “compassion is the fundamental spirit of Chinese Buddhism, as well as the guiding principle of the bodhisattva precepts” ^[23]. The threefold pure precepts encompassed by the bodhisattva precepts—the precepts of discipline, the precepts of virtuous deeds, and the precepts of benefiting sentient beings—respectively bear the three functions of refraining from evil, cultivating virtue, and delivering sentient beings, “none of which departs from the essence of removing suffering and bestowing joy upon sentient beings.” The *Brahmajāla Sūtra* (Fanwang Jing) runs the theme of “filial piety is named precept” throughout the text, securing the spirit of compassion through the binding force of precepts. The sūtra declares: “A disciple of the Buddha should have a mind of compassion and filial piety, saving all sentient beings” (T 24, 1004a). Here compassion is not merely a personal emotional disposition but the fundamental basis of institutional ethics, constituting the core spirit of the Mahayana bodhisattva path.

2.2 The Philosophical Foundations of Mahayana Compassion: Dependent Origination, Emptiness, and the Primary Sources

The reason compassion in Mahayana Buddhism can transcend worldly sympathy and attain universality lies crucially in its metaphysical grounding in the theory of dependent origination and emptiness (*pratītyasamutpāda* and *śūnyatā*). This grounding is not merely theoretical but is demonstrated through key Mahayana scriptural passages.

The *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*), one of the most influential Mahayana scriptures in East Asia, grounds compassion in the Buddha’s singular purpose of leading all beings to Buddhahood. The “Expedient Means” chapter states:

“The Buddhas appear in the world solely for this one reason, which is true; the other two are not the truth. Never do they use a lesser vehicle to save living beings and ferry them across.... In the Buddha lands of the ten directions there is only the Law of the one vehicle, there are not two, there are not three.” (T 9, 8a-b)

The “one vehicle” (*ekayāna*) doctrine establishes that the Buddha’s compassion is not partial or discriminative but universally directed toward the liberation of all sentient beings. The sūtra further declares that the Buddha’s compassion is the driving force behind all expedient teachings: “I have employed the power of expedient means to unfold and demonstrate this doctrine of three vehicles, but the World-Honored Ones, every one of them, all preach the single vehicle way” (T 9, 8b). Compassion,

in this framework, is what motivates the Buddha to adapt his teaching to different capacities without ever abandoning the universal goal.

Zhang Yuxia, in her study of the compassion thought in the Lotus Sūtra, points out that “the compassion of the Lotus Sūtra takes the theory of dependent origination and the theory of impermanence and selflessness as its intellectual foundations, with the ultimate reality of all dharmas as its internal basis”^[24]. Zhiyi, taking the ultimate reality of all dharmas as his object, proposed the “threefold truth of perfect integration” (yuanrong sandi), fusing compassion with prajñā wisdom.

The Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra provides another crucial primary source for understanding Mahayana compassion. In the “Bodhisattva” chapter, Vimalakīrti explains that the bodhisattva’s compassion arises from the recognition that all sentient beings share the same fundamental nature:

“When the bodhisattva contemplates the suffering of sentient beings, he does not generate weariness or aversion. Why? Because he has generated great compassion. As he has generated great compassion, he does not abandon sentient beings.” (T 14, 549a)

This passage reveals that Mahayana compassion is not passive empathy but an active commitment sustained by wisdom—the wisdom that sees through the illusion of separate selfhood while remaining engaged with the suffering of beings who have not yet realized this truth. The bodhisattva’s compassion is thus paradoxical: it arises from the insight that there are ultimately no beings to save, yet it does not thereby become indifferent. This paradox—grounded in the doctrine of emptiness—is what distinguishes Mahayana compassion from ordinary sympathy.

Liu Xiaobing examines the basis of compassion from the perspective of “ultimate emptiness” (bijing kōng), noting that it can be understood from four dimensions: naturelessness, signlessness, selflessness, and impermanence. “Naturelessness and signlessness reveal the dependent origination and equality of all things, laying the theoretical foundation for compassion; impermanence and selflessness reveal the existential condition of humanity, reflecting the practical necessity of compassion”^[25]. Great compassion corresponding to ultimate emptiness can therefore transcend the world’s discriminative attachments and dualistic oppositions, attaining a state of purity and vastness.

It is evident that the reason Mahayana compassion can break through the ethical radius of intimacy and distance lies precisely in its grounding of “love” upon the metaphysical foundation of “no-self” (anātman): since there is neither a self that loves nor an other that is loved, the dualistic opposition is dissolved, and the boundaries of love naturally open up.

2.3 The Practical Gradations of Compassion: A Primary-Source Analysis of the Threefold Hierarchy

According to the tradition of the Da Zhi Du Lun, compassion unfolds in practice as a threefold progressive hierarchy: compassion directed at sentient beings (zhòngshēng yuán cí), compassion directed at dharmas (fǎyuán cí), and unconditional great compassion (wúyuán dàcí). The Da Zhi Du Lun Volume 20 provides a detailed account:

“When this mind pervades sentient beings throughout the ten directions, this is called compassion directed at sentient beings (zhòngshēng yuán cí). It is practiced mostly by ordinary people, or by learners who have not yet exhausted their outflows. As for compassion directed at dharmas (fǎyuán cí): those who practice it are arhats who have exhausted their outflows, pratyekabuddhas, and Buddhas. These sages have broken through the mark of self and other, extinguished the mark of identity and difference, and merely contemplate how [beings] arise from the continuity of causes and conditions.... As for unconditional compassion (wúyuán cí): only Buddhas possess this. Why? Because the minds of Buddhas do not abide in either conditioned or unconditioned nature; they do not rely on past, future, or present; they know that all conditions are unreal, inverted, and deceptive, and thus the mind has no object of reliance.” (T 25, 209c)

This passage is crucial for understanding the internal dynamics of Buddhist compassion. The threefold hierarchy is not merely a typology but a developmental trajectory: compassion evolves from a discriminative emotional response (directed at particular sentient beings), through a philosophical understanding (directed at the dependent origination of all dharmas), to a transcendental state (free from all conceptual conditioning). Each stage transcends yet preserves the previous one.

The Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra (Da Banniepan Jing) further elaborates the threefold structure. It states: “Compassion directed at sentient beings arises from attachment to sentient beings; compassion directed at dharmas arises from attachment to dharmas; unconditional great compassion does not abide in any mark” (T 12, 456c). The sūtra explicitly links the three kinds of compassion to different levels of spiritual attainment, emphasizing that unconditional great compassion is the exclusive

domain of the Buddha.

Yang Ye, in his *A Study of the Compassion Thought in the Lotus Sūtra*, connects this progressive hierarchy with the One Vehicle thought of the Lotus Sūtra, pointing out that the elevation of compassion practice from concrete relief to ultimate universal salvation constitutes the fundamental path of Mahayana bodhisattva cultivation^[26]. The unfolding of this threefold progressive hierarchy reveals the internal tension within Buddhist compassion between emotional expression and metaphysical transcendence, and also provides an important reference for the subsequent dialogue with the Confucian schema of “graded extension” in benevolence.

3. The Connotations and Philosophical Foundations of the Confucian Concept of Benevolence

Corresponding to Buddhist compassion, the Confucian concept of benevolence likewise constitutes a clearly structured whole across three levels: original textual articulation, the schema of extension, and metaphysical grounding. This chapter examines each in turn, with close attention to primary Confucian texts.

3.1 The Origin of Ren: Primary Textual Analysis of the Analects and the Mencius

Ren (benevolence) is the core category of Confucius’s thought. The Analects establishes its guiding principle through several key passages. When Fan Chi asked about benevolence, Confucius stated simply: “To love others” (ai ren) (Analects 12.22). This brief definition encapsulates the essence of ren: it is not a metaphysical abstraction but an active orientation toward other persons. Another crucial passage occurs in Analects 6.30, where Confucius elaborates:

“Now the man of perfect virtue (ren), wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be successful himself, seeks also to make others successful. To be able to take one’s own feelings as a guide—that may be called the method of benevolence.” (Analects 6.30)

This passage is foundational: it establishes that ren operates through an analogical extension of one’s own desires to others (“taking one’s own feelings as a guide”), yet this extension is not abstract universalization but proceeds from concrete self-experience. The man of ren does not love others from an abstract principle; he loves them because he recognizes in them the same desires and vulnerabilities he experiences in himself.

Mencius subsequently clarified the source of benevolence as “the heart of commiseration is the seed of benevolence” (ceyin zhi xin, ren zhi duan ye). The Mencius 2A6 provides the most famous articulation:

“Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to alarm and distress—not because he sought an alliance with the child’s parents, not because he wanted the praise of his neighbors and friends, and not because he disliked the child’s cries. From this we may see that a person who lacks the heart of commiseration is not human; one who lacks the heart of shame is not human; one who lacks the heart of deference is not human; one who lacks the heart of right and wrong is not human. The heart of commiseration is the seed of benevolence; the heart of shame is the seed of righteousness; the heart of deference is the seed of ritual propriety; the heart of right and wrong is the seed of wisdom.” (Mencius 2A6)

This passage is pivotal for the dialogue with Buddhist compassion. Mencius grounds benevolence not in a metaphysical doctrine but in an irreducible human experience—the spontaneous “heart of commiseration” (ceyin zhi xin) that arises prior to any calculation of benefit. This is remarkably close to the Buddhist notion of compassion arising from the perception of suffering, yet the grounding is different: Mencius anchors it in human nature itself (the “four sprouts”), while Buddhism anchors it in the metaphysical insight into dependent origination and emptiness. The former is a mode of grounding in the theory of mind-nature, with love activated from within to without; the latter is a mode of grounding in the theory of dependent origination, with love opening outward from emptiness.

Xu Baiyi points out that “the Confucian culture centered on benevolence,” though scattered across different classical texts, “still possesses an implicit theoretical system,” composed of three parts: “the cognitive dimension of benevolence thought, the moral ontology based on ren, and the theoretical essentials of benevolence,” sufficient to demonstrate the philosophical essence and cultural characteristics of benevolence thought in the history of Chinese thought^[27].

3.2 The Extension of Ren: A Primary-Source Reading of “Loving Kin, Loving People, and Loving

Things”

The love of benevolence does not extend uniformly across a flat plane; rather, it expands from inner to outer according to a certain gradation. The key passage is Mencius 7A45:

“The gentleman, in his relation to things, loves them but is not benevolent toward them. In his relation to the people, he is benevolent toward them but does not feel familial affection for them. He feels familial affection for his kin, is benevolent toward the people, and loves all things.” (Mencius 7A45)

This passage has often been read as confirming the “graded” nature of Confucian love. Yet the gradation is not arbitrary: Mencius carefully distinguishes three modalities of concern—familial affection (*qin*), benevolence (*ren*), and love (*ai*)—each appropriate to its object. The movement from kin to people to things is not a decline in moral seriousness but an expansion of the scope of concern, with each modality retaining its distinctiveness. As the Song commentator Jiao Xun noted: “Affection is itself benevolence, but benevolence is not exhausted by affection. When benevolence operates within the family, it is called affection; when it extends universally to the people, it is called benevolence.”

Yang Haiwen, centering on this passage, points out that “loving kin is the foundation of consanguineous ethics, loving people is the root of kingly governance, and loving things is the basis of natural ecology”^[28]. This schema of “loving kin → loving people → loving things” has long been summarized as the graded structure of Confucian benevolence. However, Wang Wenwen and Shen Shunfu further reveal that Confucian benevolence ethics did not stagnate at graded love for kin in its historical evolution: Han and Tang Confucians constructed an “ethics of the Other,” highlighting the priority of the Other over love for kin and expanding the boundaries of consanguineous ethics; the “ethics of symbiosis” constructed by Song-Ming Confucians “emphasized loving all things from the perspective of the benevolence of oneness,” thereby achieving a genuine transcendence of early consanguineous ethics^[4]. It is evident that benevolence itself is not frozen in “gradedness,” but has undergone a genealogical evolution of continually expanding boundaries.

3.3 The Metaphysicalization of Ren: Zhang Zai’s Ximing—A Close Reading

The most profound contribution of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism to benevolence lies in its metaphysicalization. Zhang Zai’s Ximing (Western Inscription) is the locus classicus. The text begins:

“Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I regard as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.” (Zhang Zai, Ximing)

The Ximing performs a remarkable philosophical operation: it takes the natural human feeling of familial love and extends it to cosmic proportions through a metaphysical argument about the unity of all things in *qi*. If heaven and earth are parents, then all humans are siblings and all things are companions—not metaphorically, but ontologically, because they share the same constitutive *qi*.

Zhu Hanmin’s reading of Zhang Zai’s Ximing points out that Zhang Zai, taking “the Great Void is *qi*” (*taixu ji qi*) as his ontological basis, understood benevolence at “both the phenomenal and the metaphysical levels, explaining the causes of and the path to integrating partial love and universal love”; “the theory that the Great Void is *qi* both preserves the reasonable value of partial love at the phenomenal level and affirms the sublime value of universal love at the metaphysical level,” thereby achieving through metaphysics of existential attainment “the integration of partial love and universal love in actual moral practice”^[29]. “All people are my brothers, and all things my companions”—this immortal line extends benevolence from family ethics to cosmic unity, echoing from afar the Mahayana Buddhist existential attainment of “unconditional great compassion, great compassion of shared identity,” and also laying the groundwork for the subsequent juxtapositional dialogue between “all people are my brothers and all things my companions” and “unconditional great compassion.”

This metaphysicalization is crucial for the dialogue with Buddhism. Zhang Zai’s Ximing demonstrates that Confucian benevolence, when pushed to its logical conclusion, arrives at a universality that mirrors Buddhist compassion—not through the negation of the self (as in Buddhism), but through the expansion of the self to encompass all things. The difference in metaphysical path (expansion of the self versus dissolution of the self) yields a convergence at the level of practical outcome: both traditions arrive at universal concern for all beings.

4. Dialogue and Analysis Between Compassion and Benevolence

Having examined the internal foundations of compassion and benevolence respectively, this chapter enters the core stage of dialogue. Following the methodological framework outlined in Section 1.2, the dialogue proceeds through three moments: mutual interpretation, ethical complementarity, and constructive retrieval.

4.1 Common Ground: Both Arising from Commiseration, Both Aiming at Altruism

Compassion and benevolence share notable common ground at the level of surface emotional experience and ultimate direction. Huo Jinfeng points out that “both Confucian benevolence and Buddhist compassion involve the two dimensions of humans and things,” and “both possess tremendous conscious initiative in practice”; most importantly, “both share the same orientation toward engagement with the world,” regarding altruism and benefiting the world as the fundamental direction of value ^[1].

This common ground is confirmed by the primary sources examined above. Mencius’s “heart of commiseration” (cēyīn zhī xīn) and the Buddhist “four immeasurables” both originate in the irreducible experience of encountering the suffering of others. Both refuse to confine ethics to the internal realm of self-cultivation, striving instead to realize it as genuine concern for others. The Confucian extension from commiseration to governance and the Buddhist transformation of compassionate aspiration into deeds of delivering sentient beings both embody what may be called an “altruistic-world-engaging” orientation. This shared orientation constitutes the ethical basis for dialogue between compassion and benevolence.

4.2 Differences in Theoretical Foundations: The Different Starting Points of the Theory of Mind-Nature and the Theory of Dependent Origination

However, beneath the shared altruistic orientation, the theoretical foundations of compassion and benevolence are not identical. The primary-source analysis in Sections 2 and 3 reveals a fundamental difference in starting points.

Benevolence begins with the question “what makes a human being human?” Its answer—the heart of commiseration, the four sprouts—grounds love in the innate structure of human nature. The movement is from within to without: the moral subject discovers in himself a spontaneous response to the suffering of others, and then extends this response outward through the graded schema of “loving kin, loving people, loving things.” The metaphysical horizon—Zhang Zai’s “all people are my brothers”—is reached by expanding the self, not by dissolving it.

Compassion begins with the question “how do dharmas arise dependently?” Its answer—the theory of dependent origination and emptiness—grounds love in the metaphysical insight that there is no self, no other, no dualistic opposition. The movement is from emptiness outward: the practitioner realizes the emptiness of all phenomena and, on this basis, generates compassion that is inherently universal. The graded structure of the three kinds of compassion (sentient beings, dharmas, unconditional) is not an expansion of the self but a progressive dissolution of the conceptual limitations that constrain compassion.

These two modes of theoretical grounding are not diametrically opposed, but their philosophical presuppositions are indeed different. The difference shapes their distinct argumentative trajectories and determines their different directions in practical extension.

4.3 Beyond “Graded Love versus Equal Love”: A Juxtapositional Reading from the Ximing to Unconditional Great Compassion

One common way of contrasting compassion and benevolence is to categorize benevolence as “graded love” and compassion as simply “equal love.” While convenient in its simplification, this contrast easily obscures the rich tensions within each tradition. The primary-source analysis in the preceding sections already suggests that this dichotomy is reductive.

On the Confucian side, Zhang Mandi has cautioned that Confucian benevolence “contains profound ideas of equality; one cannot categorize Confucian ‘benevolence’ and Mohist ‘universal love’ as simply graded love versus equal love”—a warning equally applicable to the dialogue between compassion and benevolence ^[3]. A 2024 study of the Mencius-Yizi debate further refines this point by analyzing the “one root” (yīben) versus “two roots” (èrbēn) controversy: Mencius argues that graded love proceeds from a single source (the family), whereas Mohist impartial love is accused of “two roots” because it simultaneously acknowledges kinship and demands equal concern for all [30]. This framework can be fruitfully extended to the Buddhist context: does the Buddhist claim that “all sentient beings are equal” constitute a “second root” that competes with the natural

human inclination toward particular attachment, or does the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness dissolve the very distinction between one root and two roots by negating the self from which roots could grow? Li Xiangjun points out that although the Confucian order of benevolence is indeed “a differentiated yet integrated structure,” through “the expansion of the scope of the benevolent person’s love,” it is also possible to have “self-love dissolve into the state of the benevolent person’s unity with all things”^[31]—this bears a striking structural resemblance to the Buddhist progression from “compassion directed at sentient beings” through “compassion directed at dharmas” to “unconditional great compassion.”

