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The Scholar and the Monk:  
Two Precious Scrolls on the Conversion of Bai Juyi  
by Chan Master Bird's Nest,  
and the Practice of Self-Cultivation by Bai's Spouses

translated and introduced by  
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The Scholar and the Monk:  
Two Precious Scrolls on the Conversion of Bai Juyi by Chan Master Bird's Nest,  
and the Practice of Self-Cultivation by Bai's Spouses

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## ABSTRACT

The meeting of the Tang dynasty poet and government official Bai Juyi (772–846) and his elder contemporary Chan Master Niaohe (Bird's Nest) Daolin (741–824) was first recorded in the tenth century. In subsequent centuries it developed into the legend of Bai's conversion to a life of strict self-cultivation by the miraculous monk Bird's Nest, who appears to him in various shapes. Bai's conversion is followed by that of his wives, who assert their own ability to practice self-cultivation and achieve enlightenment. This paper presents complete translations of two versions of this legend (nowadays classified as precious scrolls). The first of these includes a strong attack on clerical misogyny; in the second, Chan Master Bird's Nest is described as an incarnation of the arhat Cloth Sack (Budai).

Keywords: Bai Juyi (772–846); Niaohe Daolin (741–824); paired self-cultivation; clerical misogyny; Budai

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## INTRODUCTION

The famous Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) was a good Confucianist in his public career, but, from early on, a devout Buddhist in his private life.<sup>1</sup> So, when he served as prefect of Hangzhou from 822 to 824, he visited the various monasteries inside and outside the city to consult their famous clerics. According to Buddhist sources from the tenth century and later, one of the Chan masters he visited was Bird's Nest (Niaoke 鳥窠, 741–824).<sup>2</sup> The earliest history of the Chan lineages, Jing 靜 and Yun's 筠 *Zutang ji* 祖堂集 of 952 offers very little information on this character:

Monk Bird's Nest was the successor to Chan Master Jingshan Guoyi 徑山國一 and lived in Hangzhou. As we have not yet seen his record of activities, we cannot decide on the details of his monastic career.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from its account of the master's meeting with Bai Juyi, the *Zutang ji* provides one other anecdote of Chan Master Bird's Nest's teaching:

Because his attendant wanted to take his leave, the master asked, "Where are you going?"

The answer was, "I will go anywhere to study the Buddhist Dharma."

The master said, "If it is the Dharma of the Buddha, I have something of that here too."

When the attendant asked, "And what is that Buddhist Dharma here?"

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed chronology of Bai Juyi's lifelong engagement with Buddhism, illustrated with many translations from his poetry and prose, see Chen 1973, 184–239.

<sup>2</sup> Chen 1973, 205–206. For Bai Juyi's interest in Chan, also see Chen 1973, 199–200.

<sup>3</sup> Jing and Yun 1990, 54. All translations in this paper are my own unless otherwise noted.

The master pulled one hair from his gown and showed it to him, whereupon the attendant immediately achieved enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

The *Zutang ji* provides the following account of the relationship between the old master and the much younger poet:

Secretary Bai personally received his heart-precepts, and the next time they sat opposite each other for a while without saying a single word. The third younger brother of the secretary saw this and made a poem:

A white-headed layman sits opposite a Chan master:  
This is the moment of the Lañkāvatāra’s *samādhi*.<sup>5</sup>  
A single thing cannot comprehend a hundred tastes;  
How many can know the number of the Ganges’s grains of sand?

Secretary Bai asked, “How should one practice self-cultivation during the twelve hours of the day<sup>6</sup> to be able to correspond to the Way?”

The master replied, “Don’t commit any sins and practice all kinds of goodness.”

The secretary commented, “An infant three years old could say that.”

The master said, “A child of three may be able to say so, but an old man of a hundred years cannot live up to it.”

The secretary therefore bowed to him and accepted him as his teacher, and he wrote the following hymn:

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4 Jing and Yun 1990, 54.

5 *Samādhi* is the mental concentration in meditation that may lead to “meditative absorption” (*dhyāna*) (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 743). The Lañkāvatāra Sutra was a Mahayana sutra that enjoyed a high status in early Chan Buddhism (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 406–407). For Bai Juyi’s acquaintance with this sutra, see Chen 1973, 195.

6 In traditional China, the day was made up of twelve hours.

The body scrawny, the face sallow after long asceticism;  
 A single hemp robe suits his feelings set on the Way.  
 He built a straw cottage by the side of the green tree,  
 And to the edge of the sky people know Bird's Nest.

The master asked Secretary Bai: "You are a boy of the Bai family, aren't you?" The secretary gave his name, Bai Juyi.

The master asked, "And what is your father's surname?"

The secretary did not know how to reply.<sup>7</sup>

Fifty years later, in 1004, Daoyuan 道原, the compiler of the *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳登錄, apparently had access to a record of the activities of Chan Master Bird's Nest, as he provided a detailed account of his monastic career:

Chan Master Bird's Nest Daolin 鳥窠道林 of Hangzhou was a man of Fuyang in this commandery. His surname was Pan 潘. His mother, woman Zhu 朱氏, dreamed that the light of the sun entered her mouth, and thereupon she was pregnant. When she gave birth, a rare incense filled the room, and so he was called Fragrant Light (Xiangguang 香光). He left the household at the age of nine, and received the precepts in the Guoyuan Monastery 果願寺 in Jingzhou at the age of twenty-one. Later he went to Dharma Master Fuli 復禮 of the Ximing Monastery 西明寺 of Chang'an and studied the *Huayan jing* 華嚴經 (Avatamsaka sutra) and the *Qixin lun* 啟信論 (*Śraddhotpada śāstra*; Treatise on the arising of faith). Fuli showed him the *Zhenwang song* 真妄頌 (Hymn of the real and the unreal) and had him practice *dhyāna*.... When Daizong (r. 763–779) summoned the Chan master Jingshan Guoyi to the capital, the master visited him and thereupon obtained the correct Dharma from him. When he returned to the

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<sup>7</sup> Jing and Yun 1990, 54.



south he first stayed at the Yongfu Monastery 永福寺 of Gushan [in Hangzhou's West Lake]....<sup>8</sup>

The *Jingde chuandeng lu* also explains how the Chan master acquired his peculiar name:

Later he noticed a large pine on Mount Qinwang. Its branches and needles were rich and flourishing and were round and curved like a hood. He roosted and rested on that tree, so the people of those days called him Chan Master Bird's Nest. There were also magpies that nested by his side and of themselves became completely tame, so people also called him Monk Magpies' Nest.<sup>9</sup>

Personally, I think it more likely that the Chan master acquired his name because of his accomplishments in meditation—when the Buddha spent his five years of meditation in the Snowy Mountains, he sat so quietly that birds nested on his head.

The *Jingde chuandeng lu* repeats the anecdote about Bird's Nest's attendant who wants to leave, and provides the following shortened account of Bird's Nest's meeting with Bai Juyi:

In the Yuanhe period (806–820), Vice Minister Bai Juyi was appointed to the provinces as prefect of this commandery, and therefore entered the hills to visit the master.

He addressed him: "Master, you are dwelling in a very dangerous spot!"

The master replied, "Prefect, your position is even more dangerous!"

Bai said, "My position places me in charge of rivers and mountains. What could be the danger?"

The master said, "Kindle and fire mixed together—an ever-active intelligence: isn't that a danger?"

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<sup>8</sup> Daoyuan 1967, 68.

<sup>9</sup> Daoyuan 1967, 68.

Bai also asked him, “What is the main message of the Buddha’s Dharma?”

The master replied, “Don’t commit any sins and practice all kinds of goodness.”

Bai commented, “Even an infant three years old could say such a thing.”

The master replied, “A child of three may be able to say it, but even an old man of eighty cannot live up to it.”

Bai thereupon bowed and retired.<sup>10</sup>

The *Jingde chuandeng lu* concludes its entry on Chan Master Bird’s Nest with an account of his death:

On the tenth day of the Second Month of the Changqing period (824), he told his attendants: “I now announce my end.”

Having said this, he passed away, in a sitting position, at the age of eighty-four.<sup>11</sup>

The entry on Chan Master Bird’s Nest of the *Jingde chuandeng lu* was copied almost verbatim by Puji 普濟 in his *Wudeng huiyuan* 五燈會元 of 1272.<sup>12</sup>

From the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when Hangzhou served as the capital of the Southern Song dynasty, we have three paintings dedicated to Chan Master Bird’s Nest. An anonymous painting of the second half of the thirteenth century, now at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, is a portrait of a hooded monk, without any distinguishing traits. A painting by Liu Guoyong 劉國用, now at the British Museum, presents a frontal view of the master seated in an upright position, while a magpie is building its nest on his bald head. The third painting, kept at the Shanghai Museum, is by the famous artist Liang Kai 梁楷 and is entitled “Bai Juyi Visits Chan Master Bird’s Nest” (Bai Juyi ye Niaoke chanshi 白居易謁鳥窠禪師). It shows the master seated on a huge nest that has been built on the

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<sup>10</sup> Daoyuan 1967, 68. Bai Juyi’s serious engagement with Buddhism is underlined by the fact that he has his own entry in the *Jingde chuandeng lu* (Daoyuan 1967, 185).

<sup>11</sup> Daoyuan 1967, 68.

<sup>12</sup> Puji 1984, 70–71

bent, horizontal trunk of a pine tree, facing Bai Juyi, who is shown from the back while bowing to the master; the painting also includes Bai Juyi’s servant.<sup>13</sup>

Chan Master Bird’s Nest clearly provided the inspiration for Chan Master Crow’s Nest (Wuchao chanshi 烏巢禪師), who, in chapter 19 of the sixteenth-century novel *Journey to the West* (Xiyou ji 西遊記), provides the pilgrim Xuanzang 玄奘 with a copy of the Heart Sutra, which will assist the pilgrims to complete the journey to the home of the Buddha.<sup>14</sup> This may well be the avatar of Chan Master Bird’s Nest that was best known in the Ming and Qing dynasties. But under his own name he appeared in adaptations of his encounter with Bai Juyi in precious scrolls (*baojuan* 寶卷). At least two different precious scroll adaptations of this theme have been preserved,<sup>15</sup> one known as *The Trajectory of Chan Master Bird’s Nest’s Conversion of Vice Minister Bai* (Niaowo chanshi du Bai shilang xingjiao 鳥窩禪師杜白侍郎行腳),<sup>16</sup> and the other as *Chan Master Niaoke Converts Vice Minister Bai* (Niaoke chanshi du Bai shilang) or *Precious Scroll of Pointing Out Delusions and Awakening to Enlightenment* (Zhimi juewu baojuan 指迷覺悟寶卷).<sup>17</sup>

While these versions retain some part of the original dialogue between the poet and the monk, the characters of the interlocutors have changed almost beyond recognition, and also the nature of their

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13 Jing Peng 2018. The modern painter He Tianjian 賀天健 (1891–1977) in his hanging scroll of Chan Master Bird’s Nest shows him perched high in a tree on one of its branches.

14 Wu Fuxiu and Wang Qizhou 2012.

15 For an inventory of known editions, see Che Xilun 2000, 6–7 and 189.

16 Reproduced in Zhang Xishun 1990, Vol. 28, 1–45. The same edition is reproduced in Pu Wenqi 2005, 11: 259–272. The blocks of this edition had been cut in 1889. The text of the precious scroll is preceded by a woodcut illustration, showing in the upper right hand corner Chan Master Bird’s Nest seated on a pine tree, and in the lower left hand corner an official greeting him while standing on a bridge; behind the official one sees his horse and a servant. The text of *Trajectory* is followed by “Four Imperially Composed Hymns by Emperor Renzong of the Song on the Return to the West on a Single Shoe” (Song Renzong huangdi Tuolü guixi zantan yuzhi sishou 宋仁宗皇帝脫履歸西讚嘆御至四首).

