Buddhism in the Poetry of Po Chü-i

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STEPHEN OWEN, the outstanding Western authority on T'ang poetry, remarks in his *Great Age of Chinese Poetry* that, although many earlier T'ang poets refer to Buddhism in their works, it is not until the appearance of Po Chü-i 白居易 (772–846) that we encounter true religious and devotional poetry.[1] Owen makes clear that his remark refers to poets of the secular tradition and is not meant to apply to the collections of religious and didactic poetry attributed to such shadowy figures as Wang Fan-chih 王梵志 and Han-shan 寒山. In so far as my limited acquaintance with the vast corpus of extant T'ang poetry allows me to form a judgment, I would say that I am completely in agreement with Professor Owen's statement. In the pages that follow, I would like to examine some of Po Chü-i's poems on Buddhist themes and suggest why Po holds the special position in T'ang poetry that Professor Owen assigns to him.

Before proceeding to a detailed examination of particular poems and themes, I would like first to point out two characteristics that distinguish Po Chü-i's religious poetry as a whole, and that may perhaps lead Western readers to judge it somewhat wrongly.

One is the fact that when Po refers in his poetry to Buddhist texts, personages or beliefs, he very often pairs the allusion with one pertaining to the Taoist tradition. It is almost as though he felt it unfair to

* This paper originated as a lecture delivered at Columbia University in the fall of 1985. In preparing the present revised version, I have been much aided by the various articles on the subject of Po Chü-i and Buddhism by Professor Hirano Kenshō of Otani University, copies of which he kindly provided for me. Particular articles will be cited in the notes below.

[1] Stephen Owen, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High T'ang* (Yale University Press, 1981), p. 44.

mention one religion without according equal attention to its chief rival. The result is that readers may well come away with the impression that Po was simultaneously both a Buddhist and a Taoist believer.

To cite a few examples, in a long poem entitled "Living in Retirement in Wei Village" (*CCC* 15),[2] he states:

> In treating the body as external, I follow Lao Tzu 老子;
> in making all things equal, I learn from Chuang Tzu 莊子.

But a few lines later he balances this Taoist pronouncement with the Buddhist-oriented lines:

> To still confusion, I turn to Ch'an meditation;
> to preserve my spirit, I enter the state of sitting and forgetting.

In a poem written in Ch'ang-an in 821 and entitled "New Hsin-ch'ang Dwelling," (*CCC* 19) he states:

> On the whole I revere Old Chuang [Chuang Tzu],
> in my private mind, serve Chu-ch'ien 竺乾 [Buddha].

and later speaks of:

> The twelve divisions of the Sanskrit scriptures,
> the five thousand words of [Lao Tzu's] dark book. . .

And, to cite an example from a prose passage, in the preface to a group of poems dating from 839 and entitled "Poems Written while Sick," (*HC* 16) he says: "From early years I have entrusted my mind to Buddhism, have let my feet wander in the tracks of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu."

This kind of pairing of Buddhist and Taoist allusions is by no means original with Po Chü-i, but appears frequently in earlier Chinese literature. Numerous examples will be found, for example, in the long poem in *fu* or rhyme-prose form entitled "Wandering on Mount T'ien-t'ai" by Sun Ch'o 孫綽 (4th cent.).[3] Just why Po himself adopts the

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[2] *CCC* is an abbreviation for *Ch'ang-ch'ing-chi*, the first collection of poems in the *Po Hsiang-shan shih-chi*; the abbreviation *HC* which appears later stands for *Po-shih hou-chi*, the second collection which makes up the latter half of *Po Hsiang-shan shih-chi.*

[3] See the translation in my *Chinese Rhyme-Prose* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), pp. 80–85.

practice I cannot say. The T'ang imperial court of course patronized both religions, with somewhat greater favoritism shown to Taoism, and Po had friends among both Taoist and Buddhist clerical circles, though I doubt that these were important factors in his decision.

One should note, however, that Po's Taoist allusions deal almost entirely with the figures and texts of philosophical Taoism such as the *Tao-te-ching* and the *Chuang Tzu*. Po clearly had great admiration for these philosophical writings and considered the views expressed therein to be entirely compatible with—indeed, all but indentical to—those of Buddhism. Thus in a reference to the practice of "sitting and forgetting (*tso-wang* 坐忘) that is frequently mentioned in the *Chuang Tzu*, he says:

> Practicing Ch'an and "sitting and forgetting":
> the end is identical, they're not two different roads.
> ("Getting up after Napping, Quietly Sitting," *CCC* 7)

With regard to the Taoist religion and the cult of the immortal spirits, Po seems to have maintained an attitude of skepticism, and in fact he scarcely alludes to them except in a tone of derision. Many of the people of the time, including some of Po's close friends, took various potions and elixirs in hopes of at least prolonging their lives, if not actually achieving immortality. But Po, though he admits taking a little mica soup at breakfast for medicinal purposes, otherwise appears to have adopted an attitude of disbelief and repeatedly stresses that the search for immortality through potions and other Taoist practices is not the proper way to deal with the problem of death. Thus in a poem written in 834 and entitled "Thinking of Old Times" (*HC* 3), he recalls old friends such as Han Yü 韓愈 and Yüan Chen 元稹 who put their hopes in such medicines, and notes rather unkindly that these friends are now all dead, while he himself, who resorted to no such measures, is still alive and well.[4]

