

# Writing the Moment of Death in Biographies of Eminent Monks\*

In this study I would like to examine how the moment of death is described in medieval Chinese biographies of monks. My examples are drawn from collections in which the subjects are designated as ‘eminent monks’, or *gaoseng* 高僧: Huijiao’s 慧皎 (497–554) *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 [Biographies of Eminent Monks; *T* no. 2059] (compiled around 531), Daoxuan’s 道宣 (596–667) *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 [Further Biographies of Eminent Monks; *T* no. 2060] (first completed in 645 but expanded later), and Zanning’s 贊寧 (919–1001) *Song Gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 [Song Biographies of Eminent Monks; *T* no. 2061] (presented to court in 988).<sup>1</sup> The compilers of these collections gathered their material from diverse sources and presented it around a largely fixed framework of ten categories. This framework had a powerfully homogenizing effect. For example, learned monks who deeply engage in court politics and mysterious magicians who materialize in sudden

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<sup>1</sup> Huijiao’s collection is discussed in considerable detail in Arthur Wright, ‘Biography and Hagiography’. For general comments on all three collections see Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk*; Shinohara, ‘Two Sources of Chinese Buddhist Biographies’ (reproduced in the present volume, 2–140).

and unexpected ways are all presented as examples of 'eminent monks'.

One important issue in interpreting this material is to what extent it should be read as history and to what extent as a distinct form of religious literature. The approach I adopt here leans toward reading this material as literature. I will focus on one almost universally present element of these biographies, namely their accounts of the deaths of their subjects, and examine how these accounts are constructed as a literary *topos*. I am particularly interested in the way the moment of death, or the short period of time leading to death, is presented in these biographies, and in how different concerns shaped the ways in which these accounts were written. Such an exploration should tell us something about how the medieval Chinese Buddhist community understood death, and particularly the moment of death.

The accounts of death in 'biographies of eminent monks' are presented with a considerable degree of uniformity. Typically, the biographies give the dates and location of the subject's death and in most cases note when this information is not available. The circumstances of the death and funeral are often described in detail. Many biographies devote a passage to the immediate circumstances that led to the death of the subject. Although these descriptions are carefully constructed, multiple and sometimes mutually incompatible ideas about the good death for Buddhist monks lie behind them. The death of an eminent monk was typically a moment of crisis, filled with anxiety not just for the dying subject, but perhaps more openly for the monastic community that he led. The complex accounts of this event that eventually resulted reflected diverse and often contradictory responses of those directly affected by the events.

The death of the Buddha offered a model for describing the deaths of eminent monks. But the applicability of this model had an important limitation: 'eminent monks' were invariably presented as monks of varying degrees of attainment, and not as Buddhas. Some biographies explicitly indicate the levels of their subjects' attainments. In some cases the hands of the deceased monks showed two or three fingers that were folded, indicating that they had attained the status of either 'once returning' or 'not returning', falling short

of the more advanced status of the *arhat* (and the Buddha).<sup>2</sup> In one remarkable passage, Zhiyi 智顛 (539–598), the founder of the influential community at Mount Tiantai 天台, comments on the relatively low level of his spiritual attainment, and then goes on to predict that Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, followed by his teachers and friends, will arrive to welcome him.<sup>3</sup> The overall account of Zhiyi's death appears to have been largely though loosely modeled after the account of the Buddha's death: the prediction of Zhiyi's inevitable death, instructions about the deposition of the body, and his final words to his disciples are mentioned.<sup>4</sup> Yet, at the same time this account also reflects a different model that is associated with the death of a monk.

Daoxuan, who produced the seventh-century biographical collection, was a specialist on monastic rules, and devoted a section of his *vinaya* commentary (*Sifen lü shanfan buque xingshi chao* 四分律刪繁補闕行事鈔 [Note on Practices Based on the Four Part *Vinaya*, Unnecessary Details Removed and Missing Gaps Filled])<sup>5</sup> to a discussion of

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<sup>2</sup> The 'second fruit' or 'once returning' is mentioned for Fakui 法匱 (?–489), *T* no. 2059, 50: 393b27, and Huikuang 慧曠 (533–613), *T* no. 2060, 50: 503c25. The 'third fruit' or 'not returning' appears in entries for Puheng 普恆 (402–479), *T* no. 2059, 50: 399b27; Baoqiong 寶瓊 (679–758), *T* no. 2060, 50: 479a14; Huibu 慧布 (?–587), *T* no. 2060, 50: 481a28; Puming 普明 (d.u.), *T* no. 2060, 50: 586b26; Zhikuang 智曠 (525–600), *T* no. 2060, 50: 659a17; and Zhenguan 真觀 (537–611), *T* no. 2060, 50: 703a3. Zanning explicitly comments on this way of indicating the attainment of the deceased monk in *T* no. 2061, 50: 891b29–c4. A number of *Song Gaoseng zhuan* biographies, all from the Five Dynasties period (907–960), note carefully the relics that were found after their subjects were cremated. These passages indicate that in some important way the status of eminent monks underwent a significant change in the last period covered by Zanning, perhaps in connection with the rise of Chan, and that they were then treated as Buddha-like figures. In contrast, in the frequent references to relics in Daoxuan's biographical collection, relics were understood to be the Buddha's relics, and not relics of monks.

<sup>3</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 567b18–9; *T* no. 2050, 50: 196b8–15.

<sup>4</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 567a20–5; *T* no. 2050, 50: 195c23–5.

the proper way in which monks are to face the moment of death. In medieval Chinese Buddhism, two different models for a monk's death existed side by side and appear to have competed with each other: in one model the moment of death is presented as the last occasion for reflecting on impermanence (*wuchang* 無常) and achieving release from this-worldly attachments; in the other, death is a critical and anxious moment when the destination for the monk's rebirth is determined. The dying monk needs to remain calm, fully mindful of his good karmas and certain of good rebirth.<sup>6</sup> It is this second model that lies behind Zhiyi's prediction about the arrival of Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta. In this way Zhiyi is presented both as a Buddha-like teacher and leader, and at the same time as a monk understandably concerned about his future rebirth. To be concerned about one's future rebirth or even about one's teacher's rebirth would be out of place in the Buddha's case, who will not be reborn at all, or even for a teacher who had mastered the Buddha's teaching, but this potential tension does not come to the surface in this presentation.

The tension between the two models that can be detected in Daoxuan's *vinaya* commentary may be seen in the biographical records of Chinese Buddhism as well, along with another significant tension that affected their construction. The monk in Daoxuan's *vinaya* commentary is an ordinary and vulnerable monk, not a suitable model for constructing accounts of the death of 'eminent monks'.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in the *vinaya* commentary impermanence is the topic

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<sup>5</sup> *T* no. 1804, 40: 143–5.

<sup>6</sup> I discussed this material in Shinohara, 'The Moment of Death in Daoxuan's *Vinaya* Commentary'. Reproduced in the present volume, 365–398.

<sup>7</sup> Attending to the sick (*zhanbing* 瞻病) is explicitly mentioned in some *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* biographies. Zhikuan 志寬 (566–643), for example, is said to have practiced it. He would welcome into his own room a sick monk or lay person who had been abandoned and took charge of their care. He would suck pus from a tumor in the stomach of a sick person to cure him (*T* no. 2060, 50: 543b). Daoshun 道舜 (d.u.) also sucked out pus with his own mouth, washed the clothing of the sick, and taught proper meditation to them (*T* no. 2060, 50: 577a). But we should note that in these examples the 'eminent monk' in question is the

of the discourse that the attendant monk gives to the dying subject. In contrast, in the biographies of eminent monks impermanence appears as the subject of the dying master's last instruction to his disciples, much as it was in the story of the Buddha's death.