17 Several of the major monasteries of the Jiangnan region stored woodblocks of this version. My translation is based on the Guangxu woodblock edition kept at Yangzhou University. For a description of that copy, see Luo Fan and Wang Dingyong 2021, vol. 1, 4–5. The text of the precious scroll in this printing is followed by three sets of seven songs to the tune Yibigou 一筆勾 (“Finished in One Stroke”).

interaction. Both versions provide Bai Juyi and Bird's Nest with a heavenly background, but their celestial identities are different. Both adaptations describe Bai Juyi as a rich court official with four spouses. However, while both texts view women as the foremost attraction of the "red dust," and so the major hindrance for a man to pursue religion, they also stress that women can pursue enlightenment while married.

Neither text makes any mention of Bai Juyi's life-long interest in Buddhism before his meeting with Chan Master Bird's Nest, and, while in the early anecdotes it is Bai Juyi who seeks out the Chan master, it is now Bird's Nest who pursues Bai Juyi. In both cases, Bird's Nest takes on different shapes to convert Bai Juyi, culminating in his confrontation with Bai Juyi in the shape of Impermanence, but the number of transformations is not the same.

In *The Trajectory*, Chan Master Bird's Nest is described as having a human body but a bird's head, because, in a previous life as a holy monk at Mount Wutai, he had shown such an abhorrence of women that, upon his death, when he is instructed to return to earth and deliver Bai Juyi as he had promised, all women refuse to carry him as an embryo. He is left with no option but to be reborn in a bird's nest.<sup>18</sup> *Precious Scroll* does away with this fantastical story and describes Bird's Nest as an incarnation of Monk Cloth Sack (Budai heshang 布袋和尚), who, when descending to the mortal world, decides to sit down in a nest of magpies in the tree outside the vice minister's mansion. The identification of Chan Master Bird's Nest with Monk Cloth Sack suggests that the *Precious Scroll* is a later adaptation of the legend than the *Trajectory*, but by the end of the nineteenth century both versions circulated side by side.

The original dates of composition of these two texts are difficult to determine. Both are largely made up of *gathas* exchanged between the characters in the story, suggesting a type of Buddhist storytelling that was popular in the first half of the second millennium,<sup>19</sup> and both of them contain a *gatha* that states that the Eight Immortals are all males. If this line refers to the best known grouping of the Eight Immortals, it would suggest that the *gatha* dates from the period of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the Eight Immortals indeed were all men. From the sixteenth century onward

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<sup>18</sup> In the retelling of the story of *The Trajectory* in Anonymous 1982 (p. 93), Chan Master Bird's Nest is born from an egg as a bird with a human head.

<sup>19</sup> Idema 2019.

the group included one woman, He Xiang 何仙姑. This does not automatically prove that the two texts date from before the sixteenth century, as the *gatha* could have been borrowed from an older source.

The episodes in the *Precious Scroll*, in which Chan Master Bird’s Nest transforms himself into a widow fanning the earth of the grave mound of her recently deceased husband, would appear to be inspired by the tale of Master Zhuang (Zhuangzi) meeting a widow who fans her husband’s grave, a story which is not attested before the sixteenth century.<sup>20</sup> While the two texts are nowadays classified as precious scrolls, they do not include even a very simple ritual opening or ritual conclusion. The texts may have been received well in “sectarian” circles because of their strong emphasis on vegetarianism (“keeping the fast”) as a first step to escape from the horrors of reincarnation. *Trajectory* may have been especially well received by female audiences because of its condemnation of the excessive misogyny of some male clerics who were convinced that women were constitutionally incapable of achieving enlightenment and feared defilement because of women’s ritual impurity.

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<sup>20</sup> For the sudden popularity of this tale from the seventeenth century onward, see Idema 2014, 33–37.

THE TRAJECTORY OF CHAN MASTER BIRD'S NEST'S DELIVERY OF  
VICE MINISTER BAI

Serving all day as an official, you're swamped by multiple duties;  
The great earth of mountains and rivers cannot be comprehended.

BUDDHA AMITĀBHA

Quickly take your leave of the love and affection of the red dust;  
Listen to a poor monk's sermon to go to the Western Paradise.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The Western Paradise is the paradise of the Buddha Amitābha, where he will receive all believers who sincerely appeal to him upon their death (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 34–35).

*Chan Master Bird's Nest Delivers Vice Minister Bai to Turn His Mind towards Goodness, Cultivate His Behavior, and Return to the West*

Long ago there were two arhats in the Western Paradise, one named Luoja and one named Tina. As they enjoyed themselves at the Pond of the Hundred-Petal Lotuses, they suddenly conceived a longing for the mortal dust. From the edge of a cloud the two of them promptly watched the floating world. That great earth of flourishing splendor was exceedingly beautiful, and all that was made there and done there pleased their hearts. As they were talking, they very soon, all unaware, wished to go there. When the World-Honored One<sup>22</sup> learned this, he immediately ordered them to descend to the mortal world to be reborn there and to go out into the world to urge all in the Eastern Land—all living beings, wise and foolish—to turn their hearts toward goodness, purify themselves and cultivate their behavior, and return to the West, dropping a sandal.<sup>23</sup> If they were to refuse to convert, all these living beings would be subject to the continuous cycle of reincarnation, whereas those who were willing to turn their hearts [to goodness], seek refuge [in the Three Treasures],<sup>24</sup> and cultivate goodness would succeed in returning to the Western Paradise and enjoy all kinds of pleasure, forever free from rebirth and death.<sup>25</sup>

Luoja said, “The two of us should certainly descend to the mortal world and each pursue his own desire!”

Tina said, “I first want to enjoy flourishing splendor and later cultivate purity.”

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<sup>22</sup> The Buddha.

<sup>23</sup> When the grave of Bodhidharma (late fourth to early fifth century) was opened, it contained only one shoe, which the holy monk apparently had lost in his hurry to return to the West. On Bodhidharma's life and legend, see Buswell and Lopez 2014, 132.

<sup>24</sup> The Three Treasures are the Buddha, the Dharma (the teachings of the Buddha), and the Sangha (the community of monks).

<sup>25</sup> Rebirth and death (reincarnation) includes passing through the underworld, where the souls of the deceased are judged by King Yama. As no sin remains hidden from the underworld judges, most humans will be submitted to cruel torture in the “earth prison” (hell) and at best rebirth as an animal.

Luojia said, “I want to become an official who is only inferior to the one man,<sup>26</sup> but who is the superior of myriads of people.”

When the two of them had pronounced their vows, Luojia said, “I am only afraid that when the two of us will have arrived in the earthly realm of the floating dust, our bodies in the billowing red dust will be snared by the desires for wealth and sex and that we will find it impossible to abandon love and affection, unwilling to say goodbye to our lovely wives and tender concubines, so what should we do?”

Tina replied, “If it is you who are deluded, I will deliver you, and if I am deluded, you will deliver me.” Once they had agreed on this, they each sought a womb.

Luojia went to Shaowu Prefecture in Fujian and landed in the family of Magnate Bai, where he found a womb and was born. He quickly was listed on the golden plaque<sup>27</sup> and was appointed as vice minister. Tina went to Shaoxing Prefecture in Zhejiang, where he found a womb and was born in the house of Notable Li. At the age of thirteen, he obtained the degree of “head of tribute.”<sup>28</sup> This man was different in character from other people. Even though he had achieved merit and fame, he still considered creatures outside the body as illusions before his eyes, and unawares he came to wonder, “Where does man come from when he is born? Where does he go when he dies? I am afraid that when my life comes to its end, I will be reborn through the four kinds of birth<sup>29</sup> on the six paths of existence,<sup>30</sup> unable to escape from the sufferings of the cycle of reincarnations.”

Thereupon he composed a *gatha*:

Flourishing splendor, riches and glory may fill the cosmos:

In final analysis fame and wealth cannot match a life of ease.

The cock in its coop is well fed but the boiling pot is waiting;

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26 “The one man” refers to the emperor.

27 The list of those who had passed the triennial examinations in the capital.

28 “Head of tribute” refers to a person who passed the provincial examinations as first on the list.

29 Birth from a womb, birth from an egg, birth from moisture, or miraculous birth.

30 The six levels of rebirth: as a god, as a human being, as an *asura*, as an animal, as a hungry ghost, or as a denizen of the “earth prisons” (hell).



The crane in the field may lack food but enjoys the open sky.  
This illusory body cannot be preserved for a hundred years  
And reincarnation on the six pathways is a continuous cycle,  
So it is best to let it all go and seek one's refuge in the hills:  
Once one's human body is lost, it's gone for a myriad kalpas!<sup>31</sup>

Having left this inscription, he abandoned merit and fame and went to Mount Wutai to cultivate his practice.<sup>32</sup>

This man was extremely dogmatic in character and abhorred women most of all. When women came to the mountain to burn incense and venerate the Buddha, he would scrape off the top layer of the ground on which they had walked and replace it with new earth; the benches on which they had sat and the bowls from which they had eaten their fill he would break and not use anymore. When the bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra saw from the edges of their clouds how dogmatically this man practiced self-cultivation,<sup>33</sup> they invited Chang'e from the moon<sup>34</sup> and the dragon daughter from the western sea<sup>35</sup> to turn into a group of beautiful and elegant mortal maidens and come to Mount Wutai to burn incense and venerate the Buddha. They visited and admired all such places as the porticoes to the left and the right, the monks' cells and the kitchen. They took all the bowls from the cupboards to drink their tea and eat their rice. They sat on all benches and chairs. They also spoke to the Chan master and sat down on the same bench!

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<sup>31</sup> A kalpa is the violent destruction of a world-system, after which the remaining karma will eventually result in the formation of a new world-system.

<sup>32</sup> Mount Wutai (Five Terraces) in northern Shanxi is the holy mountain of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of wisdom (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 1003–04).

<sup>33</sup> Mañjuśrī is the bodhisattva of wisdom (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 526–527), and Samantabhadra is the bodhisattva of goodness (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 745). In East Asia these two bodhisattvas are often depicted to the left and the right of the Buddha.

<sup>34</sup> Chang'e is the Chinese goddess of the moon, well-known for her beauty and longing for love.

<sup>35</sup> In the Lotus Sutra an eight-year-old dragon princess presents a pearl to the Buddha and demonstrates to all and sundry that she has achieved buddhahood. In Ming and Qing times, she was best known as an attendant of the bodhisattva Guanyin.

Tina immediately exploded in rage and shouted:

“How can you women be bereft of all decency! How can you have your way? You want to sit and talk with me! Only if you have practiced self-cultivation for five hundred years can you change into a man’s body! Can you do that? How can you come to this mountain and defile the Buddha hall? And you also want to sit and talk with me! Clerics and lay people are segregated, and even men and women who cultivate their behavior cannot mix and mingle. How can you get away with this?”

The women replied, “You are wrong! Qian and Kun have their fructifying and fertilizing matchings; Yin and Yang have their fixed terms of union and gathering. The sun and the moon share the same palace on the first and the fifteenth of each month, and men and women have their matched marriages to produce and rear sons and daughters—that is the major ethical bond amongst men. Heaven and Earth [and man] make the Three Talents. Why should the rite of solitary self-cultivation be the foremost champion? The ancient buddhas, the sages and wise men all were born of a man and a woman. This means that yin and yang never produced a solitary way. There never have been people who were born from a single person! Where did this skeleton of yours come from? Who nurtured you? Who gave you life? All people developed as an embryo from the bodies of their father and mother. Even though you may dogmatically practice self-cultivation, you still have a mortal body. Cleric and monks, men and women, may be distinguished, but they all share one Dharma nature.”

