

Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghost

Charles Orzech

The Buddha's Discourse on the Scripture of the Spell for Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghost (*Fo shuo qiuba yankou egui tuoluoni jing*) is one of three key texts in the development of Buddhist performances held during the Ghost Festival of the seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar. The Ghost Festival is the second most important festival of the year and the event in which Buddhism's presence in China is most visible. Chinese rites for the dead, whether performed at funerals, at seasonal festivals, or at cyclical village renewal ceremonies (*jiao*), have all been shaped by Buddhist practice. Indeed, the rituals performed on behalf of recently dead relatives throughout the year and for the uncared-for dead during the annual festival are widely viewed as the foundation of lay Buddhism and as a key factor in the survival of Chinese Buddhism into the twentieth century.

Prior to the eighth century, Buddhist rites for the salvation of ancestors were based on the *Yulanpen Scripture* and the *Scripture for Offering Bowls to Repay Kindness* (*Bao'en fengpen jing*), which recount the efforts of the Buddha's disciple Mulian (Sanskrit: Maudgalyāyana) to save his mother from the sufferings of the underworld. According to these scriptures, Mulian's magical powers are ineffective in obtaining his mother's release. Mulian in despair goes to the Buddha for aid, and the Buddha explains that offerings made to the community on behalf of the dead are the only effective means for releasing beings from the lower realms.

Plays and operas about Mulian continue to be an important part of the celebrations right up to the present. But since the eighth century, new styles of ritual developed in the esoteric (*mijiao*) tradition of Buddhism, replaced parts of the older rites. Thus, while village performances continued to elaborate on the story of Mulian, the rituals performed by Buddhist monks and nuns since the eighth century have all been based on *The Spell for Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghost*, in which another of the Buddha's disciples, Ānanda, figures prominently.

A convenient starting point for investigating the integration of esoteric rites into the Ghost Festival is the reign of Emperor Daizong of the Tang dynasty (r. 762-

79). It was under his patronage that the esoteric school of Buddhism and its major proponent, the monk Bukong jingang (Sanskrit: Amoghavajra 705–774), rose to dominance of the court. As with other missionaries to China, the esoteric masters recognized the central importance of the dead in China and promoted their own rites as the latest and most effective means for accomplishing what the already established Ghost Festival and the prescription of the *Yulanpen Scripture* set out to do. The esoteric rites introduced by Bukong aimed simultaneously at the goals of enlightenment and the goals of healing, protection, and rainmaking. The new techniques contained in *The Spell for Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghost*, in the ritual text *Distributions of Food and Water to Hungry Ghosts* (*Shizhuo yinshi ji shuifa*, T 1315), and in a host of other manuals concerning the salvation of suffering beings were adopted by the imperial house and quickly became standard. It was this eighth-century rite that was introduced to Japan by Kūkai in the ninth century, forming the core of Obon celebrations there.

The effective decapitation of the esoteric school and the gradual disappearance of its lineages after the persecution of Buddhism during the Huichang era (845 C.E.) draws a curtain over the ghost ritual during the Five Dynasties (907–960) and the Song (960–1279). Rites for forlorn dead proliferate in the form of “plenary masses” (*shuilu dahui*) during this time, but these rites are not the same as those of the Tang era and may have been devised as substitutes in the absence of trained esoteric school practitioners.

During the Yuan dynasty (1280–1368), perhaps under the influence of newly imported Mongol Diamond Vehicle practices, the mantras and ritual techniques of *The Spell for Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghost* reappear, now incorporated in the anonymous ritual manual, *Rites from the Essentials of the Yoga Teachings for Distributing Food to Burning Mouths* (*Yujia jiyao yankou shishi yi*, T 1320). From this time forward, the *Rites from the Essentials of the Yoga Teachings* is the text on which all subsequent versions of Buddhist ritual manuals are based, while *The Spell for Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghost* provides the canonical charter of the rites, their key mantras, and the tale of their origin. Modern ritual manuals often incorporate both texts, the ritual following that set out in the Yuan dynasty with *The Spell for Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghost* serving as a preface or an appendix, or sometimes present only in the form of a drawing of the Buddha preaching to his disciple Ānanda.

In contrast to pre-Tang and modern folk performances, the hero of *The Spell for Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghost* is the Buddha’s preeminent disciple and attendant Ānanda, not Mulian, and the issue is not one of Buddhist versus non-Buddhist rites for the dead but of the comparative efficacy of esoteric and nonesoteric Buddhist ritual. The *Yulanpen Scripture* promotes the collective power of the Buddhist community to make merit for the dead as clearly superior to Mulian’s spells. Conversely, the new scripture portrays the collective power of the community as ineffective, while the proper spell (*tuo-luo-ni*, Sanskrit *dhāraṇī*) is efficacious. The contrast is all the more pointed, since Mulian is traditionally

regarded as foremost of the Buddha's disciples in the practice of spells. Only the efficacy of the esoteric spell can multiply the offerings to feed the unimaginable numbers of suffering beings.