The linkage between the moment of death and rebirth resulted in elaborate accounts of deathbed visions. The largely abstract doctrinal treatment of this issue in the scriptural passages cited in Daoxuan's commentary is translated into concrete and varied stories of miraculous visions at the moment of death in the biographies.<sup>8</sup> In the biographies in Daoxuan's collection different views about the linkage between the moment of death and rebirth are often openly debated.

I will first review how the accounts of death in the biographies of monks are often modeled after the familiar account of the Buddha's death. A more detailed discussion of visions at the moment of death will follow.

### THE DEATH OF THE BUDDHA AS A MODEL

Many biographies describe their subjects as carefully preparing for death. Typically, such an account is broadly shaped by the familiar account of the Buddha's death in *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*. The account of the death of the Buddha in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* translated by Faxian 法顯 (337–422) begins with the Buddha's announcement that he is about to enter final *nirvāṇa* in three months.<sup>9</sup> Shortly before the moment of death the Buddha is said to have uttered these famous verses on impermanence:

諸行無常 All conditioned things are impermanent,  
是生滅法 It is their nature to come into being and perish.

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caregiver and not the dying monk who receives the care. These stories are told to illustrate the extraordinary virtue of the subjects of the biographies.

<sup>8</sup> Death bed visions are discussed with a focus on a later period in Stevenson, 'Death-Bed Testimonials of the Pure Land Faithful'.

<sup>9</sup> *Da banniepan jing*, T no. 7, 1: 191c6.

生滅滅已 When coming into being and perishing have ceased,  
寂滅為樂 There is peace, there is happiness.<sup>10</sup>

The Buddha then instructed his disciples on impermanence, encouraging them to practice diligently and quickly seek salvation from the fire pit of life and death. Then he announced that this was his last instruction and that the time of his final entry into *nirvāṇa* had arrived. Having reprimanded the monks, gods and other people who screamed and wailed, the Buddha went through stages of meditation. Ānanda, seeing that the Buddha had become quiet and stopped moving, announced that he had entered final *nirvāṇa*.<sup>11</sup>

Many of these themes appear in the accounts of the deaths of the ‘eminent monks’. Some of these attribute to their subjects attainments comparable to those of the Buddha. Thus, eminent monks were often aware of and announced the approach of their own death. Sengrui 僧叡 (378–438), for example, is said to have known when his lifespan was spent and unexpectedly called the assembly together to take his leave.<sup>12</sup> Over three months before his death, on the tenth day of the sixth month of Tianjian 天監 11 (520), Fatong 法通 (451–520) predicted that he would die on the twentieth day of the ninth month.<sup>13</sup> Mingshan 明瞻 (559–628) similarly declared that his life was to end in roughly a month.<sup>14</sup>

The accounts of the death of ‘eminent monks’ also frequently dwell on the instructions the teacher left shortly before his death. As in the passages on the Buddha’s death in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* mentioned above, the dying teacher often encourages his disciples to continue their efforts, sometimes telling them not to waste their lives.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *T* no. 7, 1: 204c23–4.

<sup>11</sup> *T* no. 7, 1: 204a–205a.

<sup>12</sup> *T* no. 2059, 50: 364b15.

<sup>13</sup> *T* no. 2059, 50: 382b8.

<sup>14</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 633a20.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Narendrayaśas (517–589) (*T* no. 2060, 50: 433a11–15); Huibu (*T* no. 2060, 50: 481a22); Huiyin 慧因 (539–627) (*T* no. 2060, 50:

Like the Buddha, eminent monks are often said to have spoken of impermanence before their death. In Huijiao's collection, for instance, it is noted that on the evening of his death, Tanjian 曇鑒 (d.u.) discussed impermanence with the elders with great urgency.<sup>16</sup> Often the very term impermanence (*wuchang* 無常) was used as a euphemism for death. In Daoxuan's collection, Sengyuan 僧淵 (534–602) commented on the impermanence of the Three Realms to his disciples just before his death.<sup>17</sup> After he became slightly ill Huichao 慧超 (?–618) is also said to have announced 'impermanence'. All in the monastery are then said to have gathered quickly to listen to his last instruction.<sup>18</sup> Here again the term 'impermanence' appears simply to refer to the approaching death. Following a long sermon Shanfu 善伏 (?–618) is said to have commented on the impermanence of all things. Though no one understood the significance of this statement at that time, this proved to be the announcement of his approaching death.<sup>19</sup> After predicting his death and commenting on the inevitability of death, Huimin 慧旻 (573–649) similarly instructed his disciples to reflect on impermanence and quickly to seek salvation.<sup>20</sup> When someone asked him why he was leaving so quickly, Zhiqin 智勤 (586–659) replied, 'How should we hold on to the impermanent dharmas?'<sup>21</sup> Daoying 道英 (560–636) noted that 'impermanence' is the norm.<sup>22</sup> Shortly before his death Facheng 法誠 (563–640) commented on the truth of the teaching of impermanence to the

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522b198–20); Zhikuan (*T* no. 2060, 50: 544a); Jinglin 靜琳 (565–640) (*T* no. 2060: 590c23–24); Zhixiang 植相 (d.u.) (*T* no. 2060: 646a26). Huixiang 惠祥 (549–618) instructs his disciples to make sure that the teaching is not terminated (*T* no. 2060: 598a16–17). Daolin 道林 (?–624) told his disciples not to violate the prohibitions (*lüyi* 律儀, *T* no. 2060, 50: 579c19).

<sup>16</sup> *T* no. 2059, 50: 370a8.

<sup>17</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 574c9–10.

<sup>18</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 582a6.

<sup>19</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 603b6.

<sup>20</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 620a11.

<sup>21</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 643b13–14.

<sup>22</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 654c10.

attendant, while informing him that a youth from Tuṣita heaven was standing outside the gate to welcome him.<sup>23</sup> In Zanning's collection impermanence is used for death in the biographies of Guiyu 歸嶼 (862–936) and Huineng 慧能 (638–713).<sup>24</sup>

The reference to the account of the death of the Buddha is more direct in some cases. Thus, the verse on impermanence from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* passage is reproduced in Facheng's instruction, though the second line quoted is slightly modified.<sup>25</sup> Guangyu 光嶼 (895–960) is said to have uttered the verse just before his death.<sup>26</sup> Huimin's 惠敏 (531–568) instruction that speaks first of impermanence and then encourages his disciples quickly to seek salvation also echoes the Buddha's last words as presented in the same scripture.<sup>27</sup>

Often the dying teachers specified the manner in which their bodies were to be disposed after death. Hongyan 洪偃 (504–562) instructed that his body be offered to birds and animals.<sup>28</sup> Tanyan 曇延 (516–588) told his disciples that after his death his body was to be offered to animals and the remaining parts then were to be cremated.<sup>29</sup> Facing death Huizang 慧藏 (522–605) is said to have requested to have his body exposed, and the disciples obeyed this order.<sup>30</sup> The account of the death of Haishun 海順 (589–618) suggests that the young dying monk struggled with the desire to have his body exposed in the wild or in water and with the concern over hurting his mother by doing so.<sup>31</sup> Following the instruction left by Huiyue 慧越 (509–604), his body was left on a mountain.<sup>32</sup> Xuanwan 玄琬

<sup>23</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 689b7–8.

