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Item Type	Article
Authors	Yu, Xue
Publisher	Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, Chung Chi College
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-03 18:55:48
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166166

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Ching Feng, n.s., **4.1** (2003) 29–50

Merit Transfer and Life after Death in Buddhism

XUE YU

Human beings are more frightened about the uncertainty of what may happen after death than about death itself. Many religions, in an attempt to allay the fear of this uncertainty, advocate the views on afterlife and provide their followers a way to overcome this uncertainty and to achieve a better life after death. In this regard, Buddhism has developed the concept of karma and rebirth and the practice of merit transfer for the dead. Both in the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna traditions, the monks are trained to perform ritual services and to transfer the resultant merit to the dead; lay Buddhists are instructed to make material donations or other contributions to institutional Buddhism and transfer merit to their dead relatives. The merit transfer, in connection with the concept of afterlife, has become an important part of Chinese religious practice to help Chinese people fulfil their duty of filial piety; it has thus deeply penetrated into Chinese society and become an integral part of Chinese culture. In the present work, I will first briefly discuss the concept of *Petalok* (the world of the departed) and merit transfer in Theravāda Buddhism. Then, focusing on Mahāyāna doctrine and tradition, I will elaborate on the concept of merit transfer for the departed in

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the intermediate state. Subsequently, I will illustrate how the idea and practice of both merit transfer and the afterlife constitute a major part of Buddhist activities in China.

1. ISSUES ON THE INTERMEDIATE STATE AND MERIT TRANSFER IN THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM

The intermediate state (*Antarābhava*) is a fascinating invention of sectarian Buddhism that is closely connected with the doctrines of karma and rebirth. According to this theory, living beings, after their lives end, experience a transitional state before they can be reborn into their next life. Since these living beings in the intermediate state are purely the creation of their karma—devoid of any productive power to do anything either good or bad—it is difficult for them to change their karmic destiny and to find a better rebirth. Therefore, their future destiny largely depends on merit they may receive from their living relatives. However, not all Buddhist schools endorsed the theory of the intermediate state, and the *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāsā Śāstra* records the debate between them over whether there exists such a state. The *Sarvāstivādin*, *Vatsīputrīya*, *Sammatiya* and *Purvaśaila* schools vigorously support the idea (T. 27 [1545]: 356–58), while *Sthaviravāda* (*Sthaviranikaya*), the forerunner of the Theravāda tradition now existing in Sri Lanka and Thailand, categorically rejects such an assertion. According to the Theravādins who emphasize self-effort for liberation, the doctrine of karma and rebirth implies that there is no time-gap between death and rebirth because rebirth takes place immediately after death.

The *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* in the Theravāda tradition records that the Buddha at the moment of enlightenment saw sentient beings coming and going through birth and death within six realms.[1] "The base and the noble, the beautiful and the ugly, the happy and the miserable, passing according to their deeds" (*Majimanikāya*, 1.26). However, this statement does not clarify whether there is a transitional period in

[1] The six realms are: beings in hell, hungry ghosts, beasts, human beings, titanic and celestial beings in the heavens.

which living beings undergo some state between death and re-birth. The characteristic silence on the intermediate state in the early texts, which are regarded as the "canon of Buddhavācana" (the words of the Buddha), may have left room for further speculation in Buddhist scholasticism, and different opinions began to develop in the post-canonic texts. In criticizing the assertion of the intermediate state upheld by other schools, Buddhist monks in the Theravāda tradition tried hard to prove that rebirth takes place immediately after death. The Theravādins may have drawn an established standard on the issue from the *Milindapañha*, which categorically rejects the idea that one enters into the intermediate state after death. In this text, Nagasena argues that rebirth takes place instantaneously within one thought-moment as the result of the continuous flow of consciousness. The *nāma-rūpa* (mind and matter), carried by perpetual consciousness, incessantly runs its own course even though death and rebirth physically interrupt it. There is no time break between deceased consciousness (*cuticitta*) and rebirth-consciousness (*patisandhi-vinnana*). In order to demonstrate his allegation, Nagasena uses the analogy of the shadow of two birds:

> What do you think, sire? If two birds were to fly through the air and one should alight on a tall tree and the other on a short tree, and if they come to rest simultaneously, whose shadow will fall on the earth first and whose shadow will fall on the earth later?
>
> They (will fall) simultaneously, revered sir.[2]

If two birds alight at the same time on two different trees, one short and another tall, their shadows fall upon the earth concurrently. No time intervenes between the projecting of the shadow and the falling of the shadow on the earth. Therefore, Nagasena claims that there is no time-break between death and rebirth.

