

# THE EAST RIVER SHADE

*by Colin Bredenberg*

In 1656, in the early days of the Qing Dynasty, Peng Delun was a successful businessman, as well as a minor bureaucrat in the Shanxi province. Due to accusations of bribery and corruption, Delun was forced to relinquish his post and enter early retirement at forty-five. Leaving behind his wife and son to tend to his extensive estate, he traveled to the Zhoushao Temple in the northeastern corner of the province, nestled between the Wutai mountain ranges and the East River, a minor tributary of the Yellow River. It was here that he dedicated himself to intensive Buddhist practice, engaging in vigorous fasts, days-long meditations in isolation, and prolonged vows of silence.

Peng broke a two-year period of silence in 1668 in order to record the following description of his role in the River Vigil, the most important yearly temple rite, dedicated to honoring the souls of the dead. It is the only known record we have of his communications during his isolation at Zhoushao and was written six months before he succumbed to pneumonia. Within it, he describes his encounter with the East River Shade, a being of great evil in his faith, and the doom that it brings upon him. His writing is intended for Buddhist scholars, and as such, Western readers may find many of his references difficult to follow. Part of my task as a translator has been to highlight, as best I can, the religious significance of his words. Due to the extraordinary length of his text, I have been forced to heavily abridge his descriptions of day-to-day practice and life, while distilling several of his reported religious experiences which I believe will be of particular interest to readers.

It has been a pleasure and a rare challenge to interpret the varieties of religious experience outlined in this text. It is my hope that readers will be able to gather significant value from these few pages.

-Oscar Clairmount

England, 1872

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The temple is made of wood, and winds from the pass travel uninterrupted through its halls, sometimes shrilly, sometimes softly. It reminds me of stories I was told as a child, of singing wells and whistling caves which trick and trap the people who hear their songs. Perhaps I, too, have been trapped, in a way. The beams flex outward with each gust, and their complaints travel from the central grounds to the farthest living quarters. The wind is cold, even in the summer, and our robes are thin; I was taught to breathe with the building, and to foster a fire within my breast to shield me from Yama's assaults.

The mountains were misty, and my eyesight poor. The silence profound. We were taught to listen to breath, and in so doing, I have learned that everything breathes—the building groans, the trees rustle, the stones ring with each footfall—these breaths are an unspoken but common knowledge to us all.

There are three major rituals and seventeen minor rituals each day, punctuated by two meals when there is food: one in the afternoon, and one in the evening. Pack mule delivery brings the food in each week—rice, mixed occasionally with oats, or vegetable stock for the rare stew. In my previous life, my family would eat meat every day. At first I craved meat, then the fat and muscle withdrew from my bones, my feces became thick and clean, and my eyes began to see through the fog of desire. I craved wine, and I yearned for my wife, and for my little boy, and sometimes these last two would enter my dreams at night, hounding me with questions, pressing my failure deep into my bones. They accused me of abandoning them, of failing my public duties, and fleeing to the temple. “Why would you do this?” they would ask, as they did on my final day at the estate. “Where are you running to?” But these were just the phantoms of my family. As much as I may have wanted to cling to these dreams, such ruminations could not ever reverse my failure in their eyes.

Recognizing these apparitions as apparitions, as reflections of my own desires, is the object of the first daily ritual, taken in silence, gazing down upon the East River in sunrise hues and affirming: this is enough. This ritual was my own, as were all others, in a way. We did not speak there; we were inside ourselves, in constant reflection. There was no real connection between us, as each was there to touch an internal world. None would have considered words sufficient to convey our experiences in that place, and so there was silence.

Even in that place of silence, my apparitions haunted me: you cannot outrun your own conscience. Deep breaths and vows of silence have done nothing to free me of my desire for redemption; instead I have found myself haunted by the ghosts of my past failures, and the East River Shade.

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The seventeen minor rituals are all exercises of deprivation. We decide at seventeen moments in our day to deprive ourselves, and in so doing liberate ourselves from desire. I have seen Brothers bind their arms to their sides for months at a time, or whip themselves bloody as I have been told the Christians do. I have bathed naked in the frigid waters of the East River on many cold winter mornings. I have deprived myself of the pleasures of my body, of my memories alone with my wife, of water, of air, of light. I have replaced those pleasures with horrible pain, to search for a refuge that resides within the mind, a place within which one may escape the body itself. When we take these things from ourselves, what is left? This is our daily investigation, practice, and development: we remove our greed, our ego, our pain, our love, our happiness, our perception, and we rest, enveloped in that emptiness.