<sup>24</sup> *T* no. 2061, 50: 747a1, 755a14.

<sup>25</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 689b7; *T* no. 7, 1: 204c23.

<sup>26</sup> *T* no. 2061, 50: 886a7.

<sup>27</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 620a11; *T* no. 7, 1: 204c28.

<sup>28</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 477a19–20.

<sup>29</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 489b21–23.

<sup>30</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 498b26.

<sup>31</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 525b27–c2.

<sup>32</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 569a9–10.



(540–614) requested to have his body cremated according to the ancient custom.<sup>33</sup>

These passages may be compared to the passage in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* in which Ānanda tells the warriors about the Buddha's instruction to cremate his body in the same way that the body of a Universal Monarch was cremated.<sup>34</sup> Some passages report that the bodies of 'eminent monks' were similarly cremated according to the instructions left by the deceased. But repeated instructions to have the body offered to birds and beasts in the wild should be read primarily as demonstrating the dying teacher's detachment from his own impermanent body.<sup>35</sup> In these stories, then, the Buddha's sermon about the impermanence of all things appears to have been reshaped into a remarkable gesture by the dying teacher. In the instruction given after the verses on impermanence in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* the Buddha is said to have remarked that even his diamond body does not escape the transformation through the law of impermanence. In the instructions on attending to sick monks that are found in *Āgamas*, the dying monks are often reminded of the impermanence of their own bodies. Here dying masters demonstrate their mastery of this lesson by the instructions that they leave regarding the disposition of their corpses.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 617b7.

<sup>34</sup> *T* no. 7, 1: 206a12–13.

<sup>35</sup> See Liu, 'Death and Degeneration of Life'.

<sup>36</sup> Sometimes the subject comments on the funeral and the preparation of the grave. These comments may also be read as demonstrations of the dying master's detachment. To illustrate this with examples from Daoxuan's collection, Xuanzang 玄奘 (602?–664) instructed his disciples to have his body buried at a quiet place on a mountain and not near a large monastery (*T* no. 2060, 50: 458a19). Huiyin 慧因 (539–627) and Zhiyuan 智遠 (495–572) instructed his disciples not to wail or engage in other funeral activities. (*T* no. 2060, 50: 522b20, 556a24–25). Xingdeng 行等 (570–642) refused to have any ceremonies. His body was to be taken on a palanquin with unhewn poles to the mountain. Those who disobey this order were said not to be his disciples (*T* no. 2060, 50: 543a24–26). Zhikuan (566–643) is also said similarly to have instructed that his body be

Again, perhaps echoing the account of the death of the Buddha in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*, some biographies in Daoxuan's collection mention that the dying teacher forbade the disciples from expressing their grief excessively. The story of the young monk Yunbian 雲辯 (d.u.), who is said to have screamed when he saw Huisi 慧思 (515–577) stop breathing, presents a close parallel to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* passage, though here too a new detail is introduced; Huisi then opened his eyes and reprimanded the monk, calling him the evil Māra.<sup>37</sup>

The account of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* reports some miraculous occurrences at the death of the Buddha: the earth shook and heavenly drums sounded spontaneously; the water of the Four Great Oceans produced huge waves and Mount Sumeru leaned to one side and moved; a violent wind arose; trees broke, and so on.<sup>38</sup> Some of the stories of miraculous occurrences reported at the death of eminent monks may be read in the light of this passage. Again to take examples from Daoxuan's collection, shortly before Daoping 道憑 (488–559) died, two large bells are said to have broken when lightly touched.<sup>39</sup> At the time of Huilong's 慧隆 (?–601) death the sky was covered with clouds and blowing snow filled the field. Yet at midnight, at the moment when he entered *nirvāṇa*, the sky cleared and the stars appeared. The biographer interprets this as a sign from supernatural spirits (*shenling* 神靈), gods, and dragons (*Tianlong* 天龍).<sup>40</sup> Before Huiyao 慧耀 (525–603) died, over thirty people in the monastery had the same dream in which a jeweled temple building collapsed.<sup>41</sup> As Huida's 慧達 (524–610) illness progressed, images inside the pavilion he built at the Xilinsi 西林寺 on Mount Lu 廬山

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taken away on a bamboo mat held between two unhewn poles (*T* no. 2060, 50: 544a18–19). Huimin 慧旻 (573–649) forbade his disciples from making any inscriptions and other flattering compositions (*T* no. 2060, 50: 620a12).

<sup>37</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 563c24.

<sup>38</sup> *T* no. 7, 1: 205b1–2.

<sup>39</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 484c.

<sup>40</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 515b.

<sup>41</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 662b6–7.

sweated.<sup>42</sup> Before Senghuang 僧晃 (534?–618?) died, the lotus pond in front of the Buddha hall dried up spontaneously and roses in the temple precinct bloomed out of season.<sup>43</sup> The story of Pengyuan's 彭淵 (544–611) bowl appears to presuppose a long tradition on the broken bowl. Ten days before he died, the clay bowl that he always kept with him, not letting others even wash it, is said to have broken into five pieces, causing him to observe that with the five skandhas about to scatter his life was coming to an end.<sup>44</sup>

Extraordinary fragrances are repeatedly mentioned. The fragrance in these stories may suggest the presence of the gods; the gods were gathered at the death of the Buddha. Unusual behavior of birds and animals is often mentioned. A group of white cranes is said to have appeared from the West and circled around Faxiang's 法祥 (?–624) monastic cell at his death.<sup>45</sup> Several days before Faren 法忍 (d.u.) became ill and died, an elephant appeared for no reason at the cave where he was practicing austerities.<sup>46</sup> At the moment of Tanxun's 曇詢 (516–600) death supernatural light and a fragrant breeze preceded the appearance of an extraordinary bird. This bird, white-necked and with a red body, flew over the monastery uttering sad sounds. As

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<sup>42</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 694b23. Images are often said to have sweated to predict disasters in Aśoka miracle stories collected in Daoxuan's *Ji Shenzhou sanbao gantong lu* 集神州三寶感通錄 [Collected Records of the Three Treasure Miracles in China] (*T* no. 2106). I commented on these stories in Shinohara, 'Changing Roles for Miraculous Images in Medieval Chinese Buddhism', 151–61.

<sup>43</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 695a2–4.

<sup>44</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 511c. A remarkable story about the breaking up of the Buddha's bowl into five parts as a prediction for the decline of the dharma appears in the record of the miraculous instruction Daoxuan is said to have received toward the end of his life. It is reproduced in the *Fayuan zhulin* [A Forest of Pearls from the Dharma Garden], *T* no. 2122, 53: 1008b. I have discussed this story in Shinohara, 'The Story of the Buddha's Begging Bowl'. Reproduced in this volume, . The cult of the Buddha's bowl is also discussed in Wang-Toutain, 'Le Bol Du Buddha'.

<sup>45</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 523a27–28.

