Article

Revisiting Impurity in Republican China: An Evaluation of the Modern Rediscovery of Bujing guan 不淨觀

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Abstract: During the era of the Republic of China, a number of Buddhists rediscovered early meditation techniques. These practices were mainly revivied from canonical scriptures, following a modern text-based approach to Buddhism. Within this framework, specific attention was devoted to the ‘visualization of the impure’ (bujing guan 不淨觀, Sk. aśubhābhūtānā), particularly in the form of the visualization of one’s own body transforming into a putrefying corpse and skeleton. Masters with various backgrounds (Modernist Buddhists, Yogācāra scholars, Tiantai天台 and tantric masters) wrote articles and guides on this practice, which had the advantage of being common to both Hinayāna/Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna. This study considers a selection of modern texts on bujing guan in an attempt to uncover why the meditation on impurity was favored and how it was revived.

Keywords: bujing guan (aśubhābhūtānā); meditation on impurity; aśubha meditation; modern Chinese Buddhism; early meditation techniques

1. Introduction

In the first half of the twentieth century, following the spread of modernist ideas, a rediscovery and reassessment of ‘neglected’ texts in the Chinese Buddhist canon took place in China. As part of a tendency of reevaluating the Buddha’s ‘original’ teachings, forms of meditation found in the early Chinese scriptures were rediscovered and implemented, the general idea being that of reintegrating them within Chinese Mahāyāna.

These ‘forgotten’ early meditation practices were conceived as fundamental meditative techniques that had the advantage of encompassing both the Hinayāna/Śrāvakayāna and the Mahāyāna traditions. They were outlined not only in the Āgamas (Ahan jing 阿含經) and other scriptures belonging to the ‘Hinayāna’, but also in relevant Mahāyāna texts, such as the Yogācārabhūmi (Yuqie shidi lun 瑜伽師地論, T no. 1579) and particularly the fourth chapter on ‘Foundation on Meditative Absorption’ (Samāhīta bhūmi) as well as the Dazhidu lun 大智度論 (Treatise on the Mahāprajñāpāramitāsūtra, T no. 1509) and in meditation manuals and essays on meditation techniques composed by pre-Chan 蕭 masters. The prominent reformist monk Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947), for example, stated that ‘Zhiyi 智顕 [538–597]’s “Exposition on the Perfection of Dhyāna” [Shi chan boluomi cidi famen 釋禅波羅蜜次第法門, T no. 1916, which outlines these early practices in a systemized and coherent meditative path] was the most comprehensive work on meditation to circulate in China from the Han Dynasty all the way through to the end of the Northern and Southern Dynasties.

Among the rediscovered practices are the ‘five gates of meditation’ (wù menchan 五門禪, or wù tingxin 五停心, ‘five kinds of mental stabilization’), each of which is suited to practitioners with different temperaments. The five approaches include the visualization of the impure, meant for those who are inclined to lust (tanyu 貪欲, Sk. rāgaratā). Another set of meditation techniques which received great attention is the ‘four sites for
religion were favored and revived. First, it will introduce the practice in connection with Buddhist whom have focused in particular on pre-Chan meditation manuals and Tiantai works. A cursory glance at the occurrences of this practice in Chinese texts composed from the era of the Republic of China involves the meditative observation of the phases of one’s own decaying corpse, up to the moment it transforms into a skeleton. In the recent years, the reception and development of this practice in medieval China has been investigated by a number of scholars, most of whom have focused in particular on pre-Chan meditation manuals and Tiantai works. A cursory glance at the occurrences of this practice in Chinese texts composed from the Song dynasty onward suggests that it was not completely abandoned after the advent of Chan. In fact, the practice resurfaced and spread widely among Buddhist practitioners in modern times, and it remains a prominent practice today. As with other early meditation techniques, the meditation on impurity is common both to Hinayana/Sravakayana and Mahayana. It was particularly enjoined as a way to counter desire or lust, and—like other practices found in early texts—as a useful preliminary practice within the Mahayana path. The ‘visualization of the impure’ was implemented during the era of the Republic of China as an independent practice, as part of the ‘five gates,’ and as part of the ‘contemplation of the body’ within the ‘four sites for recollection’. The present study is an attempt to uncover why and how the meditation on impurity was favored and revived. First, it will introduce the practice in connection with Buddhist Modernism by analyzing its occurrence and significance in Taixu’s works. Second, it will address the growing interest in visualization practices of impurity in the 1930s through a selection of texts penned by modern Chinese Buddhists of different inclinations (Yogacara, Tiantai, and tantric). Finally, it will provide a close reading of a long essay on the topic by Taixu’s disciple Tanxuan, which offers a detailed overview of the canonical literature on asubha meditation available at the time and proves particularly telling with regard to the variety of the forms of the practice and of the different Buddhist groups involved in its implementation.

2. Paving the Path: Taixu and the Role of Buddhist Modernism

In his essay titled ‘The features of Chinese Buddhism lie in Dhyana’ (Zhongguo foxue tezhi zai chan 中國佛學特質在禪), a fundamental work for understanding the role of meditation within his system, Taixu distinguishes between ‘tathagata chan’ (rulai chan 如來禪), i.e., meditative techniques received directly from the Buddha, and ‘patriarchal chan’ (zushichan 祖師禪), which refers to the form of meditation developed by the patriarchs of Chan Buddhism. The former includes the ‘five gates to meditation,’ and thus asubha meditation as a practice suitable for those who have a propensity toward lust (Taixu, 1943). For Taixu, meditative techniques predating Chan (including asubha meditation) were not meant to replace Chan practices. Rather, he was implementing them in order to return Buddhist meditation practices in China to a state of completeness. This attitude had already been expressed in one of his early lectures on ‘The essentials of the Buddha vehicle, i.e., Pure Buddhaharma’ (Fosheng zong yao lun. Chunzheng de fofa 佛乘宗要論—純正的佛法), which was delivered in Guangzhou in 1921. In it, Taixu places asubha meditation in the context of Hinayana practices, which aimed at ‘having a comprehensive view of impermanence, suffering and emptiness, no-self, and impurity’ (wuchang kukong wuwo bujing 無常苦空無我不淨), and are related to the ‘four sites for recollection’ (si nianzhu). Under the title ‘One’s own and others’ bodies are all impure’ (si ya qi shen bujing 自他一切身不淨), Taixu explains the notion of bujing/asubha in a manner that echoes the relevant canonical texts. The description reads as follows:

Purity implies beauty. We are used to having this body, which we love without recognizing that it is ugly. But when seen from the Hinayana practice of recollection, there is nothing beautiful in it from start to end. At the very beginning,
the body is formed in the womb from the union of the father’s essence and the mother’s blood; in this there is no purity or beauty that one can talk about. Neither is there any cleanliness or purity when the body comes into the world, leaving behind manure and dirt and shedding snot and urine. Then, when it grows up in good shape and glowing with health, it appears to be beautiful. However, when we examine it in detail, on the outside there is only sweat, dirt, and grease which do not vanish even if bathed, resulting in millions of microscopic insects continuously gnawing at our skin day and night. On the inside, the five pungent roots and various other impurities are stored. Thus, neither in- nor outside is there anything pure and beautiful. This seemingly beautiful thing is only a bubble-like perceived object; self-defiled visual consciousness; let alone when one considers that the twilight of life approaches in the twinkling of an eye, and that this seemingly beautiful bubble cannot be held for long. At that point, blood and breath become weak and the vital spirit decreases, the hair greys, the teeth fall, the flesh becomes thin and the skin yellow, all kinds of diseases break out and there are signs that the four elements will soon dissipate. When the warmth and consciousness of a lifespan is over, first the color changes, followed by flesh and skin; then pus and blood mix and spread, and bones, muscles, and ashes are scattered. If there is something left, it surely is not pure or beautiful. This way we know that our material body is impure from the beginning of its existence down to its extinction. If we extend this from ourselves to others, we will see that the same is true for all of us. Thus, the dearly loved mundane material body, which does not halt to cause defilements and create evil karma, is really meaningless.

Asūsha meditation is again mentioned in the same text by (Taixu, 1921), always within the Hinayāna section, as part of the ‘thirty-seven practices for the attainment of enlightenment’ (sanshiqi buti fen 三十七菩提分). The main aim of the text is that of reconciling Hinayāna and Mahāyāna in the name of the ‘true and pure Dharma.’ In such a context, Taixu urges a reevaluation of the ‘Hinayāna’ (xiaosheng 小乘)—defined as a conventional term for the two vehicles of the Śrāvakas and Pratyekabuddhas, which in turn should not be despised—together with its practices.