The *Milindapañha* is not regarded as *Buddhavācana*, but a post-canonic work by Theravāda monks. Nevertheless, it is accepted as the authentic text of the Theravāda tradition, equivalent to the teaching of the Buddha. Categorical denial of an intermediate state became the standard view. Therefore, many monk-scholiasts throughout Theravāda history suggest that genuine Buddhism does not support the belief that

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[2] I. B. Horner, trans., *Milinda's Questions* (London: Luzac, 1969), 114.

the spirit of the deceased person takes lodging in some temporary state until it finds a suitable place for its reincarnation. Narada, in his popular book, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, argues, "Rebirth takes place immediately, irrespective of the place of birth, just as an Electromagnetic wave, projected into space, is immediately reproduced in a receiving radio set. Rebirth of the mental flux is also instantaneous and leaves no room whatever for any intermediate state (*antarābhava*)."[3] In answer to the question whether there is always an available and appropriate condition to receive the last thought-vibrations of the dead, the Theravāda tradition maintains that there are enough channels to enable a sentient being to be reborn immediately into the next birth. There are four modes of birth for all living beings, either human or non-human, and there are numerous planets for rebirth other than the Earth.[4] "It is not impossible to believe that there will always be an appropriate place to receive the last thought-vibrations. A point is always ready to receive the falling stone."[5]

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the Theravāda does not have a notion of the intermediate state, the concept of *Petaloka*, the world of the departed, is widely accepted, and the practice of transferring merit to the dead in *Petaloka* has been popularly endorsed in society almost since the formation of the Pali canon. John Holt has traced the concept and practice of *Petaloka* to *Śraddhā* (the blissful abode of the fathers or ancestors) in the Hindu tradition.[6] The early Brahmanical rituals of sacrifice in the *Śraddhā* ceremony were designed to transform the departed ones (Sanskrit: *preta*; Pali: *peta*) to *Pitr* (the status of father).[7] The concept of *Petaloka*, which exists immediately below the realm of human beings, can be found in the early Pali literature. The status of

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[3] Nārada, *The Buddha and His Teachings* (Colombo: Lanka Bauddha Mandal, 1957), 262.

[4] The four modes of birth: womb-born, egg-born, moisture born, or water-born, and beings having a spontaneous birth. Detailed discussion on the four forms of birth can be referred to T. 44 (1581): 618; T. 29 (1558): 42–43.

[5] Nārada, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 263.

[6] John Holt, "Assisting the Dead by Venerating the Living: Merit Transfer in the Early Buddhist Tradition," *Numen* 28 (1981): 3–7.

[7] In the Hindu tradition, *Śraddhā* can only be performed by a son to his dead parents who, after receiving the sacrifice offered by their son, can be transformed into the status of father.

petas is referred to as "untimely" because they merely realize the fruit of action and cannot on their own accord initiate any kamma, or in Sanskrit, karma.[8] Although the *Petavatthu Text* (Stories of the Departed) in the Pali canon betrays a folkloristic origin, the Theravāda tradition grants it canonical status and believes it to be an authentic teaching and practice of Buddhism. The major theme of the text is that living beings ought to perform merit by offering gifts to the sangha and to transfer merit (*Parivatta*: turning) to the departed, whose welfare depends on transferred merit from their living relatives.

According to Malalasekera, two Pali terms indicate merit transfer: *Parivatta*, which means returning merit, and *Anumodana*, which means rejoicing in merit.[9] Gombrich has reexamined the epistemological origin of "merit" in term of *Anumodana*.[10] He has detected the meaning of *Anumodana* changing from "thanksgiving" to "rejoicing" in Buddhist history. The term originally meant that mutual gratitude existed between the beneficiary and the doer of merit. Only when merit transfer required doctrinal justification did its meaning shift to "rejoicing"[11] or enjoying. He supports his assertion by quoting a passage from the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, in which the Buddha tells Sunidha and Vassakara, two Magadha chief ministers, how merit transfer can be done:

> When the wise man offers food to those endowed with moral conduct, self-control, and purity of life, at the place where he has made his home, he should share the merit of the almsgiving with the devas of the place. (When merit is thus shared with them,) the devas thus being honoured, honour him (the sharer of merit) in return; being revered, revere him in return. Therefore, just as a mother safeguards her own son, the devas safeguard the sharer of merit. And the person who is under the protection of the devas meets with only good fortune at all times.[12]

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[8] Holt, "Assisting the Dead by Venerating the Living," 9.

[9] G. P. Malalasekera, "'Transference of Merit' in Ceylonese Buddhism," *Philosophy East and West* 17 (1967): 85–86.

[10] Richard Gombrich, "'Merit Transference' in Sinhalese Buddhism: A Case Study of the Interaction between Doctrine and Practice," *History of Religions* 17, no. 2 (1971): 203–19.

[11] Holt, "Assisting the Dead by Venerating the Living," 17–18.

[12] *Digha Nikaya: Long Discourses of the Buddha* (Rangoon: Burma Pitaka Association, 1984), 208–9.

The practice of merit transfer is aimed at transferring merit to devas, or sharing merit with them. The devas, who enjoy the occasion of merit making and partake of the happiness of merit, will in return protect those who have generated the merit, and shower blessings on them. Although this passage does not reveal whether living beings other than devas can receive the transferred merit, it does show that the merit transfer in the sense of sharing and enjoyment was practiced in early Theravāda Buddhism. By offering food to Buddhist clergy and sharing merit with gods, one seeks blessings from those gods.