Tina was dumbfounded by the words of these women and had nothing to say. The four women grabbed the Chan master and each stole a kiss from him.

When they had dispersed, the Chan master was overcome by rage. With a knife he cut off his lips and died from the loss of blood. His divine soul drifted to the other shore. As a solitary traveler he returned to the celestial palace and, greeting the World-Honored One, he deeply bowed down in veneration.

The World-Honored One asked him, “How many people did you convert during your stay in the mortal dust?”

Tina replied, “When I went down to the mortal dust, I dogmatically practiced self-cultivation, and I did not have a karmic bond with a single person. May you, World-Honored One, be so kind as to pardon my crime.”

The World-Honored One said, “You may not have had a karmic bond with anyone, but originally

I told the two of you to descend to the mortal world, so how is it that you return today all alone? You did not deliver him to return with you but only cared about yourself. If one does not save others, one cannot ascend to Buddhahood."

Tina countered, "That man has in the mortal world been appointed as vice minister. He is surrounded in front and in back by a crowd of underlings, and, when he leaves the house or returns to it, rides either in a sedan chair or on horseback. He has piles of gold and stacks of jade, lovely wives and young concubines—an inexhaustible flourishing splendor, riches, and status. How would he be willing to turn his heart toward goodness and practice self-cultivation?"

The World-Honored One replied, "One may practice self-cultivation for a thousand days, but its application depends on a single moment. One day when, at the great congregation of the Dragon Flower<sup>36</sup> the sutras are expounded and the Dharma is explained, not a single person will be lacking!"

So Tina had no other option but to descend once again to the mortal dust. When he came to the area of Mount Wutai, he found the place of the devout woman of the Zhang family and wanted to be reborn there. Mrs. Zhang was seated in the main hall when she suddenly saw this monk from Mount Wutai walk into the private room of her daughter-in-law. Afraid that the deed was done, she called the whole household together to chase him off, but they could not find a trace of him.

Mrs. Zhang thought, "I heard that this monk of Mount Wutai had died yesterday. Could his soul have come here perhaps to enter the embryo of my daughter-in-law?"

So Mrs. Zhang said, "Who would be willing to nurture that dogmatic practitioner? When I earlier went to Mount Wutai to burn incense and venerate the Buddha, he would refuse to use a bowl from which I had drunk or step on the earth on which I had walked. That's how much he abhorred women! How would I now be willing to let him be born in this place?"

When Tina heard these words, he could only walk over to another family to be born there. But the women in the other families felt the same and refused to carry and nurture him.

Tina saw no other way out but to return once again as a soul to the celestial palace.

When he greeted the Buddha, the World-Honored One said, "Why have you come back upon leaving?"

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<sup>36</sup> The Dragon Flower congregation will mark the new kalpa of the future buddha Maitrya (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 517–18).

Tina knelt down and implored the World-Honored One, “It is not the case that I wanted to return upon leaving. Because I earlier practiced my self-cultivation in such a dogmatic way, I have no karmic bond with any human being in the Eastern Land, and there is no place where I can be reborn.”

The World-Honored One said, “You lived for several tens of years in the Eastern Land. How could you not have formed a karmic bond with even one person? Just think harder!”

Tina replied, “In that floating world I had no karmic bond with any human being. I spent all my time on my religious exercises early and late! It was animals that provided me with food. Only birds came regularly to feed me, so I only formed a karmic bond with birds. But how can I be reborn as a bird?”

The World-Honored One said, “As you have formed a karmic bond with birds, you will be reborn in the bird’s nest on top of the pine tree next to the bridge across the Wei.”<sup>37</sup>

Tina was reborn as a human being with a bird’s head. Growing by day and by night, he spoke out and made sense. He expounded the sutras and explained the Dharma, understanding the past and the future. He excelled in converting the living beings to turn from evil and practice goodness. He turned foolish people into wise persons, and that’s why he was called Chan Master Bird’s Nest. He thereupon composed a *gatha*:

I sit atop this pine tree, more than five rods high;  
 My six roots are sufficient, most stable and solid.<sup>38</sup>  
 A clear breeze and a bright moon accompany me;  
 Without coming, without going, here I feel at ease.

Now tell that in the mansion of the vice minister there was a beauty. As she passed the bridge across the Wei, she saw a Chan master on the top of the pine tree: expounding the sutras and explaining the Dharma, every word that he said made sense. When this beauty heard that each of his phrases was

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<sup>37</sup> Bai Juyi lived in a village on the Wei River outside the Tang capital Chang’an in the years 806–809 when he was in mourning for his father.

<sup>38</sup> The “six roots” are the six senses and the passions they engender. Bird’s Nest claims to have subdued these passions.

an expression of truth and that each word was a good statement, she promptly venerated the master, intending to keep to the fast and practice self-cultivation.

The Chan master said, "Will the vice minister in your mansion agree to seek refuge in the Three Treasures, keep to the fast, and practice self-cultivation?"

The beauty replied, "Our vice minister enjoys an inexhaustible flourishing splendor, riches, and status. On top of that he has four spouses who are perfectly beautiful—impossible to leave, impossible to reject! How would he be willing to keep to the fast and practice self-cultivation? But perhaps he will obey you if you convert him yourself!"

The Chan master remembered the order of the patriarch: "I have come here for the very purpose of converting him. But no one will come if I sit here and wait for the vice minister!"

So he could not but change into a monk and go in person to the crossroads.

While he was waiting, he saw the vice minister arrive, surrounded in front and in back by underlings who cleared the road.

The Chan master addressed him, saying, "Vice Minister Bai, Vice Minister Bai, / I fear misfortune may strike anytime! / Let it all go! Let it all go, / So I won't have to come again for your conversion!"

As soon as the vice minister saw him and heard these strange words, they moved his heart, and he could not but draw his horse to a halt and ask him some questions.

He thereupon composed this *gatha*:

In what year, on what day did you leave love and affection?

Since what time do you abstain from wine as well as meat?

The food of which family do you dine on during the daytime?

To which place do you return then later on to spend the night?

Who are the people who are your companions and mates?

Which persons are your relatives as well as your family?

What do you consider as the right origin?

What do you consider as wicked desires?

I have posed eight questions to you—

What is heaven and what is hell?

The Chan master replied as follows:

From the year of no-beginning I've left love and affection  
And since birth I abstain from wine as well as meat.  
During the day I eat the food of a thousand families,  
And at night I return to rest in emptiness.  
The clear breeze and bright moon are my companions;  
Buddhas and bodhisattvas are my relatives and family.  
The Three Teachings<sup>39</sup> are one, forming the right origin;  
Thoughts that are wrong are wicked desires.  
I have answered the eight questions of yours—  
Goodness is heaven and evil is hell!

The vice minister asked, "What is goodness? What is evil?"

The Chan master replied, "A heart of compassion and an abstention from killing are goodness. Killing of living beings and committing murder are evil. Of the ten thousand evils lasciviousness is the worst; of the hundred virtues filial piety comes first. Then there are the four kinds of goodness and also the four kinds of evil. Goodness in seeing, goodness in listening, goodness in speaking, and goodness in actions: on these four kinds of goodness heaven is bound to bestow blessings. Evil in seeing, evil in hearing, evil in speaking and evil in actions: on these four kinds of evil heaven will send down misfortune."

The vice minister then asked, "What are the ten kinds of evil?"

The Chan master replied, "Wicked lasciviousness, stealing and robbing, killing living beings, unfounded speech, violence, inciting lawsuits, jealousy, pride, lazy loitering, and gambling are the ten evils."

The vice minister also asked, "What are the ten kinds of goodness?"

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<sup>39</sup> Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.

The Chan master replied, "Filial piety and determination, virtue and endurance, helpfulness and liberality, the release of living beings and frugality, modesty and acceptance of one's lot—these are the ten kinds of goodness. To summarize, don't commit any evil but practice the ten kinds of goodness, and high heaven will be pleased and send down blessings on your family. If a man is sincere in his belief, this will last for all eternity without end!"

The vice minister said, "Even an infant of three can say such a phrase!"

But the Chan master riposted, "An infant of three may be able to say so, but an old man of eighty cannot live up to it!"

The vice minister did not grasp his meaning and went on in his sedan chair.

The Chan master said with a sigh, "Excellent! Excellent! It is not that I didn't attempt to convert him so he could return to the celestial palace, but it is this vice minister who lacks the root so he is mired in delusions and doesn't wake up. So much for my sincerity! How can I convert him? I cannot but change into a beggar and stop him in the road. Let's see how he will react."

Out on the street he knelt down and appealed to him.

He thereupon composed a *gatha*:

When one man becomes an official he is carried by eight men,  
Surrounded in front and in back by his escorts, he fills the street.  
His authority and power are frightening and shake the heavens,  
But it is all the result of self-cultivation in an earlier existence.  
If in this life you become an official, it is due to earlier virtue—  
Only then can you display your authority and power in public!  
But even if you may have such frightening authority and power,  
You cannot escape from Impermanence<sup>40</sup> and his one final stroke.

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<sup>40</sup> Impermanence is the personification of death. He is dispatched by King Yama to the world of the living to arrest those who are bound to die.

As soon as the vice minister saw this beggar in front of him block the road and pronounce these words, he could not but step down from his sedan chair. "Let me also tell him some lines!"

He made the following *gatha*:

What a fine beggar you make, crying out on the street:  
 Your face is all sallow, your bones resemble bare sticks.  
 Your eyes are hazily blurred, so you can't find your way;  
 With long hair and bare feet you lack even straw sandals.  
 Without any clothes to cover your body you really suffer;  
 With no food in your stomach you suffer bitter misfortune.  
 Lacking cultivation in an earlier life, you now must suffer:  
 King Yama has still a punishing summons for you in store.

When the vice minister had pronounced this *gatha*, he ordered his sedan chair to be lifted and he departed.

The Chan master said, "The World-Honored One ordered me to descend to the mortal world to convert this person. Who could have known that he would not wake up! Proud, he is not shaken. But the proverb says, 'If a kind conversion doesn't work, an evil conversion will do the job.' I cannot but transform myself into Impermanence and go and grab him. Then we'll see how he reacts."

When the vice minister, in the third watch, at midnight, was sleeping, he suddenly saw Impermanence and his demonic underlings standing before his bed, so he cried out in his dream, "Who are you?"

The Chan master replied, "I am Impermanence!"

The vice minister asked, "Why did you come here?"

The Chan master replied, "I have come here at the order of King Yama to arrest you!"

The vice minister was so frightened his gall<sup>41</sup> was aflutter

And he implored Impermanence, "Please listen to me!"

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<sup>41</sup> The gall bladder is the seat of courage.



I will give you all my silver as well as all my ready cash  
If you go somewhere else to arrest a replacement for me."

Impermanence replied:

When I now hear your words, I cannot but laugh:  
Who on earth wants your gold and your silver?  
King Yama has always been a fair and honest lord,  
He doesn't want your riches, he just wants your life.  
If the underworld would want money and treasure,  
The poor would die first and the rich ones survive.  
If silver and cash could buy you years for your life,  
The country's king would live for millions of years!  
If King Yama decides you'll die in the third watch,<sup>42</sup>  
I cannot let you stay till the fifth watch of the night.

The vice minister said:

The underworld dispatched its black-faced demons—  
That great Impermanence will not show any mercy!  
At midnight in the third watch he's here to take my life,  
For better or worse wanting me to meet King Yama!

Impermanence replied:

I am under strict orders and always must hurry,  
Whether you're a relative of the king or queen.

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<sup>42</sup> In traditional China the night was divided into five watches.