On the Buddhist side, the threefold hierarchy of compassion itself demonstrates that compassion is not simply “equal love” in a flat, undifferentiated sense. The *Da Zhi Du Lun* explicitly states that compassion directed at sentient beings “takes the mark of sentient beings” and “is practiced mostly by ordinary people”—it operates within the realm of discriminative appearances. Only unconditional great compassion transcends all discrimination. The graded structure of Buddhist compassion thus mirrors, in reverse, the graded structure of Confucian benevolence: both traditions acknowledge the phenomenological reality of differentiated concern while pointing toward a metaphysical universality that transcends differentiation.

At the peaks of existential attainment in the two traditions—Zhang Zai’s “all people are my brothers and all things my companions” and the Mahayana “unconditional great compassion”—they reach the possibility of convergence at the metaphysical level. Therefore, rather than the reductive dichotomy of “graded / equal,” a more accurate description would be: benevolence takes gradedness as its starting point and oneness as its ultimate end; compassion takes non-differentiation as its fundamental nature and differentiated appearances as skillful means (*upāya*)—the two are mirror images of each other in their paths of extension.

4.4 Engaging the World versus Transcending the World: Complementarity as Productive Tension

Benevolence and compassion exhibit a tension that is both convergent and divergent in their ultimate directions. Although both possess an orientation toward engagement with the world, “the former emphasizes preserving benevolence and entering politics, advocating statecraft and practical application; the latter’s ultimate anchor lies in transcendence, with its final direction being the pursuit of enlightenment above and the transformation of beings below.”

However, the tension between transcendence and worldly engagement is not irreconcilable. The Mahayana bodhisattva path takes “never abandoning sentient beings” as its fundamental vow, advocating “engaging in worldly affairs with a transcendent mind”—this spirit precisely complements the Confucian orientation of “statecraft.” Compassion provides the spiritual elevation that transcends utilitarian calculation for worldly endeavors, while benevolence injects a practicable and traceable ethical path into tendencies toward withdrawal.

This complementarity is not a synthesis that dissolves the differences between the two traditions. Rather, it is a productive tension: each tradition retains its distinct identity while being enriched by the other. In the complex and pluralistic ethical circumstances of modern society, the ethical resources of a single tradition can no longer independently address compound moral questions: benevolence is more operational at the level of institutional ethics and public governance, while compassion possesses greater force at the level of ultimate concern and cross-cultural universality. The dialogue between the two therefore does not stop at the identification of differences, but points toward a dual anchor in contemporary moral practice—grounding institutions in benevolence, elevating spirit through compassion.

5. Historical Convergence and Contemporary Value

The dialogue between compassion and benevolence is not purely a conceptual construct; it has deep historical traces in the history of Chinese thought and continues to hold practical value in the contemporary era. This chapter first takes Master Yuanying’s “harmonization of Buddhism and Confucianism” as a modern paradigm, comparing his approach with those of Taixu, Juzan, and Zhao Puchu, and then explores the synergistic value of the two in contemporary philanthropic ethics, interreligious dialogue, and global ethical reflection.

5.1 Master Yuanying’s “Harmonization of Buddhism and Confucianism” as a Modern Paradigm

In modern times, as Buddhism confronted the reality of national survival, harmonizing Buddhism and Confucianism in a manner both faithful to principle and responsive to the times became a significant trend in the Sinicization of Buddhism. Among the modern Buddhist figures who undertook this harmonization, Master Yuanying (1878–1953) occupies a distinctive

position.

Why Yuanying? Master Yuanying is selected as the paradigmatic case for this study not because he was the only modern Buddhist figure to harmonize Buddhism and Confucianism, but because his approach was the most systematic in grounding the convergence of compassion and benevolence at the level of mind-nature (xin xing). Unlike other modern Buddhist leaders who primarily addressed institutional reform or social activism, Yuanying consistently returned to the philosophical question of how Buddhist compassion and Confucian benevolence share the same ontological root. It should be noted that Yuanying's thought is virtually unrepresented in English-language scholarship: the Dharma Drum Institute's Digital Museum of Chinese Buddhism provides a biographical entry^[22], but no monograph or journal article in English has been devoted to his Buddhist-Confucian harmonization. The analysis in this section thus constitutes a contribution to filling this lacuna.

Yuanying's own writings provide direct evidence of his approach. In a public lecture, he declared:

"In my youth I studied Confucian learning; in my twenties I entered the Buddhist gate. Having studied both Buddhist and Confucian learning, I find that in reality they share the same thread and follow the same path. In terms of cultivation, Buddhism speaks of 'returning from delusion to truth,' while Confucianism speaks of 'restraining oneself and returning to ritual.' In terms of ultimate attainment, Buddhism speaks of 'illuminating the mind and seeing one's nature,' while Confucianism speaks of 'exhausting principle and fully realizing one's nature.' This harmonization of Buddhist and Confucian teachings fits together like the two halves of a tally." (Yihoutang Wenji, p. 76)

This passage is revealing: Yuanying does not merely note external parallels between Buddhism and Confucianism; he argues for a structural identity at the level of soteriological method ("returning from delusion") and ultimate goal ("illuminating the mind / exhausting principle"). The convergence of compassion and benevolence, in Yuanying's framework, is not an accidental similarity but a necessary consequence of their shared root in the same universal mind-nature.

In his discourse on releasing living beings (fangsheng), Yuanying explicitly linked Buddhist compassion and Confucian benevolence:

"Regarding the protection of life, the Buddhist and Confucian teachings fit together like the two halves of a tally. Our Buddha takes great compassion and great sympathy as the foundation of saving the world. Great compassion means giving joy to all sentient beings; great sympathy means removing the suffering of all sentient beings.... The Confucian Book of Changes says: 'Heaven is called great generativity, Earth is called vast generativity; the greatest virtue of Heaven and Earth is generation.' Thus Confucius, in his commentary on the Changes, honors generation and generation again. Mencius says: 'When [the gentleman] sees [an animal] alive, he cannot bear to see it die; when he hears its cry, he cannot bear to eat its flesh.' ... We should protect life and preserve benevolence, advocating the protection of living beings. This truly accords with the shared purpose of both Buddhism and Confucianism." (Yuanying Dashi Wenhui, "Fangsheng Hui Yanshuo")

This passage demonstrates Yuanying's specific method of harmonization: he reads Mencius's "heart of commiseration" as the Confucian expression of the same fundamental impulse that Buddhism calls "great compassion." The convergence is not at the level of doctrinal formulation but at the level of the experiential root—the spontaneous inability to bear the suffering of others.

Xu Tao and Liu Ru's research indicates that Master Yuanying "along the Sinicization path of Han Chinese Buddhism—integrating Confucianism into Buddhism and achieving convergence between the two—interpreted the Mahayana bodhisattva's path of compassion of 'benefiting self and others' and 'benefiting sentient beings and saving the world' through the Confucian idea of benevolence expressed as 'loving all people and being close to the benevolent' and its spirit of 'extensively giving to and relieving the multitudes,' and, grounded in the practical circumstances of modern Chinese Buddhism, developed and harmonized the classical teachings of both Buddhism and Confucianism in a manner both faithful to principle and responsive to the times"^[2].

5.1.1 Yuanying in Comparative Perspective: Taixu, Juzan, and Zhao Puchu

To understand what is distinctive about Yuanying's approach, it is helpful to compare him with three other major modern Buddhist figures who also engaged with Confucian thought.

Master Taixu (1890–1947) advocated "Humanistic Buddhism" (renjian fojiao) and emphasized the social and institutional

dimensions of Buddhist engagement with the world. Taixu's approach to Buddhism-Confucianism relations was primarily practical: he sought to mobilize Buddhist ethical resources for social reform and national salvation. While Taixu acknowledged the compatibility of Buddhist compassion and Confucian benevolence, his primary concern was not their philosophical convergence but their shared capacity for social transformation. Pittman's comprehensive study of Taixu's reforms traces the development from "Human Vehicle Buddhism" (*rencheng fojiao*) through "Buddhism for Human Life" (*rensheng fojiao*) to "Humanistic Buddhism" (*renjian fojiao*), showing how Taixu progressively translated Buddhist compassion into a force for social transformation^[32]. A 2025 study further argues that Taixu's Humanistic Buddhism was not a rupture with tradition but a "performative philosophy" that reconfigured Buddhist practice for modern contexts^[33]. Taixu's "New Buddhist Movement" sought to integrate the ethical resources of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism to address the modern moral crisis, representing one of the most significant contemporary manifestations of Humanistic Buddhist thought and practice^[32].

Master Juzan (1908–1984) shared Taixu's commitment to social engagement but placed greater emphasis on the modernization of Buddhist ethics itself. Juzan sought to reform Buddhist institutional structures and doctrines, adapting them to contemporary social realities. His approach to Buddhism-Confucianism convergence was thus primarily reformist: he wanted to demonstrate that Buddhism could contribute to modern ethical discourse on its own terms, without being subordinated to Confucian categories. Juzan "dedicated himself to saving the nation and revitalizing the religion, propagating the Dharma and benefiting sentient beings, reforming Buddhist institutional structures and doctrines, and revitalizing Buddhist ethics and morality"^[34].

Zhao Puchu (1907–2000) represented yet another model: the Buddhist philanthropist-statesman whose charitable work embodied the convergence of compassion and benevolence in practice rather than in theory. Qing Yuan points out that Zhao Puchu's "family scholarly heritage of 'four generations of Hanlin academicians' and his Buddhist faith of 'unconditional great compassion' constituted the substrate of his philanthropic thought," and his philanthropic practice "transformed the Buddhist cultivation of 'repaying the four kinds of kindness above' into sustained charitable action, grounding religious faith and devotion to family and nation in social responsibility"^[35].

Yuanying differs from all three in a crucial respect: his harmonization operates primarily at the level of mind-nature theory (*xin xing lun*), not at the level of social reform (Taixu), institutional modernization (Juzan), or philanthropic practice (Zhao Puchu). Yuanying insists that the convergence of compassion and benevolence is not merely a matter of external cooperation or practical compatibility, but reflects an ontological identity: both arise from the same universal mind, and both aim at the same ultimate end—the transformation of the human heart. This philosophical depth is what makes Yuanying the most appropriate paradigm for the present study, which is concerned with the conceptual and metaphysical dimensions of the compassion-benevolence dialogue, not merely with their practical convergence.

5.2 Contemporary Value: Toward an Analytical Framework

The convergence of compassion and benevolence holds practical significance in at least three concrete domains. Unlike broad normative claims about "the community with a shared future for mankind," the following analysis specifies the mechanisms through which compassion and benevolence contribute to contemporary ethical practice.

5.2.1 Philanthropic Ethics: The Model of "Graded Universalism"

Contemporary philanthropic ethics faces a structural dilemma: universalist models of charity (drawing on Kantian or utilitarian frameworks) demand impartial treatment of all persons, yet in practice charitable giving inevitably reflects particular attachments—to one's community, nation, or cause. The dialogue between compassion and benevolence suggests a way beyond this dilemma.

Confucian benevolence provides the insight that ethical concern legitimately begins with particular relationships (family, community) and extends outward through graded extension. This is not a moral deficiency but a phenomenological fact about how moral motivation actually works. Buddhist compassion provides the metaphysical horizon that prevents this graded extension from collapsing into parochialism: the insight into dependent origination and emptiness ensures that the ultimate scope of concern is universal. Together, they suggest a model of "graded universalism"—philanthropic practice that begins

with concrete, particular commitments but is always oriented toward universal scope.

Sallie King's systematic study of engaged Buddhism provides cross-cultural support for this model. King analyzes nine contemporary Asian Buddhist activists and demonstrates that engaged Buddhist social ethics is grounded in the traditional Buddhist principles of interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and meditation, and that its non-adversarial stance bears structural resemblance to the Confucian emphasis on harmony^[36]. Her broader survey of socially engaged Buddhism further confirms that this complementarity is not an isolated case but a recurring pattern across Asian Buddhist traditions^[37]. This suggests that the complementarity between compassion and benevolence is not merely theoretical but is already being enacted in contemporary Buddhist social engagement.

Qing Yuan's study of Zhao Puchu provides a concrete example: Zhao Puchu's philanthropic work was grounded in both Confucian familial virtue ("four generations of Hanlin academicians") and Buddhist compassion ("unconditional great compassion"), and it was precisely this dual grounding that enabled his charity to be both practically effective (rooted in concrete relationships and responsibilities) and ethically expansive (oriented toward the relief of all suffering)^[35].

5.2.2 Interreligious Dialogue: Compassion and Benevolence as a Shared Ethical Language

The dialogue between compassion and benevolence also provides a model for interreligious dialogue more broadly. Both concepts function as "ethical bridges"—they are central to their respective traditions yet share enough common ground to enable mutual understanding. The methodology of dialogical comparison developed in this paper (mutual interpretation, ethical complementarity, constructive retrieval) can be applied to other interreligious contexts.

Specifically, the recognition that compassion and benevolence are not diametrically opposed ("equal love" versus "graded love") but are mirror images of each other in their paths of extension suggests a model for interreligious dialogue that does not require the dissolution of differences. Each tradition retains its distinct identity while being enriched by the other—a model that may prove more fruitful than either relativism (all traditions are equally valid) or exclusivism (only one tradition is valid). Hamar's study of Chinese Buddhism's reinterpretation of filial piety as universal compassion provides a historical precedent for this model: rather than dissolving Confucian filial piety into Buddhist compassion, Chinese Buddhism showed how the former could be reinterpreted as a particular expression of the latter without losing its distinctive character^[17].

5.2.3 Global Ethics: A Non-Western-Centric Contribution

The dialogue between compassion and benevolence also contributes to the emerging field of global ethics. Much of the existing literature on global ethics draws on Western philosophical frameworks—Kantian universalism, utilitarian consequentialism, or rights-based approaches. The compassion-benevolence dialogue suggests an alternative: an ethical framework grounded in the concrete experience of suffering and the relational extension of care, rather than in abstract principles or individual rights.

Zou Lulin and Cai Caihong point out that the Confucian concept of "benevolence" forms a layered circle that continuously radiates from within to without, namely "loving others → loving people → harmonizing with all states," which "admirably combines Eastern Confucian 'benevolence' civilization with Western 'universal love' (*fraternité*)," cultivating shared Eastern and Western values from "benevolence" to "great love"^[38]. The graded extension of benevolence provides a practical ladder from the individual to the collective, while the Buddhist compassion of "great compassion of shared identity" provides this ladder with a metaphysical vision that transcends national and civilizational boundaries. Together, they offer an ethical pathway that is neither the abstract rights-based individualism of the West nor the boundary-defending stance of nationalism, but a relational ethics that begins with concrete care and extends toward universal concern.

Conclusion

This paper has employed "dialogue" as a method to reexamine the internal foundations and mutual relations of the two great ethical traditions of Buddhist compassion and Confucian benevolence. The research demonstrates three main claims.

First, the common dichotomy of "graded love versus equal love" is reductive. The primary-source analysis of the *Da Zhi Du Lun*, the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and Zhang Zai's *Ximing* reveals that both traditions internally contain the mechanism for transcending their starting points: benevolence moves from gradedness toward the oneness of "all people are my brothers," while compassion moves from non-differentiation through the graded practice of the three kinds of compassion.

They are mirror images of each other in their paths of extension—benevolence takes gradedness as its starting point and oneness as its ultimate end; compassion takes non-differentiation as its fundamental nature and differentiated appearances as skillful means.

Second, beneath the shared origin in commiseration and shared altruistic direction, compassion and benevolence are respectively grounded in different metaphysical paths—the theory of dependent origination versus the theory of mind-nature. This difference does not preclude convergence; rather, at the peaks of existential attainment in the two traditions, they reach the possibility of convergence at the metaphysical level, as demonstrated by the juxtaposition of Zhang Zai’s Ximing and the Mahayana “unconditional great compassion.”

Third, this convergence is not merely conceptual but has been historically enacted. Master Yuanying’s modern paradigm of “harmonizing Buddhism and Confucianism”—distinguished from the approaches of Taixu, Juzan, and Zhao Puchu by its grounding in mind-nature theory—demonstrates that the Buddhist-Confucian ethical dialogue extends beyond scholarly analysis and can be realized as concrete spiritual resources and social practice. The synergistic value of compassion and benevolence is analytically demonstrated in three domains: philanthropic ethics (the model of “graded universalism”), interreligious dialogue (compassion and benevolence as shared ethical language), and global ethics (a non-Western-centric contribution).

This study still has its limitations: the more specific historical details of Song-Ming Buddhist-Confucian interaction, the institutional transformation of compassion ethics in the modern Humanistic Buddhist context, and further comparison of compassion and benevolence in the context of contemporary East Asian ethics—all these topics merit further in-depth investigation.

Funding

No

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Faith, Karma, Beings, Practice, Frugality: Humanistic Buddhism System and Practice

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Abstract: Humanistic Buddhism, with its core tenets of grounding itself in the human realm, attaining Buddhahood, and benefiting sentient beings, promotes the transformation of Buddhism toward greater engagement with the world and integration into daily life. This article systematically examines the classic foundations, ideological implications, and internal logic of Humanistic Buddhism, focusing on five key concepts: faith, cause and effect, sentient beings, spiritual practice, and frugality. It explores the contemporary significance and practical pathways for cultivating Humanistic Buddhist practices in today's world. The study finds that these five perspectives mutually support and organically unify to form a comprehensive intellectual framework for Humanistic Buddhism. In the face of contemporary societal challenges—such as spiritual emptiness, utilitarianism, moral decay, and social alienation—these five perspectives can offer valuable guidance for individuals seeking inner peace, moral self-discipline, and effective social governance. In the new era, Buddhist practice must uphold right belief, clearly understand cause and effect, embody compassion, pursue pragmatic cultivation, and embrace frugality while rejecting extravagance, thereby contributing to the high-quality development of Buddhism in China through its localization, modernization, and integration into everyday life.