Other details about asūsha meditation are included in Taixu’s lectures on particular canonical scriptures. For instance, in 1934 Taixu lectured on the ‘Śrūtra on the Eight Kinds of Attentiveness of Great Persons’ (Foshuo ba da ren jue jing jiangji 佛說八大人覺經講記, T no. 779), where asūsha meditation is part of the ‘four sites for recollection’. As for the Mahāyāna interpretation of the practice, it is worth mentioning Taixu’s lecture on the ‘Contemplation on the Mind Ground Śrūtra’ (Xindi guan jing 心地觀經, T no. 159), a text focused on Mahāyāna renunciants (i.e., Bodhisattva bhiksus). Aśūsha meditation is presented in the seventh chapter on ‘being disgusted with the body’ (yan shen 厌身) as one of the practices common to the three vehicles (sansheng gong fa 三乘共法). Featuring Maitreya as interlocutor of the Buddha, the chapter explains the various forms of aśūsha meditation while also including the Mahāyāna approach, i.e., references to the body as empty, as well as to its preciousness as a means of carrying oneself and others to the other shore, and thus in connection with the Bodhisattva path.
In short, Taixu’s interest in the meditation on impurity does not imply any preference for the early meditation techniques, nor did he put any particular emphasis on āsūrīha meditation when compared to the other practices. However, it was precisely this modernist inclination of aiming for completeness in Buddhist practices that paved the way for its emergence as a favorite practice of some of the other masters.

3. The Visualization of the Impure in Modern China

A number of articles published in various Buddhist periodicals of the Republican era, particularly during the 1930s, suggests that there was a surge of interest in āsūrīha meditation at that time. These articles contain reprints of early canonical and extra-canonical texts, as well as new explanations and commentaries. This section offers an overview of these and other materials produced by a few relevant Republican Buddhist masters, focusing on a long article by Tanxuan.

3.1. Practicing Bujing Guan in the 1930s: An Overview

Considering the importance attached by Zhiyi to the early meditation techniques, it is not surprising to find modern Tiantai masters among the advocates of āsūrīha meditation. Xianming, visible (1917–2007), for instance, wrote an article supporting this practice as a way to counter desire and describing it as a fundamental technique that formed the basis of the four dhāyānas (Xianming, 1936). As in the case of Taixu and other masters, Xianming highlights the universal nature of the practice, which is ‘common to both Hinayāna and Mahāyāna.’ The article’s title, ‘On visualizing impurity to counter desire’ (Bujing guan duizi tanyu 不淨觀對治貪欲) is a possible quotation of Zhiyi’s words (T no. 1915: 467b01–2). Xianming’s article was published in the 31st issue of the Buddhist journal Hongfakan 弘法刊 and was followed by an article by Zhaowu 照悟 (1936). The latter’s title is a quotation of a common definition of the first of the ‘five gates’ (Duotan zhaosheng bujing guan 多貪眾 生不淨觀: ‘The visualization of the impure for the living beings that have a predominance of lust’). Using the practice as a way to counter desire is also described by Daqu 答勤 (1936), who presents details about its different forms, distinguishing between the visualization of one’s own and another’s impurity. The efficacy of the visualization of the impure to counter desire and its connection with the ‘four sites for recollection’ was further illustrated by the Yogācāra scholar Zhou Shujia 周叔迦 (1943).

A recurring theme in our texts is the visualization of the nine phases of the decomposition of a corpse, a sequence known as ‘nine signs’ (jiuxiang 九相, hereafter referred to as: ‘nine images’) or ‘nine ideations’ (jiuxiang 九想, Sk. navasamjñā, hereafter referred to as: ‘nine meditations’). It occurs in translations of relevant Indian scriptures, such as the Mahāprajāhāpāramitāśāstra (Da bore boluomiduo jing 大般若波羅蜜多經, T no. 220.402: 7b24–26) and the Yogācārabhūmi (T no. 1579.25: 417b12–13). Similar sequences are also included in medieval meditation manuals, e.g., in Kumārajīva’s Meditation Scripture (Zuochan sanmei jing 坐禪三昧經, T no. 614: 271c12) and Zhiyi’s Exposition on the Perfection of Dhyāna (T no. 1916: 536a19–536c16). They also form the topic of the so-called ‘diagrams of the nine meditations’ (jiuxiang tu 九想圖), depicting a decaying corpse as an aid for the visualization.

The sequence of the ‘nine meditations’ is at the core of the ‘Ode on the visualization of the impure’ (Bujing guan song 不淨觀頌) by the Qing master Shengyan 省庵 (1686–1734), which was significantly republished in the journal of the Hunan Lay Buddhist Society in 1934, and was often quoted as a reference by modern Buddhists. With the exception of the sequence for the first five images, Shengyan’s version maps onto the above quoted list of Zhiyi; it reads: 1. ‘Swelling’ (zhuang xiang 肿想), 2. ‘Bluish stasis of blood’ (qingyu xiang 青瘀想), 3. ‘Decaying’ (huai xiang 坏想), 4. ‘Besmearing of blood’ (xuetu xiang 血塗想), 5. ‘Pus and decomposition’ (nonglan xiang 糜爛想), 6. ‘Being devoured’ (han xiang 嘗想), 7. ‘Scattering’ (san xiang 散想), 8. ‘Bones’ (gu xiang 骨想), and 9. ‘Burning’ (shao xiang 燒想) (X no. 1179, 256b04–257a12). Comparable verses were published two years later in Hitachaoqing 海潮音 by Fazhi 法智 (1938) under the title ‘Ode on the sequence of the
nine meditations of the visualization of the impure’ (Bu jing guan jiu xiang guan cdi song 不淨觀九想觀次第歌). The latter list matches the ‘Nine meditations to destroy lust’ (Po ying yu jiu xiang guan 膏淫欲九想觀) published in 1927 by the well-known Pure Land master Yinguang 印光 (1862–1940), a version derived from the late-Qing ‘morality book’ Bu ke lu 不可錄 (What cannot be recorded) and destined to be very influential throughout the twentieth century. That list proceeds as follows: 1. ‘Just diseased (xin si xiang 新死想), 2. ‘Bluish stasis of blood’ (qing yu xiang), 3 ‘Pus and blood’ (nong xue xiang 腹血想), 4. ‘Dark reddish juice’ (jiang zhi xiang 綜汁想), 5. ‘Devouring worms’ (chong dan xiang 蝕啖想), 6. ‘Coiling tendons’ (jin chan xiang 筋纏想), 7. ‘Scattering of the bones’ (gu san xiang 骨散想), 8. ‘Scorched’ (shao jiao xiang 燒焦想), 9. ‘Dry bones’ (ku gu xiang 枯骨想). A combination of the description of the nine images in the Bu ke le and in Shengyan’s text is reported in Tanxuan’s essay and is translated below (Section 3.2).

The ‘nine meditations of the visualization of the impure’ (bu jing guan jiu xiang 不淨觀九想)—followed by a meditation on the skeleton emitting light—were also taught in the 1930s by the tantric master Nenghai 能海 (1886–1967), who integrated the meditation on impurity into his handbook for basic meditation. I will delve into this particular case as an example of the actual practice of the visualization of the impure in modern times. The asubha meditation is part of a series of visualizations within a sequential meditative path; it is typically introduced by the ‘meditation on death’ (sixiang 死想) and is followed by the ‘meditation on the white bones’ (baigu xiang 白骨想). The meditation on death reads:

Visualize your body while it is cooling down and the vital energy is receding; the body becomes rigid: it is a corpse now.

觀想自身，身冷氣絕，肢體僵直，現前便是一具死屍。(Nenghai, 1946)

The nine meditations are listed as follows: 1. ‘Swelling’ (pang 腫); 2. ‘Tumefaction’ (zhang 胿); 3. ‘Blue [stains]’ (qing 青); 4. ‘Stasis of blood’ (yu 肿); 5. ‘Decay’ (lai 坏); 6. ‘Spread of blood’ (xu etu 血塗); 7. ‘Pus’ (nong 鄧); 8. ‘Decomposition’ (lan 腐); 9. ‘Maggots’ (qu 腐). While this list does not perfectly match any of the extant canonical lists, the explanation of the nine meditations closely follows the contents of the above quoted texts. At the same time, by referring to the Chinese heroes Liu Bang 劉邦 (256–195 BCE) and Xiang Yu 項羽 (232–202 BCE) or to a modern object such as a light bulb, Nenghai adds a personal touch to the received tradition:

Visualize one’s body as if deceased for a few days, as it slowly degenerates and smells bad. Initially, the skin becomes purple and starts to swell and bloat; after a while, blue stains begin to appear until blood comes out and the whole body assumes a dark purple color. The skin starts to decay and rot, and bad blood colors the whole skeleton. Dead blood becomes pus, while the flesh and the internal organs decompose, falling to pieces. Among the blood and the rotten flesh, worms are born; they crawl around and eat the remaining flesh. When they are done, they transform into moths and fly far away (this type of visualization is helpful in case of diseases; one can visualize worms eating at the bruises by concentrating on the areas of sickness). The body is now just a white skeleton. Next, visualize relatives and friends also as skeletons. If Liu Bang’s and Xiang Yu’s bones could be together, do you think they would still be at war with each other? The conflicts between us and our enemies are certainly not as serious as those between the two generals: if we all become skeletons [in the end], why should we fight [now]?