I don't fear heroes and stalwart fellows at all,  
But only fear those men who maintain the fast.

When the vice minister heard this, he asked Impermanence, "If I now am willing to seek refuge with the Three Treasures, to keep the fast and practice self-cultivation, can I escape from reincarnation?"

Impermanence replied, "In the world of light one fears evil; in the world of shade one fears goodness. For all people there is a gate of no-death: don't wait until old age to set your heart on goodness. But there is no one who understands this road! [But] if you go look to the top of the pine tree by the side of the bridge across the Wei and devoutly will ask that enlightened master to teach you the heart method,<sup>43</sup> you can escape from the endless cycle of rebirth and death."

The vice minister said, "If I go and ask him now, I can escape from reincarnation. Let me wait till it gets light and I will go immediately."

Impermanence said, "First there was a monk who came to convert you, but you didn't believe him. Yesterday there was a beggar who came to convert you, and you didn't believe him either. Are you still not going to obey now that we, these evil demons, have come to arrest you? Let me ask you, are you in danger or not?"

At that moment the vice minister lowered his head and remained silent. The Chan master thereupon composed the following *gatha*:

As an official, one accompanies one's lord and king all day;  
Accompanying one's lord is like a lamb attending a wolf!  
In the third quarter of the fifth watch one goes on audience:<sup>44</sup>  
One enters the court filled with worry, leaves with anxiety.  
And when one morning the dragon heart explodes in rage,  
One loses one's life in a blink and meets with King Yama.

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<sup>43</sup> The "heart method" refers to the idea that the root of all phenomena is the heart/mind.

<sup>44</sup> In traditional China, the emperor held court and received his ministers in audience at the break of dawn.

Seeing one's lord, one didn't seek the Idea from the West;<sup>45</sup>

Once one has lost the human body, it's gone for all eternity.

After some tens of years as an official with knife and brush,  
Several millions hold a grudge as they suffered an injustice.  
For one family's life of comfort, hundreds of families suffer;  
A few decades of merit and fame create centuries of hatred.

How intelligent you are, Vice Minister Bai!  
Ten thousand scrolls of writing fill your belly,  
But because you coveted a purple gown and golden belt,  
You forgot about rebirth and death and Impermanence!

A purple gown and golden belt are a candle in the wind,  
An ivory tablet and a gauze cap are only frost in the sun.  
But if you understand the true message of these things,  
The eighteen layers of hell turn into the halls of heaven!

When the vice minister woke up from his dream, he carefully considered the words of Impermanence in private. Each of his statements made sense, and none of his words were off the mark. Riches and status, merit and fame were all only illusions before one's eyes—what benefit did they have? He could not but reject his huge fortune and dump his wife and concubines to aim for pure tranquility. Why shouldn't he become an unencumbered person?

When you can take your ease, then take your ease!  
Quickly put away the fish-hook and line of the past!  
People covet riches and sex only to suffer beheading;  
Fishes covet the fragrant bait and swallow the hook.

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<sup>45</sup> The "Idea from the West" refers to the intention of the Indian monk Bodhidharma in coming to China to convert all living beings to Buddhism.

Despite his smart schemes Chen Ping lost his life;<sup>46</sup>  
 For all his merit and effort Han Xin met disaster:<sup>47</sup>  
 At the example of these ambitious men of the past,  
 I had better go home and practice self-cultivation!

The vice minister considered the words of Impermanence once again. “There is no one who understands this principle. Let me quickly go and on the top of the pine tree by the side of the bridge across the Wei pay my respects to the enlightened master in order to avoid the endless cycle of reincarnation. Today is a lucky day and a good hour. Let me quickly go there to see whether it is true.”

When he arrived at the bridge and had a look, it turned out to be true. There was a man with a bird’s head and a human body who there expounded the sutras and explained the Dharma. Chan Master Bird’s Nest addressed the vice minister with the following *gatha*:

Not seeking the Great Way one enters the path of delusion;  
 Even though you have a wise talent, it is not the big heaven.  
 Light and shadow of a hundred years are only sparks of fire;  
 The fame and power of a lifetime are only a water bubble.  
 By coveting riches and status and a flourishing splendor,  
 You forgot that your body and face are secretly decaying.  
 Let me ask you: Can piles of gold as high as the mountains  
 Procure you the continuous absence of Impermanence?

When the vice minister heard this, the flower of his heart fully opened, and he thought with a sigh, “Human life is a short scene, how could it last forever?”

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46 Chen Ping 陳平 (d. 178 BCE) was one of the competent advisors of Liu Bang 劉邦 (d. 195 BCE), the founder of the Han dynasty. He remained a major power at court until his death. It was his great-grandson Chen He 陳河 who was executed for a crime.

47 Han Xin 韓信 (d. 196) was one of the most capable generals of Liu Bang. Following the final defeat of his opponents, Liu Bang grew suspicious of Han Xin and had him killed.

Thereupon he composed a *gatha*:

Human life is one short scene and resembles the dayfly;  
Green mountains last forever, the rivers stream always.  
A hidden place of quiet and peace—say goodbye quickly;  
At the right time of glory and splendor, take your ease!  
Don't let squabbles and disputes enter your ears anymore;  
The love and affection of former days turn into enemies.  
Today I can only seek my refuge in hills and mountains—  
Let me roam freely across the wide expanse of the world!

When the vice minister had inscribed this, he stepped forward and knelt down on his knees to kowtow, "I fully want to seek refuge in the Three Treasures, and I honor you as my master to teach me the Triple Refuge and the Five Precepts so I may quickly pass beyond the ocean of suffering. Are you willing to accept me?"

The Chan master replied, "Vice Minister, I observe that you have turned your heart toward goodness and that you want to seek refuge in the Three Treasures and maintain the precepts, but I only fear that you will find it hard to abandon your huge fortune because that is a beautiful thing."

Thereupon he composed a *gatha*:

The man who loves sex cannot ascend the way of wisdom;  
How can he who covets riches become a divine immortal?  
Don't ask for the Way when you wear a black gauze cap;<sup>48</sup>  
Don't practice meditation while wrapped in a purple gown!

The vice minister replied:

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<sup>48</sup> The cap of an official.

I feel no love for the purple gown and golden belt;  
I'll be at ease in a hemp robe with a bamboo staff.  
I fully understand the fetters of love and affection:  
Back home I will sleep by myself, as a man alone.

The Chan master said, "Vice minister, as you now are willing to keep to the fast and practice self-cultivation, always continue to progress, firmly maintain the Five Precepts and don't dare to regret your choice. But when you now go back to your house, you have four spouses there. When they see you come home and hear you talk about practicing self-cultivation, they definitely will try to stop you. They will tell you to eat meat, and they will also blame me, this poor monk. I will now teach you a few lines that you have to transmit to your four spouses.

This is my message, with all due humility, to your spouses:  
Please be so good as to listen to the words of a poor monk.  
A man alone and a single woman cannot achieve the Way;  
If man and wife practice as pair they leave the cycle of woe.

When the vice minister heard this, he was very pleased and thought to himself, "This is indeed a cleric with understanding," and he mounted his sedan chair and left, after having bowed twice.

On returning home, his four spouses came out to welcome him, and they set out wine and food to cheer the vice minister up and dispel his worries.

"Now our husband and lord has returned, we these four sisters are filled with happiness. But we have learned that you will reject the red dust and abandon your chaste wife and tender concubines in order to practice self-cultivation. At present you enjoy both riches and status. Why doesn't that please you? Why don't you enjoy these blessings? Why do you want to sleep by yourself as a man alone?"

The vice minister replied, "The floating world is wonderful pleasure among flowers. I constantly hear drums and strings resound to heaven, but when will I have the ears to listen after my death? It is impossible to avoid the millions of transformations of transmigration!"

His spouses said, "Sir, you are an official. As you are condemned to transmigration, the four of us will substitute for you and together carry eight hundred pounds!"<sup>49</sup>

But the vice minister said, "The karma of the sins I have committed myself cannot be replaced even by a wife. No one else can take a share of the evil karma or the good karma one creates. I have decided to go and practice self-cultivation, and even my wives cannot stop me."

Thereupon he composed a *gatha*:

The yellow gold one has at home is not the true gold;  
The lovely wife who shares one's couch is not true kin:  
She does not know you once the candle is extinguished—  
Would she agree to carry those eight hundred pounds?

The vice minister also said, "For the karma of sins one has created oneself, one has to take responsibility oneself. I remember that, by the side of the bridge across the Wei, I was instructed on my return home not to imitate the cat that wears a hat,<sup>50</sup> because then it is truly hard to escape."

The spouses said, "Sir, you only want to go and practice self-cultivation. How can you willingly abandon us four sisters with our bodies of gold and limbs of jade?"

The vice minister thereupon composed the following *gatha*:

Your golden bodies and jade limbs only hurt one's life;  
Your ample tears that freely flow are boiling one alive.  
Your sweet words and honeyed phrases: a killing poison;  
Your ten fingers, so daintily pointed: murderous daggers!  
Inside the gauze bed-curtains are found the truest hells;  
The mandarin ducks cushion<sup>51</sup> is the mountains of swords.

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<sup>49</sup> Of the one thousand pounds the vice minister will have to carry as punishment for his sins.

<sup>50</sup> Probably a reference to tales in which a cat feigns to be a hermit in order to catch mice.

<sup>51</sup> Mandarin ducks mate for life and are a symbol of conjugal love. A mandarin ducks cushion refers to the two-person

With both hands I wrench open the gate of reincarnation  
 And turning around I crash through Ghost Gate Pass!<sup>52</sup>

The spouses said, “Sir, if you indeed definitely want to go and practice self-cultivation, on whom do you want your four wives and concubines to rely?”

The vice minister said:

At the moment of separation I instruct my four wives:  
 Don't apply any rouge anymore, don't put on lip-red.  
 You four sisters should all go back to our old village,  
 Be of one mind, determined, not cheating each other!  
 In life we resemble birds that roost in the same forest,  
 Till Impermanence arrives and each goes its own way.  
 The sword of wisdom cleaves mandarin ducks cushions:  
 You go toward the east whereas I go toward the west.

When his main spouse heard these words, she realized that her husband was fully determined to go and practice self-cultivation.

“When I consider this carefully in my own heart, I know that human life in this world is like a flowering grass in a garden and like a candle flame in the wind. We cannot but follow our husband and practice self-cultivation all together. What is stopping us? When in the past Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty abandoned the rivers and mountains, served Baozhi as his teacher, and achieved the right fruit, Empress Xi did not believe in self-cultivation and slandered Buddhism, so she fell down into the the crevasses of the mountains and became a python, to suffer without end.<sup>53</sup> When Mulian's mother, Lady

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cushion on the wedding bed.

<sup>52</sup> Ghost Gate Pass is the entry through the underworld. The line refers to an escape from the underworld.

<sup>53</sup> Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty reigned from 502 till 549. Throughout his life he was a great patron of Buddhism. His teacher, the monk Baozhi 寶誌 lived from 418 till 514. Empress Xi 鄧 was renowned for her bouts of jealousy. The emperor saved her from her infernal sufferings upon her death by a litany he composed. The legend was widely known in late imperial



Liu Qingti, secretly broke the fast, she upon her death fell down into the hells of the underworld and later was banished to Fengdu so she could not be reborn—fortunately her son practiced self-cultivation and saved her from there so she was transferred to the Western Paradise.<sup>54</sup> The main spouse composed the following *gatha*:

I will follow my husband in practicing self-cultivation;  
 The phoenix crown and roseate stole I'll wear no more.  
 Bamboo hairpins and a linen skirt will be my daily garb;  
 Coarse clothes and simple fare I'll use in spring and fall.  
 If the husband will practice, his wife too will practice;  
 Each one will seek his liberation from rebirth and death.  
 The sages of the Three Teachings have all been males,  
 But the Queen Mother of the West was born a woman.<sup>55</sup>

When the second spouse at her side heard these words she was pleased at heart and wanted to seek refuge in the Three Treasures and practice self-cultivation together with her. “If I consider this in my heart, [I see that] Layman Pang in the past sank all his gold and silver in the blue sea and his daughter Lingzhao sold skimmers to make a living.<sup>56</sup> This was all in order to practice self-cultivation together. And they succeeded in achieving the Way of the Buddha.”