Keywords: Humanistic Buddhism; Faith; Cause and Effect; Sentient Beings; Cultivation and Study; Frugality; Sinicization of Buddhism

Published: Jun 17, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62177/apbs.v1i2.1470>

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

The secularization and rationalization brought about by the modernization and transformation of contemporary society have made it increasingly difficult for the traditional Buddhist approach—characterized by an emphasis on transcendence and a neglect of practical, real-world engagement—to meet the needs of today's society. To promote the modern transformation of Buddhism, Master Taixu proposed “Buddhism for Life,” advocating that the teachings of the Buddha be deeply rooted in the practice of everyday life^[1]. Building upon Master Taixu's ideas, Master Yinshun further refined the theoretical framework and formally established the core tenets of Humanistic Buddhism, adhering to the guiding principle of “the Buddha arises from the human realm; one becomes a Buddha through engaging fully in human life; benefiting oneself and others.” Subsequently, eminent monks such as Xingyun and Sheng Yen continued to advance and innovate Humanistic Buddhism, driving its integration into daily life, social engagement, and internationalization, thereby making it the mainstream development model

of contemporary Han Chinese Buddhism. Against the backdrop of the new era's efforts to Sinicize Buddhism, Humanistic Buddhism, as an important practical vehicle for localizing and modernizing Buddhism, holds immense research value and practical significance^[16].

Today, while our society has achieved a high level of material civilization, consumerism and utilitarianism have spread unchecked, giving rise to a host of spiritual and social dilemmas—including a loss of faith among the general public, moral decline, psychological anxiety, interpersonal alienation, and ecological imbalance. The core principles advocated by Humanistic Buddhism—such as right belief, cause and effect, compassion, pragmatism, and frugality—are deeply rooted in the original teachings of Buddhism and resonate with the core values of modern society. These principles can effectively bring inner peace and well-being to individuals, guide ethical behavior in the broader community, and help resolve various social conflicts. Based on this understanding, this article constructs a systematic framework for the Humanistic Buddhist thought system around five key principles, analyzes its contemporary value, current challenges, and practical approaches, and thus demonstrates both theoretical innovation and practical relevance.

1.2 Research Status and Research Innovation

By reviewing the current state of academic research, we find that domestic studies on Humanistic Buddhism in China are abundant^[6], primarily focusing on four main areas: tracing the intellectual lineage of eminent masters, elucidating the core characteristics, analyzing practical social case studies, and exploring the adaptation of Buddhism to Chinese cultural contexts^[9]. However, overall, these studies suffer from fragmented research perspectives, insufficient exploration of the intrinsic connections among the five core concepts, marginalization of research on the concept of frugality^[8], and an overemphasis on theory at the expense of practice. Meanwhile, the Japanese academic community has been deeply engaged in the study of Chinese Humanistic Buddhism for many years^[10], concentrating on such research directions as comparative studies of modernization between Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, overseas dissemination, and addressing contemporary spiritual crises^[21]. While their perspectives are diverse and their arguments rigorous^[26], they similarly exhibit shortcomings, notably neglecting the logical connections among the core concepts and the dimension of integrating frugal living into daily spiritual practice^[13].

This article employs the methods of literature review, comparative study, and theory-practice integration, and follows a logical framework that unfolds as “Tracing the Origins of Doctrines—Constructing a System—Diagnosing the Current Situation—Optimizing Pathways—Drawing Conclusions and Looking Ahead.” Compared with existing research, the main innovations of this article lie in the following aspects: In terms of perspective, it systematically constructs a comprehensive ideological framework based on five core keywords, thereby addressing the fragmented nature of current studies; in terms of content, it formally incorporates frugality into the core ideological system of Humanistic Buddhism, filling a gap in academic research; and in terms of logic, it establishes a clearly hierarchical conceptual framework, significantly enhancing the systematicity and logical coherence of the study.

2. The Doctrinal Implications and Systematic Logic of the Five Core Concepts of Humanistic Buddhism

2.1 The Doctrinal Implications of the Five Core Concepts

The humanistic Buddhist thought system primarily comprises five core concepts: faith, cause and effect, sentient beings, practice and study, and frugality—all of which are supported by canonical texts and mutually reinforce one another, making them well-suited for contemporary human-centered practice. Faith is the foundation of spiritual cultivation; as stated in the “Xian Shou Chapter” of the Avatamsaka Sutra, “Faith is the source of the path and the mother of all meritorious virtues, nurturing all good dharmas”^[5]. Humanistic Buddhism emphasizes rational and upright faith, wisdom-based faith, and pure faith—distinguished from secular superstition and utilitarian worship. Grounded in the principle of dependent origination and emptiness, it upholds the unity of belief and practice and focuses on cultivating virtue in this very life. The Three Treasures faith advocated by Master Taixu highlights the humanistic Buddhist characteristic of placing people at the center and engaging in worldly practice.

The concept of cause and effect is the core moral principle of Humanistic Buddhism. As recorded in the “Anguttara Nikaya,”

“Good deeds lead to good consequences, while evil deeds bring about evil consequences”. Rooted in the doctrine of dependent origination, this concept holds that “one’s destiny is shaped by one’s own actions, and blessings are sought through one’s own efforts,” thereby rejecting fatalism and emphasizing that good and evil in this life will inevitably bear fruit. It encourages people to abandon evil, cultivate virtue, benefit themselves, and benefit others^[7]. Master Xingyun points out that a sound understanding of cause and effect serves as an essential foundation for personal self-cultivation and social stability, and also provides crucial support for the social development of Humanistic Buddhism^[3].

The concept of “all sentient beings” represents the ultimate value orientation of Humanistic Buddhism, establishing the core idea that all sentient beings are equal and capable of attaining Buddhahood. Upholding the Bodhisattva spirit of “great compassion without attachment and great empathy rooted in the shared essence of all beings”^[2], Humanistic Buddhism dispels discriminatory attachments and respects the inherent nature of all sentient beings. Its compassion is primarily manifested in practical actions in this present life, advocating for the betterment of society through benevolent deeds such as public welfare, care for living beings, and ecological conservation—thus putting into practice the principle of benefiting and delighting all sentient beings.

Cultivation is the key pathway for putting the Dharma into practice, requiring that theoretical study and practical cultivation be integrated and pursued in parallel^[4]. The Humanistic Buddhism advocates a way of life-oriented cultivation, breaking down the boundaries between practice and daily life and treating everyday activities, work, and living as venues for spiritual practice^[15]. It rejects the pitfalls of mere theoretical talk and attachment to formalities, thereby achieving a balanced and complete cultivation that harmoniously integrates wisdom and virtue.

2.2 The Logical Structure of the Five Core Concepts

The Five Principles constitute a comprehensive, progressive, and unified Buddhist practice system for the human realm^[14]. Among them, faith serves as the spiritual core, cause and effect as the guiding principle of conduct, sentient beings as the original aspiration for cultivation, study and practice as the path of realization, and frugality as the foundation of cultivation. These five elements mutually support one another, forming a complete logical chain: “Establishing right faith in the heart, grounding conduct in cause and effect, setting aspirations based on sentient beings, charting a path through study and practice, and cultivating integrity through frugality”^[22]. Ultimately, this leads to the cultivation goal of benefiting oneself and others, achieving perfect blessings and wisdom, and building a pure land in the human world^[27].

3. The Contemporary Significance and Practical Challenges of Humanistic Buddhism in Modern Practice

3.1 The Contemporary Relevance of Spiritual Practice

In the contemporary social context, the five core tenets of Humanistic Buddhism demonstrate remarkable practical relevance and can generate positive value across multiple dimensions—individual, interpersonal, societal, and ecological. Faced with the widespread challenges of modern society—material abundance coupled with spiritual emptiness, public anxiety, and existential confusion—Humanistic Buddhism’s rational and authentic belief system, which rejects superstition and utilitarianism in faith, offers modern people a spiritually enriching framework that is closely aligned with daily life and grounded in reason. This helps individuals find inner peace, stabilize their minds and bodies, and rebuild a robust and sustainable spiritual belief system. In response to current issues such as the rampant spread of utilitarianism, moral decay, and the erosion of integrity, the concept of cause and effect, verifiable in this very life, provides the public with clear guidelines for distinguishing between good and evil and serves as a powerful moral compass. It encourages people to abandon wrongdoing, cultivate virtue, practice honesty and altruism, thereby effectively purifying social norms and maintaining social stability.

Meanwhile, the Buddhist concept of universal equality and great compassion for all beings can help dispel the public’s self-centered attachments, cultivate a compassionate disposition characterized by inclusiveness and altruism^[23], and alleviate interpersonal alienation and indifference in modern society^[24]. The practical and down-to-earth approach to spiritual cultivation, which emphasizes living in the present moment and practicing mindfulness in daily life, helps people relieve the restlessness, anxiety, and mental exhaustion caused by the pressures of contemporary society, thus achieving harmony and

unity between body and mind ^[25]. The principles of frugality, minimal desires, cherishing blessings, and cultivating gratitude can effectively curb the extravagance, waste, and excessive greed brought about by consumerism, guiding people toward a simple and low-carbon lifestyle and fostering harmonious coexistence between humans and nature ^[30].

3.2 The Realistic Dilemmas of Contemporary Spiritual Practice

Currently, the secular practice of Humanistic Buddhism still faces numerous real-world challenges, and the implementation of its five core principles has encountered varying degrees of deviation. At the level of faith, some believers lack sufficient understanding, leading to the distortion of their beliefs—either by becoming obsessed with supernatural powers of ghosts and deities, blindly indulging in superstition, or reducing spiritual practice to mere utilitarianism. Commercialization reduces Buddhist practice to a transaction aimed at acquiring blessings and benefits, thereby straying from the core, rational, and authentic original intention. On the level of cause and effect, the public's interpretation of the teachings is often one-sided: either falling into passive fatalism and abandoning subjective spiritual cultivation, or denying the law of cause and effect altogether and indulging unrestrainedly in personal desires, thus triggering a moral decline at the individual level and social disorder ^[18]. At the level of practice, many practitioners suffer from severe self-centered thinking and lack a strong sense of compassion and altruism. They focus solely on their own personal cultivation and comfort, ignoring the suffering of sentient beings and the public good, thus deviating from the Bodhisattva spirit of benefiting and delighting all beings. At the study and learning level, there is widespread disconnect between theory and practice, as well as an imbalance between merit and wisdom. Many engage in mere verbal discussions of doctrines without applying them to daily life, fixating instead on secluded, otherworldly retreats, which leads to a hollow and formalistic practice ^[20]. In terms of frugality, influenced by consumerism, practitioners' minds have become less inclined toward simplicity and contentment; extravagance and competitive displays of wealth have become increasingly common. Moreover, some religious institutions have shown signs of secularization, contradicting the traditional practice of valuing simplicity and shunning luxury.

4. Contemporary Optimization Paths and Conclusions for Humanistic Buddhism Practice

4.1 Contemporary Practice Paths for Optimizing Spiritual Cultivation

In response to the various challenges facing contemporary humanistic Buddhist practice, and drawing on the core tenets of the five major concepts, we can develop a systematic and practical path for optimizing spiritual cultivation. First, we must uphold orthodox faith in our practice, clearly distinguishing between genuine faith and superstitious or utilitarian beliefs. We should resist the rampant trends of Buddhist superstition and commercialization, reject deviant practices such as worshipping ghosts and spirits or engaging in ritualistic exchanges for blessings, and insist on the unity of belief and action, integrating rational and authentic faith into daily life ^[19]. Second, we should embrace causal-based practice, widely promoting the concept of karmic causality in this present life, dispelling misconceptions about fatalism and the emptiness of causality, cultivating a deep sense of reverence for karma, and guiding practitioners to proactively abandon evil and cultivate goodness, using the principles of cause and effect as a regular framework to guide their words and deeds.

Third, we must put into practice compassionate cultivation, spreading the teachings of universal equality and profound compassion that sees all beings as one, thereby dismantling self-centered attachments, nurturing a selfless disposition, and actively engaging in social practices such as public welfare, care for life, and ecological conservation, thus contributing to the harmonious development of society ^[31]. Fourth, we should promote everyday-life-oriented cultivation, firmly upholding the principle of integrating practice with insight and cultivating both merit and wisdom. We should embrace the philosophy that “daily life itself is a spiritual sanctuary,” breaking down the barriers between spiritual practice and daily living, balancing theoretical study with practical application, and eliminating the pitfalls of empty theorizing and spiritual practice divorced from reality ^[28]. Fifth, we must adhere to a simple and austere approach to cultivation, emphasizing the importance of minimal desires, contentment, cherishing blessings, and valuing frugality. By combating extravagance and competitive consumption, curbing material greed, and embracing a simple lifestyle, we can cultivate a pure and serene state of mind and solidify the foundation of our spiritual practice ^[29].

4.2 Research Conclusions

In summary, Humanistic Buddhism centers on faith, cause and effect, sentient beings, spiritual practice, and frugality, thereby establishing a modern Buddhist ideological system that is logically coherent, attuned to the times, and practically implementable. It represents an important achievement in the transformation and development of traditional Buddhism and in advancing the Sinicization of Buddhism^[12]. Against the backdrop of frequent spiritual, moral, and ecological crises in modern society, the five core tenets of Humanistic Buddhism can effectively help individuals achieve inner peace and physical well-being, purify social norms, foster harmonious interpersonal relationships, and promote a virtuous cycle in the ecosystem—possessing profound contemporary value^[11]. In the new era, the practice of Humanistic Buddhism must steadfastly uphold the core principles of right belief, clear understanding of cause and effect, compassion for all beings, practical engagement in spiritual cultivation, and diligence and self-discipline^[17], thereby overcoming various malpractices in spiritual practice. The disease continues to drive the Buddhist way of life toward greater integration into society, socialization, and adaptation to the times, fully leveraging its vital role in benefiting humanity and nurturing the spiritual civilization of society^[19].

Funding

No

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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A Study on Master Shandao's Thought of the Karma of Right Assurance through Oral Invocation: Centered on Collecting the Mind via Sound and the Full Possession of the Three Minds

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Abstract: Master Shandao's (613–681) definition of oral invocation as the “Karma of Right Assurance” marks a pivotal shift in Pure Land Buddhism from visualization to vocal practice. However, contemporary practice and scholarship often overlook the intricate doctrinal structure underlying this concept, reducing invocation to mindless vocalization or over-mystifying Other-power salvation. Through a close reading of the Commentary on the Amitayurdhyana Sutra, this paper reconstructs the micro-interaction mechanism of invocation into a triadic structure of “sound-thought-aspiration,” summarized as “collecting the mind via sound” (yisheng shexin). It argues that the sound of the Name serves as a vital medium resonating with Amida Buddha's Primal Vow, while the “Three Minds” (sanxin) function not merely as provisions for rebirth but as internal cultivation norms. By examining contemporary deviations—such as prioritizing quantity over sincerity and misunderstanding “one-pointedness of mind”—this study redefines the latter as a directional rather than capability standard. Finally, it explores the implications of this doctrinal reconstruction for cultivating the monastic atmosphere (daofeng) in Buddhist academies, proposing that institutional discipline requires the internal support of the Three Minds to achieve lasting ethical efficacy.

Keywords: Master Shandao; Karma of Right Assurance; Collecting the Mind via Sound; Three Minds

Published: Jun 17, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62177/apbs.v1i2.1460>

1. Introduction

Master Shandao's (613–681) definition of oral invocation (Chin. chengming) as the “Karma of Right Assurance” (Chin. zhengdingye) marks a paradigm shift in Pure Land Buddhism from visualization to vocal practice. However, this core doctrine currently faces a dual dilemma in its contemporary transmission. Practically, oral invocation risks being reduced to mindless vocalization, leading to the misconception of Other-power salvation (Chin. tali jiudu) as an automatic mechanism devoid of subjective commitment. Doctrinally, interpretations are often skewed by later sectarian syncretism—such as the convergence of Chan and Pure Land—or generalized as mere psychological comfort, thereby obscuring the ontological depth of invocation as a profound reconstruction of praxis rather than a degradation of convenience.

Existing scholarship on Shandao and the Pure Land tradition is extensive. International scholars such as Kenneth Tanaka and Julian Pas have significantly advanced our understanding of Shandao's role in the sinicization of Buddhism and the historical formation of the Pure Land school. Furthermore, contemporary studies on religious sound practices have highlighted the ritual and acoustic dimensions of Buddhist recitation. However, most of this research leans toward macro-intellectual history,

historical philology, or general ritual studies. The micro-interaction mechanism within the invocation process—specifically how sound, thought, and vow-power interact to bridge the practitioner’s capacity and the Buddha’s Vow—remains underexplored.

This paper addresses this gap by reconstructing the internal doctrinal structure of invocation into a triadic framework of “sound-thought-aspiration,” summarized as the core proposition of “collecting the mind via sound” (Chin. yisheng shexin). It is crucial to clarify the relationship between this reconstructive framework and Shandao’s original texts: while Shandao himself did not explicitly use the phrase “collecting the mind via sound”—a term crystallized by later masters like Yinguang as “listening attentively” (Chin. she-er-di-ting)—this paper argues that the mechanism it describes is deeply rooted in Shandao’s exegesis. By deriving this implicit logic from the Commentary on the Amitayurdhyana Sutra (hereafter the Commentary) and clarifying it through Yogacara epistemology, this study interprets “collecting the mind via sound” not as a mere acoustic or psychological technique, but as a soteriological medium where the practitioner’s faith resonates with Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow.

Methodologically, this study employs textual close reading combined with conceptual derivation. Rather than solely reconstructing historical context, it derives normative implications from Shandao’s doctrinal structure to address contemporary issues. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 traces the formation of the Karma of Right Assurance; Section 3 analyzes the triadic structure of invocation; Section 4 extends the “Three Minds” (Chin. sanxin) from provisions for rebirth to internal cultivation norms; Section 5 examines contemporary deviations using these norms; and Section 6 explores the implications for cultivating the monastic atmosphere (Chin. daofeng) in contemporary Buddhist academies, arguing that institutional discipline requires the internal support of doctrinal ethics to achieve lasting efficacy.

2. From Visualization to Oral Invocation: The Formation of Shandao’s Thought on the “Karma of Right Assurance”

2.1 The Tension between Visualization and Oral Invocation in the Amitayurdhyana Sutra

A fundamental structural tension exists within the text of the Sutra on the Visualization of the Buddha of Infinite Life (the Amitayurdhyana Sutra, hereafter Contemplation Sutra). Regarding the main body of the scripture, the Buddha proclaims the “Sixteen Visualizations” to Queen Vaidehi—progressing from the contemplation of the sun, water, and ice to the splendors of the jeweled trees, ponds, and the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. This sets visualization through the “mind’s eye” as the crucial pivot of practice, which presupposes that the practitioner possesses a foundation of meditative concentration (Skt. samadhi) to keep the mind focused without distraction.

