

2A Sekishinsai Okada Tadaharu 赤心斎 岡田忠通: *Nine Stages of Bodily Decay* (Kusōzu)

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The *Buddhacarita: In Praise of Buddha's Acts* tells the story of how Siddhartha was raised as a crown prince in a lavish palace. Having received a prophecy that the boy would become an ascetic, Siddhartha's father sheltered him from everything painful and unpleasant. At the age of 29, however, Siddhartha requested to see the outside world. Proceeding in one direction, he encountered an elderly person bowed with the pain and afflictions of old age; in another, a sick man; and in another, a funeral procession. He returned to the palace grief-stricken: "The world is very painful, ruined by old age, illness, and death," he reflected (Aśvaghoṣa 2009, 30). He eventually attained enlightenment after meditating under the bodhi tree and expounded the fourfold truth: all life is suffering; the cause of suffering is desire; the abandonment of all desire will bring liberation from suffering; the path to freedom is brought by the Middle Way, between the extremes of self-indulgence and self-abnegation. By abandoning desire and leaving his earthly body behind, the Buddha achieved *nirvana* and release from the cruel cycle of death and rebirth.

Buddhist scriptures portrayed the body in negative terms as the site of hunger, thirst, and sexual desire: Just as a man who "has lived painfully afflicted in a prison" despises the prison and "seeks only freedom," so, too, should people rid themselves of attachment to this present existence and focus on attaining Buddhahood. Just as sailors would toss a broken, leaking boat to the sand without giving that unseaworthy vessel a further thought, so, too, says the *Buddhavamsa*, should people cast off their impure bodies leaking from nine orifices and seek enlightenment (Horner 1975).

Since ancient times, Buddhist texts advocated meditating on a decaying corpse or on a skull in order to remind followers of the impermanence of the human body in contrast to the eternal nature of *nirvana*. Death's ability to transform even the most beautiful body into a putrid sight was taken as evidence not only of impermanence, but also of the fundamental impurity of the human body itself. Within the male-centered Buddhist worldview, female bodies were considered particularly unclean, both because patriarchal thought blamed them for leading men astray, and because karmic retribution for acts in a previous life were cited as the reason for being born a woman, whose social status at the time was inferior to that of men.

Accordingly, whereas the sight of a beautiful body was known to incite desire, meditating on a repulsive, decaying corpse was seen as an effective means of quelling sexual desire in devout believers, particularly those who had taken the tonsure. The *Discourses on Mahayana Meditation and Contemplation* is one of several Buddhist texts that recommends meditation on the stages of death and decay in this manner. It explains:

Even a woman with graceful eyebrows, jadelike eyes, white teeth, and red lips is as if covered by a mixture of feces with fat powder, or as if a putrefied corpse were clothed with silk and twill [C]ontemplation [on a decaying corpse] is a golden remedy for sensual desire. (Translated and quoted in Kanda 2005, 61)

The stages of bodily decay were devised as an aid to meditation. Believers were encouraged to construct and reflect on detailed mental images of each of the following stages: newly deceased, distention, rupture, exudation of blood, putrefaction, consumption by animals, skeleton, and disjunction of the bones. Scholars have pointed out that beyond quelling sexual desire, the images might also help viewers mourn and come to terms with the loss of a loved one. In the eighth stage of the Field Museum version we see a skull, strands of hair, and a few bones amid flourishing autumn flowers and grass. The ninth stage features a stone stupa with scattered wooden grave tablets, autumn trees and grasses, and small birds. Despite having experienced a gruesome process of decomposition, the body of the deceased young woman ultimately returns to nature, which continues to flourish around the durable stone marker that is used to memorialize her.

