

Article

Lessons from Master Hongyi's Experiences with Impermanence for Death Education

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Abstract: This paper explores the life and teachings of the renowned Chinese Buddhist monk Master Hongyi (1880–1942), focusing on his transformative encounters with impermanence and their relevance for contemporary death education. Drawing upon historical records, personal writings, and the accounts of his contemporaries, this study traces Master Hongyi's profound spiritual journey from intense grief and existential crisis to enlightened equanimity in the face of mortality. It examines how his skillful application of Buddhist practices enabled him to find meaning, purpose, and liberation amidst the challenges of aging, illness, and dying. Through an in-depth analysis of Master Hongyi's wisdom and lived experience, this paper proposes the "Hongyi Model", an innovative paradigm for integrating the spiritual, psychological, and artistic dimensions of his approach into modern death education. The findings underscore the transformative potential of Buddhist teachings for fostering a more authentic, meaningful, and spiritually grounded engagement with mortality, offering valuable insights for educators, counselors, and healthcare professionals working in end-of-life care.

Keywords: Master Hongyi; Buddhism; impermanence; death education



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1. Introduction

Death is an inevitable part of the life cycle that all human beings must confront. However, the topic of death continues to be taboo in many modern societies, generating fear, anxiety, and avoidance (Cheng et al. 2019; Gittings 2023; Neimeyer 1994). The inability to openly discuss and come to terms with mortality has significant psychological consequences when facing terminal illness, caring for dying loved ones, or processing grief after bereavement (Committee on Approaching Death and Institute of Medicine 2015). To address this issue, the interdisciplinary field of death education emerged in the 1960s, seeking to provide greater understanding, preparation, and support around end-of-life experiences (McClatchey and King 2015; Fonseca and Testoni 2012; Wass 2004).

Death education takes a multidimensional approach, combining insights from psychology, sociology, medicine, theology, and the humanities to enrich perspectives on mortality. In recent years, scholars have increasingly recognized the valuable contributions that religious and spiritual traditions can make to the discourse around death and dying (Greyson 2006; Vachon et al. 2009). Buddhism, with its sophisticated philosophical understanding of existence and impermanence, offers profound insights that could greatly benefit contemporary death education (Keown 2005; Moon 2020).

The life of influential modern Buddhist monk Master Hongyi (1880–1942) could provide fertile ground for exploring the integration of Buddhist views on impermanence into death education. Master Hongyi's journey, beginning with deep despair upon confronting the death of loved ones and culminating in serene acceptance as he himself approached life's end, poignantly illustrates the Buddhist emphasis on non-attachment, equanimity, and mindfulness.

In particular, Master Hongyi's preparations and state of mind before his death exemplify a transcendent attitude towards life and death, free from fear or regret. In late September 1942, sensing his impending departure from the world, he wrote farewell letters with verses to close friends like Xia Mianzun (夏丌尊) and Liu Zhiping (劉質平), expressing his clear awareness and calm acceptance of his limited time remaining (Chen 2021, p. 1000; Wang 2017). His last words—sorrow and joy intermingled (悲欣交集)—written just days before his passing, further reveal his profound perspective on life, death, and living beings attaining a state of seamless integration and equilibrium (Chen 2021, p. 1002; Qian 1991). With serenity and ease, he faced his own end, embodying the Buddhist understanding of the impermanence of all phenomena.

Moreover, witness accounts from his attending disciples testify to the peace and tranquility Master Hongyi exhibited in his final moments, deeply moving those present (Miaolian 2017). His life and death serve as a example of how Buddhist teachings on non-attachment and impermanence can transform one's perspective, allowing one to confront mortality with calmness and wisdom.

This paper delves into the life experiences and teachings of Master Hongyi, drawing out the insights and practices pertinent to contemporary death education. By examining his experiences before and after embracing monastic life, this study seeks to contribute to the dialogue between Buddhist studies and thanatology, offering new perspectives to those grappling with death anxiety. It is hoped that this exploration will not only provide a deeper understanding of Master Hongyi's teachings on impermanence, but also enrich and diversify the approaches employed in death education today.