The practice of merit transfer has been a typical religious practice throughout Theravāda countries. According to Gregory Schopen, who has undertaken research on the archaeological discoveries and epigraphic materials such as donative inscriptions at Bharhut and Sanci in India, merit transfer was widely and extensively practiced by Buddhists, including Buddhist monks and nuns, in ancient Buddhist India.[13] The donors of the inscriptions that Schopen studied were clearly motivated by the idea that the merit of offering (*puja*) could be transferred "for the benefit of their mother and father," and "to all beings in the boundless universe."[14] One of the obligations of the clergy in early Buddhism, therefore, was to perform rituals, recite suttas, and transfer merit to the dead.[15] Schopen thus dismissed the view that Buddhism adopted the practice of filial piety after it was introduced to China.[16]

2. THE INTERMEDIATE STATE AND MERIT TRANSFER IN MAHĀYĀNA

Mahāyāna Buddhism affirms the existence of the intermediate state (Sanskrit: *Antarā-bhava*; Chinese: *zhongyou* 中有 or *zhongyin* 中陰). One of the early Chinese texts that expounds the doctrine of the inter-

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[13] Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

[14] Schopen, 6–7; 38–41.

[15] Ibid., 76–77; 209–16.

[16] Ibid., 57–62.

mediate state is *Da cheng yi zhang* 大乘義章 (Chapters on the Meaning of Mahāyāna) (T. 44 [1851]: 465–875), composed by Huiyuan 慧遠 (523–92),[17] a well-known monk-scholar in early Chinese Buddhism. Huiyuan gives a detailed description of the intermediate state (T. 44 [1851]: 618–19) based on the *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāsā śāstra* and the *Abhidharmakośa śāstra*. He criticizes two opposing arguments held by Hīnayāna schools[18] over whether there is an intermediate state, and articulates the Mahāyāna view on the issue:

> According to Mahāyāna, there are three possibilities [to whether one goes through an intermediate state], negative, affirmative, and indecisive. One who is endowed with the highest good and one who has committed the worst evil go directly and speedily to their destinies respectively without undergoing the intermediate existence; the karma [of others] will pass through it." (T. 44 [1851]: 618)

The intermediate state is not for all, but for those whose karma is between the highest good and worst evil, because their course of karmic destiny may be changed. Those whose karma is not powerful enough to find rebirth immediately pass through the intermediate state where they may have time to search for a suitable destiny to be reborn. The departed, however, will not remain for long in the intermediate state because they have very weak bodies[19] and their karmic forces are characterized by the strong intention of quickly gaining a new birth. These karmic forces can even overcome the karma of their future parents by forcing them to commit adultery so that the condition for their rebirth can be created.[20] Asangha in the *Yogācārabhūmi Sāstra* avers that the maximum time of staying in the intermediate state is seven days:

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[17] This Huiyuan should be differentiated from another Huiyuan (334–416) of Mt. Ru. See *Xu gao seng zhuan* (Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks); T. 50 (2060): 490.

[18] The term "Hīnayāna" is used here only to indicate a group of Buddhist schools in sectarian Buddhism, which opposed Mahāyāna.

[19] The body of the departed one in the intermediate state is like that of a little child.

[20] "The karmic cause of a living being connected with future parents can be divided into two categories: definite and indefinite, replaceability and irreplaceability. If there are alternative parents, the being may go to them when they are in union and the mother is in the conception period. If the father is replaceable while the mother is irreplaceable, the mother will commit adultery with another

> If the living beings in the intermediate state are unable to find the conditions for rebirth, they may at last stay there for seven days. If they still cannot find it within these seven days, they will die and be reborn there again, and continue to live for (next) seven days. They can continue this cycle of seven days for seven times, and will definitely find the condition of rebirth then. (T. 30 [1579]: 282)

A similar statement can also be found in the teaching of Vasumitra, who insists that one cannot stay in the intermediate state for more than seven days.[21] This seven-day period, however, can repeat for seven times, and the total time cannot be longer than forty-nine days; otherwise the living beings must take temporary rebirth in a transitional mother's womb and die shortly after birth (T. 27 [1545]: 361).

The theory of the intermediate state provides a perfect time and place for the dead to receive merit from their living relatives who are thus urged to perform meritorious deeds and transfer merit to their dead relatives. In order to understand the theory and practice of merit transfer in connection with the intermediate state in the Chinese Buddhist context, we need first to know what the tradition means by merit.

There are two terms in the Chinese language for merit, *fude* 福德 and *gongde* 功德, which possibly originate from two Sanskrit terms, *Punya* (Pali: *puñña*) and *Guna* respectively. The two Chinese terms are sometimes interchangeable, but *gongde* is more popularly used to refer to merit. *Punya* means merit, virtue, and blessings resulting from wholesome deeds intended both to achieve a happy birth in the human world and heavens, and to transcend the world. *Guna*, variable in meaning, indicates quality, element, or component (such as *Nirguna* and *Saguna* in the *Advaita*'s doctrine), as well as merit. According to Huiyuan, *gong* 功 denotes the potentiality of function that can nurture

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man so that the being in the intermediate state can quickly go to take rebirth, even though the mother has been virtuous and good mannered in observing the five precepts. In the case that the mother is replaceable and the father irreplaceable, the father will commit adultery with another woman so that the being in the intermediate state can quickly go to take rebirth, even though the father has been virtuous and good mannered in observing the five precepts. If both parents are irreplaceable, the karma of this living being will compel the parents to desire union. T. 27 (1545): 361.