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[4] Po does in fact state at one point that he had from early times been familiar with an official named Li of the Board of Punishments, who was evidently a Taoist, and had "studied the art of medicine" under him. (*Po-shih wen-chi* 19) But this may refer to the early period of his life. The Sung poet Su Shih states in his *Tung-p'o chih-lin* that when Po Chü-i was living in his thatched hall on Mt. Lu, he "roasted cinnabar, but when [the elixir] was about to be completed, the furnace and crucible burned up." Perhaps it was after this failure that Po adopted his skeptical attitude, though one can-

The second general characteristic of Po's religious poetry that requires comment is its relatively lighthearted, almost flippant or frivolous tone. This tone will perhaps come as a shock to Western readers, who are customarily brought up to believe that religious matters must always be approached in a solemn manner. Even Arthur Waley, despite his deep admiration for Po's work and personality, was apparently at times somewhat disconcerted by this quality in Po's poetry.[5]

As in the case of Po's pairing of Taoist and Buddhist allusions, I can only guess at the reasons for this quality in his religious poetry. First of all, I may remark that, as major religions go, Mahayana Buddhism strikes me as on the whole unusually sunny and optimistic in outlook. Moreover, some of its major scriptures, notably the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, a work to which Po Chü-i repeatedly alludes, are marked by passages of broad humor, and the Ch'an or Zen sect, the sect with which Po was most closely associated, likewise at times makes use of the humorous approach in its writings and teaching methods. In addition, Po himself was obviously a man of generally cheerful outlook and lively sense of humor. To be sure, he had his moments of despair and brooding, but the tone of his writing as a whole is calm and even sprightly, with very little of the heavy melancholia that seems to weigh down the works of so many other T'ang poets.

One should also note that Po's pronouncements on religion are most frequently set forth not in specifically doctrinal poems, but in poems exchanged with close friends such as Yüan Chen or Liu Yü-hsi 劉禹錫 who took a deep interest in Buddhism, or with Buddhist monks, and such poems, because of their informal and personal nature, often employ a deliberately jocular or bantering tone. Thus, for example, in an exchange of poems between Po and Liu Yü-hsi, the two men joke about which one is going to become a Buddha first.[6]

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not help wondering how Su Shih, writing some 250 years later, could have acquired accurate information on the affair. See Hirano Kenshō, "*Haku Kyoi to Rozan sōdō*," *Bungei ronsō* 30 (1973), pp. 79 and 84, n. 5.

[5] See Arthur Waley, *Chinese Poems* (London: Unwin Books, 1961), pp. 173-74, Waley's translation of the poems he calls "Taoism and Buddhism."

[6] Liu's poem is entitled "Fifth Month Fast" and describes a Buddhist fast and retreat held at Po's house in the 5th month of 835 (*Liu Meng-te wen-chi, wai-chi* 4). Po's reply is entitled "Written in reply to Meng-te's 'In your long fifth month fast you

Po had close associations with a number of distinguished members of the Buddhist clergy, and often visited temples, at some periods of his life taking part in retreats and meditation sessions alongside the monks. He was accordingly very much aware of the limitations of his own religious understanding and practice and of his status as a *chü-shih* 居士 or lay believer rather than an ordained member of the Buddhist Order. My feeling is that he perhaps deliberately adopted a lighthearted tone in his poems on Buddhism at least in part to avoid any impression that he was trying to pontificate on the subject or put himself forward as an authority on religious matters.

With these general observations on Po's religious poetry in mind, let us turn to the poems themselves. T'ang poetry as a whole makes frequent reference to Buddhist beliefs and institutions, which is hardly surprising in view of the important role that Buddhism played in the spiritual and cultural life of the nation, particularly in the capital areas of Ch'ang-an and Lo-yang. Poems alluding to Buddhism generally fall into two fairly clearly defined categories: (1) poems dealing with visits to temples, and (2) poems addressed to members of the Buddhist clergy. In the former the poet customarily concentrates upon a description of the delightful physical setting of the temple, its trees and flowers, its coolness and serenity, with only a glance at the religious activities that take place there. That is, he gives us a tourist's eye view of the temple rather than that of a spiritually involved believer. In poems of the latter type, the writer is usually intent upon paying tribute to the wisdom and sanctity of the person he is addressing, or describing the purity of the addressee's life. In either of these two types of poems, the author may work in a bit of Buddhist terminology, perhaps even a learned borrowing from Sanskrit or some other foreign language associated with Buddhism, in order to enhance the atmosphere and display his erudition. But, at least in the years before Po Chü-i's appearance on the scene, he was very unlikely to reveal his own personal feelings as they relate to Buddhist belief or practice.

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invited monks and turned away guests and friends,' ten rhymes" (*HC* 15). For a discussion of these poems, see Hirano Kenshō, "*Haku Kyoi no Saikai shi*" (Pt. I), *Bungei ronsō* 19, pp. 66–70. My interpretation of the last couplet in Po's poem differs somewhat from that of Prof. Hirano. I take it to mean, "If in this void there is such a thing as a Buddha,/ Ling-yün (i.e., Liu Yü-hsi) will probably get to be one first."

