

Spring 2020 Arts of Asia Lecture Series
Visions of the Afterlife in Asia
Sponsored by the Society for Asian Art

Dying While Live and Living While Dead: Themes Across Asian Afterlife Beliefs

Christopher M. Moreman, California State University, East Bay

January 24, 2020

While death is a certainty for all humankind, the mystery of just what happens next has resulted in a wide range of ideas across time and cultures. Some similarities do appear, especially in early cultures, but differences emerge as societies become more complex and seek to distinguish themselves from others, or as philosophical debate becomes increasingly rigorous.

Ancestor cults can be found in the ancient Middle East, in India, and China, just as can stories of those seeking to attain literal immortality. Resurrection emerges among the Jews as a reaction to the imposition of external (Greek) ideas, while reincarnation appears in India to explain the inequalities of an increasingly complex society. Philosophical arguments engage with details of just what might be resurrected or reincarnated, and what forms these might take, and further encounters with foreign ideas shape and reshape afterlife conceptions.

Alongside thoughts about what happens after death, practically universal human experiences of a spirit world, filled with ghosts, demons, heavens, and hells, persist regardless of whatever orthodox beliefs might prevail at any point in time.

Further Reading:

- D. Chidester, *Patterns of Transcendence: Religion, Death, and Dying*. Wadsworth, 2002.
D. Cohn-Sherbok and C. Lewis, Eds., *Beyond Death*. MacMillan, 1995.
H. Coward, *Life After Death in World Religions*. Orbis, 1997.
J. Davies, *Death, Burial and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity*. Routledge, 1999.
F. Holck, *Death and Eastern Thought*. Abingdon, 1974.
C.M. Moreman, *Beyond the Threshold: Afterlife Beliefs and Experiences in World Religions*. 2nd Ed. Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.
H. Obayashi, Ed., *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*. Greenwood, 1992.
A. Segal, *Life after Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*. Doubleday, 2004.
G. Shushan, *Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations: Universalism, Constructivism, and Near-Death Experience*. Continuum, 2011.

Glossary:

Anatta – in contrast to the Hindu atman, literally, not-self; emphasizing the constant changes of the self over the idea of some permanent essential sameness across time.

Ancestor Cult – any of a range of beliefs and practices found around the world and throughout history involving the veneration of the dead as spiritual members of the ongoing family unit.

Atman – the eternal soul in Hinduism, which incarnates through successive lifetimes until its final reunion with Brahman, with which it shares an essential nature.

Brahman – the primordial stuff of the universe, in Hindu thought, it is the source of all things and that to which all things will one day return.

Dharma/damma – duty, or what one ought to do, in Hinduism and Buddhism, respectively.
Epic of Gilgamesh – likely the earliest recorded tale in human history, it provides the oldest description of the afterlife.

Etimmu – the soul or shade of an individual, which leaves the body after death in the Mesopotamian tradition.

Hsien – an individual who has achieved immortality, either spiritually or physically, through enlightenment derived from any of a variety of techniques described in Taoist texts.

Hun/shen – in early Chinese thought, individuals were composed of multiple spiritual aspects; the hun (a yang aspect) leaves the body at death to become an ancestral shen spirit in heaven.

Jahiliyyah – the age of ignorance; refers to pre-Islamic Arabia and its beliefs in a form of ancestor worship.

Jinn – spirits described in the Qur'an that are said to have been created before humankind; these had been a key source of spiritual insight to the pre-Islamic Arabs.

Karma/kamma – action, in Hinduism and Buddhism, respectively; one is expected to ensure that one's karma/kamma (action) follow one's dharma (duty).

Law of Karma – The supernatural balance between one's actions and what one ought to do, in both Hinduism and Buddhism, that ensures that good deeds result in positive outcomes or rewards and that bad deeds result in suffering or punishment.

Moksha – the realization, in Hinduism, that all things are Brahman, including the self (atman).

Nirvana – the liberation from the suffering of samsara in Buddhism through the realization that all things are temporary and that attachment to anything is pointless.

Pitrloka – World of the Father; the spiritual realm of ancestors who receive proper burial and ritual offerings after death, it is one of many spiritual and physical realms in which one might be reborn in Indian tradition.

P'o/kwei – in early Chinese thought, individuals were composed of multiple spiritual aspects; the p'o (a yin aspect) leaves the body at death to become a dangerous kwei ghost in the underworld.

Pure Land – a heavenly realm just shy of nirvana in which the enlightened Buddhist might enjoy an imaginable paradise.

Rebirth – the birth of a new person in samsara as a result of previous selfish action; preferred by Buddhists over "reincarnation" because of the impermanence of the self through time.

Reincarnation – the transmigration of the self (atman, soul) from one body at death to be born into a new body.

Resurrection – a uniquely Jewish notion that the body and soul will one day be reunited in being returned to life in a paradise on Earth or in heaven.

Samsara – the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, in both Hinduism and Buddhism, in which all things exist and from which escape is only possible by aligning one's actions with what one ought to do.

Sheol – the underworld that appears in the Hebrew Bible, sometimes anthropomorphized, described as a dark hole in the ground into which the dead are bound.

Utnapishtim – an immortal who helps Gilgamesh learn to accept death as unavoidable; comparable to the biblical figure of Noah.

Yellow Springs – the bleak underworld of early Chinese tradition.