The Field Museum *Nine Stages of Bodily Decay* was donated to the museum by Frederick Gookin in 1923 and may date from the nineteenth century (Figures 2.2–2.5). Deceased persons were usually cremated in Japan, and while the sutras taught that leaving corpses in the open for consumption by animals was an expression of compassion, centuries had passed since this practice was common. By contrast, the practice of making *Nine Stages* handscrolls, hanging scrolls, and large horizontal images such as this set remained well known. As in many medieval cases, the images are accompanied by named titles of each stage of bodily decay, accompanied by poetry in literary Chinese. While these poems have been attributed to the eleventh-century Chinese literary figure Su Shi (1037–1101), they were likely composed in medieval Japan and attributed to the Chinese thinker.

Nine Stages pictures often included an image of the deceased woman while still alive. The Field's images are distinctive in their portrayal of a woman in Chinese dress: many other *Nine Stages* paintings and prints depicted the subjects in courtly Japanese robes. The deceased was sometimes interpreted as Ono no Komachi, a courtly Japanese poetess renowned for her beauty and literary gifts. The medieval Japanese Noh drama *Sotoba Komachi* portrays Komachi as an impoverished old woman whose beauty has faded and who is found seated on a burial marker. The living woman in the Field's set of paintings bears an elaborate headpiece with designs of flowers and birds. It has been suggested that she may be Yang Guifei

(719–756), the Chinese beauty who is said to have so monopolized the attention of Tang Emperor Xuanzong as to bring about the downfall of his court. Xuanzong's ministers put Yang Guifei to death, but the epic poem by Bai Juyi (772–846) recounts that Xuanzong experienced everlasting sorrow at her passing. If Japanese viewers identified this elegantly attired Chinese lady as Yang Guifei, then the identification adds layers of moral and poetic sentiment onto the established genre of *Nine Stages of Bodily Decay*.

The Field Museum *Nine Stages* exhibits careful attention to anatomical details, such as to bones in the hands and feet. In the fifth stage, the skin is removed in an almost didactic manner to produce careful windows onto the veins, muscles, and bones below. Other aspects suggest the artist's limited anatomical experience: there seems to be uncertainty about whether a skeleton has a nose, for example, and details such as the number of ribs are incorrect.

The corpse is positioned in a manner that arouses sexual desire only to subsequently negate it. In the first stage, for example, the newly deceased pillows her head on her arm, which is raised to expose the breasts and willowy torso. In stages 2 and 3, the body continues to be depicted in a sensual manner despite the facts of bloating and decomposition: stage 3 clearly depicts the pubic area, which is just visible where the white cloth has fallen away. In stages 5 through 7, by contrast, the body and face appear

gruesome, yet in the final two stages order is restored with the whiteness of the bones, the flourishing of nature, and the presence of the stupa.

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An opposing viewpoint—championed by American demographers Jay Olshansky and Bruce Carnes in their 2001 book *The Quest for Immortality: Science at the Frontiers of Aging*—is that the human lifespan has a fixed biological limit. Among other things, they suggest that our lives are subject to a certain inherent level of mortality that will remain even if we eliminate or at least drastically reduce all external and disease-driven causes of death. Confirming this interpretation, in a 2009 paper, Korean aging researchers Byung Mook Weon and Jung Ho Je reported results from a mathematical model designed to estimate the maximum possible human lifespan. Using life tables for Swedish women for the period between 1950 and 2005, they derived a figure of about 125 years. At the same time, they determined that the probability of survival is close to its upper limit in datasets for modern human populations in industrialized countries. Accordingly, the expectation is that maximum lifespan in human populations can increase to an upper limit of about 125 years but not beyond.

Moreover, there is now good reason to question the confident expectation that, enabled by medical advances, the average human lifespan will continue to expand into the future. In a 2005 paper, Olshansky and colleagues concluded that estimates of how long Americans are going to live in the twenty-first century could be incorrect because of current trends in obesity, to which

we could add the emergence of new diseases and their varied impact on populations (see Wali in this volume, on responses to the pandemic). Kontis and colleagues' analysis of the effect of obesity on longevity indicates that the steady increase in life expectancy observed in industrialized populations over the past 200 years could soon go into reverse gear (Kontis et al. 2017). In a similar manner, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that the human immunological system provides differentiated levels of protection, leaving some more vulnerable than others, as well as more susceptible to dying because of the emergence of new infectious disease.