This of course does not mean that the poets of the period before Po Chü-i were not themselves in some cases followers of the Buddhist religion. Indeed, one outstanding poet of the period, Wang Wei 王維 (699?–761), is well known for his lifelong devotion to Buddhism. It merely means that they did not employ the medium of poetry to discuss their personal religious beliefs and practices. Stephen Owen believes that this is because poetic convention in the time of men like Wang Wei did not sanction the composition of works that discuss the poet's personal religious convictions,[7] though this raises the question of why the poets of one period bowed to such conventions when those of the succeeding period flouted them.

In any event, the poetry of Po Chü-i, to the degree that it reveals the religious feelings of the writer himself, marks a turning point in the Chinese poetic tradition. Po not only discusses his personal attitude toward Buddhist beliefs at considerable length, but describes his religious practices and comments upon the spiritual solace or satisfaction they afford him. His poetry in fact, as pointed out by Hirano Kenshō, constitutes one of the most important sources we have for information on lay Buddhist practice in middle T'ang times.[8]

Po, who came from a relatively poor family, by dint of intensive study was able to pass the civil service examinations with distinction and embark upon a career as a government official, entering the bureaucracy in 803 at the age of thirty-two.[9] In the early years of his career he was inspired by the Confucian view of poetry as a vehicle for social and political criticism, and many of the works he produced in this period, such as the famous "New *Yüeh-fu*" 樂府 series, were outspoken satires on the ills of the time. The "New *Yüeh-fu*" series, it may be noted, includes one poem, *Liang Chu-ko* or "Two Red Pavilions," which criticizes the proliferation of Buddhist temples in the capital.

But although Po's outlook in these years was predominately Confucian and his attention, both as a poet and as a bureaucrat, was taken up with questions of public welfare, he had already begun to manifest a

[7] *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry, loc cit.*

[8] Hirano Kenshō, "*Haku Kyoi no Saikai shi*" (Pt. II), *Bungei ronsō* 21, p. 49.

[9] Ages are given according to Chinese and Japanese style reckoning, by which a person is one year old at the time of birth.

keen interest in the Buddhist religion. This interest deepened greatly after 815, when he incurred disfavor at court, in part because of his outspoken criticisms, and was exiled to a minor government post in Hsün-yang on the Yangtze River in present-day Kiangsi.

Po's poetry, as stated above, is unusual in the amount of information it affords us regarding his relations with Buddhism. To begin with, it reveals quite clearly what motive first led him to take an interest in the religion—that is, to put it somewhat crassly, what he sought to gain from Buddhism.

Po appears to have been at heart a rather sentimental person, and many of his poems give expression to deep feelings of anguish and sorrow. A famous example is the "Song of the Lute" (*CCC* 12), written when he was in exile in Hsün-yang, in which he describes the hardships of a woman lute player, formerly of the capital, who has fallen upon evil times, and likens her plight to his own. In this poem the feelings of grief are in a sense assuaged and sublimated, those of the woman through her lute playing, those of the poet through the act of composing his poem about her. But in other works Po seems to be deeply disturbed by the degree to which he feels "used" by his excessive emotions of grief or gloom. Quite clearly, he yearned to achieve a state of greater emotional equilibrium, to become less a prey to passing feelings, and he believed that Buddhism could help him to achieve this goal.

Let me cite a few passages to illustrate. First of all, he was convinced that, though fate might dictate the external circumstances of a person's life, the individual should be capable of controlling or determining his inner emotional state. In a poem entitled "Singing Thoughts" (*CCC* 7), he says:

> Bad times and good do not come from you;
> joy and sorrow do not come from Heaven.
> Fate you can do nothing about,
> but you can cause your mind to be at peace.

It may be noted that Po suffered from poor health at various periods in his life, and was in particular troubled by eye ailments, the latter probably brought on by the strain he inflicted on his eyes when he was studying for the civil service exams. Furthermore, he believed that these physical ills he suffered from were caused, or at least aggravated, by his

excessive emotionalism. Thus he says:

> With sorrow and joy I injure my body and spirit!
> ("Written and Presented to Ting-kuang Shang-jen," *CCC* 9)

And in a poem entitled "Sickness" (*CCC* 14):

> I realize that the outbreak of illness is in each case caused by emotion.

In an effort to solve this problem of excessive emotionalism and the physical troubles that it engendered, he turned to the Buddhist doctrine of Emptiness or nondualism, which advises us to cease labeling certain circumstances as desirable and others as undesirable, and learn to accept them all with equanimity. Po expresses this idea in a poem entitled "Early Morning, Combing My Hair" (*CCC* 9), one of many poems he wrote about combing or washing his hair, an activity that seems invariably to have set him to musing upon his mortality:

> If you don't study the Law of Emptiness,
> how can you do away with old age and sickness?
> Until you've attained the mind of no-birth [nondualism],
> though you live to be white-haired, you still die prematurely.