[21] Vasumitra was the chief inspector in the Fourth Buddhist Council at Kashmir during the time of Kaniska in the Kusan dynasty (second to fifth centuries C.E.). He was also a chief editor of *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāsā Śāstra*.

future happiness and benefit; *de* 德 implies virtue or blessings characterized by wholesome deeds, just as coolness is the characteristic or virtue of water. *Gongde* therefore means "merit" or "blessings" that can give rise to happiness in the future. A good deed causes practitioners to enjoy its happy result, because happiness and benefit are the intrinsic virtue of the good deed itself (T. 44 [1851]: 465–875).

Huiyuan then analyzes merit in term of the Six Perfections,[22] which can be categorized into three groups: wisdom, merit, and attainment. Depending on wisdom (*Prajñā* 般若 and *Jñāna* 智識), one can perform a meritorious deed; and relying on merit, one can attain Buddhahood (*Dharmakāya*). Wisdom (*zhihui* 智慧 in Chinese) consists of two meanings: that which externally illuminates the truth is called *zhi* (*Jñāna*), or the knowledge of the conventional truth; that which internally sees the truth is *hui* (*Prajñā*), or intuitive insight into the highest reality. Huiyuan holds that merit includes the first five perfections as well as the conventional aspect of wisdom (*Jñāna*). The essence of wisdom (*Prajñā*) is the ultimate reality, which is unconditioned, noncorrupted, causeless, and permanent without boundary. Huiyuan emphasizes the equal importance of both merit and wisdom (*Prajñā*) because both are indispensable for living beings to attain enlightenment (T. 44 [1851]: 649–50). From merit, Bodhisattvas will remain in this world and compassionately work for the benefit of all living beings; from wisdom (*Prajñā*), the Bodhisattvas realize the perfect truth and never attach themselves to this world. Therefore, they perform merit on the basis of wisdom; they cannot realize wisdom unless they accumulate merit through practice of qualities such as morality, generosity, patience, effort, and meditation. The perfection of both is the realization of Buddhahood, as the Buddha is also called the Perfect One of merit and wisdom (*Liangzuzun* 兩足尊).

In the *Awakening of Faith to Mahāyāna* (*Mahāyāna-śraddhotpāda śāstra*), merit is identical with the inherent Buddha nature or original enlightenment. The *Tathāgatagarbha* is originally endowed with all sorts of merit, which is neither separate nor different from the Buddha nature (T. 32 [1666]: 575). Merit in this context therefore means the original nature of Dharma-body, and all merit is found within the *Tathāgatagarbha*. Merit is the virtue, quality, or both the manifestation of

[22] Generosity, morality, patience, effort, meditation, and wisdom.

the *Tathāgatagarbha* and the *Tathāgatagarbha* itself.[23] Nevertheless, the *Awakening of Faith to Mahāyāna* also speaks of merit as the result of generosity, discipline, forbearance, diligence, calmness, and insight (T. 32 [1666]: 582). Merit is therefore understood in two dimensions: the macrocosmic dimension of the inherent nature of the *Tathāgatagarbha* and the microcosmic dimension of blessings resulting from meritorious deeds.

The expression of the macrocosmic nature of merit is also found in the *Platform Sūtra*, attributed to Huineng 慧能 (638–713). The text reconstructs the legend that Bodhidharma rejected any merit in the worldly wholesome deeds performed by Emperor Wu (464–549) of the Liang dynasty, asserting that merit is pure and perfect wisdom, the essence of emptiness and tranquility:

> Building temples, giving alms, and making offerings are merely the practice of seeking after blessings. One cannot make merit with blessings. Merit is in the *Dharmakāya*, not in the field of blessings. In Dharma nature itself there is merit (*kung-te*) [Seeing into your own nature is *kung*]; straightforward mind is *te*. Inwardly, see the Buddha nature; outwardly, practice reverence.[24]

Blessings are different from "merit," as the former results from traditional benevolent and meritorious performances while the latter is originally within each and every individual. In other words, merit is the Buddha-nature, which is not produced or created. Because they are the result of external practices, blessings may cause the fruition of worldly gains of rebirth in the heavens and the human world; yet they can have nothing to do with "merit." Huineng insisted that one attains enlightenment when one sees the self-nature of Buddha or "merit," and that it cannot be done through accumulation of blessings.

This understanding of the nature of "merit" at the formative stage of the Chan tradition may have given rise to criticism from monks of the early Pure Land tradition. In responding to the claim that all external

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[23] The interrelatedness of *Tathāgatagarbha* and merit seems similar to the illustration of *dao* and *de* in the *Dao de jing* that *de* is the virtue of *dao*, yet not separate from the *dao*.

[24] *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, trans. Philip B. Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 156.

practices are deprived of merit, Huiri 慧日 (680–748) argued that in almost all sūtras the Buddha requests his followers to cultivate merit and wisdom simultaneously. He alleged that institutional Buddhism would completely collapse if the claim of the Chan tradition were proved true. In *A Collection Outlining Various Scriptures and Treatises Regarding Methods of Contemplating the Buddha and Rebirth in the Pure Land*, Huiri elaborated the doctrine and practice of gaining merit through religious and beneficial deeds, which, as he believed, can also eventually lead to Nirvāna (T. 85 [2826]: 1236–41).