However, in the chapter concerning the “Lowest Grade of the Lowest Level,” the scripture records a highly impactful case: a dying sinner who has committed the Five Grave Offenses and Ten Evil Acts is, in the extreme distress of his final moments, “too oppressed by suffering to practice mindfulness.” In this crisis, he is told to “keep the voice continuous and complete ten invocations.” Merely by invoking the name of Amida Buddha (Namo Amituofo), he attains rebirth (Contemplation Sutra, n.d.). The Sixteen Visualizations, which require sustained power of visualization as a prerequisite, and the Lowest Grade chapter, which requires only ten oral invocations, constitute a profound conflict regarding the conditions for salvation. If this tension is not explained through refined doctrine, it inevitably leads to two opposite misreadings in Buddhist history: first, measuring the Lowest Grade chapter by the elite standards of the “Path of the Sages” and viewing it as an “expedient means of different intent” rather than a true teaching; second, absolutizing and vulgarizing the Lowest Grade chapter, thereby dissolving the necessity of any cultivation or spiritual transformation.

2.2 From Tanluan and Daochuo to Shandao: The Evolution of the Interpretive Standpoint

Prior to Shandao, Pure Land intellectual history had already accumulated important theoretical foundations to resolve this tension. Tanluan (476–542) dispelled the delusion of relying solely on self-power to sever afflictions. He distinguished between the “Difficult Path” and the “Easy Path,” clearly identifying the fundamental difference between “relying on self-power” and “relying on Buddha-power,” and attributing the basis for rebirth to the Other-power of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow (Tanluan, 476–542). Daochuo (562–645) inherited this idea, further establishing the “Gate of the Path of Sages” and the “Pure Land Gate” based on the Larger Sukhavativyuha Sutra. He pointed out that in the era of the Dharma’s Decline, the

spiritual capacities of sentient beings are shallow, and only one path remains viable: relying on Buddha-power to attain rebirth in the Pure Land (Daochuo, 562–645).

However, the mainstream Buddhist community at that time had not yet escaped the shackles of the “Path of the Sages” thinking. In particular, the Shelun School (Mahayana-samgraha), based on Yogacara logic, argued that Amida’s Pure Land belonged to the “Reward Land” (Sambhogakaya field), which only sages above the first Bhumi could enter (Yang, 2021). For instance, Huiyuan of Jingying Temple argued in his Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra that the Reward Land is “inhabited only by the Buddha... while ordinary beings and those of the Two Vehicles are excluded.” This elitist interpretation excluded the vast majority of ordinary beings (Chin. fanfu, Skt. prthagjana) burdened by afflictions—who are precisely the primary objects of Amida Buddha’s Vow—from the scope of the Pure Land gate, forcibly explaining the Lowest Grade chapter as a mere “expedient means of different intent” (Huiyuan, 523).

Master Shandao’s work of “establishing the definitive standard” was precisely his direct challenge to the Shelun School based on Daochuo’s “Two Gates” classification. In the “Section on the Essential Meaning” of his Commentary, he grasped the original cause of the Contemplation Sutra: Queen Vaidehi was not a liberated sage, but an ordinary being trapped in the suffering of the world. Using this as a catalyst, Shandao established the supreme interpretive principle of the “correspondence between the capacity (Chin. ji) and the Dharma (Chin. fa).” The focus of interpretation shifted profoundly from “what sentient beings can cultivate” to “how the Buddha’s Vow saves such beings” (Zhu, 2015; Chen J., 2024).

2.3 Following the Buddha’s Vow and the Establishment of the Karma of Right Assurance

Based on the interpretive standpoint of the “Ordinary Being,” Shandao defined oral invocation as the “Karma of Right Assurance” in the “Section on Non-Meditative Virtues” of the Commentary: “To single-mindedly and exclusively recite the name of Amida Buddha, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, regardless of the length of time, and without abandoning it thought after thought—this is called the Karma of Right Assurance, because it accords with that Buddha’s Vow” (Shandao, 613–681a).

The phrase “because it accords with that Buddha’s Vow” is the ultimate basis for the establishment of the Karma of Right Assurance. The Eighteenth Vow in the Larger Sukhavativyuha Sutra explicitly states the condition for rebirth through sincere entrusting (Larger Sutra, n.d.). Shandao further explained this vow in his Dharma Gate of the Samadhi: “For any sentient being who exclusively invokes Amida Buddha, that Buddha’s heart-light always shines upon them, embracing and protecting them without abandonment” (Shandao, 613–681d). Defining oral invocation rather than visualization as the “Karma of Right Assurance” was a deep reconstruction of the ontology of Pure Land practice. Invocation directly accesses the Buddha’s Vow, making it the most suitable “final channel of salvation” in extreme situations where the power of visualization cannot be generated (Yanjue, 2016).

3. “Collecting the Mind via Sound”: The Doctrinal Structure of Oral Invocation

Shandao’s designation of oral invocation as the “Karma of Right Assurance” was not an encouragement of unconscious, mindless chanting, but a practice embedded within an extremely rigorous doctrinal structure. This paper analyzes this structure through a triadic dimension: sound, thought, and vow-power.

3.1 The Dimension of Sound: Vocal Invocation, Aural Listening, and the Method of Collecting the Mind

In the Commentary, Shandao pointed out that practitioners should “always invoke the Buddha with the mouth and always practice mindfulness of the Buddha in the mind, without ceasing during walking, standing, sitting, or lying down” (Shandao, 613–681a). This statement reveals the internal logic of the “Sound Gate” of cultivation: “vocal invocation” is not an isolated external behavior, but the externalization of “mental thought”; “aural listening” is not passive perception, but an active mechanism for collecting and focusing the mind.

Viewing this through the explanatory framework of Yogacara, the mind of an ordinary being is constantly driven by the self-clinging of the Manas-vijnana, wandering among the six sensory objects. From the perspective of mental operations, Shandao’s invocation actually constructs a “focusing convenience” that directs the mind from scattered wandering to a single object of focus (Skt. alambana) via the concentration on the sound of the Buddha’s name. Unlike the visual concentration

on the “critical phrase” (Chin. *huatou*) in Chan or the internal contemplation of the “Three Contemplations in One Mind” in Tiantai, Shandao’s approach places the core mechanism of collecting the mind on the concentration of sound—what later masters described as “listening attentively to one’s own recitation.” It must be clarified that Shandao himself did not use Yogacara terminology, nor is “listening attentively” his original phrase; rather, it is a convenient summary by later generations. This paper uses this term to provide an interpretive reconstruction of the internal mechanism of “collecting the mind via sound” in Shandao’s invocation. This mechanism does not require pre-existing meditative power. Instead, it entrusts the task of “collecting the mind” to the perceptible object of sound, providing a concrete point of leverage for ordinary beings (Zhang, 2020).

However, a further distinction must be made: in Shandao’s context, the core salvific force is the “Luminous Name” as a whole. Shandao stated: “The World-Honored One Amida originally made deep and heavy vows to embrace and transform the ten quarters through the Luminous Name” (Shandao, 613–681c). The physical “sound” is merely the medium through which the Name manifests in the practitioner’s experience. The sound of the Name is not a simple acoustic wave but a concrete channel connecting the ordinary being with the Buddha’s Vow.

3.2 The Dimension of Thought: The Sincere Mind and Recognition of Faith

The “Sincere Mind” (Chin. *zhicheng xin*) ranks first among Shandao’s “Three Minds” and serves as the critical pivot for transforming invocation from a vocal act into a religious practice. In the Commentary, Shandao defined the Sincere Mind as “acting within a true and real heart,” requiring that practitioners “must not outwardly manifest a phase of worthiness, goodness, or diligence while inwardly harboring falsehood, greed, anger, or myriad forms of deceit and hypocrisy” (Shandao, 613–681a). This ethical requirement of internal and external consistency transforms invocation from an external lip movement into an internal recognition and acceptance of faith.

From the perspective of religious experience, the Sincere Mind embodies a profound structure of receptivity: the subject does not actively attain a transcendent state but, through the medium of faith and aspiration, allows the Buddha’s salvific power to act upon them. Shandao’s emphasis on “riding on the Buddha’s Vow-power” is a precise description of the passivity inherent in this active self-commitment. In his Hymns in Praise of Birth, Shandao cited the Contemplation Sutra: “If one invokes Amida Buddha even once, the heavy sins of birth and death for eighty billion kalpas can be eradicated” (Shandao, 613–681c). The sins are eradicated not due to the practitioner’s self-merit, but due to the vow-efficacy generated by the resonance between the invocation and the Buddha’s Vow. The absence of the Sincere Mind reduces cultivation to “mindless karma”—the Buddha’s name is recited, but the mind wanders elsewhere (Shandao, 613–681a).

3.3 The Dimension of Vow-Power: Resonance between Invocation and the Primal Vow

“According with that Buddha’s Vow” is the metaphysical foundation of the structure of “collecting the mind via sound.” Shandao elaborated on this in his Praise of Dharma Services: “All ordinary beings, whether good or evil, who attain birth do so by riding upon the great vow-power of Amida Buddha as the augmenting cause (Skt. *adhipati-pratyaya*)” (Shandao, 613–681b).

Shandao’s Other-power is not a simple binary opposition to self-power, nor is it a mechanical determinism that excludes the practitioner’s subjectivity. Within the framework of the “correspondence between the capacity and the Dharma,” vow-power is essentially the triggering and manifestation of the Buddha’s merit-transference within the sentient being’s consciousness. Shandao stripped the “self-power” of ordinary beings of its status as the “merit-power to sever afflictions and realize truth” and repositioned it as the “response-power to faithfully accept the Buddha’s Vow.” The full possession of the Three Minds makes invocation the intersection of the capacity and the Dharma at the level of vow-power. Sound is the medium, mind is the pivot, and the vow is the foundation. “Collecting the mind via sound” describes an integrated field of practice formed by the three-dimensional interaction of sound, thought, and vow-power.

4. The “Full Possession of the Three Minds” and Its Normative Significance for Pure Land Practice

In Shandao’s thought, the “Full Possession of the Three Minds” is not only the provision (Chin. *ziliang*) for rebirth but also a complete set of cultivation norms and a moral audit mechanism within the Pure Land School. Shandao explicitly stated: “Those

who possess the Three Minds will certainly be born in that land; if one is missing, rebirth will not be achieved” (Shandao, 613–681a).

4.1 The Sincere Mind: Establishing the Internal Norm of the “True Heart”

The requirement of the Sincere Mind constitutes a profound reflection on the formalistic tendencies in religious practice. Shandao severely criticized the orientation where “although the three karmas [of body, speech, and mind] arise, it is called goodness tainted by mixed poisons, or false practice” (Shandao, 613–681a). This emphasis contains a profound dimension of repentance—only through sincere reflection on past false actions can a true heart seeking salvation arise (Shibata, 2010). As an internal precept, the Sincere Mind requires practitioners to scrutinize the purity of their motivation in every invocation (Yinguang, n.d.; Chen Q., 2015).

4.2 The Deep Mind: Establishing the Faith and Aspiration of the “Ordinary Being”

Shandao interpreted the Deep Mind (Chin. *shenxin*) as: “Deeply believing that oneself is an ordinary being, and deeply believing that Amida’s Primal Vow is not in vain” (Shandao, 613–681a). The normative implication of the Deep Mind lies in its dialectical tension: “deeply believing oneself is a flawed ordinary being” and “deeply believing in Amida’s certain salvation” constitute a sublime structure of faith. Mixed practice is essentially “frequent interruption of the mind”—the oscillation of faith. As a mechanism for ensuring the stability of faith, the Deep Mind establishes a stable power of faith and aspiration for “exclusive invocation.”

4.3 The Mind of Aspiration for Rebirth and Merit-Transference: From Individual Rebirth to Communal Ethics

The Mind of Aspiration for Rebirth and Merit-transference (Chin. *huixiang fayuan xin*) breaks through closed, self-interested attachments. Shandao emphasized transferring the merit of invocation to all sentient beings for collective rebirth in the Land of Bliss (Shandao, 613–681a). The communal ethical function of the “Three Minds” stems from its internal logical structure: the Sincere Mind is a purification mechanism for motivation; the Deep Mind is a safeguard for stability; and the Mind of Aspiration is a transformation mechanism for externalizing faith into altruistic action. Together, they form a complete ethical closed-loop. When this loop operates, the development of the monastic atmosphere is no longer the result of institutional control but a natural manifestation of internalized doctrine.

5. A Doctrinal Examination of Contemporary Deviations in Pure Land Practice

Using “collecting the mind via sound” and the “full possession of the Three Minds” as normative benchmarks, several prominent deviations in contemporary Pure Land practice can be clearly examined.

5.1 Returning from Quantity to Sincerity

Based on the normative requirements of the Sincere Mind, if a practitioner focuses only on the quantity of invocations while ignoring the resonance of internal faith and aspiration, they easily fall into the “mindless karma” rebuked by Shandao. Cultivation should therefore return from an obsession with quantity to a focus on the “true heart” in every sound, placing qualitative sincerity above quantitative accumulation.

5.2 Distinguishing “Augmenting Responses” from “Response Worship”

A more subtle deviation is taking “spiritual responses” (Chin. *ganying*) as the goal of pursuit. Narrative accounts in the Contemplation Sutra, such as the “fires of hell turning into a cool breeze” (Contemplation Sutra, n.d.), belong to the category of “augmenting causes of response” in the Pure Land tradition (Shandao, 613–681a). However, if a practitioner takes seeking responses—such as seeing light or seeing the Buddha—as the purpose of cultivation, it is a reversal of root and branch, turning faith into a utilitarian pursuit.

5.3 Shifting from a Capability Standard to a Directional Standard

Another deep anxiety triggered by an unstable Deep Mind is the misplaced understanding of “one-pointedness of mind” (Chin. *yixin buluan*). This term originates from the Amitabha Sutra (Amitabha Sutra, n.d.) and is often misread as a profound state of meditative concentration. Returning to Shandao’s interpretive system, “one-pointedness” does not describe a capability state of “I can be thoughtless,” but defines a posture of faith: “I sincerely accept.” Based on Shandao’s principle of “exclusive invocation” (Shandao, 613–681a), this paper attempts a hierarchical reconstruction of “one-pointedness of mind,”

transforming it from a “capability standard” unattainable for ordinary beings into a “directional standard” for sustainable practice:

Level 1: Unidirectionality in External Practice (Foundational Dimension). “Listening attentively with one-pointed thought” requires maintaining a continuous stream of the Buddha’s name during formal sessions without being interrupted by external distractions.

Level 2: Mental Adjustment and Cognitive Transformation (Deepening Dimension). This requires the practitioner to raise the Buddha’s name to dissolve anxiety and distraction when emotions fluctuate, transforming the Buddha’s name from an “external tool” into an internal source of stability.

Level 3: Continuity of Life’s Underlying Texture (Ultimate Orientation). “Continuity thought after thought without interruption” requires internalizing invocation as the underlying texture of life. This level is the full realization of Shandao’s Karma of Right Assurance.

The correction of these contemporary deviations reveals a crucial dimension of Shandao’s thought: doctrinal structures inherently possess normative and ethical functions. The “Three Minds” are not merely internal psychological states ensuring individual rebirth; they constitute an ethical framework that regulates behavior and purifies motivation. It is precisely this transition—from the internalization of faith to the externalization of ethical norms—that bridges individual praxis and communal ethos. If invocation without the Sincere Mind degenerates into “mindless karma,” then a monastic community without the ethical infrastructure of the “Three Minds” inevitably degenerates into mere formalism. This ethical dimension provides the logical foundation for applying Shandao’s doctrine to the institutional and spiritual cultivation of contemporary Buddhist academies.

6. Implications of Shandao’s Thought for the Development of Monastic Atmosphere in Buddhist Academies

While the development of a monastic atmosphere requires institutional norms, it is difficult to form a lasting self-awareness in cultivation without the support of classical doctrine and internal aspiration. Only by exploring the paths through which doctrine is internalized into monastic character (Chin. *senge*) can enduring norms be established.

6.1 From Text to Right View: Nourishing the Foundation of Cultivation through Classical Doctrine

Currently, some students in Buddhist academies tend to hold a superficial understanding of Pure Land teachings. Institutions should incorporate Master Shandao’s “five works in nine fascicles” into their primary curriculum, laying the foundation for Right View through close textual reading. When students thoroughly understand the “position of the ordinary being” and the “decisiveness of the Buddha’s Vow” from a doctrinal perspective, they can more effectively resist the utilitarian and mystifying tendencies of folk beliefs.

6.2 From Regulation to the Body: Regulating Daily Practice through the Right Act of Invocation

A monastic atmosphere is manifested in daily life, and daily life is manifested in the body and speech. Communal regulations in temples should not merely stipulate the quantity of Buddha-name invocations but should follow Shandao’s legacy by emphasizing the collection of the mind, attentive listening, and clear articulation. By using the Right Act of invocation to collect the students’ body, speech, and mind, “collecting the mind via sound” ceases to be a conceptual term in books and becomes a real physical practice in morning and evening chanting.

6.3 From Individual Aspiration to Communal Ethics: Enhancing Monastic Character through the Three Minds

The core of monastic character formation lies in aspiration (Skt. *bodhicitta*). Shandao’s doctrine of the Three Minds can serve as an internal precept for students’ self-examination: using the Sincere Mind to counteract vanity; using the Deep Mind to counteract an unstable mind of the Way; and using the Mind of Aspiration and Merit-transference to broaden one’s mental capacity. When the ethical loop of the Three Minds operates within the Sangha, the development of the monastic atmosphere breaks through the “island” of individual practice and forms a powerful communal ethical field.