Observance within the cave is our second major ritual, daily for one hour. Its walls are lined with lichen, and its air is perpetually damp where the cold mountain air meets its internal heat. The air within the cave is so dense with water that an hour within it leaves oneself drenched and shivering. An experienced practitioner can meditate within its confines for days without ever growing thirsty. On the occurrence of the River Vigil, often in the frigid winter cold, a single acolyte is selected to enter the cave in preparation for the night of prayer. This year, I was presented with the honor. Nine days before the River Vigil, scheduled by the divination of Headmaster Chiang, I began my fast and entered the cave for a prolonged observation.

The cave is our holiest site. It is written that Bodhisattva Manjusri meditated within it for nine years prior to his Liberation. It is in honor of this feat that we take nine days of fast within its confines, sating ourselves only on the waters suspended in its air. I took my place with no great ceremony. Within several hours of my isolation, I began to hear tormenting voices, begging me to break my focus. The usual pain in my back and hips from maintaining posture turned to stabbing needles, pinpoints of light began to swim across my vision, and it took the strongest self-beration to restrain myself from fleeing the cave in shame. I told myself, “Perhaps these are the very torments the venerable Gautama Buddha himself suffered at the hands of Yama

underneath the Bodhi tree.” I stood, stretched my aching limbs, and returned to my practice. Before long, I heard the ominous rustle of insects drawn to my warmth; they crawled over my bare skin. It took all of my strength to not recoil. Such beings do not harm the still. They do not harm the calm.

In such isolation, our karma becomes our existence. I heard the voice of my little boy crying out for me, deep within the cave. It took real strength not to run to him. I saw the face of my wife, glittering eerily before my closed eyelids, almost real enough to touch. I saw my home, filled with the women with whom I was dishonest; I watched them rummage through my drawers in search of the money I took, long since spent on pretty, petty things. I saw the stern faces of the constables and prefects looking at me from their desks with dispassion, and felt once more the twisted, disgusting shame uncoil itself from my bowels and grasp at my throat as I stammered my wordless excuses to the stones. I saw my own reflection in the cave walls, reflected in the water droplets, shimmering in the sparks of light conjured before me, slipping from moment to moment in its constantly changing but constant form. I watched my son grow old and die before my eyes and be reborn again, with never once a look in my direction. I watched my wife cry and grow silent, my home weather and crumble. The three times became one: past, present, and future merged into a single moment of suffering and hatred, stewing in the cold, wet hell I had created for myself.

These visions are manifestations of our desires. In order to attain Enlightenment, we must release them. When we cling to the disgust that we hold for ourselves, we deny the possibility of change. With a powerful calm I regarded my visions in peace. I allowed my corruption, my familial neglect, my fears and greed and disgusting nature to wash over me, and in so doing I released them. Warmth spread throughout my body. I felt the cave around me shimmer with golden light. I felt ecstasy bubbling up spine to my throat, pushing out against my forehead and crown, surging with force. It was a glorious feeling, but fleeting: the ecstasy flowed through me only—to my horror—to slip out of my body and vanish. In a moment the warmth was gone, my limbs had numbed, my breath turned ragged, and the visions of my wife and son rushed back to me with renewed force, dragging me back to the crawling damp of the cave. To my guilt and despair.

It was an eternity I spent within that state. I believe the sickness that plagues me began there and has not left. I lost the fire in my breath and allowed Yama to enter my heart, for I am

no Bodhisattva—I have seen my karma and felt its judgment: consignment to death in shame. They came for me on the ninth day, frozen as I was in a moment of pure agony, and lifted me up, honoring me with their warm grasp and bright eyes. They believed that upon completing nine days within the cave I had become Enlightened, as had Bodhisattva Manjusri, but if there was an Enlightened Being within the cave, I am the shell it left behind.

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Ignorant of my condition, they dressed me in dry robes and carried me to the river on a funereal palanquin, flanking me with torches in hand for the riverside lamps they were to light. The path from Zhoushao winds down along the mountain face, and is at times treacherous in the winter, especially at night. Several times I tumbled from the palanquin at the misplaced foot of one of my bearers, and I lay there limply, with bruises spreading across my face and body, only to be lifted once more.

The voices in my head subsided. With the visions long gone, I began to return to the world around me, save for the horrible cold I still felt within my chest. The withered trees along the path created spider-patterns on my arms, shading me from the full moon's intensity. Its brightness behind the trees shocked me. To my darkened eyes the midnight expanse felt clearer than day—more vivid than my usual walks down to the river. Prayer at the river at sunset is our third and final daily ritual. We offer our prayer to the procession of the dead to their next lives, offering them our words of comfort and guidance to a more venerable existence.

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They left me standing on a mat on a hill overlooking the river and crossed it on a small boat to light the lamps on the opposing side. My brethren have performed this ritual for hundreds of years. The prayer for the passage of the dead is etched upon our lips and vibrates, eternally unspoken, within our throats. The creaking wood of our temple is its own prayer, as are our footfalls and our breaths. This prayer is the only good that has come of my life, and it is what I cling to in what I fear will be my last days.