2. Development of Impermanence Concept before Entering Monastic Life

In the period prior to his Buddhist ordination, Master Hongyi was known by his secular name, Li Shutong (李叔同), which is used in this section to distinguish between events and mental developments before and after entering monastic life. From age 5 to 39 (1884–1918), Li Shutong's life can be divided into four stages that profoundly shaped his perception and contemplation of impermanence leading up to his ordination. These four stages are as follows: emergence of his sense of impermanence (5–15 years old); the shock of his mother's death, underscoring impermanence (16–26 years old); sedimentation and catharsis of his impermanence feelings (26–36 years old); seeking solutions to deal with impermanence (37–39 years old). The progression through these four phases demonstrates how Li Shutong's encounters with impermanence evolved from initial awareness in childhood to traumatic experiences of loss, before culminating in his active pursuit of Buddhist practice as a means to understand the profundity of existence.

2.1. Stage 1 (5–15 Years Old): Emergence of the Sense of Life Impermanence

Master Hongyi (Li Shutong) was born in 1880 into an elite scholarly family in Tianjin, China. During his early childhood, Li Shutong encountered several experiences that profoundly shaped his understanding of life's impermanence. The most significant event occurred when Li Shutong was just five years old: the passing of his father, Li Shizhen (李世珍). In the autumn of 1930, Master Hongyi recounted to Hu Zhaifan (胡宅梵) the deep impression left upon him by witnessing his father's tranquil demeanor after chanting the Diamond Sutra in his final moments, despite being too young to fully comprehend the loss (Hu 2010).

Li Shutong's early brushes with death were not limited to his father's passing. According to Jin (1997, p. 8), Li Shutong's elder brother Wenjin (who was 50 years older), his nephew, and his nephew's granduncle also passed away in succession during his childhood years. Faced with the repeated loss of relatives, Li Shutong, not yet six years old, often accompanied his nephew's wife to the nearby Wuliang Temple, where she sought solace in learning Buddhist chants from a local scholar. During these visits, Li Shutong learned to recite the "Great Compassion Mantra" and the "Rebirth Mantra" by heart (Jin 1997, p. 8).

The profound impact of these early experiences on Li Shutong's worldview is evident in his later recollections as a Buddhist monk. In 1931, at the age of 51, Master Hongyi confided to his student Cai Guanluo (蔡冠洛) that he had developed an awareness of the suffering inherent in life's impermanence as early as seven or eight years old, an understanding that his wet nurse had dismissed as unsuitable for a child (Cai 2010). Furthermore, according to Hu Zhaifan, Li Shutong composed verses such as "Human life is but the sun over the western hills, wealth and status are like frost upon the grass" during his childhood years, revealing the germination of his reflections on the transient nature of existence and, perhaps, even foreshadowing his eventual renunciation of the secular world (Hu 2010).

While it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which these early experiences directly influenced Li Shutong's existential contemplations during his childhood, it is clear that, as a Buddhist monk, Master Hongyi looked back on these formative events as having played a significant role in shaping his understanding of life's impermanence. Through the lens of his monastic perspective, he recognized the seeds of his spiritual journey in the losses he experienced, the teachings he encountered, and the poetic expressions he composed during his early years.

2.2. Stage 2 (16–26 Years Old): The Deepening Awareness of Impermanence

In April 1905, at the age of 26, Li Shutong experienced his most devastating encounter with impermanence when he lost his mother (Lin 2010). According to the currently available reliable sources, such as Lin (2010) and Chen (2021), Li Shutong's mother died due to illness, although the specific nature of her illness remains uncertain. While Jin (1997) mentioned that she suffered from a lung disease, this claim lacks concrete evidence. In fact, there are limited records detailing the circumstances surrounding his mother's illness.