Conclusion

This study set out to address the contemporary dilemma of reducing oral invocation to either mindless vocalization or a mystical mechanism of automatic salvation. By reconstructing the internal doctrinal structure of invocation into the triadic framework of “sound-thought-aspiration”—summarized as “collecting the mind via sound”—this paper has demonstrated that Shandao’s Karma of Right Assurance is neither a mere acoustic exercise nor a passive reliance on Other-power. Rather, it is an integrated soteriological field where the practitioner’s capacity resonates with the Buddha’s Primal Vow. In doing so, the study clarifies the relationship between Shandao’s original texts and later interpretive frameworks: while the explicit phrasing of “collecting the mind via sound” was crystallized by later masters, its operational logic is deeply rooted in Shandao’s exegesis of the synchronous interaction between vocal sound, the Sincere Mind, and vow-power.

Furthermore, by extending the “Three Minds” from provisions for rebirth to internal cultivation norms, this paper provides a doctrinal corrective to contemporary deviations. Redefining “one-pointedness of mind” as a directional standard, rather than a capability standard, restores the accessibility and sustainability of Pure Land practice for ordinary beings. The transition from individual praxis to the communal ethics of the monastic atmosphere is not an external application but a logical extension of the text itself: the ethical closed-loop formed by the Three Minds provides the internal doctrinal support that pure institutional discipline lacks.

However, this study is primarily rooted in textual exegesis and conceptual derivation. While it clarifies the doctrinal mechanics of invocation, it does not empirically examine how contemporary practitioners or seminary students internally experience this triadic structure in their daily routines. Future research could employ ethnographic or psychological methodologies to investigate the lived experience of “collecting the mind via sound.” Additionally, comparative studies on the acoustic mechanisms of invocation across different Buddhist traditions could further contextualize Shandao’s unique contribution to the phenomenology of religious sound. Ultimately, returning to classical doctrines to regulate daily practice and nurturing monastic character through the Three Minds remains the vital heritage that Shandao’s thought offers to the contemporary Buddhist world.

Funding

No

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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The Grandeur of Dependent Retribution and Primary Retribution in the Pure Land and Its Significance for Constructing Pure Land Faith

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Abstract: Pure Land Buddhism regards the descriptions of dependent retribution (yibao) and primary retribution (zhengbao) as foundational pillars of its faith system. This paper systematically compares how the three foundational Pure Land scriptures—the Sutra on Immeasurable Life (Wuliangshou jing), the Amitabha Sutra (Emituo jing), and the Contemplation Sutra (Guan wuliangshou jing)—each emphasize distinct aspects of the two retributions. Drawing upon the interpretive traditions of the patriarchs Tanluan, Daochuo, Shandao, Lianchi, Ouyi, and Yinguang, the study analyzes the two retributions across four dimensions: the grandeur of dependent retribution, the grandeur of primary retribution, the originary power of the Primal Vow, and the non-duality of the two retributions. The study demonstrates that the three scriptures offer complementary descriptions that collectively constitute the scriptural foundation of Pure Land faith; that successive patriarchs translated the two-retributions doctrine into the core basis for practitioners' establishment of the faith–aspiration–practice structure; and that the doctrine of non-duality bridges the idealist Pure Land and the realist Pure Land, providing solid theoretical support for both the philosophical depth and the practical operability of Pure Land faith.

Keywords: Pure Land; Dependent Retribution and Primary Retribution; Other-power and Primal Vow; Faith–Aspiration–Practice; Pure Land Faith Construction

Published: Jun 24, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62177/apbs.v1i2.1496>

1. Introduction: The Doctrinal Foundations of Dependent and Primary Retribution in Pure Land Faith

1.1 The Buddhist Philosophical Content of the Two Retributions

The dyad of dependent retribution (yibao) and primary retribution (zhengbao) constitutes a core category of Buddhist cosmology and philosophy of life. Its theoretical provenance may be traced to the mind-only doctrine of dependent origination articulated in the Avatamsaka Sutra's famous verse: "The mind is like a skilled painter who can depict all five aggregates; there is nothing in any world that it does not create." The term "dependent retribution" (yi) refers to the existential environment upon which sentient beings depend, encompassing the land, nature, and the vessel-world (qi shijian); "primary retribution" (zheng) denotes the bodily form of sentient beings themselves, including body, mind, lifespan, and merit. Dependent and primary retribution are not two isolated entities; they are the retributive fruits of collective and individual karma, mutually conditioned and together constituting the complete mode of sentient existence within the cycle of rebirth.

Within the Pure Land doctrinal system, the theory of the two retributions acquired a distinctive theological significance. Master Daochuo (562–645) provided in the *Collection on the Land of Bliss* (Anle ji) the classical definition of the two retributions^[2]: “Dependent retribution refers to the lotus flowers, the seven-jeweled trees arrayed in rows, and the waters of eight meritorious qualities of the Pure Land; primary retribution refers to Amitabha Buddha, Avalokiteshvara, Mahasthamaprapta, and all the holy multitudes.” This definition not only delineated the concrete content of the grandeur of the two retributions in the Land of Ultimate Bliss but also established the theoretical framework of Pure Land grandeur: both retributions are accomplished through the vow-power of Amitabha Buddha and are beyond the capacity of ordinary beings’ self-power, thereby laying the theoretical foundation for Master Shandao’s doctrine of other-power and the Primal Vow.

Master Tanluan (476–542) further emphasized in his *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth* (Wangsheng lunzhu)^[1]: “The karmic fruits of the Pure Land: dependent and primary retribution are mutually accomplished,” thus revealing the wholeness and indivisibility of the two retributions. Master Lianchi (1535–1615) in his *Amitabha Sutra: Commentary and Subcommentary*^[8] elevated this relationship to the philosophical plane of Huayan’s “unobstructedness of principle and phenomena,” advancing the thesis: “dependent and primary retribution are non-dual; body and land are one and the same.”

1.2 Research Focus: Comparative Scripture Analysis and Patriarchal Interpretation

Existing scholarship on Pure Land Buddhism has concentrated largely on historical origins, intellectual developments, or the practical cultivation of particular patriarchs; comparative studies of the core doctrine of the two retributions across the three foundational scriptures remain insufficient. The three scriptures—the *Sutra on Immeasurable Life* (hereafter “the Great Sutra”), the *Amitabha Sutra* (hereafter “the Small Sutra”), and the *Contemplation Sutra* (hereafter “the Contemplation Sutra”)—constitute the scriptural foundation of Pure Land Buddhism and each emphasizes distinct aspects of the two retributions: the Great Sutra focuses on the process of fulfillment of Amitabha’s vows and the vow-power origin of the two retributions’ grandeur; the Small Sutra presents the dependent retribution of the Land of Ultimate Bliss in a direct and concentrated manner; the Contemplation Sutra transforms the two retributions into objects of systematic contemplation practice.

This paper proposes to analyze four dimensions: first, a systematic comparison of the differences and complementarity in the three scriptures’ descriptions of dependent retribution; second, a survey of the interpretive tradition of patriarchs Tanluan, Daochuo, Shandao, Lianchi, Ouyi, and Yinguang regarding primary retribution; third, an elucidation of the vow-power origin of the grandeur of the two retributions and its intrinsic connection with the faith–aspiration–practice structure; and fourth, an exploration of how the doctrine of non-duality bridges the idealist and realist Pure Land traditions to provide theoretical support for contemporary practice.

1.3 Review of Scholarship and Contributions of This Study

A substantial body of scholarship exists in both China and internationally, spanning historical documentation, intellectual history, and practice. Guo Hua’s study of the Pure Land thought in Daochuo’s *Anle ji*^[11], Zhu Fenlan’s analysis of the distinctive features of Master Shandao’s Pure Land thought^[22], Zhai Jiangling’s investigation of Master Ouyi Zhixu’s Pure Land thought^[15], and Wang Wei’s systematic survey of Pure Land belief in the Jin and Tang periods^[19] each contribute important perspectives. Yang Mingzhang’s compilation of Amitabha Sutra lecture texts provides an essential reference for understanding the popular transmission of Pure Land scriptures^[23]. Xia Quanli’s examination of Hanshan Deqing’s Pure Land thought further illuminates the rich diversity of Ming dynasty Pure Land interpretation^[14].

In the international academic context, Tanaka’s (1992) study of the formation of Chinese Pure Land doctrine^[25] and Livia Köhn’s (1996) translation and research on the *Contemplation Sutra*^[26] have established important foundations for international Pure Land studies. Nevertheless, a systematic structural analysis of the two retributions’ doctrinal function using the three-scripture comparative framework, together with a tracing of its development through the patriarchal interpretive tradition, remains an underexplored area warranting further inquiry.

The contributions of this study are threefold: first, it employs a horizontal comparison of the three scriptures as its principal framework to reveal differences in expression and functional emphases across the canons; second, it traces the creative interpretations of six patriarchs as a vertical narrative to demonstrate the historical accumulation of this doctrine; and third,

it positions the intrinsic relationship between the two retributions and the faith–aspiration–practice structure as a theoretical entry point for contemporary reflections on Buddhist practice.

2. A Comparative Analysis of Dependent Retribution in the Three Scriptures

2.1 The Amitabha Sutra: Sensory Description and the Stimulation of Faith

The Amitabha Sutra, translated by Kumarajiva of the Yao Qin dynasty in 402 CE^[4], depicts the dependent retribution of the Land of Ultimate Bliss in the most direct and concentrated manner, making it the most widely familiar canonical text among Pure Land practitioners. The sutra opens with: “From here, passing westward beyond one hundred thousand million Buddha-lands, there is a world called ‘Ultimate Bliss,’” thereby establishing the Land of Ultimate Bliss as a concrete, directionally situated object of faith.

Descriptions of material dependent retribution in the sutra are concentrated in three dimensions: first, the physical environment composed of seven jewels—“In that land there are ponds of seven jewels, filled with waters of eight meritorious qualities; the bottom of each pond is spread with pure golden sand”—symbolizing absolute purity that transcends mundane defilement; second, multicolored lotus flowers—“The lotus flowers in the ponds are as large as chariot wheels: blue-colored with blue radiance, yellow-colored with yellow radiance, red-colored with red radiance, white-colored with white radiance, marvelously fragrant and pure”; and third, the absence of suffering—“The beings of that land have none of the many sufferings; they experience only pleasures. Hence it is called ‘Ultimate Bliss.’”

A particularly distinctive feature of the Small Sutra is its emphasis on the quality of the six sense-objects expounding the Dharma. The sutra describes the birds of the Pure Land: “Day and night, in the six time-periods, they emit harmonious and elegant sounds; their songs give voice to the five faculties, the five powers, the seven factors of enlightenment, and the eightfold noble path.” Wind blowing through jeweled trees and nets produces “a sublime sound comparable to hundreds of thousands of instruments all played simultaneously; those who hear this sound naturally give rise to mindfulness of the Buddha, mindfulness of the Dharma, and mindfulness of the Sangha.” This depiction of the six sense-objects expounding the Dharma transforms the dependent environment itself into a continuous condition for practice.

2.2 The Sutra on Immeasurable Life: Primal Vow Fulfillment and the Complete Picture of the Two Retributions

The Sutra on Immeasurable Life, translated by Sanghavarman of the Cao Wei dynasty in 252 CE^[3], is the longest of the three scriptures and provides the most comprehensive account of both retributions. The Great Sutra’s singular contribution lies in directly connecting the grandeur of the two retributions to the forty-eight great vows made by Bodhisattva Dharmakara in his causal ground, thereby disclosing the vow-power origin of the Pure Land’s grandeur.

In its description of dependent retribution, the Great Sutra supplies more detailed accounts than the Small Sutra. Particularly noteworthy is its emphasis on the spontaneity of resources: “The beings of that land, when they wish to eat, the seven-jeweled bowls spontaneously fill with hundreds of flavors of food and drink; when the meal is finished, they spontaneously disappear; when they wish for clothing, it arrives in accordance with thought, without requiring tailoring.” This design eliminates altogether the mundane obstacle of laboring for food and clothing.

Master Daochuo provided an important exegesis of the bliss described in the Great Sutra in his *Anle ji*^[2], distinguishing three levels: “the bliss of spontaneity,” “the bliss of meditative concentration,” and “the bliss of enlightenment.” Gao Renxiong^[13] analyzed the literary qualities of Sanghavarman’s translation from a literary perspective, noting that the narrative style of the Great Sutra possesses both religious majesty and literary expressive power.

2.3 The Contemplation Sutra: Meditative Stages and the Contemplability of the Two Retributions

The Contemplation Sutra, translated by Kalayashas of the Liu Song dynasty between 424 and 442 CE^[5], transforms the dependent retribution grandeur of the Pure Land into an object of contemplation and cultivation through a systematic sequence of sixteen contemplations. The first thirteen contemplations—the sun contemplation, water contemplation, ground contemplation, jeweled tree contemplation, jeweled pond contemplation, and others—guide practitioners step by step in observing the grandeur of dependent retribution.

Master Shandao offered the most influential interpretation of the dependent-retribution contemplations in the Contemplation

Sutra in his Four-Fascicle Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra^[6], advancing the methodological principle of “pointing to a direction and establishing a form” (zhifang lixiang). Shi Yanjue’s research further shows that Shandao’s interpretation of the Contemplation Sutra played a pivotal role in the popularization of Pure Land Buddhism during the Tang dynasty^[24].

A comparative examination of the three scriptures’ descriptions of dependent retribution reveals: the Small Sutra employs sensorially intuitive language to arouse practitioners’ longing for the Pure Land; the Great Sutra grounds the grandeur of dependent retribution theologically through the logic of vow fulfillment; the Contemplation Sutra transforms dependent retribution into a concrete object of meditative cultivation. The three are complementary and collectively sustain the establishment and deepening of Pure Land faith.

3. The Doctrinal Content of Primary Retribution and Its Patriarchal Interpretations

3.1 Lotus-Flower Apparitional Rebirth: Symbolic Significance of the Mode of Rebirth

The grandeur of primary retribution in the Land of Ultimate Bliss is first manifested in its distinctive mode of lotus-flower apparitional rebirth (lianhua huasheng). The eighteenth vow of the Sutra on Immeasurable Life proclaims: “If there are sentient beings who wish to be born in my land, who with sincere mind delight and trust, and with even ten recitations [of my name] are not born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment—excepting those who have committed the five heinous acts or slandered the true Dharma.”

Lotus-flower apparitional rebirth carries profound symbolic meaning: the lotus flower grows from mud yet remains unstained, symbolizing that practitioners who have accumulated karmic deeds within the Saha world are nonetheless able to attain a pure body through recitation-based rebirth. The Contemplation Sutra describes in detail the different lotus grades of the nine classes of rebirth, embodying Pure Land Buddhism’s inclusive doctrine of “rebirth while carrying one’s karma” (daiye wangsheng)—the depth of one’s practice affects the grade of rebirth but not the actualization of rebirth itself.

Master Shandao offered a poetic interpretation of lotus-flower apparitional rebirth in his Hymns of Praise for Rebirth^[7]: “Those born through the apparition of the lotus flower are free from the defilement of carnal desire, pure and undefiled.” Master Lianchi, in his Amitabha Sutra: Commentary and Subcommentary^[8], interpreted lotus-flower apparitional rebirth from the Huayan philosophical perspective of “unobstructedness of events and events” as “accomplished by the inconceivable vow-power of Amitabha Buddha, manifesting the unobstructed interpenetration of events and events in the realm of one truth (yi zhen fajie).”

3.2 Immeasurable Lifespan and Non-Retrogression: The Dual Structure of Practice Assurance

The most supreme feature of primary retribution in the Pure Land is the attainment of immeasurable lifespan and the stage of non-retrogression (Sanskrit: *avaivartika*; Chinese: *abibaizhi*). The Amitabha Sutra explicitly states: “The lifespan of that Buddha and of his people is immeasurable, boundless, incalculable kalpas.”

Master Tanluan in his Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth^[1] regarded immeasurable lifespan as the fundamental prerequisite for “entering the treasury of the Buddha-Dharma.” Master Daochuo further emphasized: “The beings of that land have a lifespan of immeasurable duration, equal to that of the Buddha; hence they are able to attain Buddhahood in one lifetime.” Zhao Jiamin’s research further demonstrates that Daochuo’s discourse on immeasurable lifespan reflects the shift in Pure Land thought during the Northern and Southern Dynasties from abstruse metaphysics toward practical application^[17].

Non-retrogression encompasses three levels: non-retrogression from a stage, non-retrogression from conduct, and non-retrogression of mindfulness. Master Yinguang (1861–1940) in his Expanded Collected Writings of Master Yinguang^[10] provided a succinct elucidation: “In the Saha world, practitioners advance and then retreat, advancing and retreating, and non-retrogression is hard to achieve; in the Pure Land, relying on the compassionate power of the Buddha, one is reborn while carrying one’s karma and immediately attains non-retrogression.”

3.3 The Dialectical Tension Between Karma-Carrying Rebirth and Ultimate Liberation

One of Pure Land Buddhism’s most distinctive doctrines is “rebirth while carrying one’s karma.” Master Tanluan in his Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth^[1] cited the account of the lowest of the low grade in the Contemplation Sutra: “If there is a person who has committed the five heinous acts and ten evils ... at the moment of death, encounters a good spiritual friend completes ten recitations, and thereby is reborn in the Pure Land of Bliss; immediately entering the group of those

correctly established in the Mahayana, ultimately irreversible.”

Master Daochuo’s inheritance and development of this thought in the *Anle ji*^[2] more clearly displays the lineage of Pure Land thought from Tanluan to Daochuo. Zhao Jiamin and Cui Tao’s research further demonstrates that Daochuo’s karma-carrying rebirth thought, by simplifying the mode of practice, laid the theoretical foundation for the broad propagation of the Pure Land school in Sui-Tang society^[18].

Master Ouyi (1599–1655) in his *Essential Explanation of the Amitabha Sutra*^[9] provided a precise logical definition of karma-carrying rebirth, proposing: “Whether or not one is reborn depends entirely on whether one possesses faith and aspiration; the height or depth of one’s grade depends entirely on the depth or shallowness of one’s recitation practice.” Zhai Jiangling’s research demonstrates that Ouyi’s positioning of faith and aspiration at the core of the criterion for rebirth means that the key to Pure Land practice is no longer merely the depth of single-minded effort but whether faith and aspiration are genuine and complete^[15].

