

The Tale of Master Wang’s Spirit Returning to the World

(*Wang Nang panhon chŏn* 王郎返魂傳)

Translated by Richard D. McBride II

In *Kwŏnnyŏm yorok* 勸念要錄 (Important Records Encouraging Recitation of the Buddha’s Name), by Hŏng Pou 虛應普雨 (Naam 懶庵, 1509?–1565). *Han’guk Pulgyo chŏnsŏ* 韓國佛教全書, vol. 7.

Master Wang’s surname was Wang, his name was Sagwe [Thought Motive], and he was a native of Kilchu.¹ His 57-year-old wife Ms. Song, who had passed away eleven years before, knocked on his window during the third watch of the night² saying, “My husband, are you asleep in there or not?”

“Who is it?” Master [Wang] replied.

“It’s your old wife Ms. Song. I’ve come for a little while to tell you something important.”

Master [Wang], startled and considering it to be weird, said, “What important matter?”

“Although I died eleven years ago,” Ms. Song explained, “[King Yāma] has not yet finished asking me about my sins and says that he is waiting for you, my husband, to make his decision. The day before King Yāma [said] it has been a long time since we discussed this together. Tomorrow morning, five officially commissioned demons will come to apprehend your husband. He should hang up a scroll painting of Amitābha on the western wall inside your home. He should on the east facing west and recite ‘Buddha Amitābha.’ ”

¹ Kilchu 吉州 is a county in present-day North Hamgyŏng province 咸鏡北道 in North Korea. The area around Kilchu was part of the ancient Koguryŏ 高句麗 kingdom (trad. 37 BCE–668 CE) and was long inhabited by various Jurchen tribes. In 1107 it was annexed by Koryŏ 高麗 (918–1392), who gave it its current name (meaning “province of good fortune”). After the founding of the Chosŏn 朝鮮 dynasty (1392–1910), Kilchu was promoted to county in 1398, and in 1509 the county was included in the newly formed Hamgyŏng province.

² The third watch of the night (*samgyŏng* 三更) is roughly midnight. There were five changes of the watch during the night, and the third corresponds to roughly 11 p.m. to 1 a.m.

Master [Wang] replied, “What do officials of the unseen world want to apprehend me for?”

Ms. Song countered, “An Nosuk, our neighbor who dwells in the house north of us, faces west early in the morning every day and bows fifty times. On the full moon day every month she recites ‘Buddha Amitābha’ ten thousand times as her task. You and I constantly slandered her and, for this reason, you will be apprehended like a prisoner and initially asked [about your sins]. They are waiting for you to ask questions. When we inevitably fall into hell, there will be no time to escape for an eternity.”

When Ms. Song had finished speaking, she returned [to the underworld]. Thereupon, the next morning Master [Wang] recited the Buddha Amitābha’s name with utmost sincerity just as he had been instructed. At that time, all of a sudden, five demons came and stood in his courtyard, looking around for a good long time, evaluating and investigating. They then offered worship to the scroll painting of Amitābha, and after that bowed to Master Wang. Master [Wang] was really surprised, sat down on his cushion seat, and bowed back in response.

The demon commissioners said, “We received a command from the Ministry of the Unseen World to apprehend and bring you [to judgement]. Presently you have cleaned and purified a ritual space, you are seated upright, and diligently recite ‘Amitābha.’ Although we respect you, we have no choice as it is difficult to avoid a command of King Yāma. Although we are not following his orders, we have to apprehend you, that’s all. We humbly request that you follow us.”

The third demon said, “King Yāma issued a command that we should bind you up harshly when we were about to bring you. We will probably incur the king’s anger for not following our orders.”

The remaining demons rejoined, “No matter how many orders we have received, because we do not cultivate the wholesome Way to enlightenment, to the present time we have received and not yet escaped the retribution of demons. We would rather commit a crime worthy of death, and do not dare take a person who recites the Buddha Amitābha’s name and bind him following orders.”

The first demon addressed Master Wang, “Although the sins you have committed are like a mountain, such that you must certainly go to hell, we have seen good [people] presented to

King Yāma, and he has certainly returned those persons to rebirth as a human being. You, sir, dare not be sad! If you are reborn in Sukhāvātī, do not forget us demon commissioners.

For this reason, he knelt down and uttered a gāthā.³

Since I was made a commissioner for the unseen world

It has now been hundreds of thousands of kalpas.⁴

I do not see people who recite the Buddha Amitābha’s name

Falling into the unwholesome paths of rebirth.

“If you are reborn in the Lotus Flower Country,⁵ please think about our company, enabling us to shed our [fruition] rewards as demons.”