<sup>46</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 557c9.

the monk's illness became grave, the bird stopped at the base of the temple building, tame and fearless, and sometimes came through the door to the bedside of the sick monk. Then the bird screeched and blood oozed from its eyes. When the death took place, the bird flew up and circled in the sky and eventually flew away.<sup>47</sup> Fachun's 法純 (518–693) biography mentions two pigeons that entered his room.<sup>48</sup> When Fajin 法進 (?–617) died on the mountain, dragons and monkeys are said to have cried.<sup>49</sup> Two geese are mentioned in the account of Huikuan's 惠寬 (584–653) death.<sup>50</sup> Two birds flew into the room and shrieked pathetically at Fashun's 法順 (557–640) death.<sup>51</sup>

In these stories about the death of eminent monks, allusions to the familiar account of the death of the Buddha enable the biographer to present the deceased as a great monk and teacher comparable to the Buddha himself. Typically, the allusion is somewhat indirect. The themes borrowed from the account of the death of the Buddha often appear to be modified and elaborated on freely.

As I noted earlier, Daoxuan's discussion of the moment of death in his *vinaya* commentary is organized around two potentially conflicting themes of impermanence and rebirth. In a somewhat later treatment of Yijing 義淨 (635–713) these two themes are neatly separated; rebirth is the central concern of the dying monk before death, while impermanence is presented as the main theme of the funeral.<sup>52</sup> We have seen above that impermanence appears repeatedly as the central message of biographical accounts of the death of eminent monks. Often it is the theme of the final instruction. Sometimes the subject demonstrates his mastery of this teaching by the instruc-

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<sup>47</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 559b.

<sup>48</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 576a7.

<sup>49</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 576b25.

<sup>50</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 601b21.

<sup>51</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 654a5–6.

<sup>52</sup> Yijing's essay, 'Linzhong fangjue' 臨終方訣 [Instructions for the Moment of Death], is appended to his translation of the short *sūtra*, *Foshuo wuchang jing* 佛說無常經 [Scripture on Impermanence] (*T* no. 801, 17: 745b–746b; Yijing's instructions are at 746b–747a).

tions he leaves about the disposition of his body. As we shall now see, the other theme, on the rebirth of the dying master, is highlighted in frequent accounts of visions at the moment of death.

### REBIRTH AND THE MOMENT OF DEATH

Stories of deathbed visions indicating rebirth in heavenly realms appear frequently in biographies of eminent monks. The entry on the famous monastic leader Daoan 道安 (312–385) in Huijiao's *Biographies of Eminent Monks* contains an elaborate story about a vision of the realm of rebirth. The section begins by noting that Daoan used to stand in front of a Maitreya image with his disciple Fayu 法遇 (d.u.) and others and vow to be reborn in Tuṣita heaven.<sup>53</sup> On the seventeenth day of the first month of 385, not long before Daoan's death, a strange monk of quite unremarkable and humble appearance came and spent the night at the monastery. The sleeping quarters of the monastery were already full and so he was placed in the lecture hall. At that time the monastic officer (*weina* 維那; *karmadāna*) happened to be spending the night in the Buddha hall and saw this monk come in and out of an opening in the window. He quickly reported this to Daoan, who, taken aback, came to pay respects to the monk, asking for the reason for his visit. The monk answered, 'I came for your sake'. Daoan noted, 'My sins are deep. How could I be saved?' The monk answered, 'You definitely can be saved. If you quickly bathe holy monks, the wish expressed in your vow will for certain be realized'. The monk then explained the method of bathing in detail. Daoan asked the monk where he (Daoan) was going to be reborn. The monk waved his hand in space, pointing to the northwestern corner of the sky. Immediately, a cloud opened and Tuṣita heaven in all its beauty became visible. On that evening dozens of members of the congregation all saw the vision. Later, Daoan prepared a bath and saw dozens of unusually small children come into the monastery to play. After a short while they

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<sup>53</sup> T no. 2059, 50: 353b27–8.

took a bath. This indeed was a miraculous response of holy beings (*shengying* 聖應). On the eighth day of the second month, Daoan suddenly told the congregation, 'I am about to go'. Although he was not ill, he passed away on that very day.<sup>54</sup>

In this story the quest for rebirth in Maitreya's Tuṣita heaven is a deliberate effort that involved taking a vow in front of an image. The realization of this vow is predicted through a vision, particularly of the Tuṣita heaven itself, produced by a strange monk. The appearance of this strange monk, who may have been Piṇḍola, appears itself to have been a vision. We might also note that in this biography the vision takes place many days earlier rather than at the moment of death.<sup>55</sup> The intense focus on the moment of death highlighted in Daoxuan's *vinaya* commentary is absent in this biography. In stories about rebirth in the Pure Land the vision of the arrival of Amitābha and the moment of death are more closely bound together.

### Visions of rebirth in Amitābha's Pure Land

A vision at the moment of death in which the Buddha Amitābha appears to welcome the dying master into the Pure Land is mentioned repeatedly in all three biographical collections. When his illness became grave, Sengxian 僧顯 (d.u.), whose biography appears in Huijiao's collection, contemplated the Western region, or Amitābha's Pure Land. He saw the Buddha Amitābha come down in his illumined

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<sup>54</sup> *T* no. 2059, 50: 353c27–c11. In Arthur E. Link's translation of Daoan's biography, the passage appears in Link, 'The Biography of Tao-An', 36–37. Link takes *shengseng*, 'holy monk' 聖僧, in the instruction by the strange monk as a singular noun.

<sup>55</sup> Daoan's disciple Huiyuan 慧遠 (334–416) made a vow in front of an Amitābha image to seek rebirth in the Pure Land and formed a community of like-minded seekers that included laymen (*T* no. 2059, 50: 357c19–359a20). In this biography the account of seeking rebirth in the Pure Land is completely separated from the account of the actual death, where nothing is said of his rebirth in another realm.

body and all of his pain disappeared. Having bathed, he spoke of his vision to his attendant and discussed karmic causes and consequences. When morning came he passed away while sitting. The fragrance in the chamber remained for more than ten days.<sup>56</sup>

Huitong 慧通 (d.u.) prayed for the Pure Land and wished to be reborn there. He was only slightly ill, when he saw in his meditation a man with an austere appearance arrive and say to him, 'The auspicious time has arrived'. Shortly thereafter, Huitong saw the Buddha Amitābha, brilliantly illumined with a halo. Huitong then awoke from meditation and told his fellow students of the vision. Having spoken thus, he immediately passed away. A strange fragrance stayed in the room for three days.<sup>57</sup>

Falin 法琳 (?–495) often prayed for rebirth in the Pure Land and constantly recited the Pure land Scripture (*Wuliangshou jing* 無量壽經) and the Visualization Scripture (*Guan jing* 觀經). In 495 he became ill; he concentrated his thought on the Western region, worshipping and performing repentance rituals ceaselessly. He saw many holy beings gather in front of his eyes and described this vision to his disciples. He ordered them to have his body cremated after death. Having told them all of this, he assumed the gesture of worship, holding his palms together, and passed away.<sup>58</sup>

In the story of the death of Huiqian 慧虔 (d.u.) of the Jiexiang 嘉祥寺 monastery, the principal vision is given in a dream to someone other than the subject, in this case a nun in a nearby monastery. Huiqian became ill and soon realized that his life was coming to the end. He then thought of the Pure Land (*anyang* 安養) and prayed to Avalokiteśvara. Jingyan 淨嚴 (d.u.), a nun living in another temple, had a dream; she saw Avalokiteśvara come into the city from the western gate. The bodhisattva's luminous appearance shone like the sun and the moon, while banners, flags, flowers, and umbrellas all decorated with seven jewels surrounded him. Seeing him, Jingyan paid respect to him and asked, 'I do not know where the Great

<sup>56</sup> T no. 2059, 50: 395b28–c4.