A key point concerning differences in interpretation on this issue is the crucial distinction between the maximum lifespan achieved in any human population at a particular time and the *maximum possible* lifespan that any individual, with full access to a good quality health service, can attain (Imai and Soneji 2007). In the oft-quoted words of English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, human life under original gathering-and-hunting conditions is generally perceived as "nasty, brutish and short." Although it is widely accepted that in industrialized societies average life expectancy has progressively increased thanks to a wide array of technological and medical advances, it is not at all clear whether the maximum possible length of the lifespan has also increased.



Figure 2.4. The putrefaction stage is followed by consumption by animals in the sixth and seventh images of the *Kusōzu* paintings (FM 125807.6, .7-A115292d_013, 4).

Figure 2.5. The final stages of the *Kusōzu* paintings represent the skeleton, the disjunction of the bones, and the final resting place of the body (FM 125807.8, .9, .10- A115292d_017, 8, 21).

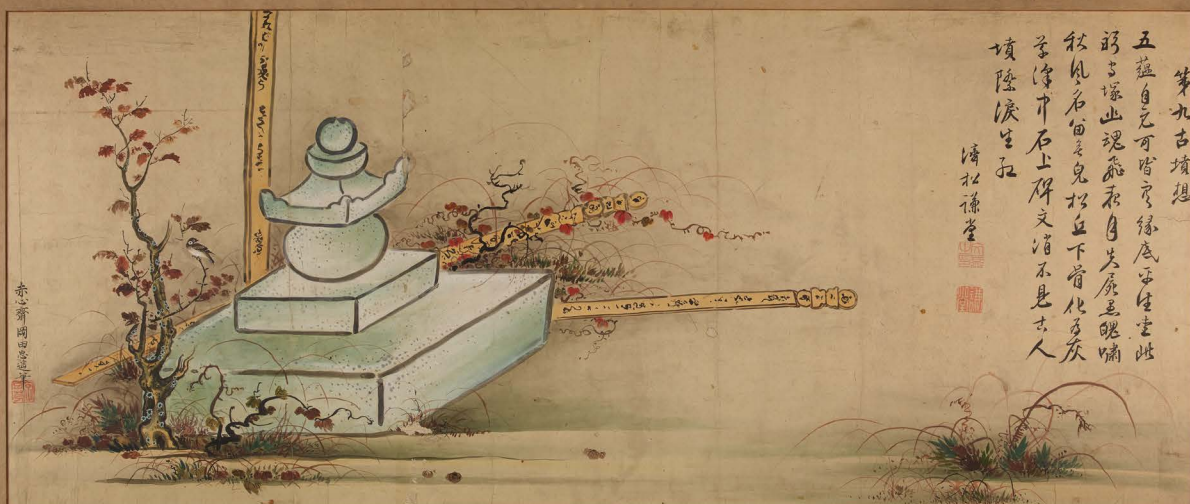






Figure 2.7. Lead pewter plate with brass rim design including examples of animals holding the *lingzhi* (fungus of immortality) in the mouth. Consuming the *lingzhi* was thought to convey energy and immortality (FM 110086).

Figure 2.6. Roman basin (reproduction) with representation of immortal gods Mars and Venus (FM 24010).

2B Daoist Immortals, the *Lingzhi* Fungus, and the Search for Immortality

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The search for immortality and the extension of the lifespan are often culturally linked, although in concept they represent two somewhat separate activities (Figure 2.6). The transition to immortality requires a transformation in the spiritual realm to free the spirit from the earthly manifestation of the body. Extension of lifespan is tied more directly to the physical body as it experiences aging and senescence. In both cases though, various mixtures of ingredients—elixirs—may play an important role. Almost always ingested either as food, liquid, or in some cases smoke or vapor, elixirs have an important role in mediating and affecting the transition from life to death to afterlife, and potentially the transition to immortality.