Tragically, Li Shutong was out purchasing a coffin when his mother passed away, leaving him with a profound sense of regret for not being by her side during her final moments (Feng 2010). The immense grief and sorrow brought about by this loss found expression in several poetic verses Li Shutong dedicated to his mother's memory (Chen 2021, p. 91). In "A Lament for the Passing of Li Jie's Mother (追悼李節母之哀辭)", he wrote, "Sorrow upon sorrow, oh soul of my mother come back to me". Another poem, "A Song of Mourning for Li Jie's Mother by the Students of Shanghai Voluntary Primary School", echoes his deep anguish (上海義務小學學生追悼李節母歌): "The pain of my mother's eternal departure". These verses poignantly convey Li Shutong's profound sense of loss and reluctance to part with his beloved mother.

The impact of this loss on Li Shutong's emotional state was significant. According to his friend and famous writer Feng Zikai (豐子愷), "After losing his mother, he was like a drifting wisp of silk, aimless and rootless" (Feng 2010). Even in retrospect, Li Shutong characterized the days following his mother's passing as filled with constant grief and melancholy, a state that persisted until he became a Buddhist monk (Feng 2010). In despair, he lamented, "With regard to family and hometown, what else was there to cling to" (Feng 2010). Li Shutong changed his name to Li Ai (李哀), signifying that his period of happiness had ended, and he was determined to study abroad in Japan (Lin 2010).

This profound experience of loss and the realization of life's impermanence inflicted deep psychological wounds on Li Shutong. The decision of studying abroad in Japan, perhaps as a way to escape and divert his emotions, marked the beginning of a new chapter in his life where he immersed himself entirely in the realm of art.

2.3. Stage 3 (26–36 Years Old): The Sedimentation and Catharsis of Impermanence Feelings

During his time studying in Japan, Li Shutong immersed himself in various artistic pursuits, focusing on writing, painting, music, and theater. He first joined the poetry group Sui'ou Yinshe (隨鷗吟社) in 1906 and had numerous poems that expressed his sorrow over the decline of the nation, the separation of friends and family, and his lamentations on life's impermanence (Chen 2021). For example, in one of his poems, he wrote, "The homeland is desolate and miserable, the thousand-year-old learning is half-covered

in dust (故國荒涼劇可研，千年舊學半塵埃)”, expressing his deep concern for the nation’s misfortune (Chen 2021, p. 109). These poetic expressions served as an outlet for his growing sense of unease and emotional turmoil, which was further compounded by his struggles with neurasthenia (神經衰弱), which was dropped from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual in 1980 due to evolving understanding in medical diagnostics.

Li Shutong struggled with neurasthenia, a term commonly used in the early 20th century to describe a condition characterized by fatigue, anxiety, and depression. His challenges with this condition started at around age 20 (Hongyi 2010f) and became more severe six months after he moved to Japan in 1906. In correspondence via a letter to his friend Yang Baimin (楊白民), he expressed that his symptoms had deteriorated further (Master Hongyi 2010g).

Despite his personal struggles, Li Shutong found solace and purpose in his artistic endeavors. In late 1906, he founded the Spring Willow Society (春柳社), which played a pivotal role in the development of modern Chinese drama (Lin 2010; Chen 2021). The society’s first performance of *La Dame aux Camélias* in 1907, in which Li Shutong played the lead role of Marguerite, marked a significant shift in Chinese theater, introducing a new dramatic form that diverged from traditional Chinese opera (Jin 1997, p. 96). Li Shutong’s performance garnered high praise from the renowned Japanese drama critic Matsui Shouu (松居松翁), who had extensive exposure to high-level Western theater. Matsui Shouu stated, “It would be more accurate to say that Mr. Li, who played the role of the Camelia Lady, performed exceptionally well. The translation of this script was very pure. Although the makeup was a bit simple, it completely followed Western customs”. He further remarked, “In particular, Mr. Li’s graceful and elegant demeanor is something that Japanese actors cannot compare to” (Bin 2010). This recognition highlighted Li Shutong’s exceptional acting skills and his ability to successfully adapt to Western theatrical conventions and aesthetics.