觀想自身死已數日，漸漸變壞，如聞臭穢之氣。初皮膚變紫；次肌肉腫脹；次一處一處變青色；次一處一處惡血浸出成紫黑色；次皮肉壞爛；次壞血塗滿骨骼之上；次血腐成膿；次見肌肉膿腐潰爛，一塊一塊，脫落地上；次見壞爛血肉盡生蛆蟲，遍身鑽吃，將腐肉食盡，化為飛蛾飛去不見。修此觀者，能愈疾病。如身生瘡者，想患處為蟲所食，病即易愈。自己觀成白骨。復觀自己平時所愛之人，畢竟亦成白骨，貪欲自息。或有平時慈善之人，觀彼與我畢竟皆成白骨，嗔心自息。試將劉邦項羽白骨置於一處，試觀其復能鬥爭否。我與我之仇怨，勢
At this point comes the visualization of the ‘white bones emitting light’ (baigu liuguang xiang 白骨流光想), the title of which is a quotation derived from canonical material (e.g., Zhiyi’s T no. 1916: 500b08–09):

Concentrate on your body, now a skeleton, and recognize that passions, desire, and rage vanish. Visualize the skeleton: every single part of it emits a soft white light, similar to pure jade. Inside each bone there is a flaming red string like the incandescent string in a light bulb. Gradually the light is projected toward the outside, and a sphere of pure white light embraces the body. (The dimensions of the sphere depend on each practitioner’s experience. Beginners visualize the diameter of the sphere with the length of their arm. During each new practice, the sphere gradually spreads out until it embraces the whole universe. The growth of the sphere follows certain parameters: each time, the sphere increases by an arm’s length. It gradually holds a room, a palace, a village, a city, a state, a continent, etc. If the process were not gradual, it would become impossible to project the light to embrace the entire universe: one would not be able to increase its size. This type of meditation can cure bone diseases and reinforce the bone structure).

思維自身已成白骨，粗大之貪嗔悉皆止息。然後觀想自身骨節，一一潔白光瑩，如白玉所成。一一骨骼之中心，各有一紅線，放出光明，如電燈泡中之電絲。光明射出白骨之外，籠罩全身，成一白光團。初時前後左右上下各一舒手遠（即使其光成一半徑一舒手遠之球形是）。以後每次修觀遂漸加大，乃至遍於三千大千世界。放光加大之法，要有一定界限。譬如一舒手遠，次加至滿一室，次加至滿一屋，次一村一邑一國一洲等。若不如是漸加，徒想遍於三千大千世界，實則心力仍只能及於極小之範圍也。如是觀者，能治骨骼中病，能使骨力強健。（Nenghai, 1946）

In Nenghai’s meditation sequence, one then focuses on the red string inside the bones, the light slowly turning into white flesh, which evolves into the reappearance of the body as a young and healthy sixteen-year-old. This is the transformation of oneself into Mañjuśrī, which is part of tantric deity yoga and has no further relevance to our topic (Bianchi 2001, pp. 149–50).

The growing interest in visualization of impurity practices during the 1930s is well documented in a long and learned article by Tanxuan, who promotes the visualization of the impure among his contemporaries and, in an attempt to legitimize it, traces occurrences of this practice throughout the Buddhist Canon (from Āgamas and Abhidharma to Mahāyāna scriptures and more recent Chinese texts). The following is an in-depth analysis of this relevant source.

3.2. Tanxuan 譚玄’s Essay on the Visualization of the Impure

This article by Tanxuan, who had studied Esoteric Buddhism in Japan33 and later enrolled in the World Buddhist Academy (Shijie foxueyuan 世界佛學苑) founded by Taixu in Wuhan, was published in 1936 by the Wuchang Academy (Wuchang foxueyuan 武昌佛學院). It is addressed to Buddhist renunciants as a guide on how to work with this useful tool to counter sensual desire (aiyu 愛欲):

For those who leave home to pursue the path, the visualization of the impure is the best way to counter desire. If one succeeds in this visualization, all female appearances resembling jade or flowers will come to be a leather bags full of dirt. You should know that those white lotus faces are nothing but skulls covered with flesh and that beautiful young ladies are only leaking toilets dressed up with clothes. Is there anything to crave that one can talk about? I will thus describe the visualization of the impure on the basis of the sacred scriptures.
After this preliminary statement about the practice’s target and objectives, Tanxuan explains the ‘name of the practice’ by making a distinction between two different forms. The meditation on one’s own bodily impurities (zixiangjing 相想境) includes a description of the visualization of the seven types of impurities, i.e., impurity of the seed, of parental intercourse, of the womb, of maternal blood, of birth, of the body covered by a thin skin and full of pus and blood, and of one’s own corpse, which is quoted nearly verbatim, without referencing it, from Zhiyi’s jingtu shiyi lun 淨土十疑論 (T no. 1961: 80c14–23). On the impurities of one’s own body, Tanxuan also quotes the Prajñāpāramitāsūtra and the Dazhidu lun. The second form is the contemplation of the common impurities (gongxiangjing 共相境); it consists in extending the awareness of one’s own impurities to the external world, and is presented through a long quotation from the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma. The examples mainly refer to the contemplation of the impurities of the internal parts of a living body; in the following, however, Tanxuan focuses more on the visualization of a decaying corpse.

In the third part of the article, Tanxuan offers an interesting ‘brief history of the visualization of the impure,’ meant to give evidence of its orthodox origins. Tanxuan takes us back to the scene of Buddha Śākyamuni under the bodhi tree as he was tempted by ‘beautiful ladies’ sent to him in order to test his determination (unreferenced quotation from the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma. The latter is one of the first Mahāyāna scriptures to appear in the article, and it serves to connect the practice with the doctrine of emptiness. As evidence of the enduring nature of the practice over the centuries, Tanxuan then quotes a commentary on the Ekottarāgama dealing with Aśoka’s brother meditating in a cemetery.

The fourth part of the article explains the three different ways of practicing the visualization of the corpse in a cemetery according to the Mahāvibhāṣa, namely the abridged practice for beginners, the extended practice for mature practitioners, and a third form of practice for expert practitioners. The text is reported almost verbatim from the canonical text (T no. 1545: 205b13–c18). Using another quotation from the same text (T no. 1545: 840a26–b10), Tanxuan explains that this practice is called ‘common visualization’ (gongxiangguan 共相觀) because it is common to the two vehicles as well as to male and female practitioners.

The fifth section, devoted to ‘diverse visualizations’ (biexiangguan 別相觀), introduces a concern regarding gender distinction in the practice. The ‘visualization of the impure for men to counter women’ (van dui nü zhi bujing guan 男對女之不淨觀) begins with a quotation from the ‘Scripture on the Methods of Censuring Sexual Desire’ (He seyu fa jing 訝色欲法經, T no. 615: 0286a19–21, and 286a29–b01) describing women as obstacles to the practice, followed by the un referenced quotation of Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667)’s description of the ‘ten evils of women’ and admonition to keep them at a distance in order to purify one’s mind (T no. 1893: 824a12–c02). Finally, the impurity of a woman’s body is described by means of other quotations, such as a passage from a dhāranīsūtra on the five types of bugs concealed in a woman’s body, and a discussion on the overall impurity of a female body from a meditation manual titled ‘Scripture on the Secrets of Meditation’ (Chan miyao jing 禪祕要經).
The ‘visualization of the impure for women to counter men’ (nǚ duì nán zhī bùjìng guān 女對男之不淨觀) begins with the common saying, ‘Beautiful ladies are surely impure; how then could all men be pure?’ (hongfēnjiaren, gu duo bù jīng, yìqíe nánren, you he jīng hu 這粉佳人,固多不淨,一切男人,又何淨乎?) (Tanxuan, 1936, p. 41). Men as well, Tanxuan tells us, are nothing but skulls covered with flesh, living ghosts with stiff corpses. Thus, as with women, also in the case of men there is no beauty to speak of. As evidence for this saying, Tanxuan quotes the ‘Śūtra of the Mātanga Girl’ (Modengnü jīng 摩訶女經, T no. 551: 0895b23–c02), featuring a dialogue between the Buddha and this girl, who was in love with Ānanda, and whom the Buddha showed the impurities (tears, mucus, saliva, faces, and urine, etc.) in Ānanda’s body. Finally, a relevant passage from the ‘Scripture on the Secrets of Meditation’ is quoted, reinforcing the idea of the many impure and polluted substances in a man’s body (T no. 620: 335c20–336a02).