And in another poem entitled "White Hair" (*CCC* 9), in which he laments his physical ills, particularly the discomfort he suffers because of eye trouble and frequent hangovers ("The book devil has darkened my two eyes,/ the wine sickness has drowned my four limbs"), he concludes with these words:

> From times past, birth, old age and death—
> these three sicknesses that have dogged us so long—
> unless one achieves the state of no-birth,
> there's no medicine in this world that can effect a cure.

At the risk of belaboring the obvious, I should perhaps point out that when Po speaks of freeing oneself from old age or death, he is not of course suggesting that one can in any literal sense escape such conditions, but simply that, by ceasing to look upon them as hateful, one can divest them of their terror.

In the following poem, we see Po attempting to apply this attitude of Buddhist calm and detachment to a particular problem in his personal

life. The poem, the second of two entitled "Self-awakening" (*CCC* 10), was written in 811 just after the death of Po's first child, his infant daughter Chin-luan or Golden Bells, who was born in 809. Some years later, he was to suffer a similar grief at the death of his first son A-ts'ui (829-31). After describing the agonies brought on by the child's death, he concludes:

> I vow to seek the water of enlightened wisdom,
> forever to wash away the dust of delusion.
> I will not let the affection for a child
> cause me to plant again the root of sadness and care.

Western readers, encountering such attempts to disavow familial affection in the Buddhist-influenced literature of China or Japan—*The Tale of Genji*, for example, abounds in them—often profess to be shocked by what they see as a deliberate rejection of emotional ties that are natural and proper to the human being. In view of the great emphasis placed in Christian teaching upon the concept of love, it would appear at first glance that Eastern and Western cultures are in fact rather far apart on this point. I suspect that in actual practice, however, in the centuries previous to our present one, when the rate of infant mortality was very high in both East and West, that parents in both cultural spheres instinctively understood the perils of becoming too emotionally attached to a child that might be carried off by disease at any moment. But whereas Buddhist inspired literature actively warns against the danger, that of Christian countries passes over it in silence, or directs the reader's thoughts to the realm of the eternal.

Such, then, was the problem that Po hoped Buddhism would solve for him. I would like to put off for the moment the question of how successful he was in finding a solution, and turn instead to an examination of the particular beliefs and practices that he embraced.

At one period in his life, Po tells us, he belonged to a society that recited the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, and at another he commissioned paintings of the Western Paradise of Amitabha and the paradise of Maitreya and carried out devotions that were said to lead to rebirth in the Tuṣita Heaven. But his main interest, as he makes clear in his poetry, was in the teachings of the Southern School of Ch'an, which enjoyed great popularity in China at this time. Thus, in a poem entitled

"Presented to [Li] Shao-chih" (*CCC* 6), written in 815 when he was in exile in Hsün-yang, he says:

> In recent years my mind
> has turned to the Southern Sect of Ch'an.

And in another poem he alludes to Hui-neng 慧能, the famous Sixth Patriarch of the Ch'an sect:

> [Sleep] comes close to rivaling Ts'ao-ch'i's [Hui-neng's] meditation
>
> ("Spring Sleep," *CCC* 6)

and to the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*:

> The one-scroll *Platform Sutra* expounds the Buddha mind.
>
> ("Tasting the Way," *HC* 6)

One of the sutras most often referred to by name in Po's poetry is the *Leng-chia-ching* 楞伽經 or *Lankāvatāra*, which he obviously evaluated very highly. Thus he writes:

> In the world of men this sickness [sorrow] has no medicine to cure it;
> the only thing, the four chapters of the *Lankāvatāra Sutra*.
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> ("I saw Yuan Ninth's poem mourning his departed wife and wrote this to send to him," *CCC* 14).

And in a poem with the title "Late spring, climbing the southern tower of Big Cloud Temple, presented to Ch'an Master Ch'ang" (*CCC* 16), he says:

> I beg the Master to cure these ills.
> He only urges me to read the *Lankāvatāra*.

This interest in the *Lankāvatāra* stayed with Po throughout his life, as we see from the following poem, "Late Rising, Leisurely Stroll" (*HC* 4), written in 842 when he was living in retirement in Lo-yang, which concludes:

> They're lecturing on the *Lankāvatāra* at the western temple;
> I stroll over to join in the enjoyment.

In the past it was thought that the *Lankāvatāra* was associated

almost exclusively with the Northern School of Ch'an and that it dropped out of sight when the Southern School, which favored the *Diamond Sutra*, came to prominence, but in recent years this view has been discarded as simplistic.[10] These poems of Po Chü-i, in fact, indicate clearly that such was not the case.