Different understandings or rather the linguistic confusion over the meaning of merit may have overshadowed the controversy between the Pure Land tradition and Chan Buddhism, especially the later Southern School of Chan. On the one hand, early Chan masters propounded the identity of living beings, mind, and Buddha. All livings are fully and equally endowed with "merit," which is identical with Buddha-nature. According to the *Platform Sūtra*, "merit" is inherited within *Dharmakaya* itself; it cannot be increased or decreased but remains as it is forever. All we should do is to realize this truth here and now, and all practices and doctrinal elaboration, therefore, are unnecessary and futile so far as "merit" is concerned. On the other hand, the early Pure Land masters expounded that one accumulates spiritual provisions of merit in order to be born into the pure land. All kinds of religious and charitable activities earn merit, which will finally bring one to enlightenment. The controversy about the meaning of merit in early Chinese Buddhism reveals that the masters of the two traditions are arguing over different sides of twofold truth: the worldly and the transcendent. Both of them, because they emphasized one over another, failed to demonstrate that one truth cannot be established without the other. In the Chan tradition, "merit" is the transcendent Buddha-nature and one who sees this inner "merit" realizes the highest truth; in the Pure Land practice, merit is a conventional way in order for religious practitioners either to gain a higher rebirth or to attain liberation from the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*).

We have discussed the meaning of "merit" and blessing, and now let us turn to merit transfer (*Parinama*, which means bending round, alteration, or change), which is called *huixiang* 迴向 in Chinese. The term literally means returning (*hui*) merit (*gongde*) toward (*xiang*) benefiting others or for attaining enlightenment. Having performed merit, one transfers or redirects it for the benefit of others and eventu-

ally enabling one to achieve Buddhahood. Tanluan 曇鸞 (467–542), in *The Commentary on the Thesis of Rebirth* (*in the Pure Land*) (T. 43 [1819]), speaks of two forms of merit transfer in the context of Pure Land Buddhism: one for the sake of going to the Pure Land and the other for the sake of returning to this world in order to benefit all living beings. Huiyuan, however, classifies merit transfer into three different categories depending on its purpose:[25] for the sake of seeking *Bodhi* (wisdom); for the sake of benefiting other sentient beings; and for the sake of realizing the truth. A practitioner can do each one of these three again for the purpose of transcending the world, living in the world, and multiplying merit (T. 44 [1851]: 636–37). According to Huiyuan, the practice of merit without redirecting or transferring it to others is incomplete and will eventually fail to transcend the world, to attain the highest truth, or to magnify the outcome of the merit. Huiyuan believes that the most popular form of merit making, especially for lay Buddhists, is almsgiving, which could be a double blessing: to the one who gives and to the one who receives. A devoted action, a kind verbal expression, and a pure thought of one who gives accumulate wholesome karma for him or her. When the merit of such wholesome karma is transferred to others with compassion and friendliness, the recipient of the merit will be blessed and benefited accordingly.

3. MERIT TRANSFER FOR THE AFTERLIFE

Now let us turn to an important issue: whether karma, or rather, the destiny of living beings in the intermediate state, can be changed by the merit accumulated and transferred by their living relatives. In other words, does merit transfer contradict the doctrine of karma? In the *Anguttara Nikāya* of the Theravāda tradition, the Buddha says: "O Bhikkhus, it is volition that I call kamma. Having willed, one acts through body, speech, and mind" (*Anguttara Nikāya* 3:294). Karma, produced by the body (physical), by speech (verbal), or by the mind (mental), is the manifestation of the ethical law that one is responsible

[25] *The Thesis on Rebirth (in the Pure Land)* was composed by Vasubandhu, based on the *Sukhavativyuha Sūtra*.

for one's own actions, which are performed with volition.[26] Karma is one's own doing, and it reacts upon oneself. Buddhism, in general, admits that one has the power to divert the course of karma to some extent. How far one can change it depends on the cause (one's own effort) and conditions (the assistance from others).[27] Can one's karma then be changed while he or she is in the intermediate state?

The masters of *Abhidharma* rejected the idea that one's karma can be altered in the intermediate state; they argued instead that one's karma can be changed only when one is in the state of origin (between birth and death), not in the intermediate state (between the death and birth). This is so because one's karma in the intermediate state is too powerful to be modified, and one's body is too powerless to generate any new karma, good or bad (T. 27 [1545]: 369–70). However, the masters of *Avadāna*, forerunners of *Sautrāntika* in early sectarian Buddhism, claimed that the karma by which the intermediary beings are formed can be changed, because even the karma of five grave sins can be transmuted (T. 27 [1545]: 359).[28] They give the following example to demonstrate the possibility of changing karma in the intermediate state. At the moment of death, a man, having done nothing but good in his lifetime, visualizes the appearance of hell in the intermediate state due to the sequent order of fructification of karma he accumulated in his previous lives. He, however, consciously reminds himself of all the good deeds he has performed in this life. As a result, the appearance of hell gives way to a manifestation of heaven, and he is born there accordingly (T. 27 [1545]: 359).