The sixth part of the article addresses the method of the practice (bùjìng guān zhī xiūfá 不淨觀之修法):

When practicing the visualization of the impure, one may go to a cemetery, or sit under a tree, or in a pure abode. Sitting cross-legged, one enters into correct contemplation, proceeding from the visualization of a just deceased corpse to that of white bones. One gets familiar with the practice and clearly distinguishes the objects of the sequence till there is nothing left but the white bones, at which point the visualization changes. One may visualize flesh growing on the white bones, or light emitting from the white bones, or may blow a breath of air so as to crush the white bones. One may also set the fire of the syllable ra alight and burn out one’s bodily impurity. The variations of this visualization practice have no limit.

修不淨觀時,或趨塚間,或坐樹下,或於淨室。跏趺而坐,入正思惟,自新死觀,至白骨觀。次第熟練,了了分明,除白骨外,一無所有,至此轉觀,或觀白骨生肌,或觀白骨放光,或自吹氣一口,白骨粉碎,或起囉字之火,燒焚?自身不淨,變化修觀,亦無窮矣。

(Tanxuan, 1936, p. 42)

This gives us an idea of the ways the visualization of the impure was being practiced during Tanxuan’s time. First of all, it points to forms of imaginative visualization of the corpse under a tree or inside a Buddhist abode, such as had become common in medieval China (Greene 2021b, 27). Reference to the practice by means of an actual corpse in a cemetery may simply mirror the contents of early texts, since to my knowledge there is no evidence of asubha meditation being practiced in cemeteries in Republican China. On a speculative basis, one could also hypothesize an awareness of the performance of the practice on charnel grounds by Tibetan practitioners, at a time when the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China was at its apex (e.g., see Chen 2008). Second, the visualization of the white bones is described according to different variations and seemingly also includes a reference to a tantric version of the practice (i.e., the focus on the syllable ra), which Tanxuan may have encountered during his esoteric training in Japan.

This short but significant paragraph is followed by a detailed description of the images to visualize. Interestingly, for what seems to be the highlight of his article, Tanxuan combines the version found in the late-Qing ‘morality book’ Bu ke lu, which had been republished a decade earlier by Yinguang, and Qing dynasty master Shengyán’s verses in the ‘Ode on the visualization of the impure.’ Tanxuan reports, nearly verbatim, the whole sequence from the Bu ke lu, introduced by wei 詩 but without referencing it, while he openly references Shengyán’s ode (but only includes eight images of the latter’s sequence, omitting the fourth image, and adding the meditation on the moment of death, which in Shengyán’s original is not part of the sequence). This combination of the two pre-modern descriptions of the ‘nine images’ reads as follows:

1. Visualize the image of a newly diseased. [Bu ke de, 1]: Meditate (jìngguān 靜觀) on a person who has just died, lying stiff on the back, cold air piercing to the bones, not knowing anything. You should observe that your greedy and
luxurious body in the future will also be like this. Hence lust will naturally fade away. Master Shengyan’s verses [0] read: *What is loved eventually leaves forever; it is so miserable that one cannot bear to behold it. Consciousness leaves the body and the corpse is already in the empty coffin! The night fire in the unoccupied hall is cold, the autumn wind blows on the mourning curtain: I advise you, Sir, while still alive, to meditate on the moment of death.*

観新死想。1. 謂靜觀初死之人，正直仰臥，寒氣徹骨，一無所知，當觀我貧食變色之身，將來亦必如是，則噁心自然淡矣。（0）省庵法師頌曰：‘所愛竟長別，淒涼不忍看；讞裁離故體，已下空棺！夜火堂冷，秋風素飄寒；勸君身在日，先作死時觀。’

2. Visualize the image of devouring worms. [Bu ke de, 3]: Meditate on a corpse that has been decaying for a long time, worms grow all over the body, they crawl and clean skin, in the future will also be like this. Hence lust will fade away. Shengyan’s verses [3] stated: *Once skin and muscles drop off, the shape is damaged: half-open flesh like a split gourd, a snake trying to burrow out of the intestines. Twined messy hair like withered vines, and rotten clothes like waterfall moss; send a note to the beautiful ladies: do not paint that manure bag.*

観省憎想。2. 謂靜觀未斂骸死，一日至七日，黑氣騰溢，轉成青紫，甚可畏懼。當念我如花美貌之身，將來亦必如是，則噁心淡矣。（2）省庵頌曰：‘風日久吹炙，青黃殊可憐；皮乾初爛橘，骨朽半枯椽。耳鼻缺遺在，筋腸斷復連；石人雖不語，此對亦渾然！’

3. Visualize the image of pus and blood. [Bu ke de, 4]: Meditate on a putrefying corpse, after it has been lying for a long time, a yellowish liquid flows out, giving off an unbearable stench. You should recollect that your body, with its fragrant and clean skin, in the future will also be like this. Hence lust will fade away. Shengyan [3] stated: *Once skin and muscles drop off, the shape is damaged: half-open flesh like a split gourd, a snake trying to burrow out of the intestines. Twined messy hair like withered vines, and rotten clothes like waterfall moss; send a note to the beautiful ladies: do not paint that manure bag.*

4. Visualize the image of dark reddish juice. [Bu ke de, 5]: Meditate on a corpse that has been decaying for a long time, worms grow all over the body, they crawl around and gnaw inside the bones, it is like a beehive. You should recollect that the body of your beautiful spouse in the future will also be like this. Hence lust will fade away. Shengyan [6] stated: *The corpse is being devoured, a few spots are finished; the hungry belly of a crow does not fill, and it is difficult to dry the saliva of a greedy dog. Back then you loved yourself in vain, who would have pity today? Not equal to pork or lamb meat, your flesh may be worth just a few coins.*

5. Visualize the image of pus and blood. [Bu ke de, 2]: Meditate on a corpse not yet prepared for burial; within a week, black fluids rise and overflow, and it turns into dark purple, really fearsome. You should recollect that your own body, as beautiful as flowers, in the future will also be like this. Hence lust will fade away. Shengyan’s verses [2] read: *Long blows the wind, and the sun burns blue and yellow—how pitiful; the skin dries like an orange when it begins to rot, and the bones decay like half-withered beams. Ears are gone while the nose is still there, tendons and bones are broken and yet joined; a petrified person who does not talk: for all this, shed your tears!*

観省憎想。3. 觀省憎死人，初爛肉腐成鱉，勢將濕下，腸胃消糜。當念我風流俊雅之身，將來亦必如是，則噁心淡矣。（1）省庵曰：‘風大鼓其內，須臾脹，身如盛水袋，腫似斷藤瓜。垢腻深塗炭，蛆蠅亂聚沙。曾因薄皮訝，翻悔昔年差。’

観省憎想。4. 為觀死人，初爛肉腐成鱉，勢將濕下，腸胃消糜。當念我風流俊雅之身，將來亦必如是，則噁心淡矣。（3）省庵曰：‘風大鼓其內，須臾脹，身如盛水袋，腫似斷藤瓜。垢膩深塗炭，蛆蠅亂聚沙。曾因薄皮訝，翻悔昔年差。’

観省憎想。5. 為觀死人，初爛肉腐成鱉，勢將濕下，腸胃消糜。當念我風流俊雅之身，將來亦必如是，則噁心淡矣。（3）省庵曰：‘風大鼓其內，須臾脹，身如盛水袋，腫似斷藤瓜。垢膩深塗炭，蛆蠅亂聚沙。曾因薄皮訝，翻悔昔年差。’
6. Visualize the image of coiling tendons. [Bu ke de, 6]: Meditate that, when the skin and flesh of a rotten corpse have been gnawed completely, only tendons are left attached to the bones, like ropes binding firewood so that it does not fall apart. You should recollect that your philandering body in the future will also be like this. Hence lust will fade away. Shengyan [5] stated: The thin skin is like torn paper glued together, and the rotten flesh like discarded stale soup; pus and blood break through from within, while flies and maggots fight from outside. By eating pig intestines, it becomes easy to vomit, and dog urine is difficult to wash clean; if not by profound abhorrence, how can you break your delusion?

7. Visualize the image of scattered bones. [Bu ke de, 7]: Meditate on a dead body, once the tendons rot and decay, the bones are scattered crisscrossed, no longer staying in one place. You should recollect that your exalted and precious body in the future will also be like this. Hence lust will fade away. Shengyan [7] stated: The four limbs suddenly divide and scatter, where does a whole body come from? You not only lose your appearance, at the same time your name also becomes empty. As for duration, observe the autumn grass, and in terms of abundance, ask the evening breeze; I request you, Sir, to pay close attention, this matter is detailed and exhaustive.