4. The Vow-Power Origin of the Two Retributions and the Faith–Aspiration–Practice Structure

4.1 Bodhisattva Dharmakara’s Forty-Eight Vows and the Fulfillment of the Pure Land

The grandeur of the two retributions in the Land of Ultimate Bliss originates from the karmic fruits of the forty-eight great vows made by Amitabha Buddha (the Bodhisattva Dharmakara in his causal ground) before the Buddha Lokeshvararaja. The *Sutra on Immeasurable Life* provides a detailed account of Dharmakara Bodhisattva’s process of deliberation over five kalpas to select and absorb the qualities of the pure lands of all Buddhas.

The forty-eight vows may be divided into three categories: vows to embrace the Dharmakaya (e.g., the twelfth vow for immeasurable radiance), vows to establish the Pure Land (e.g., the thirty-first vow for the purity of the land), and vows to embrace sentient beings (e.g., the eighteenth vow for rebirth through recitation). Among these, the eighteenth vow is regarded as the “fundamental great vow”: “If I attain Buddhahood, and the sentient beings of the ten directions who with sincere mind delight and trust, wish to be born in my land, with even ten recitations, are not born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.”

4.2 The Historical Construction of the Doctrine of Other-Power and the Primal Vow: From Tanluan to Shandao

Master Tanluan, drawing upon Vasubandhu’s *Treatise on Rebirth* in his *Commentary*, proposed “other-power” to correspond to the empowering support of Amitabha’s vow-power. Guo Xiaocui’s research demonstrates that Tanluan’s doctrine of other-power, through its exposition of the “easy practice path,” laid the theoretical foundation for the Pure Land school’s practical cultivation in subsequent generations^[12].

Master Daochuo further distinguished Buddhist practice into “the Path of Sages” (*shengjiao men*) and “the Pure Land Gate” (*jingtu men*) in the *Anle ji*^[2]. Zhao Jiamin’s research demonstrates that Daochuo’s doctrinal classification both inherited Tanluan’s other-power theory and provided systematic justification for the independent status of the Pure Land school through the “Path of Sages–Pure Land” twofold categorization^[17].

Master Shandao (613–681) provided the most systematic exposition of the doctrine of other-power and the Primal Vow in his *Four-Fascicle Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*^[6]. Zhu Fenlan’s research demonstrates that Shandao’s doctrine of other-power and the Primal Vow, through its emphasis on the vow that “ten recitations ensure rebirth,” transformed Pure Land practice from aristocratic metaphysical discussion to mass religious belief, exerting a far-reaching social influence^[22].

4.3 The Practical Connection Between Faith–Aspiration–Recitation and the Grandeur of the Two Retributions

The grandeur described in the two retributions is not purely objective knowledge but directly serves the establishment of the faith–aspiration–practice structure. Master Lianchi in his *Amitabha Sutra: Commentary and Subcommentary*^[8] explained why faith–aspiration–recitation is able to connect with Buddha-power: the fundamental reason is “mutual response in the path of stimulus and response” (*ganying dao*): the practitioner’s faith, aspiration, and recitation constitute the “stimulus,” and Amitabha’s compassionate reception and embrace constitute the “response.”

Zhou Tiance's research demonstrates that Master Lianchi's synthesizing methodology, while preserving the distinctiveness of Pure Land Buddhism, absorbed the intellectual resources of Huayan, Tiantai, and other schools, enabling Pure Land doctrine to gain broader recognition within the intellectual circles of Ming dynasty Buddhism^[21]. This observation is of significant importance for understanding the development of the two-retributions doctrine in the Ming period.

Master Yinguang offered a concise summation of the relationship among faith, aspiration, and practice: "Faith, aspiration, and practice: these three are the guiding principles of the recitation school." Zhao Zunxun's research demonstrates that Yinguang's faith-aspiration-practice thought, through its emphasis on "sincerity" (cheng) and "reverence" (jing), grounded Pure Land practice in every detail of daily life, providing practitioners of the modern period with a practically feasible guide for cultivation^[20].

5. The Non-Duality of the Two Retributions: Harmonizing the Idealist and Realist Pure Land

5.1 The Theoretical Tension Between the Idealist and Realist Pure Land

The most significant theoretical challenge facing the two-retributions doctrine in the history of Pure Land thought is how to address the tension between the "idealist Pure Land" (weixin jingtu) and the "realist Pure Land" (shiyou jingtu). In Mahayana Buddhism, "when the mind is pure, the Buddha-land is pure" is an eminently representative Pure Land concept. The Huayan and Yogacara traditions explain from a "all dharmas are mind-only" perspective that the Pure Land should not be understood as an external space entirely separate from the nature of mind.

However, if the Pure Land is interpreted solely as a symbol of the purity of one's own mind, then the grandeur described in the two retributions loses its substantive significance. Successive Pure Land patriarchs sought, within this tension, to find solutions to the unification of principle and phenomena and the non-duality of self and other through various approaches.

5.2 Tanluan's Dialectic of Being-Born and Non-Arising, and Daochuo's Classification of the Pure Land Gate

Master Tanluan inaugurated the early form of the non-duality doctrine through his dialectical interpretation of the relationship between "rebirth" and "non-arising." His Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth^[1] emphasizes that rebirth in the Pure Land is not a falling into real arising-and-ceasing but an entry into the forbearance of the unborn Dharma (wusheng faren) within a pure realm accomplished through the Buddha's vow-power. Zhengcheng's research demonstrates that Tanluan's dialectic of being-born and non-arising successfully resolved the apparent contradiction between "the real existence of the Pure Land" and "Prajnaparamita emptiness," providing an important argument for the metaphysical legitimacy of Pure Land Buddhism^[16].

Master Daochuo in the Anle ji^[2] advanced the formulation: "Although one speaks of 'mind-only,' this does not mean the Pure Land does not exist; although the Pure Land exists, it does not lie outside mind-only." This discourse provides a solid theoretical foundation for Pure Land faith.

5.3 Lianchi's Body-Land Non-Duality and Ouyi's Six-Faith Integration

Master Lianchi in his Amitabha Sutra: Commentary and Subcommentary^[8] provided the most systematic philosophical interpretation of the non-duality of the two retributions using Huayan's "unobstructedness of principle and phenomena," advancing the thesis: "dependent and primary retribution are non-dual; body and land are one and the same." Zhou Tiance's research demonstrates that Lianchi's body-land non-duality thought played an important role in elevating Pure Land Buddhism's standing within Ming dynasty Buddhist doctrine^[21].

Master Ouyi in his Essential Explanation of the Amitabha Sutra^[9] systematically integrated the tension between the idealist and realist Pure Land through the "six faiths" (liu xin)—faith in self, faith in the other (the Buddha), faith in cause, faith in effect, faith in phenomena, and faith in principle. Zhai Jiangling's research demonstrates that Ouyi's six-faith doctrine not only resolved the theoretical tension between idealism and realism but, more importantly, elevated the faith-aspiration-practice structure to a systematic philosophical plane^[15].

6. Contemporary Interpretation and Practical Value of the Two-Retributions Doctrine

6.1 The Scholarly Pathway of Doctrinal Interpretation

In the context of contemporary Buddhist academic research and Buddhist college education, study of the two-retributions doctrine cannot remain at the level of affective faith but must advance toward scholarly interpretation. With respect to terminological standardization, contemporary Pure Land research must establish accurate correspondences between the depth of Chinese doctrinal meaning and international academic expression, avoiding the impairment of scholarly exchange through inadequate translation.

6.2 The Scholarly Deepening of the Three-Scripture Comparative Perspective

A comparative study of the three foundational Pure Land scriptures' distinct emphases regarding the two retributions constitutes an important pathway for deepening Pure Land doctrinal research. The Small Sutra employs sensorially evocative language to arouse practitioners' longing for the Pure Land; the Great Sutra provides theological grounding for the grandeur of the two retributions through the logic of vow fulfillment; and the Contemplation Sutra transforms the two retributions into concrete objects of meditative practice through its systematic sequence of contemplations.

At the level of international academic research, Tanaka's historical examination of the formation of Chinese Pure Land doctrine^[25] and Livia Köhn's translation and research on the Contemplation Sutra^[26] can each provide reference frameworks for domestic three-scripture comparative research.

6.3 The Implications of the Grandeur of the Two Retributions for Contemporary Recitation Practice

In the context of contemporary society, the two-retributions doctrine carries multi-layered practical implications for recitation practitioners. First, knowledge of the grandeur of dependent retribution reminds practitioners to attend to the cultivation of their practice environment. Second, the thought of the non-duality of the two retributions indicates to practitioners that improvement of the external environment must proceed in tandem with the purification of the inner mind.

Third, the doctrine of karma-carrying rebirth bestows immense confidence on contemporary practitioners. Master Yinguang's analysis of the obstacles to practice in modern society—"The beings of the present age are of inferior and dull faculties, burdened with thick afflictions; if they cultivate other Dharma methods, it is difficult to hope for accomplishment; only by relying on the Pure Land school, drawing on the compassionate power of the Buddha, can one be reborn while carrying one's karma"—retains profound contemporary relevance.

7. Conclusion

The two retributions, as the complete description of the mode of existence in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, constitute both the theoretical foundation and the faith pillar of the Pure Land belief system. Through a systematic survey of the three-scripture comparison and the patriarchal interpretive tradition, this paper has revealed the multiple functions of the two-retributions doctrine: at the level of scripture, the three scriptures' distinct emphases regarding the two retributions are complementary; at the doctrinal level, the grandeur of dependent retribution provides a condition for the enhancement of practice (*zengshang yuan*), while the grandeur of primary retribution ensures the non-retrogression of practice; at the practical level, the two-retributions doctrine directly serves the establishment of the faith-aspiration-practice structure.

The creative interpretations of the two-retributions doctrine by successive patriarchs—Tanluan, Daochuo, Shandao, Lianchi, Ouyi, and Yinguang—demonstrate how Pure Land thought, while maintaining its foundation in the Indian Buddhist canon, has continuously deepened and refined itself within the Chinese cultural and philosophical context, forming a Pure Land belief system with distinctively Chinese Buddhist characteristics.

Looking toward the future, research on the two-retributions doctrine may be further expanded in the following directions: first, deepening the reception-history research of the three scriptures within East Asian Pure Land traditions; second, exploring from a comparative religion perspective the similarities and differences between Pure Land grandeur descriptions and concepts of the "ideal land" in other religious traditions; and third, introducing the research findings of modern Buddhist psychology into the understanding framework of Pure Land cultivation practice.

Funding

No

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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A Study of Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings in the Frontispieces of Liao Buddhist Sutra Prints

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Abstract: A distinct category of imagery known as “Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings” (护法神王) frequently appears in Buddhist sutra frontispieces across regions including Hebei, Shanxi, Inner Mongolia, Gansu, and Xinjiang. Through a systematic review and analysis of various typologies of these frontispieces, this paper traces their iconographic prototypes and elucidates the underlying combinatory logic and functional mechanisms of such imagery. The visual representation of the Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings originates from the Buddhist belief in the Four Heavenly Kings, manifesting their Dharma-Protecting functions within sutra frontispieces. Furthermore, the pairing of the Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings with the Lengyan Dashi (楞严大师) establishes a functional complementarity between “propagating the Dharma” and “protecting the Dharma.” This iconographic arrangement profoundly reflects the unique ideological pursuit of “preserving sutras and safeguarding the Dharma” in Liao dynasty Buddhism, encapsulating the era’s deep anxiety in the face of the perceived crisis of the “Age of Dharma Decline”.

Keywords: Buddhist Sutra Frontispiece; Dharma-Protecting Divine King; Lengyan Dashi; Khitan Tripitaka

Published: Jul 25, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62177/apbs.v1i2.1543>

Guardian god-kings constitute a distinctive and important iconographic group in the history of Chinese Buddhist art. The category may encompass a wide range of Buddhist protective figures, including muscular guardians, heavenly kings, and yakshas. To date, however, comparatively little scholarly attention has been paid to images of guardian deities in Buddhist sutra frontispieces. Cheng Jiajing and Yang Fuxue have observed that the guardian god-king frontispiece from Khara-Khoto TK274 is highly consistent, in both composition and bodily posture, with the woodblock illustrations of the Khitan Canon discovered in the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda. In particular, the seated posture and facial rendering are nearly identical, indicating that the image derives from a Liao-dynasty visual system. Dunhuang fragments preserved in Russian collections display a similar iconographic structure, suggesting that Liao Buddhist prints influenced not only the Western Xia but also Dunhuang.^[1] Wu Xuemei, in “Picturing Jiedi: An Analysis of Western Xia Dharma-Protecting Deity Prints and Their Multidimensional Images,” argues that the image of “Prajna Jiedi” in Western Xia Buddhist printed frontispieces was modeled on narrative traditions found in Tang-dynasty Dunhuang manuscripts and had an independent pictorial tradition. This image also reflects official preferences in religious worship. In the Western Xia context, the cult of such guardian deities served multiple functions: protecting the state and pacifying the people, safeguarding the Buddhist Dharma, and guarding tombs.^[2] Building on existing scholarship, this article examines the combinations and devotional functions of guardian god-kings in Liao Buddhist sutra frontispieces from the perspective of multi-regional visual materials.

1. Classification of Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings in Buddhist Sutra Frontispieces

Buddhist sutra prints are religious images made by woodblock printing. As illustrations placed at the beginning of sutra scrolls or volumes, frontispieces include preaching scenes, narrative transformation tableaux, and images of Dharma-protecting deities. In addition to protectors whose identities are clear, such as Jiedi spirits, Buddhist sutra frontispieces also contain a class of Dharma-Protecting Divine King images labeled “Dharma-Protecting Divine King,” “Dharma Protector (护法神),” “Dharma-Protecting Good Deities (护法善神),” or “Hufa Shengzhu (护法神主).” According to the number of figures in the image, these can be divided into two groups: single Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings, and Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings with attendants. On the basis of the frame and content of the frontispiece, the single-figure examples can be divided into two types, while the images with attendants can be divided into five types.

1.1 Frontispieces with a Single Dharma-Protecting Divine King

Type A: The frame of the frontispiece has a distinctive form: the upper, lower, and right sides are all double lines, while only the left side is a single line. In the frontispiece to a scroll-mounted Amitabha Sutra excavated from the Tiangongsi Pagoda in Fengrun County, Hebei, dated to the Liao Chongxi to Xianyong period (1032-1074),^[3] an inscription reading “Dharma-Protecting Good deities” appears on the left. The protector wears a jeweled crown and has a circular flaming head halo. His eyes are wide open, his nose is high, his beard bristles fiercely, and his expression is formidable. He wears elaborate scale armor, holds a long-handled axe-halberd in his right hand, stands upright, and plants both feet firmly on auspicious clouds. The upper background of the frontispiece is decorated with four floral motifs (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Frontispiece to the Amitabha Sutra. Source: (Fengrun Museum)



Type B: All four sides of the frontispiece frame are double lines. Within the double lines on the left and right sides are two vajras separated by round motifs. The upper half of the frontispiece to the Chui (垂)-character fascicle 47 of the Avatamsaka Sutra from the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda in Shanxi is damaged. In the upper left corner is an inscription reading “护法 □□”; the lower body of the figure resembles the Dharma-Protecting Good Deities in Type A. In addition, the lower part of the frontispiece contains the single characters “heaven,” “above,” “king,” and “human,” interspersed with jewels (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Frontispiece to the Chui (垂)-character fascicle 47 of the Avatamsaka Sutra; Source: (Yingxian Muta Liaodai Mizan991, p.19).



1.2 Frontispieces with a Dharma-Protecting Divine King and Attendants

Type A: The upper, lower, and right sides of the frontispiece frame each consist of two double lines, while the left side is a single line. In the frontispiece to the scroll-mounted Sutra of the Buddha's Peak Heart Avalokiteshvara Sutra from the Tiangongsi Pagoda in Fengrun County, dated to the Liao Chongxi to Xianyong period (1032-1074), the Dharma-Protecting Divine King wears a jeweled crown and has a circular flaming head halo. His face is square, his nose is high and broad, his eyes glare fiercely, and his bearing is austere. The divine king wears armor, is surrounded by cloud vapor, sits atop a yaksha, and holds a sword in his right hand. Another yaksha attendant stands to his left, holding a scabbard in his left hand. Mountains and waves are visible in the background (Figure 3). A similar layout appears in the frontispiece to the scroll-mounted Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Mahayana Holy Infinite-Life Definitive Radiance King Tathagata Dharani from the same pagoda (Figure 4), with an inscription reading “护法 □□” in the upper right.

Figure 3. Frontispiece to Buddha's Peak Heart Avalokiteshvara Sutra. Source: (Fengrun Museum).



Figure 4. Frontispiece to the Mahayana Holy Infinite-Life Definitive Radiance King Tathagata Dharani. Source: (Fengrun Museum).



Type B: On the upper, lower, and left sides of the frontispiece frame, two vajras are drawn with floral ornament between them, and the four corners are decorated with fishtail patterns. In the frontispiece to fascicle 1 of the Lotus Sutra from the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda, dated to the fifth year of Baoda in the Liao dynasty (1125), the Dharma-Protecting Divine King wears a jeweled crown, short shoulder armor, and a circular head halo. His face is square, his angry eyes are slightly knitted, his beard curls, and his expression is solemn and majestic. He sits in a relaxed posture on a rock, with his right leg folded, his left leg braced on the ground, his right hand resting on a sword, and his left fist supported on his left leg. To his right is a slender heavenly maiden wearing a floral crown and a long robe; her expression is peaceful and gentle, and she holds a tray

with both hands (Figure 5).

Figure 5. frontispiece to fascicle 1 of the Lotus Sutra. Source: (Yingxian Muta Liaodai Mizang 1991, p.183).



Type C: All four sides of the frontispiece frame are decorated with scrolling-vine patterns. In the Dharma-Protecting Divine King frontispiece to fascicle 20 of the Dirghagama Sutra, no. T74, excavated from Khara-Khoto, an inscription reading “Dharma-Protecting Divine King” appears inside the upper-left frame. The divine king wears a jeweled crown and has a circular flaming head halo. His face is rounded-square, with a moustache above the lips, slightly pursed mouth corners, calm eyes, and a solemn expression. He wears armor, holds a sword in his right hand, sits on a hexagonal Sumeru throne, and is encircled by cloud vapor. To his left stands a yaksha attendant holding a scabbard. Mountains and wave patterns are visible in the background (Figure 6). Similar layouts include Dharma-Protecting Divine King frontispieces from Khara-Khoto in Russian collections (hereafter “Russian Khara-Khoto Collection”), nos. 23A and T75; Dharma-Protecting Divine King frontispieces from Dunhuang in Russian collections (hereafter “Russian Dunhuang Collection”), nos. D1576 and D1572; and examples from Turpan in German collections (hereafter “German Turpan Collection”), nos. 878r+880r, Ch/731r, MIK III 190r, MIK III 7269bv, and others.