Many other Buddhist schools took the position of *Avadāna* that one's karma can be transmuted in the intermediate state, either by self-effort or through others' help. The Yogācāra School holds that the intermediate state is crucial for one to increase the chance of gaining a higher rebirth. "If the course of one's karma can be amended by others, the seeds in the intermediate state can also be changed and one may

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[26] "By oneself, indeed, is evil-done; by oneself is one defiled. By oneself is evil left undone; by oneself, indeed, is one purified. Purity and impurity depend on oneself. No one purifies another." *Dhammapada*, v. 165.

[27] Nārada, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 199.

[28] Five grave sins: killing the father and mother, killing an Arhat, injuring the Buddha, and causing the schism of the sangha.

take rebirth in another realm" (T. 30 [1579]: 282). The *Sūtra on the Intermediate State* (T. 12 [385]: 1058–70) asserts that the Buddha enters into the intermediate state and specifically preaches the Dharma for the benefit of intermediary beings, including the spiritually advanced saints.[29] Numerous (eighty-four thousand billion *Nayuta*) sentient beings eliminate their corruptions and obtain the Dharma-eye after they listen to the Buddha's preaching.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the possibility of changing one's karma is indispensable for the ideas and practices of Bodhisattvas, whose enlightenment relies solely on serving and liberating others. Bodhisattvas can attain Buddhahood only because there are countless ignorant beings. In fact, the existence of these beings is the necessary basis for the Bodhisattvas to practice altruism, compassion, and loving-kindness. Precisely because these living beings need help to achieve liberation, the Bodhisattvas can practice the path of benefiting others. It is therefore unquestionable that the wisdom and compassion of the Bodhisattvas can change the course of the karma of other living beings, or perhaps even do away with their karma and lead them to enlightenment. The idea and practice of serving and saving others based on the Bodhisattva path may have endorsed and further enhanced the belief that the karma of living beings in the intermediate state can be changed. The living relatives may pray Bodhisattvas on behalf of the dead for helping them in the intermediate state.

As a critical moment for the next birth, the intermediate state entails the necessity of assistance from the living to transfer merit to their dead relatives. The Buddha and Buddhist masters devised religious rituals to generate and transfer merit to the newly dead.[30] It is asserted that the merit generated by rituals or by offering to the sangha will be speedily conveyed to the departed ones who, with the help of transferred merit, will find their way to the next life. This kind of practice, in collaboration with traditional filial piety, modified the Chinese tradi-

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[29] The sūtra was translated by Danapala who lived at Udyana in India. He arrived in China in 980 during the Song dynasty, and translated more than one hundred texts into Chinese. See *Song gao seng zhuan*, T. 50 (2061).

[30] The practice that Buddhist ritual is performed in every seven days for seven weeks may be the result of the belief that the living beings in the intermediate state have to renew themselves in every seven days.

tion of ancestor worship and became dominant in major religious activities throughout China.

In pre-Buddhist China, Chinese people already believed in the afterlife and made sacrifices to their dead relatives. As early as the Shang (1600 B.C.E.–1100 B.C.E.) and Zhou (1100 B.C.–221 B.C.E.) periods, sacrifice was generally regarded as an actual feeding of the dead. According to bronze inscriptions found from new archaeological discoveries, the ancestors of royal family were sacrificially offered the same kinds of animals as were presented to the king as food.[31] The hungry ancestral spirits enjoyed sacrificial food offered by their living relatives.[32] The claim that China had had no concept of the afterlife before the advent of Buddhism has now become outmoded. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that the idea of a heavenly world above and an underworld below was gradually developed and became conspicuous when the Buddhist concept of heaven and hell was brought to China.[33] In connection with ancestor worship, Chinese people made material sacrifices, mainly food, to their ancestors. In contrast, the Buddhist tradition assumes that meritorious deeds such as generosity can generate merit, which can be mentally transferred to those who need it, and that it is not necessary to offer materials directly to the dead. The Buddhist theory and practice of merit transfer, therefore, may have influenced traditional material sacrifice that had existed before Buddhism was introduced to China, and the two together have shaped the common ritual practices for the dead in Chinese society.[34] Today, merit transfer and material offering are practiced side by side for newly dead relatives in almost all traditional rituals.

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[31] Ying-shih Yü "'O Soul, Come Back!' A Study in the Changing Conceptions of the Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47 (1987): 378.

[32] This kind of belief and practice is found in the Han texts and confirmed in archeological discoveries. Ying-shih Yü, "Han," in K. C. Chang, ed., *Food in Chinese Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 53–84.

[33] Yü, "O Soul, Come Back," 382.

[34] It would be very interesting to compare how material sacrifice to ancestors both in the early India (before the arising of Buddhism) and China (before Buddhism was introduced) was influenced by the Buddhist practice of merit respectively.