In addition to the *Lankāvatāra*, Po was well versed in the *Vimalakīrti* and *Lotus* sutras, as evidenced by the large number of allusions in his poetry to figures and events in those texts. And a poem entitled "Ch'ien Kuo-chou sent me a *chüeh-chü* 絶句 on the Three Halls; I have composed this poem using the same rhymes to match it" (*CCC* 18), he mentions the *Chin-kang san-wei ching* 金剛三昧経 and adds a note to the poem saying: "When I was young I studied how to chant the *Chin-kang san-wei ching* with Mr. Ch'ien." The *Chin-kang san-wei ching* or *Sutra of the Adamantine Samadhi* was traditionally said to have been translated into Chinese around A.D. 400, though it has long been regarded as of doubtful origin. The latest theory is that it was composed in Korea in the period around 645–56.[11]

But Po's Buddhist practice did not consist merely in the study and recitation of sutras. In addition, he performed various acts of charity, on a number of occasions contributing funds for the building or repair of temples. And late in his life, in 844, he donated money to help cover the cost of clearing the "Eight-Jointed Rapids of Lung-men," a rocky gorge in the Yi River south of Lung-men in Lo-yang, so that boats could navigate the river without danger of capsizing. Po at this time was spending much of his time at the Hsiang-shan-ssu, a temple on the Yi River directly opposite the famous Lung-men Buddhist caves. The project to clear the river passage was initiated by the monks of this temple and carried out under their supervision, so it is not surprising that Po should have wished to contribute to it. He celebrated the successful completion of the project in two poems preserved in *HC* 17.

Other Buddhist practices that Po mentions in his poems include *hsing-hsiang* 行香 or "walking the incense," a ceremony performed in a temple in which one holds a stick of incense and circles around a Buddhist hall (*HC* 10, "Returning from *Hsing-hsiang*"), and a ritual that

[10] See John R. McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), pp. 27–9 and p. 271, n. 7.

[11] See McRae, *op cit*, p. 118.

involved recitation of the three thousand names of the Buddhas in the 100-section *Fo-ming ching* 佛名經 or *Buddha Name Sutra* (*HC* 17, "Two *Gatha* on Delight").

But of course, since Po was an adherent of the Ch'an teachings, his principal Buddhist practice was *zazen* 坐禪 or Ch'an style meditation. He seems to have taken this up in earnest when he was in exile in Hsün-yang. At that time he frequently visited the temples of nearby Mount Lu, particularly the "two Lin temples," Tung-lin-ssu or East Forest Temple and Hsi-lin-ssu or West Forest Temple, and for a time he lived in a small house on Mount Lu, the "thatched hall" referred to so often in his writings. In a poem in five-character *lü-shih* 律詩 or regulated verse form entitled "Living in a Mountain Temple" (*CCC* 16), he describes his stay at one of these temples:

> When I go alone to fast at the temple,
> affairs of the dusty world are no more my concern.
> Refusing horse and saddle, I go by indigo carrying chair.
> Black-robed Buddhists I take for my friends now.
> Morning meal—just some medicinal greens;
> night companion—only the gauze lamp.
> If you overlook my blue official's jacket,
> in all other respects I'm a monk!

Po at this time held the nominal post of *ssu-ma* 司馬 or marshal, which is why he speaks of himself as wearing an official's jacket. The sixth line refers to the evening meditation session, which often lasted all night. Clearly, Po was very proud to be able to participate in temple activities as though he were one of the black-robed monks.

A few years later, in 819, when he had been transferred to the post of prefect of Chung-chou, he wrote a long poem entitled "Prefectural Office, etc." (*CCC* 18) in which he recalled how he used to visit the temples on Mount Lu:

> Then I went to stay at the two Lin temples,
> opened a little thatched hall of my own,
> peacefully devoting myself to the practice of the Way,
> perching quietly on the meditation platform . . .
> The teachers with black armrests and slippers,
> the layman in white robe and skirt . . .

The "layman" or *chü-shih* is of course Po himself. And in a poem written in 821 and entitled "Spring, remembering the two Lin temples, etc." (*CCC* 19), he recalls his visits to the temples in these words:

> Now I'm a runaway from the *dhūta* assembly,
> an old official among the ranks of those who serve the throne.
> Purity I left long ago, my companions of incense and flame;
> amid dust and toil, hard to find the way with this body of illusion
> and foam.

In his late years of retirement in Lo-yang, Po combined his Ch'an meditation with another popular Buddhist practice of the time, the taking of the *Pa-kuan-chieh* 八關戒 or "Eight Gate Precepts." These were eight precepts observed by lay believers for a certain period of time, usually one month. The precepts were (1) not to take life, (2) not to steal, (3) not to commit sexual offenses, (4) not to lie, (5) not to drink wine, (6) not to sleep in a high bed, (7) not to have music played or to listen to music, and (8) not to eat after noon. During the T'ang dynasty, the death penalty was not carried out in the first, fifth and ninth months, and many T'ang officials such as Po frequently fasted and observed these eight precepts during one or more of these three months, living in retirement in their homes and often inviting monks to their homes to take part in the observance.

Po wrote a number of poems describing these periods of *chai* 齋, fasting or retreat, and we therefore have considerable information on how they were conducted. Though most of the eight precepts presumably posed no great problem for Po, there were two that represented a real hardship, namely, those forbidding the observer to drink wine or to listen to music. Music and wine were very important elements in his daily life, particularly during the time of his retirement, and to give them up for a whole month at a time was no easy commitment.

Po knew, however, that at least in the case of wine, it would be distinctly beneficial to his health to forego it for a time—he continued to suffer from eye trouble in his late years and had been urged by his doctors to give up drinking entirely. And in fact, the poems that he wrote describing his periods of fasting almost always mention what a sense of physical wellbeing he gained as a result of the vegetarian diet,

the regular hours, and the abstention from alcohol. But toward the end of the month-long retreat he generally began to grow restive, and as soon as the fast ended, he customarily held a drinking party with friends to celebrate its conclusion.