Figure 6. frontispiece to fascicle 20 of the Dirghagama Sutra; no. T74. Source: (E cang Heishuicheng wenxian 1997, vol.4, p.365).



Type D: All four sides of the frontispiece frame are decorated with scrolling floral-vine patterns. In German Turpan Collection MIK III 6r, the left side is carved with inscriptions reading “Dharma-Protecting Divine King” and “Fengxianjun fengwei. (冯县郡奉为)” The Dharma-Protecting Divine King wears a jeweled crown and has a circular flaming head halo. His face is full, his brows are tightly furrowed, his eyes glare fiercely, bristling moustache grows above his slightly open lips, and his tense face conveys stern majesty. He wears armor, holds a sword in his right hand, is surrounded by cloud vapor, and the background shows mountain and wave patterns (Figure 7). Although this frontispiece is badly damaged, it can be compared iconographically with the Dharma-Protecting Divine King frontispiece to fascicle 4 of the Fangguang Bore Sutra (放光般若经) in the Zhaocheng Jinzang at Sakya Monastery in Tibet.^[4] The two correspond closely in their scrolling floral-vine frames and subject matter. Through comparison, it can be inferred that this divine king clenched his left fist and sat on a hexagonal Sumeru throne. To his left was another yaksha attendant, holding a scabbard and carrying it on his right shoulder (Figure 8). Similar layouts also include German Turpan Collection Ch 582v, MIK III 564v, MIK III 7486r, Ch/U 7733a+Ch/U 7733b, and Ch/U 8143.

Figure 7. German Turpan Collection MIK III 6r. Source: (Museum of Asian Art, Berlin).



Figure 8. Frontispiece to fascicle 4 of the Fangguang Bore Sutra (放光般若经). Source: (Sakya Monastery in Tibet).



Type E: On all four sides of the frontispiece frame, two vajras are drawn between double lines and separated by round motifs. In German Turpan Collection MIK III 6707r+MIK III 197r, an inscription reading “Dharma Protector” appears in the upper right. The Dharma-Protecting Divine King in the image has no head halo. He wears a jeweled crown; his face is full and his jaw broad and thick. His brows rise while their inner ends are slightly knitted, his eyes are wide open and protruding, and bristling moustache grows above his lips, giving him a fierce expression. The divine king wears armor and a cloak, holds a sword in his right hand, and sits on a Sumeru throne. To his left stands a yaksha attendant, holding a scabbard before his body with both hands and gazing at the protector. Behind and to the right of the protector is a monk holding an incense burner; in

the upper left is an inscription reading “Lengyan Dashi.” Both the protector and Lengyan Dashi are encircled by cloud vapor, while no mountain or wave patterns appear in the background (Figure 9). Frontispieces with similar layouts include German Turpan Collection C294, Ch/U 7732r (Figure 10), and Ch 2265; a Dharma-Protector frontispiece excavated from the Bezeklik Caves in 1980-1981 (Figure 11); Russian Khara-Khoto Collection 08A (Figure 12) and T77; and the frontispiece to fascicle 21 of the Amoghapasha-vikurvana-mantra Sutra in the collection of the Sackler Museum in the United States.

Figure 9. German Turpan Collection MIK III 6707r+MIK III 197r. Source: (Museum of Asian Art, Berlin).



Figure 10. German Turpan Collection Ch/U 7732r. Source: (Museum of Asian Art, Berlin).



Figure 11. Frontispiece excavated from the Bezeklik Caves in 1980-1981. Source: (Turpan Museum).



Figure 12. Russian Khara-Khoto Collection 08A. Source: (E cang Heishuicheng wenxian, vol.6, p.126).



Among the Buddhist sutra frontispieces discussed above, single-figure Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings are relatively rare. All belong to the Liao dynasty and are distributed in Hebei, Shanxi, and related areas; they comprise two types. Frontispieces with a Dharma-Protecting Divine King and attendants comprise five types and are mainly distributed in Shanxi, Hebei, Inner Mongolia, Gansu, and Xinjiang. Those that can be clearly dated to the Liao include Type A: the Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Mahayana Holy Infinite-Life Definitive Radiance King Tathagata Dharani and Buddha's Peak Heart Avalokiteshvara Sutra from the Tiangongsi Pagoda in Fengrun County, Hebei, dated to the Liao Chongxi to Xianyong period (1032-1074). Type B: fascicle 1 of the Lotus Sutra from the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda in Shanxi, dated to the fifth year of Baoda in the Liao dynasty (1125). Type C: the Russian Khara-Khoto Collection fragments T74, from the Asura chapter of the fourth division, "Account of the World," in the Agama Sutra Spoken by the Buddha, and 23A, from "The Chapter on Gains" in the Ekottarika Agama. Scholars have identified both as fragments of the Liao-printed Khitan Tripitaka.^[5]

Within Type D, the "Dharma-Protecting Divine King" inscriptions and scrolling floral-vine frames of German Turpan Collection nos. MIK III 6r and MIK III 7486r are basically consistent with the frontispiece to the Liao-period German Turpan

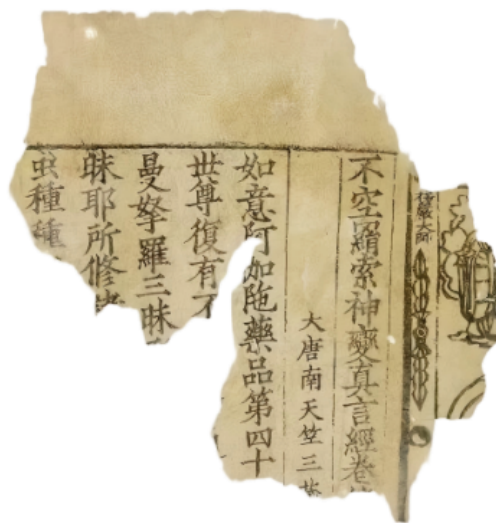
Collection fragment Ch/U 8143r (Figure 13), fascicle 30 of the Amoghapasha-vikurvana-mantra Sutra^[6] The characters for “Dharma-Protecting Divine King” are archaic and weighty, with square and forceful strokes. Horizontal strokes show slight flaring; vertical hooks often end with a pause or in a “crab-claw hook” shape. Overall, the horizontal strokes often begin with a reverse brush entry: the tip first pauses lightly to the left before moving right, and the stroke ends with a slight return, sometimes sharp and sometimes rounded. The final stroke of the “shi” radical in the character “shen” often interlocks with other strokes. The intersections of vertical and horizontal strokes are slightly thickened, suggesting a Liao-period print. In Type E, fascicle 21 of the Amoghapasha-vikurvana-mantra Sutra in the collection of the Sackler Museum in the United States (Figure 14) has lettering similar to Turpan Liao Ch/U 8143r, fascicle 30 of the same sutra, and should likewise be considered a Liao frontispiece.

Figure 13. German Turpan Collection fragment Ch/U 8143r.

Source: (Museum of Asian Art, Berlin).



Figure 14. Frontispiece to fascicle 21 of the Amoghapasha-vikurvana-mantra Sutra. Source: (Sackler Museum in the United States).



The same type of “Dharma-Protecting Divine King” can be further subdivided into different forms (Table 1). Type C frontispieces with a Dharma-Protecting Divine King and attendants can be divided into two forms. Among them, frontispiece T77 is identical to T74, the Asura chapter of the fourth division, “Account of the World,” in the Dirgha Agama, in cloud vapor, frame, background mountains, and waves, but its inscription reads “Lord of Dharma-Protecting Spirits” (Figure 15). It is therefore listed as a separate form.

Type D can be divided into two forms. Compared with the Dharma-Protecting Divine King in fascicle 4 of the Fangguang Bore Sutra in the Jin Tripitaka at Sakya Monastery in Tibet, the German Turpan Collection MIK III 6r figure has a broader and thicker jaw, protruding pupils, more roughly carved eyebrows, slightly pursed lips, an expression in which “anger” exceeds “awe,” and slight damage at the top of the flaming head halo. Comparison shows that German Turpan Collection Ch 582v, MIK III 564v, MIK III 7486r, MIK III 6r, and Ch/U 8143 all belong to this version. By contrast, the mountains in German Turpan Collection Ch/U 7733a+Ch/U 7733b (Figure 16) differ from those in the above frontispieces, and there are no decorative motifs above the mountains; therefore Type D can be divided into two forms. It is worth noting that Types D and C as a whole display a very high degree of similarity. First, the figures are the same, and the scabbards held by the yakshas are all carried on the right shoulder. Second, the divine king’s seated posture is the same: in all examples he sits upright on a hexagonal Sumeru throne. Third, Type C has simpler scrolling-vine patterns, while Type D has more elaborate and ornate scrolling floral-vine patterns, yet both belong to the scrolling-vine motif and may derive from the same prototype.

Figure 15. Russian Khara-Khoto Collection T77. Source: (Ecang Heishuicheng wenxian 1997, vol.4, p.367).



Figure 16. German Turpan Collection Ch/U 7733a+Ch/U 7733b. Source: (Museum of Asian Art, Berlin).



Type E can be divided into four forms, and the inscription “Lengyan Dashi” appears in three positional arrangements. First, in German Turpan Collection Ch/U 7732r the inscription is enclosed separately within a long frame. Second, in MIK III 6707r+MIK III 197r the inscription lies outside the double-direction frame. Third, in the Dharma-Protecting Divine King frontispiece from the Bezeklik Caves and in Russian Khara-Khoto Collection 08A, the inscription is placed between the double lines of the frame. In addition, the round motifs between the double frame lines differ among four examples: German Turpan Collection MIK III 6707r+MIK III 197r, Ch/U 7732r, the Dharma-Protecting Divine King frontispiece from Bezeklik, and Russian Khara-Khoto Collection 08A. Taking these differences together with the positions of the “Lengyan Dashi” inscription, they can be divided into four forms. Although the Bezeklik example and Russian Khara-Khoto Collection 08A are similar in design, the latter has no round motifs between the two vajras in the upper frame. German Turpan Collection Ch 2265 preserves no trace of round motifs in the upper frame; judging from the round motifs inside the frame, it should belong to the same type as Russian Khara-Khoto Collection 08A. The face of the yaksha and the cloud vapor in German Turpan Collection Ch 2294 are consistent with those in MIK III 6707r+MIK III 197r, so they belong to the same version. By contrast, the yaksha’s face and the “Dharma Protector” inscription in Russian Khara-Khoto Collection T77 differ from German Turpan Collection C294. Considering the characteristics of the round motifs, T77 should belong to the form represented by the Bezeklik frontispiece or by Russian Khara-Khoto Collection 08A. The frontispiece to fascicle 21 of the Amoghapasha-vikurvana-mantra Sutra in the Sackler Museum, 1984.297.24, is severely damaged, but it may also belong to one of these two forms.

Table 1: Classification of Buddhist Sutra Frontispieces with Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings and Attendants

Form Type	Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D	Type E
Form I	Fengrun Tiangongsi Pagoda: Buddha’s Peak Heart Avalokiteshvara Sutra frontispiece; Mahayana Holy Infinite-Life Definitive Radiance King Tathagata Dharani frontispiece	Yingxian Wooden Pagoda: Lotus Sutra fasc frontispiece.1, Liao Baoda 5 (1125)	Russian Khara-Khoto Collection T74,23A; Russian Dunhuang Collection D1576, D1572; German Turpan Collection 878r+880r, Ch/731r, MIK III 190r, MIK III 7269bv; Shodo Museum SH.160-10A; 877+80TBI:494-1[7]	German Turpan Collection MIK III 6r; Ch 582v; MIK III 564v; MIK III 7486r; Ch/U 8143.	German Turpan Collection MIK III 6707r+MIK III 197r; C294; C547
Form II			Russian Khara-Khoto Collection T75	German Turpan Collection Ch/U 7733a+Ch/U 7733b	German Turpan Collection Ch/U 7732r

Form Type	Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D	Type E
Form III					Bezeklik Caves Dharma-Protecting Divine King frontis- piece
Form IV					Russian Khara-Kho- to Collection 08A; German Turpan Collection Ch 2265

2. Analysis of the Prototype of the Dharma-Protecting Divine King in Buddhist Sutra Frontispieces

In the frontispieces to Buddha's Peak Heart Avalokiteshvara Sutra and the Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Mahayana Holy Infinite-Life Definitive Radiance King Tathagata Dharani from the Tiangongsi Pagoda in Fengrun County, the Dharma-Protecting Divine King assumes the classic posture of sitting atop a yaksha. This iconographic feature is directly related to the sculptural tradition of the Buddhist Four Heavenly Kings and their attendant retinues.^[8] Images of the Four Heavenly Kings seated atop yakshas were already widespread in Dunhuang caves during the High Tang. In the Middle and Late Tang, female figures were added to the attendant retinues of heavenly king images. From the eleventh year of Dali (776) to the second year of Jianzhong (781), the southern Heavenly King on the south side of the east wall in the antechamber of Yulin Cave 25 stands upright, holds a sword in his right hand, and has a yaksha on his left wearing a scabbard slung diagonally at the waist (Figure 17). By the tenth year of Xiantong in the Late Tang (869), the southern Heavenly King beside the south door on the west wall of the antechamber of Mogao Cave 12 sits atop two yakshas; on the right, a yaksha holding a scabbard stands behind the king, an attendant below carries an arrow case, and a heavenly maiden on the left holds a vase (Figure 18). In the gilt silver reliquary casket with a hipped roof and the Four Heavenly Kings from Famen Temple, dated to the fifteenth year of Xiantong in the Tang dynasty (874), Virudhaka, the Heavenly King of the South, sits on two yakshas and holds a sword downward in his left hand, using it to brace against the ground (Figure 19); the yaksha on the right holds a scabbard, and the heavenly maiden holds a vase. In the Liao Baoda fifth-year (1125) printed frontispiece to fascicle 1 of the Lotus Sutra from the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda, the sword-holding posture of the Dharma-Protecting Divine King and the arrangement of the female attendant are both highly similar to Virudhaka in the Famen Temple gilt silver casket. In the other frontispieces, the Dharma-Protecting Divine King is paired with a yaksha holding a scabbard.

Figure 17. Southern Heavenly King on the southern side of the east wall in the front chamber of Yulin Cave 25. Source: (Digital Dunhuang).



Figure 18. Southern Heavenly King beside the southern doorway on the west wall in the front chamber of Mogao Cave 12;

Source: (Digital Dunhuang).



Figure 19. In the gilt silver reliquary casket with a hipped roof and the Heavenly King of the South. Source: (Famen Temple Museum).



It should be noted that although the combination of Virudhaka, the Heavenly King of the South, and a yaksha holding a scabbard is common, it is not a fixed pairing. A yaksha holding a scabbard may also appear beside other heavenly kings. For example, in the western wall painting of the underground palace of the Wugou Jingguang Sarira Pagoda in Shenyang (沈阳无垢净光舍利塔), dated to the thirteenth year of Chongxi in the Liao dynasty (1044), Virupaksha, the Heavenly King of the West, sits on a rock, holds a sword in his right hand, and is accompanied by a yaksha who holds a scabbard behind him with his right hand. In fascicle 47 of the Besson zakki held at Ninnaji in Kyoto, among the four heavenly kings, the southern and western kings hold swords in their hands and the yakshas beneath their feet hold scabbards, while the northern and eastern kings do not hold swords and the swords held by the yakshas beneath their feet are sheathed. This shows that the scabbard-bearing yaksha was not the exclusive retainer of a particular heavenly king. Rather, the figure appears in response to the sword in the king's hand, indicating submission to and service of the Buddhist Dharma.