The ancient spiritual and ritual practices that coalesced in the later Han period (206 BCE–220 CE) into a more formalized set of religious and philosophical beliefs that became Daoism evolved over centuries (Copp 2018). There are legions of Daoist deities, sages, and wise adepts that inhabit various forms and live in sacred places such as mountains, blessed islands, and celestial places such as the moon. They have achieved immortality either through divine intervention or by extensive study or an extraordinary life or talent. An ancient example is the Queen Mother of the West who lives in the moon with many attendants in the form of animals, including a magical rabbit who pounds elixirs in a mortar and pestle. Many immortals are based on historical or legendary figures. Of later appearance in Daoist literature and practice, a core set of several individuals known collectively as the Eight Immortals is among the most well-known. Drawn from various walks of life and life histories, the Eight Immortals include four pairs of opposites: male and female, rich and poor, military and civilian, and young and old. They reinforce a central idea in Daoism that anyone can pursue mental cultivation.

The nature of beliefs and practices surrounding death and the interest in immortality was more prominent at certain times than at others. Nevertheless, Daoism does recognize a richly detailed and diverse set of beliefs regarding immortality and how it may be achieved (e.g., de Bary and Bloom 1999). Proper burial and the attentive care of one's descendants is important. Achieving immortality is difficult and requires many steps, such as mental cultivation, correct living, and a corresponding incorporation of, or surrender to, the Dao or the Way, a concept that loosely translates as the force and universality of energy that animates everything that happens, all of nature, and the cosmos (Ebrey 2010, 46–49; Watson 2007).

Understanding the Dao is the work of several lifetimes, and perhaps truly unattainable, but key concepts include the embeddedness of all things in nature, the interdependence of opposite states, and a focus on yielding to the flow of nature and energy (Watson 2007).

The search for immortality can also include the use of elixirs (e.g., de Bary and Bloom 1999). There is a long history of alchemical attempts to develop elixirs to extend the lifespan, to achieve immortality, or to preserve the mortal remains of the body prior to burial. Many preparations made use of minerals and elements such as cinnabar, gold, sulphur, arsenic, and lead, often in deadly combinations. Many preparations used plant and animal ingredients, of which several are still in wide use such as the *lingzhi*, otherwise known as the fungus of immortality or the mushroom of immortality (Figures 2.7–2.9).

The *lingzhi*, *Ganoderma lucidum*, is also known as the reishi in Japanese. It is widely cultivated and has been a component of traditional Chinese medicine for centuries. It has a glossy brown surface appearance with a firm or woody texture; the exhibition includes a botanical specimen, now dried. All parts of the *lingzhi*, such as the spores or the fruiting body, have medicinal uses. Many health benefits are ascribed to *lingzhi*, including longevity and improvements in energy, as well as regulation of blood sugar, liver function, and other systems. As with many products from nature with traditional uses, it is being investigated today for the degree to which there are clinically measurable effects. It is widely available and marketed as a supplement for longevity and general health, including immune system support.

Given its long association with medicinal benefits of such power as to include immortality in the right preparations, the *lingzhi* is also potent symbolically. Hiding in plain sight in many artworks from East Asia, and especially China, is a stylized depiction of the *lingzhi*. Often depicted as an upside-down heart or kidney bean shape, the *lingzhi* is part of the rich visual vocabulary of Asian art. It is often used both as a symbol of longevity and, due to its similarity in shape to a wish-granting scepter known as a *ruyi*, as a visual rebus that expresses the desire that a wish be granted (Bartholomew 2006).

In the examples from the exhibition, the *lingzhi* appears in several configurations. The rhinoceros horn cup (Figure 2.8) employs motifs of the *lingzhi*, as well as bamboo. Rhinoceros horn libation cups were highly valued gifts made primarily for scholars, but the horn itself

Figure 2.8. Rhinoceros horn cup with stylized *lingzhi* fungus on the body of the cup (FM 110574).