Thus, in a poem written in 835 and entitled "The fifth month fast is ended, etc." (*HC* 13), he begins with a couplet describing the situation at his home during the fast. (It may be noted that he kept two singing girls as part of his household so they could supply him with musical entertainment in ordinary times.)

> In the singing girls' room the boxed mirror is covered with red dust;
> in the wine closet the sealed jars have grown green with moss.

But in the latter part of the poem he describes the party that marked the end of the fast, concluding with the line:

> When the meditation monks leave, the drinking companions arrive.

Temperance-minded persons may be inclined to scoff at a man who is in such a hurry to renew his dependence on alcohol when he has just succeeded in doing without it for a period of thirty days. But Po's attitude toward wine was a complex one.

He was perfectly aware that drinking could be injurious to his health, and that he had a marked tendency to indulge in it to excess. In a poem quoted on page 8 above we have seen him refer to his fondness for alcohol as "the wine sickness." And in a poem written late in life, "Sent to be inscribed at my thatched hall on Mount Lu and to be presented to the monks of the two Lin temples" (*HC* 16), he says:

> Gradually I've conquered the wine devil, no more getting hopelessly drunk,
> though I go on making mouth karma, not having ceased to write poems.

At the same time, in poem after poem he records the pleasure that he derived from drinking, and extols it in particular for its power to lift him out of his frequent moods of melancholy. In this sense, he sees it as a means to the same end as that which he hoped to achieve through

his meditation practice, namely, the emancipation from excessive emotionalism.

In a poem written in 828 ("Harmonizing with 'Understanding Wrong' ", *HC*), he states:

> First of all, there's nothing like Ch'an;
> second, there's nothing like getting drunk.
> Ch'an can wipe out 'self' and 'others';
> in drunkenness you can forget glory and decay.

Then, after several lines in which he points out the shortcomings of the Confucian and Taoist philosophies, he declares:

> Nothing compares to studying Ch'an meditation;
> there's a very deep meaning in it.
> In breadth and wideness in the end it's like the sky,
> in clearness and concentration, superior to sleep.
> It wipes away dark dark thoughts,
> utterly extinguishes fretful fretful longings.
> In spring you have no spring-wounded heart,
> in autumn, no moved-by-autumn tears . . .

He concludes the poem by advising his friend Yüan Chen, whose poem "Understanding Wrong" it is designed to match:

> Let me urge you, though you're old:
> when you encounter wine, never turn away.
> Otherwise, study Ch'an—
> they're two roads that lead to a single goal!

In a poem entitled "Forcing Myself to Drink" (*CCC* 15), he again pairs these two methods of dealing with excessive feeling, Ch'an meditation and drinking, in this way:

> If I don't do Ch'an meditation to wipe out vain thoughts,
> then I must get out the wine, pour out my wild songs.

Here to the indulgence in alcohol he adds another of his "vices," the compulsive writing of poetry, which he regarded as still another way of relieving the pressure of emotion. In the lines quoted on page 14, we have seen that, though he felt he had gotten his drinking under control,

he continued to make "mouth karma" (what Waley translates as "the karma of words"[12]) by going on writing poetry. And in a famous four-line poem written in 817 and entitled "Idle Droning" (*CCC* 16), he speaks of his addiction to poetry in this manner:

> Since earnestly studying the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness,
> I've learned to still all the common states of mind.
> Only the devil of poetry I have yet to conquer—
> let me come on a bit of scenery and I start my idle droning.

As I mentioned earlier, when Po writes in this rather lighthearted vein—as he does so often in his religious poetry—it is difficult to know just how seriously to take him. I think we are safe in saying, however, that although from a Buddhist point of view he saw his attachment to both poetry and wine as an undesirable involvement or dependence—and in that sense a "devil" or hindrance to enlightenment—in actual life he relied on them heavily to assist him in coping with emotional stress and had no intention of trying to give them up, at least for any extended period of time.

Writing in the same rather facetious tone, Po offers a justification for his addiction to poetry by claiming that he must have been a poet-monk in a previous existence and to have incurred certain "poetry debts" that he is obliged to fulfill. Thus, in a poem entitled "I Love to Write Poetry" (*HC* 6), he says:

> Sitting leaning on my rope chair, I ponder idly—
> in a former life I must have been a poet-monk.

And in a poem written in 839, after he had suffered a stroke ("Explaining to Myself," *HC* 16), he mentions a man who could remember having been a Ch'an monk in a previous existence, and Wang Wei's own statement that he (Wang Wei) had been a painter in a former life. He then states:

> I too in my meditations observe my old karma;
> over many existences I must have been owing these poems.
> If not, why would I go on madly singing?
> Since my illness, more poems than in the time before I took sick!

[12] Arthur Waley, *The Life and Times of Po Chü-i* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1949), p. 207.