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times and also adapted as a precious scroll.

<sup>54</sup> Mulian 目連 Maudgalyāyana is a disciple of the Buddha who stood out by his command of supernatural powers. In China he is best known for the legend that narrates how he rescued his mother, Liu Qingti 劉青提, from hell, to which she had been condemned upon her death because of her sinful life (especially her consumption of meat following her promise that she would keep to the fast). Fengdu is one of the many Chinese terms for the underworld, but would here appear to refer to the Avīci hell, the deepest level of the earth prisons. The legend was extremely popular all over China and adapted in many forms of drama and prosimetric storytelling from the Tang dynasty onward.

<sup>55</sup> In the popular belief of late imperial China, the Queen Mother of the West lives atop the mythical Kunlun Mountains of the West as the ruler of all female immortals.

<sup>56</sup> Layman Pang 龐居士 (740–808) and his daughter Lingzhao devoted themselves to a life of self-cultivation.

She thereupon composed a *gatha*:

The phoenix-headed golden hairpins I hand in today;  
 The embroidered mandarin ducks cushion I do away:  
 As of today I want to emulate the maiden Lingzhao—  
 Only so can I demonstrate my lofty moral character.  
 When the husband practices, the wife too will practice:  
 Each seeks the wonderful goal of the Western Heaven.  
 The eighteen arhats are all males, but Samantabhadra  
 First was a woman who practiced self-cultivation.

When the third spouse at her side heard these words, she thought to herself: “The greatest fortune in the world eventually comes to an end. I cannot but follow my husband and together with him practice self-cultivation in order to obtain pure blessing for all eternity.”

The vice minister said, “Do you three oily-heads and two simply-dressed ones know how to practice self-cultivation?”<sup>57</sup>

His wife replied, “In the past there was this woman Wang Guihua. From the age of seven she kept the fast and knew all about self-cultivation. Later she was married off by her mother to her husband Zhao Lingfang who all day slaughtered pigs and goats to make a living. Within three years she had persuaded her husband to stop butchering. He sincerely wanted to take refuge in the Three Treasures. Husband and wife practiced self-cultivation together and succeeded in achieving Buddhahood.<sup>58</sup> Today I will walk the path of wisdom myself.”

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<sup>57</sup> Women sometimes oiled their hair to give it an additional sheen, so "oily-heads" refers to women—often, as here, in a somewhat denigrating way.

<sup>58</sup> Wang Guihua 王桂花 is also known as Woman Wang 王氏 and Woman Huang 黃氏. She distinguished herself by her extraordinary Buddhist piety from her earliest youth. She especially excelled in the recitation of the Diamond Sutra. Summoned by King Yama to the underworld to recite the sutra, she made no mistake and answered all his questions on the text perfectly, so he allowed her to be reborn as a man. Growing up, she passed the examinations and became an official in her old hometown. After she was reunited with her husband, the butcher Zhao Lingfang 趙靈方, and their children, the

She thereupon composed a *gatha*:

This day I reject the love and affection of the red dust  
And, pure and clean, devoutly practice self-cultivation.  
As of today I will emulate that woman Wang Guihua  
And urge my man to practice as a pair, convert quickly!  
When the husband practices, the wife too will practice,  
Each on its own seeking the Non-Ultimate Great Way.  
The Old Buddha at Spirit Peak is a man, but Mañjuśrī  
First was a woman who practiced self-cultivation.

The fourth spouse saw that the whole household—old and young—had turned their hearts toward goodness, and all wanted to go and practice self-cultivation. "They leave the ten of us here behind. How chilly and dreary!"

All of a sudden her heart was filled with painful thoughts, and she pondered, "The light and shade of a hundred years may number thirty-six thousand days, but they resemble a midnight dream: when one wakes up one day, it all turns out to be empty. So I cannot but seek my refuge in the Three Treasures and with all the others keep to the fast. When I will practice self-cultivation together with my husband, I may obtain an eternal life without aging and be reborn with him in the Western Region, on the terrace of the thousand-petalled lotus for all eternity without decay!"

The vice minister said, "You are still so young, what do you understand about how to practice self-cultivation?"

The fourth spouse replied, "I may still be very young at present, but I have an ambition that soars to heaven. Once long ago in ancient times there was the princess Miaoshan. She did not marry a prince-consort. She did not seek flourishing splendor. She was quite eager to experience suffering and practiced self-cultivation at Incense Mountain. Later she achieved the right fruit. To this day she dominates Mount

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family spent their remaining years in practicing self-cultivation.

Putuo in the Southern Sea: a body of gold and miraculous limbs! Today it is my own wish to practice self-cultivation.<sup>759</sup>

She thereupon composed a *gatha*:

A pampered beauty of eighteen, right in the prime of spring,  
 I want to emulate bodhisattva Guanyin of the Southern Sea.  
 I don't want flourishing splendor, but I seek the Pure Land:  
 This dharma body is not defiled by a single speck of dust.  
 When the husband practices, the wife too will practice  
 To cultivate herself a golden body of the seven treasures.  
 The divine immortals of the eight grottoes are all men  
 But the bodhisattva Guanyin has always been a woman!

When the vice minister saw that his whole household, old and young, had turned their heart toward goodness and all together kept to the fast and practiced self-cultivation, he was filled with joy, and thereupon composed the following *gatha*:

The whole household, old and young, have all been converted:  
 I am grateful to you, my spouses, for understanding my sorrow.  
 Meeting in this mortal world, we are a gathering of sages—  
 Cultivation in earlier lives extends to our present cultivation.

The vice minister took his four spouses with him and together they arrived at the bridge across the Wei to pay their respects to Chan Master Bird's Nest and to ask him to enlighten them, and teach them the

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59 Guanyin 觀音 (the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara) was in late-imperial times often venerated in female shape. From the early years of the second millennium, the legend of Princess Miaoshan 妙善 related the mortal life of the female Guanyin. This legend was extremely popular in the Ming and Qing dynasties and circulated in many forms, including precious scrolls. Mount Putuo is a little island off the Zhenjiang coast that is a major pilgrimage site.

Right Dharma so they might devote themselves to the cultivation of the Great Way. The Chan master was very pleased and thereupon composed the following *gatha*:

One thought makes one miss the pond of the hundred-petalled lotus:  
You have discarded your purple gown to exchange it for a cassock.  
When deluded, you're blocked by thousands of mountains and rivers;  
Once enlightened, you only have to turn around to arrive at the spot.

The Chan master said, "Those who cultivate the Way have to free themselves in their hearts from compassionate pity and fear of shame; they must take helpfulness as the basis and forever diligently progress. They must uphold the one phrase 'Hail to the Buddha Amitābha.' Their hearts may not be dispersed and not be involved in all affairs of the dusty world. Always practice like this. Don't seek anything inside or outside the body. Don't establish a scholarly ambition, and don't seek a method outside the heart. I only transmit by direct pointing, so you have to listen intently. Return to the root and revert to the source; turn around and you are at the other shore!"

A *gatha* goes:

Heaven is your heart and your heart is heaven:  
Heaven and heart richly nurture a joy without limit.  
If you depart for the West on a single shoe,  
You'll roam free and easy, forever without regret.

He thereupon composed the following *gatha*:

Within your own body there's cohabitation of yin and yang;  
Each and every one has his own living Diamond Protector.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> The Diamond Kings are the fearsome protectors of Buddhism. They are often portrayed in the gate building of Buddhist monasteries.

His sharp sword will sever the fetters of love and affection  
 And on the road of reincarnation you'll evade King Yama!

When the vice minister heard this clear explanation of the Chan master, it was all the true words of the wonderful Dharma of the Great Vehicle. Upon the teaching of his golden mouth, suddenly all was clear and consistent, and his delusions had been fully elucidated, as if a blind man regained his sight or a lamp shining in darkness.

"This is indeed an understanding cleric! I was only enlightened after receiving his instruction. It is impossible to repay such a great favor!"

He thereupon told his spouses to implore the Chan master for his teaching and express their thanks. When they did so, the Chan master stepped forward and hastily helped them to their feet.

After the vice minister had taken his leave with a bow, he returned home. He abandoned his office and rejected its seal. In retirement in his home village, he burned incense each morning and evening with sincere devotion, recited the name of the Buddha and read the sutras. With ritual bows he repaid the Chan master for his four thoughts. Seated upright in the main hall of the house, husband and wife practiced self-cultivation as a pair and together ascended the other shore, enjoying utmost joy and peace of mind. Thereupon he composed the following *gatha*:

Leaving action for quietude one eventually finds purity;  
 Abandoning falsehood and following truth, that is truth.  
 Who knows that amid desires the heart is free of desire?  
 From now on I reside in the dust but transcend the dust.

Don't say that the deepest mountains provide freedom:  
 This whole family is actually practicing self-cultivation.  
 My chaste wife and wise concubines achieved the Way;  
 Husband and wife together leave the cycle of suffering.

I bow in thanks to the Chan master for his true teaching;  
 The dharma body is clear and pure without any limit.  
 If I hadn't found an enlightened teacher to convert me,

I would for always be drowned in the sea of suffering.

In this floating life my life may end with each breath:

With my own I eyes I see the red sun sink in the west.

A charming wife and great wealth turn out to be empty;

Once one loses this human body, it is gone for eternity.

Recite the name of the Buddha to enter the holy land:

A pure seven-treasure body ascends the lotus terrace.

The whole family practiced self-cultivation, and on this day they shed their bodies and returned to the West. Tina and the vice minister carried the four spouses with them to the celestial palace where they paid their respects to the World-Honored One.

The Old Buddha was pleased and repeatedly exclaimed, "Luoja! Luoja! When you originally descended to the mortal world, you found a womb and were born in order to convert others to practice self-cultivation. Why were you yourself lured away from your heart's nature by gorgeous charmers so you forgot to practice self-cultivation? You only coveted wealth and sex. It must have been your desires and hopes. You loved the smiling faces of boys and girls and the wonderful sounds of music and song. And once deluded, you never woke up. Fortunately Tina was enlightened in his heart and practiced self-cultivation. He abandoned the red dust and said goodbye to wife and children. Abandoning house and hearth he sought a refuge in the hills to cultivate himself. Only after tens of years he achieved a full comprehension of his nature so its divine light manifested itself. He changed into Impermanence to come and arrest you. He also transformed himself into Chan Master Bird's Nest to preach on cause and fruit. Only when you had understood the dangers of the red dust and fully grasped your heart's nature, could you return to the West on a single shoe."

Upon a full report the Buddha allowed them by appointment to loftily ascend the ninth category and together be seated on the lotus terrace. Thereupon he composed a *gatha*:

Being born and dying again: no one knows the cause—

In past and present those many men all died in the dust.

How can they return to the West and meet the Buddha  
Without an enlightened teacher who points out the way?



CHAN MASTER BIRD'S NEST DELIVERS VICE MINISTER BAI

Once long ago there was a Vice Minister Bai;  
Enlightened by the Chan master, he delivered his wife.  
The whole family, old and young, ascended to heaven:  
Returning toward the West, they met the Dharma King.