<sup>57</sup> T no. 2059, 50: 398c9–13.

<sup>58</sup> T no. 2059, 50: 402a25–28.

Being is headed now'. He answered, 'I am going to welcome Master Huiqian of the Jiayang monastery'. Huiqian then passed away. Those attending him all perceived an extraordinary fragrance, which stayed for a long time. Huiqian himself knew that he was to die and had also experienced a vision of miraculous signs.<sup>59</sup>

In some stories, the miraculous sign promising Pure Land rebirth is separated from the moment of death by a brief period of time. Shortly before his death in 485 Huijin 慧進 (402–485), who had been engaged in self-cultivation directed toward rebirth in the Pure Land, heard a voice in the sky saying, 'Your wish is fulfilled. You will for certain be reborn in the Western region'.<sup>60</sup> This auditory vision is nevertheless presented as the central part of the account of the subject's death.

Daoxuan's biographical collection, covering the period 502–667, also presents several stories of deathbed visions. Huiming 慧命 (531–568) and Fayin 法音 (531–568) were fellow students. On the day of his death Huiming sat facing the west. Everyone present saw the Buddha arrive as Huiming held his palms together in the worshipful gesture and passed away. Some in the temple dreamt of gods descending to the earth with banners and flags shining like the sun. They also heard voices of praise and repeatedly perceived unusual fragrances. The same auspicious signs occurred at the death of Faming twelve days later.<sup>61</sup>

To give another example from the same collection, Shanzhou 善冑 (660–720) is suddenly said to have sat up and held his palms together. He told his attendant to prepare a seat for the World Honored One. He said aloud, 'The World Honored One came. I will now repent'. After a while he said, 'The World Honored One is leaving'. He lowered his head as if sending him off. Lying down, he said, 'Just now Amitābha Buddha came. Did you not see him? I will be leaving soon'. Having uttered these words, he died.<sup>62</sup>

Rebirth in the Pure Land is also often mentioned in biographies

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<sup>59</sup> *T* no. 2059, 50: 357c3–8.

<sup>60</sup> *T* no. 2059, 50: 408a2–3.

<sup>61</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 561b9–14.

<sup>62</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 519c20–24.



in Zanning's 988 collection. Some of these biographies also describe visions of the Buddha arriving to welcome the subject.

When he was ninety-six years old Sengxuan 僧銜 (d.u.) is said to have met the famous Pure Land Buddhist leader Daochuo 道綽 (562–645). Fearing that his life was about to end, Sengxuan bowed in front of the Buddha one thousand times every day and recited the name of the Buddha Amitābha eight hundred myriads of times. Having practiced tirelessly in this way for five years, when he was about to die, he told his disciples, 'The Buddha Amitābha came and gave me a fragrant robe. [Bodhisattvas] Avalokiteśvara and Mahāstāmaprāpta are at the front of the procession. Transformation bodies of the Buddha fill the sky. They are going from here to the west, indeed to the Pure Land'. Having said this, he died.<sup>63</sup>

Huaiyu 懷玉 (?–742) recited the name of the Buddha Amitābha five myriads of times everyday and had chanted the Amitābha scripture, amounting to thirty myriad rolls. On the ninth day of the sixth month of 742, he suddenly saw in the western direction holy images, numbering as many as the sands of the Ganges. One person, holding a silver platform (*baiyintai* 白銀臺) came in through a window. Huaiyu said, 'I should have a golden platform (*jintai* 金臺)'. The man took the silver platform outside. Huaiyu doubled his determination. Later, a voice in the sky said, 'The halo appeared above your head. Please sit cross-legged and form the hand seal (*mudrā*) of the Buddha Amitābha'.<sup>64</sup> The light of the Buddha filled the room. Huaiyu gestured to the others to withdraw, saying 'Do not touch this light'.<sup>65</sup> In the middle of the night a white ray of light appeared again. Holy beings filled the sky. Huaiyu said, 'When you perceive

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<sup>63</sup> *T* no. 2061, 50: 863b23–28. Stories of Qifang 啟芳 (d.u.) and Yuan-guo 圓果 (d.u.) are appended to this biography; In a dream Qifang was told by Amitābha Buddha that he would be reborn in his Buddha land. Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāstāmaprāpta are said to have arrived at his death.

<sup>64</sup> Amitābha's hand seals are described in Sawa, *Butsuzō zuten*, 22–29.

<sup>65</sup> A distinctive ritual appears to be implied here: did Huaiyu, by making the *mudrā* of Amitābha and emitting the light from his body, become a receptacle for Amitābha Buddha himself?

an unusual fragrance, my life will end'. To his disciple Huiming 慧命 (d.u.), who asked where he was to be reborn, Huaiyu answered with verses indicating the Pure Land. When Huaiyu finished uttering these verses, a fragrance filled the sky. A crowd, as great as the ocean, filled the sky, and the Buddha Amitābha, [bodhisattvas] Avalokiteśvara and Mahāstāmaprāpta were seen to arrive. Their bodies were the color of refined gold, and they were riding together on a diamond (golden?) platform, coming to welcome Huaiyu [to the Pure Land]. Huaiyu smiled and ended his life.<sup>66</sup>

### Deathbed Visions of Other Rebirths and Accounts of the Subject's Choices

Daoxuan's *vinaya* commentary in its discussion of the moment of death mentions not only the Western realm of Amitābha, but also Maitreya's Tuṣita heaven and the Vulture Peak of Śākyamuni as realms of rebirth desired by the dying monk. It also notes that some people rejected rebirth in all such idealized realms as the ultimate goal.<sup>67</sup> It is clear that different ideas about heavenly rebirth and some disagreement about this teaching existed at the time Daoxuan composed his *vinaya* commentary. The entries in the eminent monk collections offer concrete examples of such differences and disagreements.

The subjects of a number of biographies sought rebirth in Maitreya's Tuṣita heaven. The quests for rebirth in Amitābha's Pure Land and for rebirth in the inner quarter of the Tuṣita heaven where Maitreya resided sometimes openly competed with each other.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> T no. 2061, 50: 865a9–21. Other stories of deathbed visions assuring Pure Land rebirth are found in the biographies of Zhixuan 智玄 (710–882?), T no. 2061, 50: 744a24–b6; Daoguang 道光 (682–760), T no. 2061, 50: 797a17–21; Qihan 齊翰 (708–775), T no. 2061, 50: 799c13–15; Fazhi 法智 (d.u.), T no. 2061, 50: 862b29–c4.

<sup>67</sup> T no. 1804, 40: 144c21–22.