But Po's view of poetry is a large topic and one that is only tangential to the subject of his paper, so I will not go into it further here. I would like instead to return to the question of how much satisfaction Po gained from his Buddhist practices, of how successful the religion proved to be as a solution to his problem, the morbid emotionalism that seemed to beset him.

At times, Po's poetic reports indicate success. Thus, in a poem entitled "Sending off my brothers and returning on a snowy night" (*CCC* 10), written in 811, he first describes the sadness he experiences as a result of parting from his brothers and the cold dreary winter weather. He seeks relief from the sadness by practicing Ch'an meditation, and then reports:

> Revolving my thoughts, I enter the state of 'sitting and forgetting';
> turn melancholy around and make it Ch'an joy.
> My lifelong practice of the mind-washing doctrine [Buddhism]
> must have been intended for nights like this!

In a poem entitled "Quietly Sitting, Idly Intoning" (*CCC* 15), he says:

> Fortunately I've studied the Ch'an school's no-thought meditation;
> a thousand cares, ten thousand concerns, void in a moment!

And in two poems with the title "Year End, Relating Feelings" (*CCC* 15), the last couplet of the first poem reads:

> Because I study the teachings of Emptiness, all dharmas equal,
> I first of all achieve a mind in which old age and youth, birth and death are one.

And the second poem ends with this couplet:

> The effect of my Ch'an study becomes apparent, though people don't realize it:
> times when I ought to be sad I don't feel sad.

But other poems strongly suggest that Po was not always so successful in utilizing the Buddhist philosophy of nondualism to free himself from excessive emotionalism. Thus a poem entitled "Dreaming of Prime Minister P'ei" (*CCC* 10), in which he describes a vivid dream

he had of his friend, the stateman P'ei Chi (d. 811), who had died five years previously, concludes with these words:

> Since I began studying the Mind Law [Buddhism],
> ten thousand attachments have become a single emptiness.
> But this morning because of you
> the flowing tears wet my breast all over.

In another poem ("Night Rain, Thoughts Come," *CCC* 10), in which Po is troubled by longings for his brothers, he declares:

> Since I turned to the Way,
> it's been six or seven years.
> I've refined and completed the nondual nature,
> wiped out a thousand, ten thousand ties.
> But still the fires of love and affection
> at times blaze and burn as before.
> It's not that the medicine is ineffective,
> but I've so many ills it's hard to cure them all!

And in one of his last extant poems, "Spring evening during a fast: I am moved to write my thoughts" (*HC* 17), a description of a fast carried out at his home in Lo-yang in the spring of 845, he writes:

> Fast and precepts, meditation for thirty days,
> while neighbors on four sides indulge in pipes and songs.
> The moon is brightest these nights when I've given up wine,
> though my eyesight's too poor for anyone hoping to view
> blossoms.
> Luckily I've learned to look at things as void,
> know very well that thoughts are a defilement.
> But still I recall the laughter of idle conversations,
> cannot forget old companions and friends . . .

And he concludes the poem with these words:

> Everything I do I do to excess;
> time and time again I ask myself why.
> And can I now ignore the glorious sights
> this spring of my seventy-fourth year?

We are left with the feeling that, although Po could at times achieve

an attitude of appropriate calm and indifference, he was not always able to sustain it for long, particularly at times such as the spring season, when the phenomenal world was at its most appealing.

But of course Po is a poet and not a philosopher, and he had no intention of giving a systematic presentation of his views or attempting to resolve the conflicts inherent in them. He uses his poems to record his passing moods, and those are as multifaceted and variable as the man himself, which is why his religious poetry is so much more interesting than that composed by members of the Buddhist Order who are committed to a more consistent outlook. He gave us what few other writers of Buddhist poetry in Chinese were capable of giving, or willing to give: a frank account of one man's faith and religious practice in all its imperfections and emotional ups and downs.

Yet if one were to venture some sort of conclusion in the case of Po, one might say that, though he turned to Buddhism originally with a specific hope in mind—that of freeing himself from emotional attachments—he in time came to realize that religious practice is best carried out for its own sake and without thought of goals or objectives.

He suggests this outlook in the following four-line poem that relates the practice of Ch'an meditation to his various physical ailments. The poem bears the title "Stopping Medicine" (*CCC* 15):

> Since I began practicing Ch'an meditation, I've stopped taking medicine.
> I let things be, and the sickness seems to sink out of sight.
> With this body, I should not strain to stay in good health;
> strain for health and you have too many thoughts of 'self' and 'others'.

And the idea is stated in specifically religious terms in a doctrinal poem entitled "Understanding erroneous attachments: to be inscribed on the wall of Ju Shang-jen" (*HC* 8). Ju Shang-jen is the Buddhist priest Ju-man Ta-shih 如滿大師 of the Sheng-shan-ssu temple in Lo-yang, Po's teacher in his late years.[13] The poem concludes with these words:

[13] Both Ju-man and an earlier teacher of Po's, the Ch'an Master Wei-k'uan 惟寬 (755–817), were disciples of the famous Ch'an teacher Ma-tsu Tao-i 馬祖道一 (709–88). See Arthur Waley, *The Life and Times of Po Chü-i*, pp. 99 and 191.

> If one is too intent in one's pursuit of religious practice,
> that can become an attachment too.