Once long ago there lived a Vice Minister Bai who, in his earlier life was the crown prince in the palace of the Golden Spouse. Together with the arhat Cloth Sack he practiced self-cultivation.

In front of the Buddha they made the following vow, "If later you descend to the mortal world, I will deliver you, and if I descend to the mortal world, you will deliver me."

The crown prince of the palace of the Golden Spouse longed for the mortal world and tumbled down to its flourishing light. His one speck of true soul went to the Bai family on the bank of the Qiantang River in Hangzhou, and he was born as their son. They gave him the name Juyi; his nickname was Letian. When he had reached the age of twenty-nine, he achieved the rank of vice minister at the court of Xianzong of the Tang dynasty.<sup>61</sup> He enjoyed no end of imperial favors, blessings and emoluments, and a main wife and young concubines, and he forgot about the self-cultivation in his earlier life.

Because of his undivided belief, the arhat Cloth Sack eventually went to the World of Utmost Joy of the Western Paradise, but he thought to himself, "The crown prince of the palace of the Golden Spouse and I were united in our self-cultivation and made a vow in front of the Buddha. But because of his longing for the mortal world he tumbled down and ended as the son of the Bai family on the bank of the Qiantang River in Hangzhou. Until when will I wait if I don't go right now? I definitely will deliver him. Great! Great!"

Riding on an auspicious cloud he arrived in Hangzhou and in the blink of an eye he transformed himself into a monk. In front of the gate of Vice Minister Bai, he saw, grew a large pine tree that

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<sup>61</sup> Emperor Xianzong reigned from 806 till 820.

resembled a precious parasol, and in that tree there was a nest of magpies. “Let me sit down in that magpies’ nest and recite the sutras to entice the vice minister to come outside so I can enlighten him.”

The servants and maids all praised this miracle. When the vice minister, devoting himself to his books in his study, heard that there was a monk in the tree whose clerical style was lofty and wide, he came outside to question him.

The monk saw that the vice minister had come outside, “Let me recite a poem to see what he makes of it.”

A karmic bond, a sworn friendship took me to Qiantang;  
 In your career as an official you’re now a vice minister.  
 Dressed in a purple gown, a gold belt around your waist,  
 You live a life of carefree pleasure, enjoying your glory.  
 But merit and fame resemble a dream in the third watch  
 And wealth and status are like frost of the Sixth Month.  
 You only think of sophistication and seek your pleasure,  
 Not aware of the reincarnation overseen by King Yama.

As soon as the vice minister heard the words of the monk, he thought to himself, “He must have a karmic bond with me from a former existence that he has come here to urge me to practice self-cultivation. But it is hard to abandon that family fortune of millions, hard to leave my young wives, and hard to dump the seal of office that I carry. My blessings and emoluments are both complete, so who is willing to practice the Way with you?”

He only thought about pleasure. Now, that monk was not a mortal monk but a holy monk who had descended to the mortal world, and he understood the hidden thoughts of the vice minister. “How stupid! Light and shade move as fast as an arrow, and sun and moon move as fast as a shuttle. Impermanence can arrive any moment, and in the morning you are not sure about the evening. I see that he is not enlightened at all.

The golden crow and jade hare<sup>62</sup> keep each other busy:  
Each day he greets His Majesty, making his bows.  
Peng Zu crossed the ocean and enjoyed longevity,  
While Yan Hui unfortunately died at an early age.<sup>63</sup>  
Physician Lu mixed his longevity medicine in vain;  
Bian Que left us his recipe for survival to no purpose.<sup>64</sup>  
For all their supernatural powers and clever schemes,  
Each of them unavoidably had to go to King Yama.

When the vice minister heard this, he thought, "Indeed, as it is said, 'A good mouth speaks of a good heart.' What will he do if I don't turn around?"

Seeing this, the monk thought, "Let me compose another eight lines to see how he will react."

At thirty, one is half decayed in this human life,  
So I urge you to put in effort as early as possible.  
Zhang Liang left his office and returned to the hills,<sup>65</sup>  
Fan Li boarded his boat and went off to the lakes.<sup>66</sup>  
Wudi venerated monks and sponsored Buddhism,<sup>67</sup>

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62 The sun is inhabited by a three-legged crow while the moon is inhabited by a hare. Jade is associated with the color white (not green!)

63 Peng Zu 彭祖 is said to have lived to an age of almost a thousand years. Yan Hui 顏回 was a favorite disciple of Confucius who died in poverty at an early age.

64 Physician Lu 盧醫 and Bian Que 扁鵲 are both famous physicians of ancient times.

65 Zhang Liang 張良 (ca. 251–186 BCE) was one of the ablest advisors of Liu Bang. Legend has it that Zhang Liang left the court in disgust over the treatment Han Xin had received.

66 After Fan Li 范蠡 (first half fifth century BCE) had assisted the king of Yue to take revenge on Wu, he left the court of Yue to pursue the life of a traveling merchant, sailing the lakes of the Jiangnan region.

67 Wudi is Emperor Wudi of the Liang dynasty (r. 502–549).

Kongming practiced the Way in a thatched cottage.<sup>68</sup>  
 Layman Pang's wealth and treasure sank into the sea,  
 Leaving a picture of the patriarch in the green hills.

When the vice minister heard this, [he thought,] "He indeed has it right. Those five ancient persons of long ago were not enthralled by house and garden but all left to practice self-cultivation, and they achieved the right fruit." Having heard these few lines the vice minister still went inside.

When Chan Master Bird's Nest saw that he left without turning around, the monk thought to himself, "I know what to do! Wouldn't it be best if I would speak to him again on the street when he returns tomorrow from the morning audience?"

In the blink of an eye the monk had disappeared. But the next day when the vice minister indeed returned from the morning audience, Chan Master Bird's Nest had transformed himself into a crazy monk, and on the street he kept on screaming, "Don't commit any sin! Perform all kinds of goodness!"

The adjutant grabbed this monk, "You transgress the rules! His Excellency is arriving but you only keep yelling without knowing the law!"

The monk replied, "His Excellency may control the army above and the people below, but how can he control me, a monk?"

The adjutant said, "You can't claim that you are not fed by the water and rice of the imperial court! Let me take you to His Excellency and see how he disposes of you."

When the vice minister lifted his head to have a look, he saw that the monk had a high and lofty celestial storehouse and that his two ears hung down on his shoulders.<sup>69</sup> If he was not the scion of an official family, he must be a wealthy hero. "I have here an eight-line poem. If you can match it, I will

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68 Kongming 孔明 is the social name of Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 Liang (181–234), the advisor of Liu Bei 劉備 (161–223), the founder of the Shu-Han dynasty, one of the Three Kingdoms.

69 In physiognomy, the celestial storehouse designates the forehead. Long ears hanging down on the shoulders are one of the thirty-two physical characteristics of the Buddha.

venerate you as my teacher. If you cannot match it, you'll get forty heavy strokes of the bamboo and you'll be transported to your original domicile."

Chan Master Bird's Nest replied, "It is easy enough for me to match your poem, but it will be exceedingly hard for you to venerate me as your master."

The vice minister said, "If one word has been said, not even a four-in-hand can catch up with it."

The monk said, "Say those lines, and I will answer." The minister said,

In which region or state do you live?

When did you abandon love and desire?

Where do you beg during daytime?

Where do you rest at night?

What do you take to be the right lineage?

Who do you take to be your relatives?

What do you take to be the halls of heaven?

What do you take to be the prisons of the earth?

The monk replied, "Your Excellency, forgive my lack of respect!"

I live in the state of No-Image<sup>70</sup>

And since ancient times abandoned love and desire.

During the day I beg in the streets

And at night I rest in emptiness.

I take the Three Teachings to be the right lineage

And the buddhas and bodhisattvas are my relatives.

Your Excellency, beware:

One thought of goodness is the hall of heaven;

One thought of evil is the prison in the earth.

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<sup>70</sup> The absolute truth that is beyond differentiated ideas.

The vice minister said, "Enlighten me about heaven and hell."

The monk replied, "I have here a *gatha* that provides a description.

If one as a human being is good and has a good heart,  
 One respects Heaven and Earth, and respects his parents.  
 But if one each day engenders evil thoughts in one's heart,  
 One will spend the day in drinking wine and killing cattle.  
 Day in day out one covets riches and loves sex,  
 But quite soon light and shade will not last longer.  
 The gates of the hall of heaven and hell face each other,  
 So I ask you in which direction you want to go.

The vice minister then said, "I have no business with heaven, but it is definitely hard to escape from hell. I don't want to be an official anymore and would like to practice self-cultivation, but I hold an imperial appointment so I cannot very well venerate you as my teacher. Let me choose some other time to venerate you as my teacher."

His Excellency ordered the three bands to clear the road, and, having mounted his spirited horse, he went home.

On arriving at home, he sat down in front of the hall, downcast and unhappy. When his main and minor spouses appeared to welcome him, they were filled with happiness.

His spouse said, "My lord, why are you so unhappy today?"

The vice minister replied, "While making my way I met with a monk who discoursed on the hall of heaven and prisons in the earth. I have no business with the hall of heaven, but it is definitely hard to escape from the prisons in the earth. So I considered the importance of reincarnation. Our human existence is only an idle affair, so I don't want to be an official anymore but want to leave the household and practice the Way. But it is hard to reject all this and hard to abandon you all. That's why I am so troubled."

As soon as his spouse heard these words, she said, "My lord, you are wrong, very wrong! What is

so great about practicing self-cultivation? As an official you enjoy so much glory! On your head you wear a black gauze cap and your body is wrapped in a gown of embroidered brocade. Outside the home you either ride a horse or a sedan chair. Isn't that great? Above your head you have painted beams and corbel brackets, and below your feet you have finely polished square tiles. Each and every day is Mid-Autumn, and each and every evening is First Night.<sup>71</sup> My lord, why do you refuse to enjoy all this?"

His spouse had one *gatha* to persuade her husband:

Without any pleasure a human being lives in vain;  
One calls that loafing around just like a young guy.  
Each and everyone loves to eat spicy meat dishes,  
And every individual loves to wear fine clothes.  
After tens of years of devoted study of the books,  
Through bitter sufferings you reached high office.  
You have become vice minister, your position is splendid,  
Bringing glory to your ancestors and joy to your household.

As soon as the vice minister heard these words of his spouse, he said, "My dear wife, don't talk about being an official! When you raise that topic, it even increases my troubles. I too have a *gatha*:

With knife and brush as an official for tens of years,<sup>72</sup>  
I've met with millions of problems, issues, and conflicts.  
For one family's life of comfort hundreds of families suffer;  
A few decades of merit and fame create centuries of hatred.  
I feel no attachment for that purple gown and brocade belt,  
A hemp rope and a supporting staff feel much more natural.

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<sup>71</sup> Mid-Autumn is celebrated on the night of the fifteenth of the Eighth Month; the First Night is celebrated on the fifteenth of the First Month.

<sup>72</sup> Before the invention of paper, Chinese wrote on wooden or bamboo slips, and mistakes were erased with a knife.

If people ask me for the Message that came from the West,  
It's the water in the Long River and the moon in the sky.<sup>73</sup>

The vice minister said, "Some time ago I made a vow to go on pilgrimage to Mount Wu, but so far I have not fulfilled that vow. I now order all people belonging to this household to keep to the fast. We will talk again when I will have returned."

His spouse said, "As you wish," and the vice minister went on pilgrimage to Mount Wu.

Chan Master Bird's Nest transformed himself into four elderly men for another attempt to convert him. As the vice minister traveled on the road, he observed the mountain scenery and was quite happy. When he lifted his head, he saw before him four elderly men. With their bushy eyebrows and white hair they looked the same, and he could not tell how old they were. "Let me get down from my horse and ask them."

