

Seeing Suchness: Emotional and Material Means of Perceiving Reality in Chinese Buddhist Divination Rituals

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1 Text

Nine years after he received his monastic precepts, after experiencing the death of his mother, serious illness while in retreat, and the death of two close friends with whom he had hoped to establish a community of monks living in accordance with Buddhist teachings, Ouyi Zhixu 藕益智旭 (1599–1655) drew lots to determine the purity of his precepts before doing a summer retreat. When he received the lot of a bodhisattva-*śrāmanera*—that is, a novice monk who has taken the bodhisattva precepts—he gave back his monastic precepts. However, he continued experiencing strange illnesses (*guaibing* 奇疾) that hindered his religious practice. In a letter to a group of monks he wrote:

At Xihu I performed the ritual [of the *Divination Sutra*] seven times but did not receive the wheel mark of purity. Last year I performed the ritual fourteen times but did not receive it. This year I entered the mountains, performed the ritual seven times, and one day I still did not receive it. While performing repentance, afflictions and habit energies appeared, and I felt abnormal. Therefore I decided to settle my mind. I completely abandoned the pure precepts of a novice monk and became only a disciple who has taken the three refuges. I waited for [the monk] Liaoyin to come to the mountain, and I did one thousand days of seclusion. I asked Buddhas and bodhisattvas to save me, or else I would grind my bones to dust in seclusion.¹

Even after he receives a mark of purity, Ouyi remains doubtful about whether he has lapsed in upholding the precepts of a novice monk. When he encounters afflictions (*fannao* 煩惱) and habit energies (*xiqi* 習氣) that make him feel

1 Ouyi Zhixu, *Ouyi dashi quanji* 藕益大師全集 [The Complete Works of Master Ouyi] (Taibei: Foijiao chubanshe, 1989), 17:10974–10975.

abnormal (*yichang* 異常), he decides to withdraw even further to the status of one who has taken the three refuges, and enters seclusion to entreat Buddhas and bodhisattvas to help him.

Ouyi's account of his ritual performance and his struggle with physical illness, emotional obstacles, and mental afflictions give a sense of the personal and social circumstances surrounding his practice of divination.² The divination ritual is based on the *Zhancha shan'è yebao jing* 占察善惡業報經 (Sutra on the Divination of Good and Bad Karmic Retribution; hereafter referred to as the Divination Sutra), a sutra compiled in China during the late sixth century CE that purportedly enabled one to divine karmic retribution from past good and bad deeds.³ The sutra recommends spinning three sets of wooden wheels or tops (*lun* 輪) to determine one's karmic retribution: the first set of ten tops reveals good and evil deeds committed in the past, the second set of three tops measures the strength of these karmic forces, and the third set of six tops determines whether retribution will occur in the past, present, or future.

These types of divinatory practices flourished especially in the Ming and Qing dynasties (14th–20th century CE), and they cut across social divisions of education, privilege and economic status. They included fate prediction using the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes), physiognomy, spirit writing, dream interpretation, geomancy, astrology and numerology. The emperor Ming Taizu 明太祖 (r. 1368–98) allegedly believed in divination as well as ghosts and spirits, and Western missionary accounts of the late Ming dynasty attest to the widespread practice of astrology and other forms of divination.⁴ However, there have been relatively few studies of Buddhist divination practices in China because of several reasons, including its prohibition in Buddhist monastic codes, the difficulty of isolating distinctly Buddhist dimensions of some Chinese divinatory

2 I begin with Ouyi's narrative to convey the personal characteristics and circumstances that might give "concrete meaning of affective phenomena," which Paolo Santangelo identifies as crucial for scholarly studies of emotion in China, see Santangelo, Paolo, ed. *Love, Hatred, and Other Passions: Questions and Themes on Emotions in Chinese Civilization* (Boston: Brill, 2006), 27.

3 The sutra has been translated into English by Lai, Whalen, "The Chan-ch'a ching: Religion and Magic in Medieval China," in *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, ed. Robert Buswell (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990) and analyzed by several scholars: Lai, "The Chan-ch'a ching;" Kuo, Liying, "Divination, jeux de hazard et purification dans le bouddhisme chinois: Autour d'un sutra apocryphe chinois, le Zhanchajing," in *Bouddhisme et cultures locales: Quelques case de réciproques adaptations*, ed. Fukui Fumimasa and Gérard Fussman (Paris: École française d'Extrême Orient, 1994); and Zhiru, *The Making of a Savior Bodhisattva: Dizang in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

4 Smith, Richard, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers: Divination in Traditional Chinese Society* (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1991), 44–5.