I saw lamps light the path across the river, so that firelight and moonlight mixed on the rippling, placid surface. My brethren returned home by another route, and I did not see them again that night. As I had done hundreds of times before, I sat down upon my mat and looked out across the river, feeling weakened and hollow. As my breath and prayer slowly gained their rhythm, time softened and stretched; it became the ripples of the river, who move but do not

move, the flicker of the lamp flame, which dances perpetually in place. Moments slipped over one another with a liquid playfulness; the future, present, and past became indistinguishable; my heart and breaths joined the water's ripples and flames' dance in ushering time back upon itself, knotting together to create one flicker of breath and pulse. My prayer proceeded in silence, as a light mist descended over the river, diffusing the lamplight, allowing the damp cold to return to my bones, pressing into my heart, compressing my lungs as they struggled to breathe.

It was in this state that I first became aware of the being floating across the water, suspended between myself and the lamplights. It was at first a spot of darkness, and then an emptiness which took form; tall, thin, ragged, blurred by distance and mist, it hung motionless, ethereal. I felt an instinctive recognition and fear. Monks within our temple have spoken for centuries of its visitations, disturbing the meditations of brothers within their cells or terrifying young acolytes within the cave. Undoubtedly, it was the East River Shade, a manifestation of Yama, sent to collect souls for judgment. To see Yama is a mark of supreme meditative attainment, but it is also cause for terror: his judgment is harsh, and his presence on the night of the East River Vigil was an ill omen. At great distance the being emanated a chilling horror, ushering all light and life in the world onward to the next, leaving behind the cold, the dark, and me. I fought to resume my practice as I felt terror push up from my mat and reach icy claws into my stomach. With the last vestige of my will I intensified my silent prayer, lips taking the shape of words I had never spoken, throat vibrating with an empty air I had never shaped:

*Yama, stay your hand from these souls that pass below you: tempt them not to your darkness. O souls, recognize that you are freed of the four aggregates, that you are freed from the desire, pain, and suffering of your past life. May you find a new life that is fortuitous. May you find in that life freedom from samsara and peace in all things. Dīpankara smiles upon you from the past. Gautama Buddha smiles upon you from the present. Maitreya smiles upon you from the future.*

I saw below human shapes reflected in the water by the intermixing of moonlight and firelight, as all souls must be formed. Their procession advanced from ripple to ripple, the water determining their gait—ever in place, ever advancing—their destination I know not where. Over

these pallid creatures loomed the shade, their shepherd, its darkness an expanse from which I recoiled, for in its shape surely lurked death. I turned my gaze fearfully from the shade to its flock, only to know a deeper terror: among those soft forms I recognized myself, stepping lightly from silvery ripple to ripple with a wan smile. My form emanated the warmth of an Enlightened being, vibrating the air, the water, and the mist around it in lotus patterns. The beauty of my Enlightened form taunted me—my terror and cold the price of its liberation—I no different from my son and wife—cast aside.

I turned away from my apparition in fear. I stood from my spot and looked away, shattering the rhythms to which I had bound myself. It was a fear and a shame, and an understanding that I *deserved* my failure. That to complete my duties was beyond my karma. But it was beyond me to even accept this failure with grace: rapidly my shame gave way to a desperation for redemption. I frantically returned my gaze to the river, but the shade was gone, as was its procession. Tense with fear, I returned to my seat and offered my prayer once more, first in silence, and then with my true voice, urging—demanding—that procession return to me. My own soul was out among the dead, bereft of my prayers. I had looked upon the dead and failed to protect them. I had cast them aside in fear and shame, and in this failure I was caught, shivering and hollow, repeating my prayer endlessly and hopelessly, for the procession did not return.

It was in this state that my brothers found me at sunrise, hoarsely rasping my prayer. They looked upon me with confusion, wondering what accursed Enlightenment I had found. It took three days of food and hot baths before I could walk again, but since that time I have been beset by a terrible cold in my bones, and a harsh, wet cough.

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Within several weeks of the River Vigil, I returned to the city to seek medical care. I left with the cart which brings our food offerings each week. I have resumed eating meat, which now upsets my stomach horribly, and have spoken sparsely, though my voice sounds strange. I have taken daily doses of ginseng tea and have ceased my frigid daily baths, which my doctor insists are a poison. I know that none of these things will save me. I know that I have been judged and marked for death. Each day my cough intensifies, to the point that I can no longer comfortably sit and meditate. My body is still filled with the frigid waters of the cave, my mind with the pain and shame of my failure. My consolation is my prayer, which I delivered to the souls of the dead but once, and which I now repeat for myself ceaselessly.

*Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form*, it is written, but I am these words' negation. I am an emptiness without form, a point within an expanse, in whose coldness I have been judged, and am now left alone to death, abandoned by my Enlightened soul. I will spend my last days with my family, bearing my shame.

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