In addition, images of yakshas holding swords with both hands can also be found. Such figures most often appear as attendants of Vaishravana, the Heavenly King of the North. In niche 5 of the Beishan grottoes in Chongqing, carved in the first year of Jingfu in the Tang dynasty (892), the image of Vaishravana is flanked by figures including a prince, yakshas, rakshasas, Five-Element Daoist heavenly maidens, and heavenly consorts; among them, a yaksha solemnly stands to one side holding a long sword in both hands. On the north wall of the underground palace of the Wugou Jingguang Sarira Pagoda in Shenyang, dated to the thirteenth year of Chongxi in the Liao dynasty (1044), the yaksha to the left of Vaishravana is different: he carries a long sword on his shoulder, giving the figure a more animated posture. The term "Dharma-Protecting Divine King" in Buddhist sutra frontispieces is a relatively broad concept. Any Buddhist protector charged with guarding the teaching and protecting the scripture can be included within the category of Dharma-Protecting Divine King or Dharma-Protecting Good Deities. In Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures, titles such as "Mountain Divine King,"

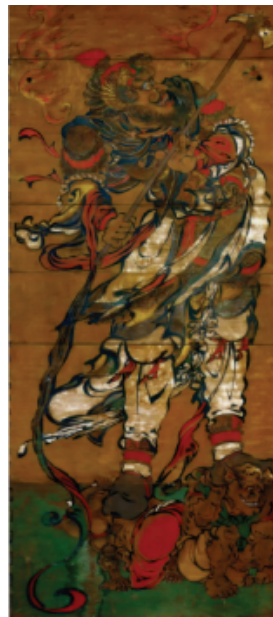
“Wind Divine King,” and “Tree Divine King” appear; most of these divine kings are Indian deities. They are usually grouped in sets of six, eight, or ten. This iconography appears only in the north, began in the fifth century, took shape around the sixth century, flourished in the second half of the sixth century, and gradually disappeared around the Sui-Tang transition.^[9]

As another extremely important group of Dharma protectors, the Four Heavenly Kings were also called “Four Heavenly Divine Kings” in early translations from the second century. The Later Han Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on Warming Rooms and Bathing the Sangha states: “The Buddha told Jivaka: those who arrange baths for the monks and bodhisattvas obtain seven blessings through this cause; they may become ministers, or kings, or the sun, the moon, or the Four Heavenly Divine Kings...First, the Four Heavenly Kings administer the four regions; their radiant bodies are upright, and their majesty protects the four garrisons.”^[10] Because the “Four Heavenly Divine Kings” possessed the function of ruling and protecting the four directions, they were also called the “Four Garrison Kings (四镇王).”^[11] The designation “Four Heavenly Divine Kings” appears in An Shigao’s Later Han translation of the Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on Warming Rooms and Bathing the Sangha, in the Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Four Heavenly Kings translated by Zhiyan and Baoyun in the Liu Song, in Bodhiruci’s Tang translation of the Vast Jeweled Pavilion Secret Dharani, and in Amoghavajra’s Tang translation of the Great Teaching-King Sutra of the Thousand-Armed and Thousand-Bowled Manjushri of the Mahayana Yoga Vajra Nature Ocean. Similar terminology, “Four Great Divine Kings,” appears in the Sutra Asked by the Deva Son Shanshuyi, translated by Vimalaksha and Prajnaruci in the Northern Wei, in Bodhiruci’s translations of the Sutra Asked by Brahma Visessacinti and the Wordless Jeweled Casket Sutra, and in the Great Buddha-Crown Extensive Dharani. Regarding the origin of the title “divine king,” Huizhao’s Tang Commentary on the Suvarnaprabhasa Sutra clearly states that the Four Heavenly Kings are also called the Four Heavenly Divine Kings because they command the gods and are therefore called “divine kings.”^[12] In Tang esoteric ritual manuals, moreover, they are also called “Dharma-Protecting Good Deities guarding the four quarters.” (四方镇守护法善神)^[13] With the transmission of Buddhism and the development of sectarian traditions, the functions of the Four Heavenly Kings continued to expand. The Daloutan Sutra records that the Four Heavenly Kings command many ghostly and divine retinues and, every month, send messengers or princes, or personally descend to the human realm, to inspect the good and evil conduct of the people.^[14] By the fifth century, they had begun to acquire the additional functions of protecting the world, the realm, and the ruler.^[15] Although different names emerged through translation lineages and sectarian developments, these changes never departed from the core function of protecting the Buddhist Dharma. The Tang Scripture Asked by the Bodhisattva Great Akasagarbha in the Great Collection clearly proposed the concept that the Four Heavenly Kings protect the Dharma in the Final Dharma age: the Buddha entrusted this teaching to the Four Heavenly Kings, and because the four kings protect the world, this Dharma would long abide in the world and circulate widely.^[16] In the Song, moved by the vast vow of the divine kings to protect stupas and images, uphold the Dharma, and benefit sentient beings in the Final Dharma age, Yuanzhao, when building an ordination platform at Kaiyuan Monastery in Mingzhou, deliberately installed Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings on the platform and prayed that the divine kings would constantly come to protect it, guard the sangha in receiving the precepts according to the Dharma, and thereby ensure that the ordination platform would long endure, that monastic discipline would flourish, and that the seed of Buddhahood would not be cut off.^[17]

The Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings in Liao Buddhist sutra frontispieces inherited the iconographic tradition and protective belief of the Four Heavenly Kings from the Middle and Late Tang. In the frontispiece to the Amitabha Sutra from the Tiangongsi Pagoda in Fengrun County, the Dharma-Protecting Good Deities holds an axe-halberd and tilts his head slightly upward. His attribute and posture are basically consistent with the western heavenly king on the wooden casket inside the Shengzhengzhu Sarira Jeweled Reliquary from Ruiguang Pagoda Temple in Suzhou, dated to the sixth year of Dazhong Xianfu in the Northern Song (1013) (Figure 20). Among frontispieces with Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings and attendants, Type B alone combines the divine king with a heavenly maiden; Types A, C, D, and E all present the divine king together with a scabbard-bearing yaksha. This clearly shows that the Dharma-Protecting Divine King in Liao Buddhist sutra frontispieces took the Four Heavenly Kings as its basic prototype. While Liao painters inherited the iconographic tradition of the Four Heavenly Kings since the Middle and Late Tang, they also developed different compositional variants according to local needs in the spread of belief. The addition of Lengyan Dashi in Type E gave new meaning to Liao belief in Dharma-Protect-

ing Divine Kings.

Figure 20. Western Heavenly King on the inner wooden casket of the pearl reliquary pagoda. Source: (Suzhou Museum).



3. The Meaning of the Combination of Lengyan Dashi and the Dharma Protector

After Shakyamuni entered nirvana, the Buddhist Dharma gradually declined. It was divided into three periods: the True Dharma, the Semblance Dharma, and the Final Dharma. When teaching, practice, and realization are all present, it is called the True Dharma; when teaching and practice remain, it is called the Semblance Dharma; when only teaching remains, it is called the Final Dharma.^[18] According to the Sutra on the Extinction of the Dharma, in the Final Dharma age the first texts to disappear will be the Shurangama Sutra and the Pratyutpanna Samadhi Sutra; the remaining twelve divisions of scripture will then all disappear and no longer appear. Only when Maitreya Buddha appears will sentient beings be saved.^[19] Only the Infinite Life Sutra will remain in the world for another hundred years in order to save beings widely. In the second year of Yongding under the Chen dynasty (558), the Chan master Huisi (慧思), deeply aware of the danger of the Final Dharma, made a great vow to uphold this sutra so that it would not perish and to teach sentient beings until the appearance of Maitreya Buddha.^[20] Regarding the time when the Final Dharma would arrive, the Poxie lun records:

At dawn on the fifteenth day of the second month in the fifty-second year of King Mu, the renshen year, a violent wind suddenly arose, damaging houses, breaking trees, and shaking mountains, rivers, and the whole earth. In the afternoon the sky became dark with clouds. In the west, twelve white rainbows appeared, running north and south and continuing through the night without disappearing. King Mu asked the grand astrologer Huduo, "What sign is this?" Huduo replied, "In the west, a sage has entered extinction; these are signs of decline." King Mu was greatly pleased and said, "I have always feared him. Now that he is about to enter extinction, what need have I to worry?" At that time, the Buddha entered nirvana... According to the scriptures and vinaya, Shakyamuni's True Dharma lasts one thousand years, the Semblance Dharma one thousand years, and the Final Dharma ten thousand years. (穆王五十二年壬申岁二月十五日平旦, 暴风忽起, 发损人舍, 伤折树木, 山川大地皆悉震动。午后天阴云黑, 西方有白虹十二道, 南北通过连夜不灭。穆王问太史扈多曰: 是何征也? 扈多对曰: 西方有圣人灭度, 衰相现耳! 穆王大悦曰: 联常惧于彼, 今将灭度, 联何忧也。当此之时, 佛入涅槃也 依经律云, 释迦正法千年, 像法千年, 末法万年。)^[21]

If the fifty-second year of King Mu of Zhou is taken as 949 BCE, the year of the Buddha's nirvana, then the True Dharma lasted until 51 CE, the Semblance Dharma continued until 1051 CE, and the Final Dharma began in 1052 CE. Liao Buddhism felt deep anxiety about the impending arrival of the Final Dharma in 1052, and therefore sought to "preserve scriptures in preparation for the extinction of the Dharma." In the twelfth year of Chongxi in the Liao dynasty (1043), the inventory note attached to the objects placed in the heavenly palace under the twelfth eave of the North Pagoda at Chaoyang, Liaoning, recorded: "In the Great Khitan state, at noon on the eighth day of the fourth month in the twelfth year of Chongxi, the objects

were reinterred. Since only eight years remain before the Semblance Dharma enters the Final Dharma, this record was made.” The third layer of the four nested gold-and-silver scripture slips excavated from the same heavenly palace is inscribed:” Buried at noon on the eighth day of the fourth month in the twelfth year of Chongxi. The Semblance Dharma has only eight years left.” In the thirteenth year of Chongxi in the Liao dynasty (1044), an underground palace was added within the foundation of the same pagoda. At its center was enshrined a stone dharani pillar, beneath which was carved:” In the Great Khitan state, in the thirteenth year of Chongxi, the jiazhong year, on the jihai day, the eighth day of the renchen month, the fourth lunar month, the objects were reinterred at noon. Seven years remain before the Semblance Dharma enters the Final Dharma.”^[22] It can thus be seen that Liao people were highly alert to the approaching Final Dharma age. Through building pagodas, storing scriptures, and carving inscriptions, they attempted to preserve the Dharma for later generations and placed special emphasis on transmitting and protecting the Dharma.^[23]

The Shurangama Sutra was regarded as the first scripture that would be lost in the Final Dharma age and was therefore highly valued. It was translated in ten fascicles by the Indian monk Paramiti in the first year of Shenlong under the Tang (705). Its full title is The Great Buddha-Crown Tathagata’s Secret Cause of Cultivation and Realization, the Complete Meaning, the Bodhisattvas’ Ten Thousand Practices, and the Shurangama Sutra. It is also commonly abbreviated as the Shurangama Sutra, the Great Buddha-Crown Shurangama Sutra, or the Great Buddha-Crown Sutra. The sutra systematically expounds the essentials of meditative cultivation, including the method of perfect penetration through the ear faculty, the fifty skandha-demons generated from the five aggregates, the sequence of stages in practice, and the causal distinctions among the six destinies plus the realm of immortals, the “seven destinies.” The Shurangama Sutra has an especially powerful function of protecting the True Dharma in the Final Dharma age. After the Buddha’s extinction, reciting the Shurangama Mantra not only brings the support of all buddhas and bodhisattvas; even harmful ghosts, spirits, poisons, and creatures are transformed into supportive conditions for protecting the Dharma.^[24] Although the Bodhisattva Vajragarbha King had already attained unsurpassed bodhi and could have entered nirvana, he vowed not to enter nirvana, specifically in order to protect practitioners in the Final Dharma age who uphold the Shurangama Mantra and cultivate Shurangama samadhi. Whether they practice meditation diligently or wander with distracted minds, he constantly attends and protects them.^[25] The Shurangama Sutra exposes the various disorders of false teachers in the Final Dharma age, who “praise sexual desire, violate the Buddha’s discipline,” and claim to have become buddhas. It warns practitioners that if they do not rely on this sutra to distinguish the fifty kinds of skandha-demons, they can easily go astray and fall among the retinues of demons. Therefore, the Buddha instructed Ananda and later disciples, after his extinction, to “transmit this Dharma-gate and show it to the final age,” so that beings might “awaken to this meaning and not encounter wrong paths,” and might securely enter the knowledge and vision of the Buddha.

^[26] Zhixu’s (智旭) Ming compilation Yueyang zhijin (阅藏知津) calls this sutra “the compass of the teachings, the essential summary of nature and characteristics, the essence of the Dharma-gates of the entire age, and the true seal for becoming buddhas and patriarchs.”^[27] When Master Tongli Hengce of the Liao presided over the carving project of the Fangshan Stone Sutras, limited funds prevented the scriptures from being carved sequentially by cases. Instead, he skipped nine cases of texts, including the cases beginning “fu (覆), qi (器), yu (欲), nan (难), liang (量), mo (墨), bei (悲), si (丝), ran (染),” and made the Shurangama Sutra, in the most important and most urgently preserved “si (丝)” case, the first scripture to be carved. This shows the special importance he attached to the Shurangama Sutra.^[28]

Commentarial work on the Shurangama Sutra began as early as the Tang monk Weique (惟惔). In the Song, interpretation of the Shurangama Sutra can broadly be grouped into three approaches. First, Gushan Zhiyuan (孤山智圆) advocated “establishing contemplation through Heng and Tai,” using the Tiantai doctrinal and contemplative system to explain the scripture. Second, Changshui Zixuan (长水子璇) sought “to promote the lineage through Xianshou (贤首),” clarifying the text through the integrative principles of the Huayan school. Third, Wenling Jiehuan (温陵戒环) inclined toward “explaining the vertical meaning through Chan (禅),” establishing the scripture’s significance for practice from the standpoint of Chan.^[29] Since the Middle Tang, many scholars had commented on the Shurangama Sutra, but Changshui Zixuan alone received the honored title “Lengyan Dashi.”^[30]

Changshui Zixuan was the Northern Song monk Zirui (子璿) (?-1038). He first studied the Shurangama under the Tiantai

master Hongmin, and later paid homage to the Chan master Huijue of Langya Mountain to study Chan practice. He later resided at Changshui, promoted the teachings of the Huayan school, and wrote the *Annotated Commentary on the Meaning of the Shurangama Sutra*. The censor-in-chief Wang Sui wrote a preface for this commentary, which was then printed and circulated.^[31] In the sixth year of Dazhong Xiangfu (1013), the Hanlin scholar Qian Gongyi submitted a memorial requesting that he be granted the title “Lengyan Dashi.”^[32] Because of his commentary on the *Shurangama Sutra*, Zirui came to be placed among Huayan patriarchs such as Qingliang Chengguan (清凉澄观) and Guifeng Zongmi (圭峰宗密). In the *Record of the Rebuilding of the Pavilion for the Pagoda of the Lengyan Dashi*, the Master of the Changshui Commentary, as well as in Tiantai historical works such as *The Orthodox Lineage of the Buddhist Gate* and *The Comprehensive Chronicle of the Buddhas and Patriarchs*, Zirui was included in the Huayan lineage.^[33] Zirui used Huayan as his guiding principle to promote the lineage and interpret the text, namely.^[34] He composed a Xianshou-school commentary on the *Shurangama Sutra* in ten fascicles,^[35] and people recognized that Changshui explained the *Shurangama* from the standpoint of Huayan.^[36] Since the mainstream of Liao Buddhist learning was esoteric Buddhism and Huayan,^[37] Zixuan’s Huayan-based commentary on the *Shurangama Sutra* seems to have had a certain affinity with the intellectual atmosphere of Liao Buddhism. However, no extant Liao textual evidence or archaeological discovery has shown that either Zixuan himself or his *Annotated Commentary on the Meaning of the Shurangama Sutra* circulated in Liao territory. It is worth noting that although Zixuan’s commentary has not been found in Liao lands, it circulated widely in Western Xia. Fragments from the Shanzuigou Grottoes contain material from Zixuan’s *Annotated Commentary on the Meaning of the Shurangama Sutra*, corresponding to fascicles 1, 4, 5, 6, and 8 of the *Shurangama Sutra*. A Tangut annotated version of the *Shurangama Sutra* survives, and the only Tangut commentary version currently known is the Changshui commentary, showing how widely it circulated at the time. In addition, the *Shurangama Sutra* was incorporated into various Western Xia Buddhist texts. The *Essentials Collected from Various Scriptures: The Great Buddha-Crown Tathagata’s Secret Cause of Cultivation and Realization*, the *Complete Meaning*, the *Bodhisattvas’ Ten Thousand Practices*, and the *Shurangama Sutra*, excavated from the Baisigou Square Pagoda, derives from the “Chapter on Mahasthamaprabhata Bodhisattva’s Perfect Penetration through Mindfulness of the Buddha” in fascicle 5 of the *Shurangama Sutra*. The *Collection on Rebirth through the Perfect Cause of Secret Mantras* and the *Preface to the Collected Explanations of the Sources of Chan*, both found at Russian Khara-Khoto Collection, were also clearly influenced by the thought of the *Shurangama Sutra*.^[38]

This indicates that Liao emphasis on the *Shurangama Sutra* more likely derived from its symbolic meaning as a scripture for “protecting the Dharma.” The *Ashoka Sutra* records that before entering nirvana, Shakyamuni entrusted the Four Heavenly Kings with the task of protecting the Dharma treasury after his extinction.^[39] In Dunhuang caves excavated from the Five Dynasties through the Song, during the period of the Hexi Guiyijun regime, the Four Great Heavenly Kings were often painted in the four corners of cave ceilings to guard the four directions and protect the Buddhist realm. This tradition of Dharma protection extended into Buddhist sutra prints. Within the small space at the beginning of a sutra scroll, the Four Heavenly Kings and their retinues became Dharma protectors of the scripture, guarding the continuation of the Buddhist Dharma. The Dharma-Protecting Divine Kings in Buddhist prints and the Four Heavenly Kings in mural painting share an obvious iconographic source. The *Shurangama Sutra* itself emphasizes “protecting the True Dharma,” and the pairing of Lengyan Dashi, the transmitter of this scripture, with the Dharma-Protecting Divine King continued the scriptural tradition of “eminent monks transmitting the Dharma and divine kings protecting it.” Lengyan Dashi takes the propagation of scripture and Dharma as his responsibility, devoting himself to the dissemination of teachings and the continuation of the Dharma lineage. The Dharma protector, through awesome divine power, protects the teaching and the scripture, dispels demonic obstacles, and ensures the unobstructed circulation of the True Dharma. One is primarily responsible for transmission and propagation; the other, for protection. Together they answer the dual needs of “transmitting the Dharma” and “protecting the Dharma” in the Final Dharma age and respond to the Liao Buddhist anxiety over “preserving scriptures and protecting the Dharma.”

4. Conclusions

The different forms of the “Dharma-Protecting Divine King” frontispiece not only display the diversity of Liao Buddhist print art, but also deeply reflect the religious thought and social psychology of the time. The image of the “Dharma-Protecting

Divine King” in Buddhist sutra frontispieces first appeared in Liao printed editions, and its prototype was drawn from the Buddhist Four Heavenly Kings. This special iconographic phenomenon carries profound religious doctrine while also implying distinctive social and secular meanings. From the perspective of Buddhist doctrine, the “Dharma-Protecting Divine King” bears the important mission of safeguarding the Dharma. From the social perspective, it deeply reflects the influence of Final Dharma thought on Liao Buddhism. At the time, society felt deep anxiety that the Buddhist Dharma was about to disappear. Because the Shurangama Sutra was regarded as the first scripture to be lost in the Final Dharma age, the “Dharma-Protecting Divine King” and “Lengyan Dashi,” who propagated that scripture, complemented one another. Their combination jointly responded to the double urgency of “transmitting the Dharma” and “protecting the Dharma” in the Final Dharma age.

Funding

This paper is a phased outcome of the 2025 National Social Science Fund project on "Rare and Endangered Studies" (冷门绝学), titled Organization and Research of Documents Unearthed from the Toyuq Caves, undertaken by the Toyuq Excavated Documents Research Team at the Toyuq Institute of Turpanology grant number [25VJX22].

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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