The vice minister greeted them and addressed them in a friendly way as follows, "Gentlemen, what good deeds have you committed during your lifetime that you have reached such an old age?"

One of these elderly people replied, "I have not committed any good deeds, but all my life I have kept to the fast to begin with, and devotedly recited the name of the Buddha."

With the praying beads always in my hands  
I have constantly recited the Buddha's name.  
With bows I respected the Three Treasures  
And so reached the high age of ninety-nine.  
As I count the praying beads on their string in my hands  
I daily recite the name of the Buddha thousands of times.  
Thanks to my virtue Heaven granted me these many years,  
So as a human being I now achieved this blessed old age.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> The Buddhist Dharma is often compared to the reflection of the full moon in the stream of a river.

<sup>74</sup> Throughout this text the *gathas* are made up of seven-syllable lines. The answers of the four elderly men are made up of four five-syllable lines followed by four seven-syllable lines.



The vice minister put the same question to the second elderly person, who said, "All my life I have donated medicines to create karma. I have universally benefitted the living beings."

I held a medicine pouch in my hands  
Each day when walking in the streets.  
Giving them away, I didn't want cash,  
And so reached the age of ninety-nine.  
I was a famous physician, always donating medicines,  
Without distinction, to poor and rich, to high and low.  
And when people took my divine cinnabar medicine.  
Each of them could ascend the ladder to high heaven.

The vice minister asked the third elderly person, "What kind of good deeds did you commit during your life?"

That person replied, "All my life I've been straight and honest."

I used a balance that was perfectly fair,  
And used a peck that was a fair measure.  
My balance and peck cheated no one  
And so I reached the age of ninety-nine.  
All my life I refused to come up with any clever tricks;  
Honest by nature, I never used large and small cups.  
Thanks to my virtue Heaven granted me these many years,  
So as a human being I now achieved this blessed old age.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> The rich are often accused of using small measure cups when making a loan, and using large measure cups when being repaid.

The vice minister also asked the fourth elderly person, "What good deeds have you done all your life?"

That man replied, "I have unreservedly cared for the life of creatures."

I honor Heaven and venerate the Dipper,<sup>76</sup>  
All my life I have respected good friends.  
And I have never killed any living being,  
And so I reached this age of ninety-nine.  
When sweeping the floor, I fear to hurt the lives of ants;  
I treasure the flying moth and don't kill any living being.  
Thanks to my virtue Heaven granted me these many years,  
So as a human being I now achieved this blessed old age.

Once the vice minister had heard these four elderly persons explain their good deeds, he took his leave of them, mounted his horse and left.

The Chan master said, "The ways of world are the same for all. He will have understood most of it. But he is extremely rich and does not understand the sufferings of poverty. Why don't I change into a poor woman in order to convert him?"

As the vice minister traveled on, he saw a poor woman who was holding a bamboo stave in one hand and a brown bowl in her other hand, begging on the street. The vice minister thought, "Are there such poor people in the world? Let me compose a poem:

In a former existence she planted the root of evil,  
So as a human being in this life she has to suffer.  
The clothes she is wearing are only tattered rags;  
Her face is sallow and her bones are jutting out.  
Many scabs cover the skin of her stinking body;  
When she approaches people, she's chased away.

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<sup>76</sup> The Dipper (Ursa Maior) is considered to be a major deity.

Her three daily meals she has to find by begging,  
All because a lack of self-cultivation in the past."

The poor woman grasped the vice minister and said, "You may be rich and I may be poor, but that's no reason to shame me. I also have some lines of verse to answer you, but don't get angry!

In a former existence you planted the root of goodness;  
As a human being in this life you're blessed by wealth:  
Five-colored red banners and a yellow parasol for shade;  
A dragon carriage a sedan chair carried by eight men.  
An escort in front, an escort in back to frighten people,  
And to clear the road there is this tiger-head plaque.  
But when one day in the end Impermanence arrives,  
King Yama won't be afraid of your tiger-head plaque.

When the vice minister heard this poor woman, he shut his mouth and remained silent.

The Chan master thought, "He'll have understood the sufferings of poverty. But at home he still has his wife and concubines that he is attached to, so how could he consider practicing self-cultivation? Let me transform this time into a widow."

With a white fan in her hand and all dressed in white,<sup>77</sup> while tears flowed from her eyes, she was fanning the earth of a grave mound. The vice minister thought, "This is weird! Let me dismount and ask this woman why she is fanning this grave." The woman replied, "When my husband was about to pass away, he left me the following instruction: If you have the determination, wear mourning for me for three years. If you don't have that determination, you can marry someone else when you have fanned the earth of my grave till it is dry."

The vice minister thought, "Let me compose an eight-line poem on the faithless women of this world and see how she reacts."

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<sup>77</sup> White is the color of mourning.

A shift of white gauze and a skirt of white silk,  
And a white fan in her hand to fan the grave dry:  
Without a thought for her husband's affection,  
She forgets the love at their wedding long ago.  
How great was their love in the wedding night:  
Husband and wife, one of heart, deeply bound.  
Once her fanning has dried the earth on the grave,  
She will touch up her make-up and marry again!

The woman said angrily, "Pfui! You go your own way, and I choose my own home. You may give yourself airs, but I will demean myself if I want to. That's no reason to ridicule me. I have also some lines to reply to Your Excellency, but don't get angry with me."

In earlier lives I lacked cultivation, so I became a woman,  
On whom can I rely without a son and without a daughter?  
I constantly think of my husband's affection and loyalty;  
I would like to live as a loyal widow beyond three years!  
You say that your career as an official will have no end,  
But once your blessings run out, your life will be gone.  
The women of this world have a most poisonous heart:  
Your wedded wife too will fan the grave of her husband.

When the vice minister heard the words of this woman, each line was a word of truth, and, gloomy and dazed, he mounted his horse, thinking to himself, "There is nothing good in being a human, Definitely, practicing self-cultivation is the best."

The Chan master thought, "He now understands women. But as an official he is powerful and eminent, so he has not seen through that illusion. Let me transform myself into a monk who is seated on top of a mountain rock."

The vice minister traveled on by horseback. When he lifted his head, he saw a monk who was seated on top of a mountain rock, so he said, "Monk, you are seated in a very dangerous position!"

The monk replied, "You are in danger, not me!"

The vice minister said, "Outside the home I ride on horseback or in a sedan chair, but you say that I am in danger. You are seated on top of a mountain rock and still you say you are not in danger."

The monk replied, "One is in danger when one's office is high, and one is safe when one's way is lofty."

The vice minister asked, "How can a high office be dangerous?"

The monk replied, "You must know that in the Chu-Han period there was a Ying Bu who was appointed as Prince of the Nine Rivers and a Han Xin who was appointed as Prince of the Three Qi.<sup>78</sup> Later they died at the hands of a woman. This surely must mean that one is in danger when one's office is high. Long ago the Buddha was born in the palace of the Brahman King, but he did not desire the pleasures of the palace. Eventually he went to the Snowy Mountains to practice the Way. He obtained his golden body as proof till today, and by his practice achieved the correct enlightenment, so all people came to bow to him, and each and everyone paid his respects. Doesn't this show that one is safe when one's way is lofty?"

As an official one accompanies one's lord and king all day;

Accompanying one's lord is like a lamb attending a wolf!

A minister accompanying his lord will meet with disaster,

And a lamb that follows a wolf will definitely lose its life.

In the third quarter of the fifth watch one enters the palace;

Entering the court one resembles a ghost, exiting a man.

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<sup>78</sup> The Chu-Han period refers to the decade following the death of the First Emperor of Qin. Upon his death in 210 BCE, rebellions soon erupted all over the empire. Eventually the battle for supreme power came down to an all-out war between Xiang Yu 項羽 (232–202 BCE), the Hegemon-King of Western Chu, and Liu Bang, the founder of the Han dynasty. Ying Bu 英布 (d. 195 BCE) and Han Xin were both able generals of Liu Bang. They were murdered by Liu Bang's wife once Xiang Yu had been defeated.

But if there's only half a word that goes against the grain,  
One's life has come to resemble a candle in the wind!

As soon as the vice minister heard these words of the monk, he suddenly achieved understanding. "I don't want to be an official anymore. It is far better to practice the Way!"

Chan Master Bird's Nest said to himself, "The vice minister has achieved success of ninety percent in his heart. But he has not yet seen through the illusion of the phenomenal body. Let me transform myself into a skeleton to see how he reacts."

Traveling on, the vice minister saw a skeleton lying at the side of a field. A herding boy had loosened a tile and muttered to himself, "I'll beat him to the left, I'll beat him to the right!"

When he had beaten him several times, the vice minister asked, "Herding boy, what kind of feud exists between you and the skeleton?"

The herding boy replied, "There is no feud between the skeleton and me. I do this only because he clenches a golden coin in his mouth."

When the vice minister heard this, he thought to himself, "Human life in this world is only a spring dream! This bag of pus and blood has lost its use upon one's death. I have seen through the illusion of the phenomenal body!"

When the vice minister heard the words of the herding boy,  
He grew the more sad the more he pondered and thought.  
A bird dies for the sake of food, as it flies great distances;  
And man dies for wealth, led on a chain by profit and fame.  
The fastest horse on the battlefield attracts a swift arrow;  
A sturdy tree will in the end be ruined by sturdier borers.  
Why would one need to place a coin in a corpse's mouth,  
If one knew the skull would now be smashed with a tile?

On seeing this, the vice minister was troubled at heart, mounted his horse and returned home.

The gate keeper announced to his wives that His Excellency had returned. Welcoming him, they

entered the hall, and the main wife and concubines came forward to greet him. "My lord, you must have suffered on the road!"

The vice minister replied, "Indeed! And how have you all been doing?"

His main wife said, "We are doing fine. My lord, when some days ago you returned from court, you were distressed and unhappy. But on your return from your pilgrimage you still are troubled. Why are you so unhappy?"

The vice minister replied, "Dear wife, because of the important business of reincarnation. I don't want to be an official anymore, but I want to go and practice self-cultivation. That's why I am so troubled."

The main wife then ordered the serving girl to lay out a banquet.

The serving girl took her order, but the vice minister said, "After my sufferings on the road I will not eat spicy meat dishes. I'll only have vegetarian food."

The main wife asked, "Why won't you eat spicy meat dishes?"

Allow your humble wife to admonish you with this *gatha*:

I admonish you, my husband, not to practice self-cultivation.

Who sees a flower and doesn't love it, is a silly, doltish fool;

Who has food but doesn't eat it, is a muddleheaded fellow.

Who has wine and doesn't get drunk, is not a heroic person;

Who has blessings but doesn't enjoy them, lives all in vain.

Old and young in the household will all be filled with joy—

Each quarter of a spring night is worth a thousand in gold!

"My lord, what is the profit of practicing self-cultivation? Your mouth will have to do with vegetarian fare and your body will have to suffer from drafts and cold. As an official you will eat a hundred kind of delicacies and you will wear silk and satin and brocaded textiles. Those you interact with are the noble men whom you meet at court. That must be great!"

The vice minister answered his wife with the following *gatha*:

Even though love and affection are boundless, they will end.  
Husband and wife may be compared to birds in one forest:  
When the Great Limit<sup>79</sup> arrives, each will fly off on its own.  
So let's cut off love and affection as quickly as possible—  
Why wait for a parting at death or separation while alive?  
If I don't right now leave to search for a road to salvation,  
I only fear that King Yama will confront me with trouble.

The serving girl then announced, "Your Excellency, your meal has been set out in your study."

The main wife took the lead in toasting him, and his four spouses urged him to drink with cup after cup and bowl upon bowl.