Finally, *The Spell for Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghost* is typical of the many esoteric texts that gained wide popularity in China from the early eighth century onward and which, through their spread and adaptation in Daoist and folk practices, transformed the landscape of Chinese religions.

The translation below is based on *Fo shuo qiuba yankou egui tuo-luo-ni jing*, Amoghavajra's translation (T 1313 21.464b–65b).

Further Reading

For a treatment of the Ghost Festival up to the point when esoteric material was infused into it, see Stephen F. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); for the overall integration of the festival into Chinese culture, see Robert P. Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987). For Mulian operas, see David Johnson, ed., *The Mu-lien Operas* (Berkeley: Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1989). For an outline of the esoteric rituals of the Ghost Festival, see Charles D. Orzech, "Seeing Chen-yen Buddhism: Traditional Scholarship and the Vajrayana in China," *History of Religions* 29.2 (1989): 87–114. For a full treatment of the text as well as an earlier translation, see Charles D. Orzech, "Esoteric Buddhism and the *Shishi* in China," SBS Monograph Series no. 2 (University of Copenhagen, November 1993). For comparison with Daoist esoteric rites, see Judith Boltz, "Opening the Gates of Purgatory: A Twelfth-Century Taoist Meditation Technique for the Salvation of Lost Souls," *Tantric and Taoist Studies, Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques* 21 (1983): 487–511.

The Buddha's Discourse on the Scripture of the Spell for Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghost

At that time the World-Honored One was residing at Kapilavastu at the Bamboo Monastery, with all the monks and bodhisattvas—an innumerable assembly. They surrounded him and he expounded the teaching on their behalf. At that time Ānanda was alone in a quiet place contemplating the teaching he had received. Just after the third watch of the night he saw a hungry ghost (Sanskrit *preta*) whose name was Burning Mouth (Yankou). His appearance was repulsive, his body was emaciated. His mouth was fiery and his throat was like a needle. His hair was disheveled, his nails and teeth were long and sharp. It was very frightening. He stopped before Ānanda and said, "After three days

your allotted lifespan will be exhausted and then you will be born among the hungry ghosts." At that time, when Ānanda had heard these words he became terrified and asked the hungry ghost, "If after I die I am born among the hungry ghosts, is there any skillful means (*fangbian*, Sanskrit *upāya*) which may be practiced to escape such grief?"

Then the hungry ghost told Ānanda: "Tomorrow, if you are able to distribute bushels of provisions in measure like those used in the city of Magadha, to the one hundred thousand myriads of hungry ghosts—ghosts numberless as the sands of the Ganges—and to the one hundred thousand brahmins and seers (*ṛṣis*), and so forth, and if you distribute one bushel of food and drink [to each being], and on my behalf present these offerings to the three jewels, then you will attain increased longevity and cause me to depart from the suffering of the hungry ghosts and to attain birth in Heaven."

Ānanda looked at this Burning Mouth hungry ghost; his body and appearance was withered and extremely emaciated, his mouth was fiery and his throat was like a needle. His hair was disheveled and his nails and teeth were long and sharp. Moreover, having heard such disagreeable news, he was terrified and the hair on his body stood on end. He forthwith got up from his seat and hastened to the Buddha and fell prostrate, touching his head to the Buddha's feet. His body was trembling as he said to the Buddha: "Can you save me from suffering? I was alone in a quiet place meditating on the teaching I had received when I saw Burning Mouth, a hungry ghost, who told me that 'after three days it is certain that your lifespan will be used up and you will be born among the hungry ghosts.' I then asked how I could escape such suffering, and the hungry ghost replied: 'If now you are able to distribute every sort of food and drink to one hundred thousand myriads of hungry ghosts—ghosts numberless as the sands of the Ganges—and to the one hundred thousand brahmins and seers, and so forth, you will get increased longevity.' World-Honored One, how will I be able to help so many hungry ghosts, seers, and others to food?"

Then the World-Honored One told Ānanda: "Now do not fear, I have a skillful means which will enable you to distribute every sort of food and drink to so many hundreds of thousands of hungry ghosts—ghosts numberless as the sands of the Ganges—as well as to all of the brahmins and seers and so forth. Do not worry."

The Buddha then explained to Ānanda, "I have a spell called The Wonderful Victorious Power of Unlimited Awesome Self-Existent Light. If one chants this spell, then one will be able to completely satisfy with excellent food and drink hungry ghosts as numberless as sands of the Ganges, as well as brahmins, seers, and so forth. Through its use each and every one of this throng of beings will get forty-nine 'Magadha' bushels of rice. Ānanda, in a previous existence I was a brahmin in the place of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva and in the world of the Self-Existent and Awesome Thus-Come One, and therefore I received this spell. [It] enables one to distribute every sort of food and drink to numberless hungry ghosts, seers, and so forth. It causes all the hungry ghosts to be liberated from

their suffering bodies and to attain birth in Heaven. Ānanda, if you now receive and keep it, your blessings and lifespan all will get increased.”