After that, they arrived at the Ministry of the Unseen World. King Yāma was furious at his underworld envoys, stating, “Quickly apprehend him, bind him, and come. Why are you so late?”

³ A gāthā (*ke* 偈) is a Buddhist style poem or song of praise. All of the gāthās in this story are pentasyllabic (five logographs) poems comprising four lines.

⁴ A kalpa (*kōp*, Ch. *jie* 劫, also *kōpp’a*, Ch. *jiepo* 劫波) refers to the longest unit of time according to traditional Indian cosmology. The concept of a kalpa was also translated into Sinitic logographs as “great time” (*taesi*, Ch. *dashi* 大時) and “time” (*si*, Ch. *shi* 時). Buddhist literature on the topic of cosmology speaks of a small kalpa, a middling kalpa, and a great kalpa. According to the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* small or intermediate kalpa (Skt. *antarakalpa*) is the period in which human life increases by one year a century until it reaches 84,000 with people reaching a height of 8,400 feet. Then it is reduced at the same rate until the lifespan reaches 10 years with people being a foot high. These two processes each are a small kalpa (*sogōp*, Ch. *xiaojie* 小劫). The *Dazhidu lun* 大智度論 says that both together are one small kalpa (See *Dazhidu lun* 38, T 1509, 25.339b25–c26). Twenty small kalpas is a middling kalpa. A middling kalpa (*chunggōp*, Ch. *zhongjie* 中劫) is a period of 336,000,000 years. Eighty middling kalpas is a great kalpa (*taegōp*, Ch. *dajie* 大劫; Skt. *mahākalpa*). It is the span of time from the beginning of a universe until it is destroyed and a new universe takes its place. It is comprised of four types of kalpas that last twenty middling kalpas. These four kalpas are the kalpa of decay (*koegōp*, Ch. *huaijie* 壞劫, Skt. *saṃvartakalpa*), the kalpa of nothingness (*konggōp*, Ch. *kongjie* 空劫; Skt. *saṃvartasthāyikalpa*), during which there is no world; the kalpa of duration of creation (*sōnggōp*, Ch. *chengjie* 成劫; Skt. *vivartakalpa*), and the kalpa of duration of the created world (*chugōp*, Ch. *zhujie* 住劫; Skt. *vivartasthāyikalpa*). Each of the four kalpas lasts for twenty intermediate kalpas and, thus, a whole cycle of creation and destruction of the universe lasts for eighty intermediate kalpas. During the kalpa of decay or dissolution, living beings are no longer born in the hells and the hells themselves ultimately disappear. This process is also repeated for the other unwholesome rebirths of animals and hungry ghosts. Unwholesome and evil people rejoice during this time and think that because the hells have disappeared they can do whatever they want. The *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, however, explains such joy in evil doing would be misplaced. The text says that individuals who have not received the full extent of karmic retribution would be transferred to a hell in another universe. See *Apidamo jushe lun* 阿毘達磨俱舍論 (*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*) 12, T 1558, 29.62c7–63a9. On the four kalpas, in English see Akira Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology: Philosophy and Origins* (Tokyo: Kōsei, 1997), 99–105.

⁵ Lotus Flower Country (*yōnhwaguk* 蓮花國) here is another name for the Buddha Amitābha’s Pure Land in the Western Region, Sukhāvātī.

The demon commissioners fully laid out what they saw, and the king arose from his seat, stood, and said, “Well done, O Master Wang. You will speedily ascend upward.”

The Ten Kings⁶ bowed all together and said, “This man and his wife used to always slander An Nosuk’s practice of chanting the Buddha Amitābha’s name. We previously imprisoned Ms. Song and should question Master Wang who was going to fall into the unwholesome paths of rebirth.⁷ Now, the extremely unwholesome demon commissioners we sent, we have heard what these demon commissioners have seen. You have changed your heart/mind, repented, and diligently cultivate chanting the Buddha Amitābha’s name. What sins do you have?”

The king, for this reason, uttered a gāthā, which said:

The Lord of the Western Region, the Buddha Amitābha
Has a special karmic connection with this Sahā World.
If you do not for one thought-moment think of that Buddha,
It will be difficult to subdue the fierce commissioners of the Ministry of the
Unseen World.

“Return this husband and wife to the human world because their remaining lifespan is thirty years, and add sixty more years. If they practice diligently, make seminal progress, and recite ‘Buddha Amitābha,’ they will speedily be reborn in that *kṣetra* [world system]. We, the Ten Kings, also will attain rebirth in the Western Region.” They escorted him back with care.