In other words, Buddhist practice did not enable Po to gain the sustained and consistent freedom from emotional entanglement that he had originally hoped it would. What it seems to have done instead was to convince him in the end that striving for such freedom was unrealistic and undesirable. Thus in his late poems he appears to reach a kind of attitude of acceptance, as we see in the following poem. The second of two poems in seven-character four-line form entitled "Two *Chüeh-chü* on Hsiang-shan-ssu" (*HC* 12), it describes the Hsiang-shan-ssu temple on the Yi River south of Lo-yang, where Po spent much of his time in his final years.

> Loving the breeze on clifftops, I climb to a shelter of pines;
> entranced by moonlight, beside the pond I sit on a ledge of stone;
> and with these clouds and fountains I form bonds of karma—
> in another existence, certain to be a monk of this mountain!

There is no longer any fear of "bonds" or attachments, any question of transcending feeling. Feeling in fact is openly proclaimed in the verbs *ai* 愛, "loving," and *lien* 戀, "entranced by." Indeed, it is through these very feelings that the poet is able to establish bonds of karma with the scene, and by extension with the temple situated there, so that in a future existence he can be assured of being reborn as a monk of the temple, where he can renew and carry on his Buddhist practice.

Po the lay believer, with his incurable fondness for wine and poetry, was no doubt well aware of the limitations of his religious understanding and knew that he needed further practice as a monk in future existences before he could hope to attain true enlightenment. But, if the mood of this poem is any indication, he had at least by this time achieved a condition of peace and acceptance with regard to his own personality.

In a poem with the title "Intercalary Ninth Month, Ninth Day, Drinking Alone" (*HC* 17), Po remarks:

> Since I started fasting during the ninth month,
> it's been fifteen years since I've been drunk on Double Ninth.

Double Ninth is the festival held on the ninth day of the ninth month, which was customarily celebrated with drinking parties. The poem was written in 841 and indicates that in his late years Po observed at least the ninth-month fast with great regularity. (He is drinking this year on the ninth of the ninth month because, in addition to the regular ninth month, an intercalary ninth month has been inserted into the calendar.) At the same time, in these late years he was of course continuing to turn out poems at a rapid rate, to enjoy his drinking activities and his appreciation of the beauties of nature during the months that he was not fasting, and even at times to take part in political life.

In a poem written in Lo-yang in 834 and entitled "After Submitting a Memorial to the Throne, Returning and Idly Strolling" (*HC* 12), he comments upon these various roles that he plays and denies that they involve any contradiction. The poem begins with a couplet describing the dazzling costume that he donned for his appearance at the court in Lo-yang. He then continues:

> At dawn I present my memorial, calling myself a courtier;
> at evening I go out for a stroll in the hills, a country man.
> Bodhidharma transmitted Mind, causing thoughts to cease;
> Hsüan-yüan 玄元 [Lao Tzu] left behind words, telling us to blend with the dust.
> With the fast of the Eight Gate Precepts I pass the days;
> with one wild song, in drunkenness I send off the spring.
> The wine shop, the Dharma Hall, the Ch'an master's room—
> when I'm in these places, how could I be two different persons?

To outside observers, Po might well have appeared to be a man of split personality, pulled by his instincts now in the direction of sensual indulgence, artistic activity, or engagement in the political scene, at other times in the direction of reclusion or religious austerities. But Po himself had come to realize that, despite these seemingly conflicting tendencies in his personality, he was in fact a single individual, all of whose facets must be acknowledged and accepted.

I would like to conclude with two poems in seven-character *lü-shih* or regulated verse form that depict Po at his religious practices in his late years and suggest this mood of resignation and acceptance. The first, entitled "Half in the Family, Half Out" (*HC* 16), was written in

840, when the poet was around seventy. To be "in the family" means to be a lay Buddhist believer; to be "out of the family" means to be a monk. The cranes in line five are pet birds that Po kept in his garden. The daughter mentioned in the last line was Po's eldest daughter, who had recently been widowed and had returned with her infant son to live with her parents.

> Comfortably fixed for clothing and food, children married off,
> from now on family affairs are no concern of mine.
> In nightly rest, I'm a bird who's found his way to the forest;
> at morning meals, I'm one in heart with the monk who begs his food.
> Clear cries, several voices—cranes under the pines;
> one spot of cold light—the lamp among the bamboo.
> Late at night I practice meditation, sitting in lotus position.
> My daughter calls, my wife hoots—I don't answer either of them.

The second, "Sitting Alone in the Place of Practice" (*HC* 17), is of uncertain date but undoubtedly comes from the same general period. Since so many of Po's poems from the years 843 until his death in 846 are now lost, this is one of the last glimpses we have of him practicing meditation.

> I straighten and adjust robe and headcloth, wipe clean the platform:
> one pitcher of autumn water, one burner of incense.
> Needless to say, cares and delusions must first be gotten rid of;
> then when it comes to enlightenment, you try to forget that too.
> Morning visits to court long suspended, I've put away sword and pendants;
> feasts and outings gradually abandoned, jars and wine cups are neglected.
> In these last years, when I'm no more use to the world,
> best just to be free and easy, sitting here in the place of practice.