I will not go on to discuss how the Buddhist practice of merit influenced material sacrifice in China, or vice versa, but I shall embark on reviewing how Chinese Buddhist texts perceive the concept of merit transfer and afterlife. In the *Bowl Sūtra* (T. 16 [685]), the mother of Maudgalaputra (Mulian) is reborn into hell after death because she was stingy when she was alive. Having failed to save his mother from suffering even through his magic power, Maudgalaputra asks the Buddha for help. The Buddha then instructs him to offer almsgiving to monks during the *Pravarana* ceremony[35] on the fifteenth of the seventh month. Maudgalaputra, following the Buddha's instruction, performs offering to the sangha. He then sees his mother released from the hell (T. 16 [685]: 779).[36] The sūtra illustrates that the merit-force resulting from this sort of religious service is more powerful and efficacious because it is done through the medium of the sangha. Even evil spirits can receive the merit produced by the good deeds of their relatives as the result of offering to clergy. The *Consecration Sūtra* explains:

> A creditor will restrain from asking the return of money borrowed by a debtor who is protected by the king. Similarly, Yama as well as others who serve in the judiciary court are under the command of Indra. They would rather respect him (who has received the merit sanctioned by sangha) than torture him. The merit will enable him to get rid of all trails of suffering and not to go to hell. (T. 21 [1331]: 530)

Indra, the superior of Yama (king of the dead), is the follower of the Buddha and a guardian of institutional Buddhism. Yama and other officials will condescend to show their favor to those provided with the merit transacted by the sangha headed by the Buddha. They will help these dead people through the trial period of the intermediate state. When the karmic cases of the departed are under review in the court of Yama, the possibility of changing their destiny is still open. During this crucial period, the merit should be performed on their behalf before they undergo the trial. A powerful external assistance to push them through the trial, therefore, becomes vital for them to gain a better rebirth. The *Consecration Sūtra* continues,

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[35] This is a Buddhist ritual performed at the end of the three month rainy retreat.

[36] A similar record is also found in the *Consecration Sūtra*, in which Yasa asked the Buddha to rescue his sinful mother. See T. 21 (1331): 530–33.

> One performs meritorious deeds for the sake of the dead, sincerely sympathizing with them and compassionately acting on their behalf. Repent for their sin which may be extinguished immediately. Produce merit on their behalf as one prepares food for those who come from afar. Surely they will be able to receive it. Just as a man, having committed a crime, eagerly seeks help from his relatives and solicits the powerful (people) to rescue him from the peril. The incense should be burnt so that the dead can gain liberation. Transfer merit to the dead by calling their name. By the power of merit, their liberation can be achieved. They thus go to ten directions [for rebirth]. There is no wish that the dead will not fulfil. (T. 21 [1331]: 529)

The newly departed ones in the intermediate state wander alone as if they have come to a new "stop" for transition. In order to continue their journey, they need to be provided with enough allowance, or they will be withheld in this "stop." The merit transferred from their living relatives supplies them with sufficient provisions so that they can continue their journey of finding their new destiny. Just as a poor man needs a financial sponsor to repay his debt, the intermediary beings require merit to compensate for their spiritual debt.

We do not know how much effort the departed themselves should exert in order to receive transferred merit. Yet in all cases, the sincere wish to receive merit seems to be vitally important. Their intention to seek release meets with or empathetically responds to the merit intentionally performed for their benefit; together, these provide an opportunity for the dead to receive merit.[37] Nevertheless, Buddhist literature offers differing opinions about how much transferred merit the living beings in the intermediate state can obtain. In the *Consecration Sūtra*, the Buddha tells *Puguang* 普光 (Universal Light) Bodhisattva that one gains one-seventh of the merit performed by others (T. 21 [1331]: 530). The reason why one can obtain only one-seventh of the whole merit is that that one does not have faith in the law of karma. It is unclear, however, whether the departed can procure the whole sum of

[37] In *Milindapañha* of the Theravāda tradition, when Nagasena is asked whether ancestors can obtain merit from their living relatives, he replies that only those who live on merit given by others are able to sympathize with the merit of others. Nevertheless, even if the departed ones may not be able to receive the merit thus transferred to them, the merit will not be wasted, but return to the doer of the merit, just as a gift, which is presented to others but turned down, will go back to the giver. Horner, *Milinda's Questions*, 123–24.

merit transferred to them if they believe in the law of karma. In the *Forty-two Chapter Sūtra*, the Buddha is quoted as saying that one who is delighted to help meritorious performance and shares the happiness of offering will also obtain the merit in full. The merit can be shared indefinitely and its quality and quantity will not be diminished; just as a torch can kindle hundreds and thousands of lamps without changing itself (T. 17 [784]: 722). Merit transfer is, therefore, an efficient way to multiply merit so that all to whom the merit is transferred can equally enjoy it.[38]

4. JUSTIFICATION FOR MERIT TRANSFER FOR THE DEAD

The practice of merit transfer has thus made the monastic community the legitimate and worthy recipient of meritorious offerings. Institutional Buddhism acts as the productive field of producing merit (*futian* 福田), and as a catalytic agent or "broker" for transferring merit between the living beings and their dead relatives. Merit practice in Buddhism, therefore, is sometimes suspected of being a Buddhist device that aims at exacting donations and offerings from lay-society by promising magnanimous rewards for their generosity. The practice of merit transfer can also be compared to the legal process of bailing a criminal out of jail. The living relatives buy merit through making an offering to the sangha so that they can seek the freedom of their dead from being punished. After receiving the bail in terms of merit from their living relatives, Yama releases the dead so that they can gain a better rebirth in the next life. It is, therefore, undeniable that the idea of an intermediate state and the practice of merit transfer are Buddhist programmes to gain financial support.[39] In early Buddhism, monks were supposed not to participate in any agricultural production and their material welfare completely depended on the support of laity. In

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[38] According to Malalasekera, the recipient of merit, rejoicing in merit performed by others, gets even greater merit than the original doer. He goes to say: "there cannot, strictly speaking, be an arbitrary division of 'your' merit and 'mine'" ("Transference of Merit," 89).