8. Visualize the image of dry bones. [Bu ke de, 9]: Meditate on the abandoned bones in a broken tomb, hit by sun and rain, their color turns white, or yellowish again, trampled by humans and beasts. You should recollect that your body, with its beautiful youth easily fading away, in the future will also be like this. Hence lust will fade away. Shengyan [8] stated: Skin and flesh have melted and disappeared, only the bones remain; rain adds color to moss, water soaks the sand marks. Involving many insects and collecting few descendants, where does passionate love take you to? Feel profound grief for the unreturned soul!

9. Visualize the image of being burnt. [Bu ke de, 8]: Meditate on a dead body, having been burnt by fire, it is scorched and shrunken on the ground; be it cooked or raw, it is always an unbearable sight. You should recollect that your unparalleled body in the future will also be like this. Hence lust will fade away. Shengyan [9] stated: Raging flames lean on the dry bones, and in a flash, they burn vigorously; red flames in the sky, black smoke on the trees. Be aware that all ends in ashes, and the true mind that very day is suspended. If you wish to go beyond the samsāra path, you should study this meditation carefully.

(Tanxuan, 1936, pp. 42–43)
In this sixth and final part of the essay, Tanxuan’s highly scholarly-oriented article finally turns to the actual practice and experience of the aśubha meditation. Though it does not hint at the ways in which Tanxuan himself or his students practiced these teachings, the above explanation of the ‘nine meditations’ may well have served as meditation guidelines for the same monastics to whom the article was declaredly addressed.

The ‘final remarks’ of the article consist in a number of new quotations, which deserve close consideration because they allow for a connection between the described practice and the Bodhisattva ideal. The first quotation is taken from another well-known morality book which was promoted by Yinguang. Penned by the Qing dynasty Buddhist layman Zhou Mengyan 周夢顔 (1656–1739, styled Anshi 安士), it clearly reveals a Mahāyāna concern:

If this visualization is accomplished, it will remove the very root of sensual desire (aiyin 愛婬). I vow that in my future existence I will sweep away the armies of Māra, and that, transforming the body in unmeasurable Buddha kṣetras, I will broadly benefit all sentient beings.

Furthermore, one who fixes his thoughts and carefully contemplates, and then comes to see, all the white bones of his body, will at the end of his life be reborn in the Tusiṣa heaven where he will meet Maitreya (tr. Greene 2021b, p. 169).

Finally, after a few canonical verses reiterating the value of this practice for countering sensual desire, Tanxuan provides a list of the relevant canonical sources, including reference to the chapters (juan 卷) where the practice is presented. This table of references is worthy of mention as a reminder of the sources available for this practice in the 1930s (see Appendix A).

As we have seen, Tanxuan gives large quotations of a great variety of texts in the main body of the article. These and a number of other scriptures are referenced in the final table. Among Tanxuan’s primary sources are meditation manuals, such as the ‘Scripture on the Methods of Censuring Sexual Desire’ (Chanyao heyu jing 禪要诃欲經, T no. 609, juan 1), a locus classicus for this practice, and other meditation manuals of the fifth century. Early Buddhist texts include Āgamas and a variety of vinaya literature, including the Shanjianlü piposha 善見律毘婆沙, referenced as a translation from the Pāli. Quotations from Mahāyāna sūtras are from the Prajñāpāramitā corpus and a few other texts. Śāstra references span from the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma to the Srīvatsabhūmi and the Dazhidu lun. As for tantric texts, Tanxuan particularly quotes a commentary on the Vairocana-bhisambodhitantra. In general, canonical sources of works by Chinese masters are quoted without referencing them, as in the notable case of Zhiyi’s works on meditation.

This detailed list of references seemingly aims at giving full legitimacy to the aśubha meditation from the perspective of the Buddhist tradition as a whole.

4. Final Remarks

The rediscovery of the aśubha meditation, together with other early meditation techniques, has been presented in this article as both a result and a sign of the spread of modernist ideas into China. In these final remarks I will try to elucidate how and to what extent the analytical category ‘Buddhist modernism’ may be useful in capturing the
phenomenon under discussion. I will mainly refer to Tanxuan’s essay, as it offers both an overview and a close look into some of the relevant features of the rediscovery of the visualization of the impure in modern China.

The most common themes developed by the various forms of Buddhist modernisms include the adoption of a text-oriented approach and a modern notion of Buddhism as a world religion, the search for a ‘pure’ and ‘original’ Buddhism, an emphasis on meditation, discourses on gender equality, and the establishment of modern forms of education for the Buddhist clergy. Tanxuan’s long essay reveals traces of all the mentioned modernist aspects. A disciple of Taixu, Tanxuan was a modern scholar monk with an interest in ‘forgotten’ teachings and practices and with a marked preference for a text-oriented approach. Not only does his article reveal a rediscovery of early texts within the Buddhist Canon, it also includes a wide array of scriptures, striking us as a true example of the modern monastic education propagated by Taixu and his fellow monks, which by itself reveals an understanding of Buddhism as a world religion. The numerous sources he is able to quote represent all of the main genres present in the Buddhist Canon, because, as he declares himself, ‘the visualization of the impure is discussed in detail in both Hinayana and Mahayana sutas, vinayas, and sstras,’ ranging from Agamas to Tantras. Tanxuan’s modernity also emerges through other aspects. First, it is interesting to note that he shows an awareness—even if only a modicum—of gender distinctions, separately addressing female practitioners, at a time when gender had become ‘a useful category’ in Chinese religions (Valussi 2019). Finally, and more significantly, Tanxuan, who was himself engaged in the revival of the so-called ‘Tang Tantrism’ (Tangmi 唐密), gives us an idea of the varieties of the visualization of the impure as practiced during his time, when different traditions within the early meditation practices were being revived—marking a new trend in modern Tiantai and Yogacra approaches to meditation—and new ones were spreading in response to the surge of interest in Japanese and Tibetan tantrism. This latter aspect reflects a modern understanding of Buddhism as a world religion, which favored both the acceptance of other forms of Buddhist practice and the integration of early forgotten teachings in the bosom of the Chinese Mahayana.

However, it is my conviction that to fully understand modern forms of Buddhism, one should not only focus on the novel modernist themes resulting from the encounter with Western modernities; rather one should also consider the resilience and vitality of ‘concomitant religious phenomena centered on local and long-established practices, rituals, and ways of relating to Buddhist scriptures’ (Bianchi and Campo forthcoming). In Tanxuan’s essay, we find traces also of this more local approach, such as in the reference to morality books or other pre-modern Chinese materials. It is particularly in these quotations and references that Tanxuan reveals an interest which goes beyond a mere scholarly approach. On the contrary, he strikes us as a sincere promoter of the actual practice of the visualization of the impure, particularly addressing his essay to ‘those who leave home to pursue the path,’ as he clarifies from the very incipit of his text. From this perspective, what might otherwise seem like a mere display of erudition serves the objective of legitimizing a form of practice that the contemporary sangha may not always be in favor of.

On a general note, distinguishing the masters interested in asubha meditation according to their doctrinal inclinations and predilections enables us to observe how, within a general modern trend of re-evaluating the whole range of Buddhist teachings, different approaches emerged where modern themes coexisted with more conservative or local inclinations. Notably, Tiantai masters mainly referred to Zhiyi’s works (whose main canonical source is the Dazhidu lun) or to later Tiantai-related materials. By contrast, other masters, displaying a more markedly ‘modernist’ attitude, preferred to turn to texts with Indian origins, and masters interested in tantric Buddhism also referred to tantric scriptures and traditions. The shared feature of the rediscovery of the asubha meditation, at least in the cases presented above, seems to be that the visualization of the impure was framed within a Mahayana context. Ultimately, as it was for Taixu, the meditation on impurity was implemented as
‘one of the practices common to the three vehicles,’ and as such it was legitimized for the modern Chinese Buddhist practitioners.

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### Abbreviations

- **T** *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大経. 85 vols., eds. Junjirō Takakusu 高楠順次郎 and Kaigyoku Watanabe 渡邉海旭. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1934.
- **X** *Shinsan Dai Nihon zoku zōkyō* 卍新纂大日本續藏経. Tōkyō: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1975–1989 (CBETA edition).