At that time on Ānanda's behalf the World-Honored One pronounced the spell: NAMO SARVA TATHĀGATA AVALOKITA SAṂVARA SAṂVARA HŪM.

The Buddha told Ānanda, “If there are good sons and good daughters who want and seek long life, merit, and prosperity, and [want] quickly to be able to fulfill the perfection of giving, then every morning—or at any time when there are no hindrances—take a clean vessel and using pure water set out a little drink and rice or various cakes and so on. Using the right hand put these in the vessel and recite the previous spell seven times. Afterward, invoke the names of the four Thus-Come Ones.

“NAMO BHAGAVATE PRABHŪTA-RATNĀYA TATHĀGATĀYA. Because of the power (*jia zhi*, Sanskrit *adhiṣṭhāna*) [generated by] invoking the name of the Thus-Come One Baosheng (Jewel-Born), one is able to smash all demons and for many lives to come mitigate evil karma and forthwith you will get your merit fulfilled.

“NAMO BHAGAVATE SURŪPĀYA TATHĀGATĀYA. Because of the power [generated by] invoking the name of the Thus-Come One Miao-si-shen (Fine-Body), one is able to smash all ghosts and demons of vile appearance and forthwith get a satisfying and pleasing countenance.

“NAMO BHAGAVATE VIPULA-GĀTRĀYA TATHĀGATĀYA. Because of the power [generated by] invoking the name of the Thus-Come One Guang-pu-shen (Expansive-Body), one is able to make the throats of all the ghosts expand so that the food that is distributed can satisfy them.

“NAMO BHAGAVATE ABHAYAM-KARĀYA TATHĀGATĀYA. Because of the power (generated by) invoking the name of the Thus-Come One Li wuwei (Fearless), one is able to cause all ghosts and every terror to be entirely eradicated and [they will] depart from the realm of the ghosts.”

The Buddha told Ānanda, “When good sons and others of your clan invoke the power of the names of the four Thus-Come Ones, they should snap their fingers seven times and take the rice vessel and sprinkle rice and water on purified ground. Having done this the distribution is complete and each of the hundreds of thousands of myriads of hungry ghosts in all the four quarters—ghosts as numberless as the sands of the Ganges—will have forty-nine ‘Magadha’ bushels of rice. Having received this rice they will be completely satisfied and all these ghosts and others will completely slough their ghost bodies and be born in Heaven. Ānanda, if monks and nuns and male and female devotees regularly use this spell with the names of the four Thus-Come Ones to empower food and distribute it to ghosts, they will moreover get complete satisfaction and uncountable merit. It would be no different from getting the merit from offerings made to one hundred thousand myriads of Thus-Come Ones. Their lifespan will be prolonged and enhanced and the good roots will be completed. All nonhumans, demons (*yakṣas*), and specters (*raṁṣas*) and all of

the evil ghosts and spirits will not dare to harm them, and they will be able to obtain limitless merit and long life.

"If you wish to distribute food to all of the brahmins and seers and so forth, take pure water and food and fill a vessel. Then, using the previously mentioned spell, empower [it] twice seven times and cast [the offerings] into pure flowing water, and so it is done. It may [now] be regarded as the beautiful food and drink of gods and seers and offered to the one hundred thousand myriad of brahmins and seers. Thus, all will obtain this empowered food. Through use of the spell of Majestic Virtue, each and every one will accomplish their fundamental vows and all good merit, and at the same time each and every one will issue a vow, wishing to distribute food to people so that their lifespans will be lengthened and their appearance and strength will be peaceful and joyous.

"Moreover, the spell will cause the minds of those who witness the rite to be upright, understanding, and pure. They will each completely attain the majesty of the god Brahmā and perform the acts of the god Brahmā. Moreover, the merit obtained is like the merit gotten by making offerings to one hundred thousand myriad of Thus-Come Ones; thus all sorts of injustices and enemies will be unable to afflict or harm you.

"If monks, nuns, and male and female devotees wish to make offerings to the [three] jewels—the Buddha, the teaching, and the community—they should take incense, flowers, and pure drink and food and use the power of the previously mentioned spell twenty-one times as an offering to the three jewels. These good sons and daughters then may use the heavenly delicacies so obtained as offerings to the buddhas, the teaching, and the community of the worlds of the ten directions. Furthermore, if you praise their merit, you will consequently have joy and merit. If you persevere in intently praising all the buddhas, then all of the gods and good spirits will come to protect you, and you will have fulfilled the perfection of giving.

"Ānanda, if you do as I have said and cultivate, practice, and promote this technique, you will cause all living beings everywhere to see, hear, and obtain innumerable blessings. This scripture is called the *Scripture of the Spell for Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghost and Suffering Beings*. You should respectfully hold fast to its words."

All the great assembly, Ānanda and the others, heard what the Buddha said and with wholehearted faith they reverently received it and joyfully put it into practice.