His main wife wanted to urge her husband more strongly, so, a golden cup in her hands, she knelt down on the floor on both knees, "My lord, you are out of your mind. You can refuse or avoid this!"

Holding this golden cup in my hands I urge my husband:  
Should a jade mouth and silver teeth not consume meat?  
My lord, if you ever commit a crime of a thousand pounds,  
I, your wife, will be happy to carry eight hundred pounds!

The vice minister laughed out loud, "So now I will not leave!"

So his wife rose to her feet. He asked her to sit down, and they drank until after the second watch, and they only stopped after they had drunk as much as they could.

The vice minister said, "My wife, I have suffered on the road, so I will not go to the bed chamber, but catch some sleep right here."

His wife replied, "My lord, do as you want!"

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<sup>79</sup> The hour of death.



The vice minister feigned to sleep, as does a determined person confronted with unsuspecting guests. His four spouses had had too much wine and had all fallen asleep. When the vice minister lifted his head and had a look, he saw that his main wife and concubines all had fallen asleep.

The vice minister blew out the candle on its stand, slapped the candlestand and said, "Who extinguished the candle?"

When the four spouses woke up with a start, they all said that they had no idea. At the side there was a serving girl who said, "Your Excellency, you extinguished that candle yourself, so whom do you want to blame for that?"

The vice minister then said, "When a moment ago I had committed a crime of a thousand pounds, you all were willing to take responsibility for it. Can it be that no one is willing to take responsibility for extinguishing a candle?"

The yellow gold in the house is not my possession,  
A couple's love and affection is not a shared heart.  
When I extinguish a candle, no one takes the blame,  
So who will agree to carry eight hundred pounds?  
The wine we pour each other is the blood of thousands;  
The lamb we finely cut is the fat of the common folks.  
The tears dropping from a candle are the people's tears;  
The songs that loudly rise are the sounds of hatred.  
It's up to me to judge the affairs of the world of light,  
The karmascope in the underworld shows no mercy.<sup>80</sup>  
So today I kindly urge you, wise and good women,  
To all turn your heads and carefully consider all this.

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<sup>80</sup> The karmascope is a mirror in the underworld that shows the true nature (all virtues and all sins) of the soul that is reflected in it.

“When a wife cannot change her husband’s mind, she can only follow her husband to study the Way and practice self-cultivation.”

When the four spouses heard the vice minister, they were suddenly awakened. His main wife composed the following *gatha*:

When the husband wants to practice, the wife too will practice;  
 When husband and wife practice together, each has his origin.  
 The Sages of the Three Teachings were all practicing men,  
 But the bodhisattva Guanyin was a woman who practiced.  
 She took off her pearly headgear, changed into a simple robe,  
 Returned the light and reversed its glare,<sup>81</sup> reciting ‘Amitābha.’  
 With both hands she opened a path to escape reincarnation,  
 And the pits of fire were transformed into white lotus ponds.

The vice minister spoke, “The main wife will practice self-cultivation. My second spouse, what is your intention?” The second spouse said, “I too have a *gatha*”:

When the husband wants to practice, the wife too will practice,  
 Each of them seeking the mysterious and wonderful message.  
 The three thousand buddhas were all men who practiced, but  
 The bodhisattva Mañjuśrī was a woman who practiced the Way.  
 I’ll take off my silken gown and replace it with a linen robe;  
 Husband and wife are separated and each goes his own way.  
 When love and desire are cut off, reincarnation too is cut off:  
 Pure at heart, free of desires, one recites “Buddha Amitābha!”

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<sup>81</sup> Thereby turning one’s sight inward to observe one’s own nature, which is identical to the Buddha nature.

The vice minister said, "My second spouse will practice self-cultivation. My third spouse, what do you think?"

His third spouse also composed a *gatha*:

When the husband wants to practice, the wife too will practice,  
Each of them seeking the wonderful meaning of the Non-Image.  
The five hundred arhat were men who practiced the Way, but  
The bodhisattva Samantabhadra was a woman who practiced.<sup>82</sup>  
Having seen through the red dust, the heart practices by itself,  
And all former affection and love have come equally to an end.  
I have stopped loving all the many kinds of joys and pleasures;  
Coarse tea and bland rice will be my fare throughout the year.

The vice minister said, "My third spouse will practice self-cultivation. My fourth spouse, you are the youngest. Leaving the household is impossible for you and practicing self-cultivation is impossible for you. I am causing you problems. What should we do?"

The fourth spouse replied, "My lord, you don't have to worry. I, your youngest concubine, also have a *gatha*":

When the husband wants to practice, the wife too will practice,  
Each of them seeking the wonderful message from the West.  
The divine immortals of the eight grottoes may have been men,  
But the Queen Mother of the Western Pond was a woman.  
The veil of soft silk before my face resembles a black cloud:  
I pronounce a vow to return to the hills and become a nun.  
As of now I am not tainted anymore by the vulgar red dust:  
For all eternity I'll never turn around to look at my husband.

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<sup>82</sup> Samantabhadra is often portrayed with feminine features.

When the vice minister understood that his four spouses all wanted to practice self-cultivation, he composed that very night a memorial to present at court.

The next day at the third quarter of the fifth watch the emperor ascended the throne hall. When the civil officials and military officers had made their bows to the Son of Heaven and thrice wished him ten thousand years, the Son of Heaven gave the order,

“If there is any business, report it; if there is no business to report you may retire.”

The vice minister had business to report, so he stepped forward and addressed the emperor.

In the past there was

A Vice Minister Bai

Who left the court and the emperor;

Before the golden steps

He deeply knelt down

And reported to His Majesty thusly:

“As I at present

Want to practice the Way,

I hereby hand in my seal of office.

I hope that Your Majesty

Will show me compassion

And allow me to practice the Way.”

His Imperial Majesty

Said, “My dear minister,

You are such a capable person!

You are still young,

You are in your prime,

So what is the need of practicing?”

The vice minister replied, “In all things one has to start early. In practicing self-cultivation even

early is late. Light and shade are as fast as an arrow, and the sun and moon pass like a shuttle. Once Impermanence arrives, your servant will suffer on the three paths<sup>83</sup> for cycles of kalpas. How can I avoid such a fate? If I do not repay all favors, I cannot escape from hell!"

The favors of Heaven and Earth

Are impossible to repay, [so I will]

Refrain from killing and release the living;

The favors of the sun and moon

Are impossible to repay, [so I will]

Observe my nature and enlighten my heart.

The favors of the emperor

Are impossible to repay, [so I will]

Display an undivided loyalty in his service;

The favors of my parents

Are impossible to repay, [so I will]

Abstain from wine and do away with meat.

If one keeps to a permanent fast

And recites the name of the Buddha,

The five grains will flourish in abundance;

If one reads the sutras

And honors the World-Honored One,

The world within the four seas enjoys peace.

I hope that Your Majesty

May live for ten thousand years

And that all phenomena may return to spring;

I wish that imperial grandsons

In an unbroken succession

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<sup>83</sup> The three paths refer to rebirth as a denizen of hell, rebirth as a hungry ghost, and rebirth as an animal.

Will occupy the dragon throne forever!

The emperor

Was overcome with joy

And allowed him to practice self-cultivation,

And said, “My beloved minister,

When you achieve the right fruit,

Make sure to come here and deliver me!”

So Bai Letian

Thanked the emperor for his grace

And retreated, exiting the palace gate.

The officials and officers

Came to see him off

And the whole crowd was converted.

When the vice minister came home again ...,<sup>84</sup> he was overjoyed. He told a serving girl to invite his spouses to come outside to discuss the household affairs—a wealth of millions and over a hundred people.

He instructed the servants and maids as follows, “Those who are willing to keep the fast can stay in my house to practice self-cultivation. Those who do not want to keep to the fast, will be given twenty ounces of silver to find a living elsewhere.”

Only some twenty people stayed at the house to serve them.

The front hall was changed into an Incense Mountain Monastery;

The hall in the back was turned into the gate of the Buddha hall.

The whole household, old and young, followed the fast precepts,

Devotedly reciting the name of the Buddha to ensure their future.

Those overly large bushels were refitted to conform to standard,

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84 Three characters are missing here in the Chinese original.

And each peck, when measured, was found to contain ten cups.  
They did not go and reclaim the money they had loaned to people,  
But allowed them to settle their accounts when that suited them.  
On the first and fifteenth of each month they fed monks and nuns;  
On each seventh and the first third they fed the men of the Way.<sup>85</sup>  
When they saw people who were starving they gave them rice,  
And the travelers passing by they provided with refreshments.  
They built monasteries and pagodas and dug communal wells.  
Near bridges they erected pavilions to take a rest in the shade.  
In the hot months of the summer they donated mosquito nets;  
In the darkest months of winter they donated warm blankets.  
When snow fell and on cloudy days, they donated umbrellas,  
And in dark nights without moon they donated bright lanterns.  
People who were advanced in years and lacked sustenance  
Would receive each month three pecks of grain at their door.  
Where there were rivers but no bridge, they installed a ferry,  
Benefitting in this way all the many travelers passing there.  
Practicing self-cultivation the vice minister was very active,  
And he proposed to His Majesty to declare a pardon.

The vice minister devoted himself to the Way without slackening. In the morning he prayed, in the evening he bowed. Undividedly devout and sincere, he achieved the right fruit through his practice and his merits were complete. On the fifteenth day of the Seventh Month, during the hour of *mao*, he passed away while seated in an upright position and returned to the West. His four spouses too devoted themselves to the Way and practiced self-cultivation. They read the sutras and recited the name of the Buddha. Early and late they prayed and bowed to the bodhisattva Guanyin. Each of them achieved the

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<sup>85</sup> The seventh refers to the seventh day in a ten-day week. The first third refers to the third day in the first ten-day week of each month.

right fruit. On the thirtieth day of the Seventh Month the bodhisattva in her great compassion and great mercy transferred the four spouses so they all returned to their home. This was the rarest meeting of a thousand years, the most miraculous event of ten thousand years! When this was reported to the Enlightened Sage,<sup>86</sup> he granted imperial sacrifices and imperial burials. The civil officials and military officers all came to send them off and pay their respects as they returned to heaven.

To realize the Way through meditation is harder than hard;  
 Throughout the twice six hours of the day one has no rest.<sup>87</sup>  
 But practicing self-cultivation indeed produces a reaction:  
 To this day they're buddhas, residing atop Spirit Mountain!

This case has been preserved by Our Buddha in the great Tripitaka. It urges good men and pious women to turn around and compare the vulgar to the sage and the past to the present. Vice Minister Bai was an official but still feared the sufferings of reincarnation, so he kept to the fast, recited the name of the Buddha, realized the Way through meditation, and achieved the right fruit. But the good men and pious women of this age do not want to practice self-cultivation and recite the name of the Buddha. But it cannot be that the large crowd does not fear the sufferings on the three paths! Today you do not know what will happen tomorrow; in the morning you cannot be sure about dusk at night. When the large crowd now lose their body and their life, where will they find those again in ten thousand kalpas and a thousand reincarnations?

Be steadfast when it comes to practicing self-cultivation:  
 Read the sutras, recite Buddha's name, and forge forward!  
 Destroy the fire of [distinguishing] ignorance and *samādhi*;  
 Chase away the six bandits<sup>88</sup> so you won't be chained.

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<sup>86</sup> The emperor.

<sup>87</sup> In traditional China the day was divided into twelve hours (each double the length of modern hours).

<sup>88</sup> The six bandits are the six senses, which are the cause of attachments.



Destroy with one blow of your fist your face at birth,  
Kick with both your feet an escape from reincarnation.  
If you, undisturbed in your heart, go and return home,  
You will engender lotus flowers in the midst of fire.

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