### Appendix A. Tanxuan’s Sources

| I. Meditation Manuals                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ‘Scripture on the Methods of Censuring Sexual Desire’ (*Chanyao heyu jing* 視要呵欲經, *T* no. 609, *juan* 1); |
| ‘Scripture on the Secret Essential Methods of Meditation’ (*Chan miyao fa jing* 禪秘要法經, *T* no. 613, *juan* 2); |
| ‘Secret Methods for Curing Meditation Sickness’ (*Zhi chanbing miyaofa* 治禪病秘法, *T* no. 620); |
| ‘Ocean *Samādhi* Contemplation Scripture’ (*Guanfo sanmei hai jing* 觀佛三昧海經, *T* no. 643, *juan* 9). |

| II. Vinaya                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Vinaya of the Mahīśāsaka (*Wufenlü* 五分律, *T* no. 1421, *juan* 8);               |
| Vinaya of the Sarvāstivāda (*Sapoduo lü* 薩婆多律, *T* no. 1435, *juan* 3);       |
| *Shanjianlü piposha* 善見律毘婆沙 (*T* no. 1462, *juan* 10);                      |
| ‘Sūtra of Mahāprajāpatti’ (*Daaidao jing* 大愛道經, *T* no. 1478).               |

| III. Early Buddhist Texts                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| *Madhyamgama* (Zhong Ahan jing 『阿含經, *T* no. 36, *juan* 20); 65                |
| ‘Sūtra of the Collection of the Past Activities of the Buddha’ (*Fo benxingji jing* 佛本行集經, Sk. *Buddhacarita sangrāha*, *juan* 36, *T* no. 190); |
| *Fenbie gongde lun* 分別功德論 (*T* no. 1507). |
IV. Mahāyāna Sūtras

Ratnākāṭasūtra (Baoji jing 寶積經, T no. 310, juan 105);66

‘Contemplation on the Mind Ground Sūtra’ (Xindi guan jing 心地觀經, T no. 159, juan 6);57

Mahāprajñāpāramitāsūtra (both the Da bore jing 大般若經, T no. 220, and Dapin bore jing 大品般若經, T no. 223, juan 6);

‘Great Collection Sūtra’ (Daji jing 大集經, T no. 397, juan 243);

‘Sūtra of Mañjuśrī’s Questions’ (Wenshu wen jing 文殊問經, T no. 468);

Sarangamasūtra (Lengyanjing 楞嚴經, T no. 945).

V. Tantric Texts

‘Dhārani of the Greatly Powerful One’ (Daweide tuoluoni jing 大威德陀羅尼經, T no. 1341);

‘Commentary on the Vairocanābhisambodhitāntra’ (Darijing shu 大日經疏, T no. 1796, juan 20).

VI. Sūtras

Dazhidu lun 大智度論 (T no. 1509, juan 24);

Jñānaprasthāna (T no. 1544);

Mahāvibhāṣa (Da piposhu lun 大毘婆沙論, T no. 1545, juan 40);

‘Śāriputrābhidharma (under the name: Sheli apitan 舍利阿毘昙, T no. 1548, juan 18),69

Yoṅgācārābhūmiśāstra (Ch. Yuqie shidi lun 瑜伽師地論, T no. 1579, juan 30).

VII. Works by Chinese Masters

‘Commentary on the Flower Ornament Sūtra’ (Huayanjing shu 華嚴經疏, T no. 1735, juan 18), by Chengguan 澄觀;

‘Methods for the Cultivation of a Clear Faith [in the Mahāyāna]’ (Jingxin jie guan fa 淨心戒觀法, T no. 1893), by Daoxuan 道宣;

‘Exposition on the Perfection of Dhyāṇa’ (Shi chan boluomi cidi famen 釋梵波羅蜜次第法門, T no. 1916), by Zhiyi 智顗;

‘Four sites for recollection’ (Si nianchu 四念處, T no. 1918), by Zhiyi 智顗;

‘Treatise on Ten Doubts about Pure Land’ (Jingtu shiyi lun 淨土十疑論, T no. 1961), by Zhiyi 智顗.

Notes

1 I will engage with the meaning of Buddhist modernism in the context under discussion in the final remarks.

2 I wish to thank Michel Mohr for inviting me to contribute to this special issue on “Impurity Revisited: Contemplative Practices, Textual Sources, and Visual Representations in Asian Religions” and for his support and valuable suggestions. I am also indebted to an anonymous reviewer for the insightful criticism and useful proposals.

3 The present article includes only a brief outline of the general background in which the rediscovery of buijing guan 華嚴經疏 transpired. For a presentation on the phenomenon of the rediscovery of early meditation techniques in modern Chinese Buddhism, see Bianchi (forthcoming).

4 On the use of Hinayāna, Pāli Buddhism, South, and South-East Asian Buddhism or Southern Buddhism, Śrāvakayāna, and other expressions as alternatives to Theravāda, see Anālayo (2003, pp. 223–28). On the corresponding Chinese terminology, with a focus on modernity, see Bianchi (forthcoming).

5 This ‘Hinayāna’ literature was preserved in the Chinese Buddhist canon but was previously regarded as inferior and had been classified at the bottom of the panjiao 判教 systems since the Sui and Tang dynasties. On the rediscovery of the Agamas by modern Chinese Buddhists, see Travagnin and Anālayo (2020).
The Yogācārabhūmi itself was reevaluated in modern China and considered a scripture representing the ‘original’ Mahāyāna. For more information on the role of the Yogācāra tradition within recent developments in Chinese Buddhism, see Makeham (2014). For further details about the importance of the Yogācārabhūmi in twentieth-century Chinese scholastic Buddhism, see Aviv (2013).

The ‘Treatise on the Path to Liberation’ (Jietuo daolun 解脫道論, Pāli ‘Vimuttimagga; T no. 1648, Chinese translation attributed to Samghabharasamghapāla, early sixth c.), one of very few extant Chinese translations of Pāli works, was also ‘rediscovered.’ Since the comparable Visuddhimagga would not be translated into Chinese until 1981 (Ye, 1981), this text was regarded as the main reference for early meditation techniques within the Theravāda tradition during the Republican era. Awareness of the existence of this text was stimulated in Japan by articles published by the scholar Nagai Makoto (1881–1970). See Jaffe (2019, pp. 211–35). In China, lay-Buddhist scholar Lü Cheng 吕澂 (1896–1989) determined that the *Vimuttimagga* was one of the few texts of the Southern traditions to reach China and suggested that the *Visuddhimagga* was based on this earlier text (Lü 1996). For an overview on the *Vimuttimagga*, see Crosby (1999). For a comparison with the *Visuddhimagga*, see Análayo (2009). The *Vimuttimagga* is not treated in the present study, as I found no evidence of any modern master referring to it for the visualization of the impure in the material I was able to collect.

See Taixu (1943), quoted in Wang (2009, p. 158). On the Shi chan boluomi cüdi famen, see Greene (2021a, p. 114f) and Wang (2001). In the present study, the term chan 禪 (Sk. dhīyāna) is mainly employed to refer to forms of meditation predating the emergence of Chan Buddhism. The latter will only be addressed occasionally, when referring to the Chan school itself or to the form of meditation developed by the Chan masters, i.e., the so-called ‘patricial chan’ (zushichan 祖師禪) mentioned by Taixu (see below, note 15).

The other gates include love meditation (cibei 慈悲, Sk. maitrī) for those who are inclined to anger; meditation on causes and conditions (yin yuan 因緣, Sk. pratītyasamutpāda) for those who are inclined to ignorance; meditation on worldly discrimination (jifenbi 界分別, Sk. dhītānirupadha) for those who are inclined to pride; and breath mindfulness (nian anhan 念安般 or nianxi 念息, Sk. anāpānasmiti) for those who are inclined to discursive thinking. In some cases, such as Kumārajīva’s ‘Meditation Scripture’ (T no. 614) the fourth gate is supplemented by Buddha recollection (nianfo 念佛, Sk. buddhānusmṛti), for ‘those with equally distributed defilements or grave sins.’ See Greene (2021b, pp. 21–22).

They involve the visualization of the body (guan shen 觀身), of sensation (guan shou 觀受), of the mind (guan xin 觀心), and of mental formations or dharmas (guan fa 觀法). For a history of this meditation technique based on Pāli, Chinese, and Sanskrit sources, and considering both Hinayāna/Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna texts, see Schmithausen (1976); refer also to Análayo (2003), Lin (1949), and Stuart (2015).

Eric M. Greene (2016, 2021a) argues that the term ‘visualization’ may not fully capture the phenomenology of these practices: ‘visualization, a concept coined in the nineteenth century by experimental psychologists, implies a degree of willful control that is usually inapplicable in the context of the visionary experiences aimed for in medieval Chinese Buddhist meditation practices’ (Greene 2021a, p. 94, note 67). More specifically, Green notices that the object to be ‘visualized’ should not be seen as a mental representation phenomenologically corresponding to ordinary sight; in addition, he observes that these practices result in confirmatory experiences that can be better understood as ‘visions’ rather than visualizations. This notwithstanding, in the present study I have followed the convention of translating guan 觀 as ‘visualization,’ by which I imply the imaginary observation of the described object (the decaying corpse) by the practitioner. I only occasionally touch upon confirmatory visions.