<sup>68</sup> The relative merits of rebirth in Amitābha's Pure Land and Maitreya's

Tanjie 曇戒 (d.u.), a student of Daoan, recited Maitreya's name ceaselessly when his illness became grave. His disciple Zhisheng 智生 (d.u.) asked why he did not wish for rebirth in the Pure Land, and he replied, 'I made a vow to be reborn in the Tuṣita heaven with my master (Daoan) and others. We are altogether eight people. The master, Daoyuan 道願 and others have already been reborn there. I have not gone there yet. This is why I have this wish'. When he finished saying this, light is said to have shone on his body and he appeared particularly happy. Suddenly he passed away. The light that shone on his body, or possibly the light that his body emitted, may be read as a visionary confirmation of the monk's rebirth in Tuṣita heaven.<sup>69</sup>

The famous translator Xuanzang 玄奘 (602?–664) is widely known

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Tuṣita heaven were debated repeatedly by scholars. Cf. the article on *miroku jōdo* 彌勒淨土, or 'Maitreya's pure land', in *Jōdoshū daijiten*, 3: 375–76. The famous translator Xuanzang's comment on this issue is found in the *Fayuan zbulin*, juan 16 (*T* no. 2122, 53: 406a3–9). On a brief summary of the competition between Maitreya cult and Amitābha cult, see also Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 170–172.

<sup>69</sup> *T* no. 2059, 50: 356c1–6. An elaborate story of rebirth in Tuṣita heaven is told in the extended and complex account of the death of Zhixi 智晞 (556–627), though at the moment of his death it is only said that music was heard in the sky. Zhixi was an important disciple of the Tiantai patriarch Zhiyi (539–598). When Zhixi announced the approaching death to his disciples, a student is said to have asked, 'I do not know where the master is to be reborn'. Zhixi said, 'I had a dream. I was in Tuṣita heaven, with its blue-colored palace, situated in the Northwestern direction. There was one empty seat. I asked why, and they answered that in six years Guanding 灌頂 (561–632), a prominent figure in the Tiantai community after Zhiyi's death, will arrive and preach here' (*T* no. 2060, 50: 582c19–23). This story is repeated in Guanding's biography (*T* no. 2060, 50: 583a8–12). The biographical tradition about Zhixi's teacher Zhiyi is ambiguous. Though he chose to die in front of a large Maitreya image in Shicheng and offered half of his possessions to Maitreya, that is to his image, he also predicted that Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta would come to welcome him at his death (*T* no. 2060, 50: 567a28, b19).

to have desired rebirth in Maitreya's realm.<sup>70</sup> Yizhong 義忠 (d.u.), whose biography appears in Zanning's tenth century collection, also followed this tradition as a student of Ji 基 (631–682), himself a prominent disciple of Xuanzang. In the last year of his life, when he was seventy-two years old, Yizhong frequently sat facing Northwest and looking up toward the Tuṣita heaven, visualizing its inner quarters. He made a vow, wishing that when he died, he would be able to see Maitreya. One morning, having bathed, he straightened his posture and looked toward the sky and worshipped. He looked as if he was making an earnest request. Shortly thereafter, as he sat with his legs crossed, entrusting to his disciples the continued circulation of the teaching; a strange fragrance suddenly filled the room and a bright colored cloud came down from the sky. Yizhong held his palms together in the position of worship and looked intently into the sky. 'Why would a great sage come himself to welcome a defiled and weak monk [like me]?' Having said this, he died.<sup>71</sup>

Daoang 道昂 (560–634), on the other hand, was determined to seek rebirth in Amitābha's Pure Land. At the moment of his death Daoang looked up and saw a group of gods dance to the music of strings and pipes. Beautiful sounds penetrated afar. Daoang said to the assembly, 'Musicians of the Tuṣita heaven have come down to welcome me'. He said, 'The [rebirth in] a heaven is the foundation for [further] births and deaths. I therefore do not wish [rebirth in the Tuṣita heaven]. I have been constantly praying for [rebirth in the] Pure Land. Why has this wish not been realized?' As he said this, he saw the heavenly musicians go up and disappear in the distance. Then he saw from the western direction a crowd of musicians with incense and flowers fly over like a cloud. They circled over his head and everyone in the assembly saw them. Daoang said, 'You should not be disturbed. A miraculous welcome has arrived from the west. I should be able to go as I vowed'. When he finished saying this, people saw the incense burner fall out of his hand. Then, sitting straight in the high seat, he passed away.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> T no. 2060, 50: 458a7.

<sup>71</sup> T no. 2061, 50: 729c26–730a3.

Other realms of rebirth are also mentioned. Zhenyu 真玉 (d.u) is said to have seen the quest for rebirth in the Western Pure Land as a form of attachment and instead sought to be reborn in a Buddha land in the eastern direction.<sup>73</sup> In the story of Huiling 慧稜 (596–640) the welcoming party came from the realm of Yama, the lord of the dead and hell. In the middle of the first month Dharma master Chang 昶 of Gantongsi monastery 感通寺 (d.u.) had a dream; King Yama [of the realm of hell] appeared and requested Master Ling (Huiling) and Master Zhiba 智拔 (573–640) to lecture on the Three Treatises and on the Lotus Scripture respectively. When he heard about this Huiling said, ‘Good! I have made a vow to be reborn in hell and teach Mahāyāna scriptures to sentient beings there. This was a sign that the vow is realized’. When he was near death, while he was speaking to his disciples, a loud voice was heard outside, saying ‘Dharma master, get up quickly and burn incense’. When the messenger arrived, disciple Baodu 寶度 (d.u.) asked who he was. The messenger answered, ‘King Yama sent a messenger to welcome Huiling to his realm’. Huiling immediately rose, burnt incense, bathed, repented and paid respect to the Buddha. Then he returned to the chamber and took leave of Baodu. While he was taking a light meal, a strange fragrance suddenly appeared. Huiling straightened his posture and passed away.<sup>74</sup>

### Visions of Messengers From Other Realms

In the stories reviewed above, as is typically the case with stories of rebirth in Amitābha’s Pure Land or Maitreya’s Tuṣita heaven, the

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<sup>72</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 588b12–20.

<sup>73</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 475c10–23. Rebirth in a realm in the eastern direction is also mentioned in the biography of Famin 法敏 (579–645) (*T* no. 2060, 50: 538c29–539a5). Lingrui 靈睿 (564–646) was told that he would be reborn in Avalokiteśvara’s place, ‘at the western corner of the Mount Guanming 光明山 in the great kingdom in the southern sea’ (*T* no. 2060, 50: 540a8–19).

<sup>74</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 537a14–29.

subject has deliberately chosen the realm of rebirth and has directed his efforts toward this goal. In other stories it is the gods who take the initiative. Daoyou's 道幽 (d.u.) *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* biography tells such a story:

He was sitting on a chair, when, as if in sleep, he saw a deity of extraordinary appearance. The deity said, 'I am Śakra. I came here deliberately with the intention of asking you to lecture in heaven'. When he first heard this, he feared that this meant death and did not accept it. He said, 'I am in the middle of constructing a Buddha hall. There are matters that prevent me from accepting this invitation'. Waking up from sleep, he described all this to dharma master Ru 如 who was there with him. Ru said, 'One seldom receives such an offer. All human lives end with death. One dies without knowing in which realm one is to be reborn. Now you have secured rebirth as a god in heaven. This is better than being reborn as a human being. Gods understand the dharma better than human beings. Why should you not go? Don't even think of the merits gained by the Buddha hall project'. Daoyou accepted this advice.<sup>75</sup>

In some cases, the destination is not clearly indicated. This is what we find in the biography of Daohong 道洪 (572–650). Before his death Daohong made unusual gestures. When his attendant asked about them, he replied that two people, properly attired with a crown, had repeatedly come to pay respects to him. He was indicating to them that they should stop doing so. He also commented on the beauty of the red flowers and green pond [in his vision]. He then held his palms together, eyes turned to the sky, and said that the honorable monk Rāhula had come to take leave [of him]. As he died, an unusual fragrance filled the temple.<sup>76</sup>

The remarkable story about Huisi 慧思 (515–577), who appears in the list of Tiantai patriarchs as Zhiyi's predecessor, may be interpreted against this background of messengers from different realms

<sup>75</sup> T no. 2060, 50: 660c4–18.