[39] R. Alan Cole, *Mothers and Sons in Chinese Buddhism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 11.

order to seek and secure lay support, the clergy encouraged the practice of generosity of lay Buddhists by emphatically elaborating on the significance of merit transfer. The pious sons and daughters of good families were instructed to invite Buddhist clergy to perform rituals for merit making and merit transfer. Consequently, the monastic community accumulated enormous material resources from lay society.[40]

However, to consider only the social and financial implications of these practices may obscure the understanding of some practical aspects and religious significance. The religious tradition from time immemorial in India shows that supporting the material welfare of clergy through almsgiving is the duty of the laity, who in return obtain spiritual guidance from these clergy. The relation between the laity and clergy is one of reciprocal material and spiritual supports. Almost all religious traditions emphasize spiritual advancement more than material development; in the same way Buddhism considers the Dharma gift better than material gifts. Meanwhile, the Buddhist tradition considers that the gift of Dharma aims not to invite material offering, but to express gratitude for material gifts. In the *Kasibharadvaja Sutta* of *Sutta Nipata*, Brahman Kasibharadvaja accuses the Buddha of begging for food without working himself. Only after the Buddha has revealed the spiritual work he and his monks perform is the Brahman convinced that the Buddhist monks are worthy of an offering. The Brahman then presents the Buddha with a bowl of rice but the Buddha turns it down. He tells the Brahman that by preaching the monks are not seeking almsgiving, and by teaching the Dharma they are not expecting to receive material benefits.[41]

When they are offered material donations necessary for physical survival, the members of the sangha also need to be worthy of receiving such gifts. In other words, the quality of the receivers is also important; for this reason, Arhat is called the one who is worthy of receiving offerings. Monks and nuns need to advance their spiritual cultivation so that they can provide spiritual guidance, and possess a fertile merit-field from which the laity can obtain a good harvest. If a

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[40] The detailed report on financially oriented Buddhist ritual services in the early Republic Era can be referred to Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967).

[41] Nārada, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 118–19.

member of the sangha who is unworthy to receive an offering accepts the gift, he or she will harvest bad karma as a consequence of his or her own hypocritical action. In order to enrich their field of merit, members of the sangha also make offerings through material donations to institutional Buddhism. This kind of practice has been demonstrated beyond doubt through the archaeological and epigraphic studies by Schopen,[42] and it is currently practiced among Buddhist organizations. The clergy of Buddhist institutions such as the Buddhist Compassion Relief and Merit Society (*Fojiao Cijigongde Hui* 佛教慈濟功德會) in Taiwan,[43] make donations to disaster relief funds that work to ease natural and human disasters.

5. CONCLUSION

Both Theravāda and Mahāyāna emphasize the possibility and vitality of merit transfer, and the practice of transferring merit to the dead becomes the centre of popular Buddhist activities through which Buddhism has spread through society. Although the Theravāda tradition does not acknowledge that living beings undergo an intermediate state after death, it has adopted the practice of transferring merit to *peta* in the *Petaloka*, and it justifies this practice by granting canonic authenticity to the doctrine of *Petavatthu* literature. Aside from these differences, Mahāyāna and Theravāda share an attempt to build up institutional Buddhism through the concept and practice of merit transfer and afterlife. The assertion that the departed ones, either in *Petaloka* or in the intermediate state, are in desperate need of help intensifies the practice of merit transfer while the practice of merit transfer necessitates a belief in the afterlife.

The intermediate state in the Chinese context thus provides a special arena for people to fulfil their filial piety through merit transfer. For the sake of merit making and merit transfer, almost every Buddhist temple performs rituals for the dead. The monastic community has uniquely

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[42] Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*.

[43] Don Pittman, *Toward A Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 285–91.

developed into the legitimate and indispensable agent, the fertile field for producing merit, and the efficacious source of support for the welfare of the dead. Thus, the concept of merit transfer and the idea of afterlife, reinforcing each other, enhance the relationship between Buddhism and society, bringing enormous resources to the development of the monastic community. The members of this community in return become occupied in dealing with the welfare of the dead. The practice of merit and afterlife may have gone to such an extreme that the religious spirit behind it has disappeared; only the body of ritual performance remains to win the exchange of material gain from society. The excessive emphasis on merit transfer for the dead has eclipsed the dynamic aspects of Buddhism for living human beings. In fact, merit transfer is not exclusively for the dead, as it can largely be practiced to improve the welfare of living beings and to enhance the relationship between human beings. Some enlightened Buddhist monks in modern Chinese history, such as Taixu and Xingyun, witnessed the malpractice of the rituals that exclusively catered to the interests of the dead. They realized that Buddhism is endowed with a great potentiality of benefiting the living as well. Their advocacy that Buddhism should serve both the living and the dead may, therefore, become a guide for future Buddhist development.

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