Particularly, the ‘Special Issue on Impurity Revisited’ (Religion, 11 and 12), includes contributions addressing Chinese Buddhism or Chinese materials by Dhammajoti (2021), Kritzer (2020), and Mohr (2020). For the meditation on impurity in Chinese Buddhist texts, see also Greene (2006, 2014, 2016, and the two recent monographies, Greene 2021a, 2021b) and Radich (2019). General descriptions of asū́ba meditation are provided by Dhammajoti (2009) and, with reference to the Pāli Satipaññhāna, Análayo (2003, pp. 152–55). For the practice in Theravāda Buddhism, see also Bond (1980). For the Gandhāran early Yogācāra context, see Stuart (2015, vol. 1, pp. 505–8). For the Khotanese Mahāyāna context, see Martini (2011).

The practice of *buying guan* by Chinese Buddhists during and after the Song dynasty is a topic that deserves further investigation. Among the texts where it is explained are the following: X no. 976 (Song), X no. 250 (Yuan), X no. 0877 (Yuan), T no. 1939 (Ming), X no. 1162 (Ming), X no. 1549 (Qing), etc. Significantly, many of these texts are related to the Tiantai tradition.

For the interfusion of Mahāyāna elements with the Abhidharma interpretation of the visualization of the impure in the ‘Ocean Samādhi Contemplation Scripture’ (T no. 643) and the ‘Meditation Sūtra of Dharmatrāṭa’ (T no. 618), showing an increasing interest in Buddha visualizations, see Dhammajoti (2021, pp. 23–30). Also notice that, in the ‘Meditation Sūtra of Dharmatrāṭa’ (Damoduolu chanjing 達摩多羅欽經, T no. 618), the visualization of the impure culminates in visions of a pure land, which can be associated with the Mahāyāna (Mohr 2006, 2020). Kumārajīva’s ‘Meditation Scripture’ (T no. 614) describes all practices, including the visualization of impurity, within the paths for becoming an Arhat, a Pratyekabuddha, or a Buddha; despite the differences in the final goals, the Bodhisattva methods are very similar to those of the non-Bodhisattva practitioners (Yamabe and Sueki 2009, pp. XIV–XVIII). For the absence of a clearly marked dichotomy between Hinayāna and Mahāyāna methods in the early meditation manuals, see Greene (2021b, pp. 25–28).

Taixu distinguishes between meditation in China before the development of Chan and the features of meditation as practiced by Chan Buddhism. The former includes ‘breath meditation’ (yanbanchan 呼吸禪), the ‘five gates of meditation’ (wén menchan, or
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wu tingchan), ‘meditation of being mindful of the Buddha’ (nianfochan 念佛禅) and ‘meditation on the real characteristics of things’ (shuxiangchan 實相禪). This essay was recorded by Taixu’s disciples and published as part of the collection Zhongguo foxue 中國佛學 (Taixu, 1943). According to Yinshun, Taixu first realized the importance of meditation as the very feature of Chinese Buddhism in 1926 (Yinshun, 1973, p. 217a).

More precisely, the recollection of the body is related to impurity (guan shen bujing 観身不淨), that of the sensation to suffering (guan shou shiku 観受痛苦), that of the mind to impermanence (guan xin wuchang 観心無常), and that of mental formations or dharmas to the no-self (guan fa wuwo 観法無我).

In the version mentioned by Taixu, the thirty-seven practices for the attainment of enlightenment are as follows: ‘four sites for recollection,’ ‘four kinds of right effort’ (si zhenqing 四正勤); ‘four supernormal powers’ (si riqi 四如意足); ‘five wholesome roots’ (wugen 五根); ‘five powers’ (wuli 五力); ‘seven branches of bodhi’ (qi juezhi 七覺支); and ‘eightfold holy path’ (ba shengxing 八聖行).

Translated by An Shigao 安世高 (148–170), this scripture is focused on eight forms of mindfulness, which are related to the eightfold path.

The lecture was delivered at the Yongning monastery 永寧寺 in Zhenhai (see Taixu, 1934).

The lecture was delivered at the Minnun Buddhist Academy (see Taixu, 1932). The ‘Mahāyāna Sūtra on visualization of the mind ground of essential nature’ (Dusheng bensheng xindi guan jing 大乘本生心地觀經, T no. 159), a probable apocryphal scripture attributed to Prajñā (late eighth c.), includes many meditation practices for monastics.

In later times, another Tiantai master, Miaojing 玄境 (1903–2003), recommended the visualization of the impure as part of the ‘contemplation of the body’ within the ‘four sites for recollection’ (Miaojing, 2006). ‘In the later decades of his teaching career, Miaojing put much energy into teaching this meditation method [si nianchü], with special focus on the initial element of the fourfold guan procedure, in which a vivid set of white skeleton contemplations is carried out. When a meditator has become securely proficient in this method, then other guan practices can be adopted, as suitable for the individual practitioner’ (Binnaubam 2019).

Examining the phases of decaying involves looking at how various ‘ideations’ (xiang 想) produce corresponding ‘signs’ (xiang 相, Sk. laksana). This may constitute one of the keys for understanding the link between samyābjā (ideations, conceptions), laksana (signs, marks), and dhāra (images). I am grateful to Michel Mohr for this insightful suggestion. Also see Mohr (2020, p. 19).

The Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra ‘offers one of the earliest enumerations of the nine perceptions of foulness, that is the nine stages through which a dead body transforms until cremated (Mohr 2009, p. 177). The sequence goes as follows: 1. ‘Swelling and tumefaction’ (pangzhang xiang 破脹想), 2. ‘Pus and decomposition’ (nonglan xiang 臭膿想), 3. ‘Extraordinary red color’ (yichi xiang 異赤想), 4. ‘Bluish stasis of blood’ (qingyu xiang 青瘀想), 5. ‘Being devoured’ (zhuduan xiang 噬噉想), 6. ‘Being scattered’ (lisan xiang 離散想), 7. ‘Skeleton bones’ (shigu xiang 骸骨想), 8. ‘Being burnt’ (fenshao xiang 焚燼想), and 9. ‘Decaying’ (michuai xiang 殞壞想).

The list in the Yogācārabhūmi’s reads: 1. ‘Bluish stasis of blood’ (qingyu xiang), 2. ‘Pus and decomposition’ (nonglan xiang), 3. ‘Decaying’ (pohuai xiang 死壞想), 4. ‘Swelling and tumefaction’ (pangzhang xiang), 5. ‘Being devoured’ (danshi xiang 噬食想), 6. ‘Besmearing of blood’ (xuetuan xiang 血漬想), 7. ‘Scattering’ (lisan xiang 離散想), 8. ‘Bones’ (shigu xiang 骸骨想), and 9. ‘Observation of emptiness’ (guan xin wuchang 觀心無常).

The ‘Meditation Scripture’ has the following sequence: 1. ‘Bluish stasis of blood’ (qingyu 青瘀), 2. ‘Swelling and tumefaction’ (pangzhang 破脹), 3. ‘Decomposition’ (polan 磕爛), 4. ‘Blood shedding’ (xueliu 血流), 5. ‘Besmearing of blood’ (huam 受污), and 6. ‘Bones’ (shigu 骸骨).

The Meditation Scripture requires the following sequence: 1. ‘Swelling’ (zhuang xiang 脹脹想); 2. ‘Decaying’ (huai xiang 烏坏想); 3. ‘Besmearing of blood’ (xuetuan xiang 血漬想), 4. ‘Pus and decomposition’ (nonglan xiang), 5. ‘Bluish stasis of blood’ (qingyu xiang), 6. ‘Being devoured’ (han xiang 噬食想), 7. ‘Scattering’ (san xiang 散想), 8. ‘Bones’ (gu xiang 骸骨想), and 9. ‘Burning’ (shao xiang 燒想). The same list is also included in the Mohe zhiguan 莫诃止觀 (T no. 1911, 121c15–16).

For a study on Dokuan Genkō 納原玄光 (1630–1698)’s ‘Odes on the Nine Perceptions’ and in general for the sources and meaning of this sequence, see Mohr (2009).

Shengyuan’s text is still often quoted on contemporary Buddhist websites. e.g., http://www.suttaworld.org/ancient_t/ascs/3-5.htm (accessed on 4 October 2021); http://fodizi.net/qt/qita/16591.html (accessed on 4 October 2021); etc.

On Yinguang’s talents in revising, editing and promoting morality books, see Kiely (2016, p. 34f).