<sup>76</sup> T no. 2060, 50: 547b12–16.

coming to welcome great monks to their realms. Huisi withdrew from the congregation, meditated, and quietly ended his life. A young monk Yunbian saw that he had stopped breathing and screamed. Then Huisi opened his eyes, saying ‘You are an evil Māra. I am about to go. Many holy beings are arriving to welcome me. I am discussing (*Jun* 論) with them the place of my rebirth. Why do you make such a scene and disturb me? Silly ones should go out!’ As he returned to meditation and passed away, all perceived an extraordinary fragrance.<sup>77</sup>

A divine messenger plays a central role in a complex story about the period preceding Fachun’s death. He did not feel well and was sitting quietly in a closed room. A youth robed in white and holding a lamp was standing in attendance at his right. His disciple Huijin 慧進 (d.u.) came in and asked, ‘Who is this person?’ Fachun answered, ‘Gods from the Sixth Heaven in the Realm of Desire frequently come to invite me to be reborn (?) there. But gods in heavens are attached to pleasures. So I do not agree to it. It would interfere with my cultivation of the Way. I have always vowed to be reborn in a place where the Buddha’s teaching is absent and to teach to save sentient beings. Be careful not to mention [the fact that a god is with me]. After I die you may speak freely of this’. When the fifth month arrived, disciples held a large vegetarian feast for him in order to secure merits in the world beyond. When monks and lay people gathered in front of Fachun, a pair of pigeons flew into his chamber and, perched on the frame used to hang his robes, the birds stared at him. People tried to grab them, and yet they showed no sign of fear. Fachun said, ‘Let them be. Do not catch them’. They stayed there until the sunset. When his illness became grave and someone asked questions, he ordered them to conduct themselves according to the dharma: ‘It will not be long before you can do as you wish (‘be free

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<sup>77</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 563c23–27. Similarly, many gods from different heavenly realms are said to have appeared when Xuanjing 玄景 (?–606) faced death. He appears to have been certain that he wanted to be reborn in Tuṣita heaven (*T* no. 2060, 50: 569c8). In the biography of Daojie 道傑 (573–627), the messenger is an old acquaintance who had died earlier (*T* no. 2060, 50: 530a4–10).

to deceive yourselves’). He also said, ‘Unexpectedly, suddenly I am riding a white elephant. This is a result of delusion. Why should I let it go on?’ He had his meal taken away and took leave of his old acquaintances. He distributed his robes and other possessions among his fellow practitioners to form karmic bonds with them. With his mind clear and free from other concerns, he passed away.<sup>78</sup>

In the later story of Wuen 晤恩 (912–986), in Zanning’s tenth century collection, the emphasis again appears to be on the messenger: On the first day of the eighth month of 986, in the middle of the night, Wuen saw a white light emerge from the well and appear on and off. He said to his disciples, ‘My life span, determined by karma, is to end now’. He stopped eating grain, and not uttering a word, single-mindedly meditated on the Buddha (or recited the name of the Buddha?). Then he dreamt of a monk wearing a robe of rags, holding a golden incense burner with incense burning. The monk circumambulated his room three times and said, ‘I am Patriarch Guanding 灌頂 (561–632). I came to welcome you. You must now go’. Waking up from the dream, Wuen called out to his disciples. An extraordinary fragrance was all around. On the twenty-fifth day he dictated ‘The Essence of Cessation and Insight’ and ‘The Meaning of Contemplation’. Around eight o’clock in the morning he sat facing the West and passed away. He was seventy-five years old and had been a monk for fifty-five years. In that night, monks Youxing 有興 (d.u.), Wenyan 文偃 (d.u.) and others in the monastery heard clearly the sounds of string and wind instruments in the sky. There was no sound of drums but many bells and chimes could be heard. Gradually the sound moved away and disappeared into the west.<sup>79</sup>

### Use of Images

The line between visions and the contemplation of an image could be blurred in some of these accounts, and images could replace

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<sup>78</sup> T no. 2060, 50: 575c29–576a15.

<sup>79</sup> T no. 2061, 50: 752a2–11.



the visionary experience. Daoxuan's *vinaya* commentary describes the use of an image at the moment of death.<sup>80</sup> This practice appears in some biographies of eminent monks, particularly those collected by Daoxuan. On the day of his death, Sengfan 僧範 (476–555) is said to have taken an image into his room and, kneeling before it, repented of his former sins.<sup>81</sup> Shortly before Faxiang's death, Faxiang, surrounded by attendants, said softly, 'The Buddha's image, the Buddha's image'. When those around him turned around to look, they saw a towering image on the western wall, complete with halo and marks. Soon the image disappeared, but fragrance and music appeared.<sup>82</sup> The reference to the western wall in this story suggests that Faxiang was reborn in Amitābha's Pure Land. As the illness of Xinxing 信行 (540–594), famous leader of the Teaching of the Three Stages movement, progressed, he struggled to go to the Buddha hall and view an image. When he became weaker, he requested that the image be brought inside his monastic cell, and lying down and looking at this image, he passed away.<sup>83</sup> Zhiyi's death took place in front of the stone image at Shicheng 石城.<sup>84</sup>

The reference to images is not confined to biographies in Daoxuan's collection. Sengquan 僧詮 (d.u.), whose biography appears in Huijiao's earlier collection, is said to have repeatedly produced large golden images earlier in his career and when his final illness became grave, he saw these images appear on the western wall. He also saw several heavenly youths come and attend to his illness. In a dream his disciple Falang 法朗 (d.u.) saw several people carrying a platform. When he questioned them, they explained that they were taking it to welcome Dharma master Sengquan. Sengquan died in the following morning.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> *T* no. 1804, 40: 144a17–20.

<sup>81</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 483c29.

<sup>82</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 523a23–26.

<sup>83</sup> *T* no. 2061, 50: 560a21–23.

<sup>84</sup> *T* no. 2061, 50: 567a25. This passage is framed as an account of preparing for rebirth in Amitābha's Pure Land, though elsewhere, in Zhixi's biography, Zhiyi is said to reside in the Tuṣita heaven (*T* no. 2060, 50: 582c21).

<sup>85</sup> *T* no. 2059, 50: 369c22–25.