The king issued a command to Judge Ch’oe of the Ministerial Seat, “Master Wang made and set in order a ritual space, and he earnestly chants the Buddha Amitābha’s name.

⁶ The ten kings are the judges of the various courts in the unseen world, the Buddhist purgatory a living being went to after death in one life. There he or she was judged, and either sentenced to rebirth in another form of existence or acquitted and returned to life (a rare event). If an individual was not delivered to Amitābha’s Pure Land, he or she usually merited rebirth in one of the unwholesome rebirths as an animal, hungry ghost, or denizen of one of the Buddhist hells. The construction of purgatory in medieval Sinitic Buddhism evolved over several centuries, and the names of the ten kings could vary, but typically included both Indian and Chinese figures. I have left the name of the one judge mentioned by name in Korean pronunciation in the translation that follows. See also Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism*, Kuroda Institute: Studies in East Asian Buddhism 9 (Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 1994).

⁷ The unwholesome paths of rebirth (*akto*, Ch. *edao* 惡道) are rebirths as an animal, a hungry ghost, or a denizen of hell.

Retribution for sins causing rebirth in Avīcī Hell,⁸ which he committed previously, has now been totally eliminated. Due to the meritorious virtue of merely chanting the Buddha Amitābha's name the husband and wife will return together to the human world and grow old living together, chanting the Buddha Amitābha's name. Since Ms. Song's life ended long ago, her skin and bones are scattered and lost, so where will her dependent spirit reside?"

The judge listened to the king's command, and by means of King Yāma's decree, he bowed back at Master Wang and, for the husband and wife, addressed the king saying, "A princess born of a royal concubine in the country of the Tokharians is twenty-one-years old. Because the limits of her life have reached the end, her spirit has now come here. Her reward of rebirth in Yāma's Heaven is already exhausted, and she will be returned to life in heaven. Her body is complete, so Ms. Song's spirit will be given to the form of the princess, and it is appropriate that she be returned to life."

King Yāma was overjoyed, "If you, milord, and your wife do not forget these vows, you will speedily be reborn in the Western Region. Listen carefully, milord. Do not dare slander An Nosuk who lives in the house to the north of you. If from the time you have received this body and henceforth constantly revere the Western Region, due to this merit, all the buddhas and all the gods will constantly protect and preserve you. You will constantly provide her with food just like parents, and we entreat you to transmit our message to An Nosuk."

Master Wang promised to do so, and King Yāma bowed toward Nosuk and said, "What is her essence of the Way to enlightenment like? It is renewed daily, firm and sure. In an interval of three years, on the first day of the third month, the founder of the teaching on the Western Region will take up a lotus flower seat of purple gold and welcome you. And you will be reborn in the highest grade of the Pure Land in the Western Region."

When he had finished speaking, they were returned alive to their original home. When the occupants of the house desired to bury them, they returned to life and spoke a gāthā:

⁸ Avīcī hell (*mugan chi*, Ch. *wujian di* 無間獄; also *abi chiok*, Ch. *abi diyu* 阿鼻地獄) is the last and largest of the eight hot hells. It is shaped like a cube, 20,000 yojanas long on each side, and its bottom is 40,000 yojanas beneath the earth's surface. People who commit the five heinous crimes, destroy stūpas, slander the holy community of monks and nuns, wantonly waste materials gifted to the monastic community are reborn in this hell. Its name, which means "no intermission," derives from the fact that the suffering and torture that take place in this hell are constant. The denizens are stripped of their skins, their skins are tanned and turned into leather straps that are used to bind them. They are loaded like carts and their bodies are cast into the flames. The yakṣas who guard and torture them heat up iron spears and poke them through the nose, mouth, stomach, and so forth, all over their bodies and also throw them into the air. See *Chang ahan jing* 長阿含經 (*Dīrghāgama*) 19, T 1, 1.124c28–125a27.

A full house—wife and children, wealth and treasures—
Do not substitute for a body when it is time for suffering.
One thought of Amitābha eradicates the retribution for one’s sins;
Returned to life and life extended compensate to cultivate the truth.

Ms. Song was entrusted to the body of the princess and was returned to life. When Wang and his wife were happy, the reborn body of the princess would fully lay out the foregoing matters. The king sighed, and wrote a missive to Master Wang, which said, “We have never seen a matter such as this—the so-called auspiciousness of being in a dream.”

Master Wang immediately addressed him, “Because Ms. Song did not consider another intimate [relationship] for the space of eleven years, and only protected her past confidence [in our marriage], we have received an opportunity for repeated intimacy.”

Overcome with joy, they withdrew [from the world], and after extended lifespans of 147 years, they were reborn together in the Sukhāvātī.