Examples of the contemporary spread of Yinguang’s version—in its original form or translated into modern Chinese—on Buddhist websites include: http://foxue.com/2019/09/26 (accessed on 4 October 2021); http://big5.xuefo.net/nr/article21/212449.html (accessed on 4 October 2021); http://www.bskk.me/thread-3152704-1-1.html?bovqzc=xty (accessed on 4 October 2021); https://www.guang5.com/fjrw/hcrw/yinguangdashiy/170883.html (accessed on 4 October 2021); etc.
See Nenghai (1946). The texts are newly translated for the purpose of this study. An earlier English translation of Nenghai’s meditation techniques is included in Bianchi (2001, pp. 136–65).

The explanation was recorded by Nenghai’s nun disciple Longlian 隆蓮 (1909–2006) on the basis of Nenghai’s lectures and was later revised by Nenghai himself. On the subject of meditation, Nenghai referred to Tsongkhapa’s Lamrim as well as to a number of Chinese scriptures, including the ‘Meditation scripture.’ In his later years he focused on the ‘Śāriputrābhīḍharmam’ (Shelfu apitan lun 舍利弗阿毘曼論, T no. 1548, 620–624), a systematic overview of meditation techniques; Nenghai’s lectures were centered on the chapter on Dhāyāna (Chanding pu 舍定品). See Nenghai (1960a, 1960b).

Tanxuan went to Japan to study esoteric Buddhism (Shingon and Tendai) in 1925 and returned to China in 1929–1930; he studied in Japan again between 1934–1935. He was an expert on Tendai and returned to China with more than two thousand esoteric Buddhist scriptures. See Chen (2008, p. 392).

The quotation, on the impurity of one’s own body, however, is not from the Prajñāpāramitāśūtra but from the ‘Contemplation on the Mind Ground Sūtra’ (T no. 159: 321b14–16). I was not able to trace the following quotation about the visualization of one’s own body mentioned by Tanxuan (1936, p. 37) as taken from the Prajñāpāramitāśūtra.

The first quotation, from the Dazhidu lun, is not verbatim. This is followed by a quotation on the filthy aspects of the body (T no. 1598: 60a21, almost verbatim) and on the five types of impurity (T no. 1599: 198c–22–24).

T no. 1545: 840a26–b10 (*Mahāvibhāṣa, see note 41 below). At this point Tanxuan also quotes the ‘Śūtra of Mañjuṣrī’s Questions’ (Wenshu wen jing 文殊問經, T no. 468), which explains that the visualization of impurity is aimed at getting rid of desire. However, I was not able to trace the exact quotation.

On these two forms of the visualization of impurity, i.e., the contemplation of the impurities of a living human body and the meditation on the decay of a corpse—a standard Sarvāstivāda systematization—see Dhammajoti (2009) and Greene (2006, pp. 66–92).

Quotations include the ‘Ocean Sunmādhi Contemplation Scripture’ (T no. 643: 652b), which is paraphrased instead of being quoted at length (on this text, which is currently regarded as apocryphal, see Yamabe 1999) and the Jñānaprasthāna (by quoting its commentary *Mahāvibhāṣa, T no. 1545: 206c27–207a26), where the Buddha declares that he will devote himself to the visualization of impurity.

Quotation on the Buddha teaching the practice, the monks being scared, fetching a corpse, being scolded by the laypeople, and lastly, the Buddha explaining that they should not touch a corpse (T no. 1421: 134b15–18, b21–24, and b28–c04).

On this early Chinese Commentary on the Ekottarāgama, which shows an affinity with Prajñāpāramitā thought, see Palumbo (2013).

The ‘Treatise of the Great Commentary on the Abhidharma’ (Sk. *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāsāstra, T no. 1545.27: 1a–1004a) is a commentary on the Jñānaprasthāna (T no. 1545), a canonical work of the Sarvāstivāda school. On the asubhadhāvanā in the Mahāvibhāṣa, see Dhammajoti (2009).

The text quoted is the jìngxin jìe guān fǎ 浮心戒觀法 (T no. 1893).

A reference to the Daweide tuolunmì jìng 大威德陀羅尼經 (T no. 1341), quoted from the Faguanzhulin 法苑珠林 (T no. 2122: 446b26–446c05).

The content seems to be an abridged version of the Zhì chanbing miyao fǎ 治禅病要法 (T no. 620: 335c09f). It may also be a quotation taken from another non-canonical meditation manual. On this genre and on the various ‘Chan essentials,’ see Greene (2021b, pp. 76–81).

Tanxuan apparently quotes the text from the Faguanzhulin (T no. 2122: 630c04–11).

In this case the text is very likely taken from the Zhì chanbing miyao fǎ (T no. 620), even if minor variations may point to a different version than that from the Taishō text.

This is a possible reference to a tantric version of the practice, whereby the syllable ra is connected with the fire element.

Quotations inspired by the Bu ke le are presented in full, Shengyans’s verses in quotation marks. Due to the need to match their contents, both sequences are slightly modified in Taoxuan’s combination.

The text, titled Yuhai hui kuang 欲海回狂, is the third chapter of the ‘Anshi collection’ (Anshi guanshu 安士全書), which became well known at the beginning of the twentieth century as it was promoted as the number one ‘moral book’ (shanshu 高書) by Yinguang. See Kiely (2016, p. 34).

The text broadly corresponds to the Chan miyao fa jing 禪秘要法經 (T no. 613: 254c03–11), a prominent example of the fifth-century meditation manuals attributed to Kumārajīva. Also in this case, as with above, it may be regarded that the quotation is taken from a non-canonical version of the meditation manual. On T no. 613, see Greene (2018), and for the rebirth in Maitreya’s heaven, see Greene (2021b, pp. 12–13).

Small differences between Tanxuan’s text and the Taishō edition in italics.

The verses are quoted verbatim from the ‘Śūtra of the Collection of the Past Activities of the Buddha’ (Fo benxingji jing 佛本行集經, Sk. Buddhacaritasasangrāha, T no. 190: 729a08–11). Tanxuan, however, references the Mahāvibhāṣa. Translated by Jñānagupta, the Buddhacaritasasangrāha is the most complete version of the Buddha’s life in the Chinese canon. Tanxuan includes this text in the final list of references.
The notion of ‘Buddhist modernism’ is referred to forms of Buddhism that developed in the nineteenth century and afterward as a response (and reaction) to the spread of ideas from Western modernity (McMahan 2008). Recent scholarship has shown that one should rather speak of ‘modernisms,’ given the variety of aspects involved, and considering the fact that local developments may include only a few of them depending on contingent factors and on the local understanding of ‘modernity’ (see the essays included in McMahan 2012); for the Chinese case, see Fisher (2012); Ritzinger (2017b). While often employed as interchangeable synonyms, I prefer to distinguish Buddhist modernism from the broader category of ‘modern Buddhism,’ which includes a combination of these modernist approaches and more established teachings and practices.

Among the other most common themes is also the adoption of a modern scientific approach and of the new category of religion as opposed to superstition; ‘modernist’ features also include an emphasis on rationality, on egalitarianism in general, and on a social and/or political engagement of the Buddhist clergy, as well as an increased involvement of the laity and a connection with nationalism, etc. On the focus on meditation, see McMahan and Braun (2017). On the spread of the notion of ‘original Buddhism’ in Republican China, see Ritzinger (2016).

The ‘Four sites for recollection’ (T no. 1918), ‘Exposition on the Perfection of Dhyāna’ (T no. 1916) and ‘Treatise on Ten Doubts about Pure Land’ (T no. 1961), three works by Zhiyi, are quoted verbatim in the main text without explicit reference, and are also not included in the final table. On one occasion, Daoxuan references the Dazhidu lun, but quotes Zhiyi’s own quotation of the text (T no. 1918: 559a01–2).

The list includes the ‘Secret Methods for Curing Meditation Sickness’ (Zhi chanbing miyaojiao 治禪病要法, T no. 620), one of the apocryphal meditation manuals of the fifth century, describing a series of healing meditations. See Greene (2021b, p. 75f).

The ‘Shanmianli piposha (tr. attributed to Samghabhadra, 488) is a vinaya commentary which was considered a translation of the Samantapāsādikā (a commentary attributed to Bhadgahoṣa) throughout the twentieth century. This attribution has been questioned by scholars. See Heirman (2004) and, for the origin of this attribution by Takakusu Junjirō (1866–1945), Jaffe (2019, p. 218). It is referenced by Tanxuan as a translation from the Pāli (T no. 1462: 744b11–14 and b28–c01).

The Jñānaprasthāna (T no. 1544) and its commentary *Mahāvibhāṣā (T no. 1545). See note 41. For the visualization of impurity in the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma, see Dhammajoti (2009, pp. 248–63).

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