## Controversy

In discussing the instructions to be given to the dying in his *vinaya* commentary, Daoxuan cites a passage from the Treatise on the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsūtra* (*Da zhidu lun* 大智度論) and discusses an objection that is raised to the excessive emphasis on the moment of death.<sup>86</sup> While stories of rebirth in the Western Pure Land or in other superior realms appear frequently in Daoxuan's biographical collection, in some of the biographies the subject is openly critical of this idea. The vision at the moment of death could be controversial. Some accepted such visions and sought them deliberately, while others were skeptical or hostile. At the time of Faxi's 法喜 (572–632) death, members of his congregation suddenly heard the sound of music and carriages to the north of the forest and told him of this. Faxi said, 'I have long ago given up [attachments to] karmic rewards. How would I [wish to be] reborn in lands of bliss. In the end it is a form of bondage'. He then returned to meditation. After a short while the sound stopped. Fragrance filled [the room] and early in the morning he passed away.<sup>87</sup>

Zhiman's 智滿 (541–628) biography records a remarkable exchange between Zhiman and Daochuo, a well-known Pure Land leader. Taking issue with Daochuo's emphasis on the capacities of sentient beings and conditions, Zhiman argued that such 'conditions' are unreal and in fact there is nothing that is to be 'guided' (*yin* 引) into the Pure Land. Thus, to place the emphasis on the one moment of death (*yiqi yaofa* 一期要法) is in fact to be buried in bondage over many world ages. Zhiman is then said to have asked Daochuo to leave.<sup>88</sup> At Tanxuan's 曇選 (531–625) deathbed, Daochuo suggested

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<sup>86</sup> *T* no. 1804, 40: 144c913.

<sup>87</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 587c8–16.

<sup>88</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 583b29–c5. Zhiman summarizes Daochuo's position with the expression 'yiqi yaofa' (the essential teaching of the one period of time, or opportunity) (*T* no. 2060, 50: 583c4). A similar expression, 'yiqi dayao 一期大要', appears in Daoxuan's commentary (*T* no. 1804, 40: 145a11); this expression in that context appears simply to mean 'the great importance of the one moment [of death]'.

that he make a vow to be reborn in the Western Pure Land, ‘the land of happiness’, but Tanxuan contemptuously rejected the idea of seeking happiness for himself.<sup>89</sup> These stories attest both to the popularity of the Pure Land teaching of Daochuo, for whom Daoxuan wrote a biography while the subject was still alive,<sup>90</sup> and also to the fact that there was significant opposition to it. The criticisms directed against Daochuo in the entries on Zhiman and Tanxuan may in fact be read as expressions of different approaches to death. These stories thus highlight the tension between the teaching of Pure Land rebirth and the doctrinal discourse of emptiness and no-birth.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 641c5–10.

<sup>90</sup> *T* no. 2060, 50: 594a29.

<sup>91</sup> This tension is not always recognized in the biography. Daoying 道英 declared in his last sermon that impermanence is the norm. He then continued, ‘Do not indulge in self-deception. Do not die in vain’. He then is said to have instructed that verses from Bodhisattva Xianshou’s 賢首 chapter of the *Huayan jing* [Flower Garland Scripture] be recited. When the moment of death arrived, he was encouraged to meditate on, or visualize, the superior realms of rebirth (*shanchu* 善處). When signs of the morning came, he passed away (*T* no. 2060, 50: 654c10–12). Reciting verses from the *Huayan jing* as noted here may have been a widespread practice. In the ‘attending to the sick’ chapter in his *vinaya* commentary, toward the end of the section where the practices at the moment of death are discussed in considerable detail, Daoxuan cites verses from the Xian-shou chapter of the *Huayan jing* (*T* no. 278, 6: 40.145a13–17). The original scriptural passage explicitly speaks of the ray of light that makes those who realize that their lives were about to end obtain the *samādhi* of Buddha visualization and see the Buddha. After their death they are said to be reborn in front of the Buddha. The light is also said to appear at the moment of death. Its purpose is to encourage visualization of the Buddha (*T* no. 278, 6: 9.437b1–4). The verses from the Xianshou chapter mentioned in Daoying’s biography may in fact refer to these same verses; approaching the moment of death Daoying is to have been ‘encouraged to meditate on or visualize’ superior places, as is described in a verse from the corresponding part of the *Huayan jing* (*T* no. 2064, 50: 654c11–12; *T* no. 278, 6: 9.437b3). In this account of the death of Daoying, then, the teaching of impermanence, presented as the norm, and the story of a heavenly

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In Chinese biographies of Buddhist monks, the account of the death of the subject is often constructed as a summary evaluation of the subject's entire career. In some accounts miraculous signs are said to have appeared, demonstrating the efficacy of the subject's teaching. As noted above, these signs may allude to the supernatural signs that are said to have appeared at the Buddha's death. Others bear no recognizable relationship to the account of the Buddha's death. Thus, for example, realizing his approaching death, Kumārajīva is said to have made a vow: if the scriptures he translated were free of mistakes his tongue was to remain unburned after cremation.<sup>92</sup> The biography carefully notes that after cremation, only the tongue remained; everything else was reduced to ashes. Again, toward the end of Daoan's biography, Daoan is said to have been anxious about the reliability of his commentaries on scriptures. Daoan made a vow, asking for a miraculous confirmation (*ruixiang* 瑞相). He then had a dream in which a foreign monk told him that his comments on scriptures were truthful. Later, when Huiyuan had a chance to read the newly translated *Sarvāstivāda vinaya* at Mount Lu, he realized that the foreign monk was Piṇḍola Bharadvāja.<sup>93</sup> The account summarized above of the visit of a strange monk who predicted Daoan's rebirth in Tuṣita heaven closely follows this story of a visionary confirmation. The reader is left with the impression that the strange monk who predicts Daoan's rebirth in Tuṣita heaven is also Piṇḍola and that the two stories together call attention to Daoan's anxiety facing death. The stories about deathbed visions reviewed throughout this chapter may be read as examples of such miraculous signs. These stories must have been driven ultimately by anxiety both about the ultimate worth of the dying subjects and their impending rebirths. The passage about the arrival of Amitābha accompanied by Avalokiteśvara

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rebirth in front of the Buddha, are presented side by side with no suggestion as to the potential tension between them.

<sup>92</sup> T no. 2059, 50: 333a2–3.

<sup>93</sup> T no. 2059, 50: 353b. See Link, 'The Biography of Tao-an', 34–35.

and Mahāsthāmaprāpta at Zhiyi's death perhaps should be read as a reflection of the anxiety on the part of his disciples.<sup>94</sup> Having recorded Zhiyi's own humble comment about his attainments, the community may have felt compelled to also report their teacher's rebirth in Amitābha's Pure Land.

In this investigation, I attempted to read the passages describing the death of eminent monks in the standard biographical collections as carefully constructed literary accounts. I also noted that these accounts were guided by ideas that were in many ways contradictory to each other. Viewing death as a critical moment for realizing the truth of impermanence would seem to imply a lack of concern about future rebirths. In passages that describe the subjects' death as comparable events to the Buddha's death or *parinirvāṇa*, the subject is not anxious. But those around him are anxious, though often this anxiety appears to be only indirectly suggested by the emphasis on the extraordinary calmness of the subject in facing death. The preoccupation with visions at the moment of death in many of the entries suggests that in the end the profound anxiety on the part of those who were left behind may have spilled over into the presentation of the dying subject as well. Though there may have been some historical kernel to these stories of visions and rebirth, the community must also have been quick to invent and elaborate such stories as a strategy for coping with the confusion that must often have followed the death of their teacher.

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<sup>94</sup> Satō Tetsuei 佐藤哲英 has commented on the notable emphasis on Amitābha cult at this point in Zhiyi's biography. See Satō, *Tendai daishi no kenkyū*, 65.