The Spring Willow Society’s second performance, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (黑奴籲天錄), featured Li Shutong as Mrs. Shelby, an American noblewoman. His portrayal received positive reviews from Japanese dramatists Dohi Shunsho and Ihara Seiseien (Lin 2010). These two performances are considered landmark events in the emergence of modern Chinese spoken drama (Huang 2020).

Li Shutong’s accomplishments in the arts were considerable, yet his personal life was characterized by a profound sense of solitude. Ouyang Yuqian (歐陽予倩), who interacted with him, remarked on the discrepancy between public perception and private reality: “Many people thought him to be a sophisticated and engaging individual; however, his true nature was exceptionally reserved” (Ouyang 2010). Furthermore, health issues frequently troubled Li; records indicate that he sought medical attention more than ten times between 1908 and 1909 (Chen 2021). Details regarding the nature of his illness and the treatments he underwent, however, remain undocumented.

Additionally, in late 1907, Li developed an emotional attachment to a Japanese woman who posed as a model for his paintings, a relationship documented in the scholarly literature (Li 2014, p. 10). Despite the significance of this relationship in his personal life, Li chose not to mention this woman in his writings. Confirming this, even Li’s closest acquaintances rarely discussed her, and when they did, they provided scant details (Jin 1997, p. 89). This omission underscores the private nature of Li Shutong’s personal relationships and adds an element of mystery to his biography.

Li Shutong returned to China at the age of 32 after graduating from the Tokyo Art School, following nearly six years in Japan. Initially, he took a position as a librarian at the Tianjin Model Industrial School before transitioning to a teaching role at the Zhejiang Second Normal School the subsequent autumn. There, Li devoted himself to school affairs and the promotion of literature and the arts until he was 36 (Lin 2010, pp. 48–50).

While Li’s period in Zhejiang appeared professionally stable, his personal reflections during this time reveal a deeper sense of existential unease. His student, Cao Juren (曹聚仁), noted, “This period represented his middle-aged reflections on the impermanence of life,

a concept that distressed him considerably despite finding some solace in artistic creation” (Cao 2010). Indeed, it was during this time that Li composed a series of emotionally charged poems, indicating his internal struggle with life’s fleeting nature.

Among these poems, “Grieving over Autumn (悲秋)” articulates a poignant awareness of the ephemeral nature of existence. The lines “In the mirror, a rosy face surrounded by sorrowful white hair, Time stealthily hastens one’s aging, even a thousand gold pieces, even a thousand gold pieces, cannot buy back youth.” lament the swift passage of time and the transient beauty of life, themes echoed in “Recalling My Childhood (憶兒時)” and the globally resonant “Seeing Someone Off (送別)”, which reflects on the inevitability of farewells. Similarly, “Fallen Flowers落花” profoundly resonates with these sentiments:

“Fluttering, fluttering, fluttering, silently the fallen flowers lay on the ground, turning to mud and dust.

Silent, silent, silent, where has the spring light gone that never returns, forever gone!

Recalling the days of the eastern wind, when beauty competed for bloom.

Soon glory fades and time shifts; spring is over!

Seeing the fallen blossoms off the branch, mourning the fading flower affair. It’s over!

The cycles of spring and autumn follow each other; I reflect on the late days.

Glory and decay are momentary, rise and fall follow a set pattern.

The fleeting years of life are like morning dew, mourning springs from the soil.

Bright colors quickly fade, youth never returns.”

紛紛紛紛紛紛紛紛，紛紛紛紛紛紛紛紛。

惟落花委地無言兮，化作泥塵。

寂寂寂寂寂寂寂寂，寂寂寂寂寂寂寂寂。

何春光長逝不歸兮，永絕消息！

憶東風之日暄，芳菲菲以爭妍。

既垂榮以發秀，條節易而時遷，春殘！

覽落紅之辭枝兮，傷花事其闌珊。已矣！

春秋其代序以遞嬗兮，俛念遲暮。

榮枯不須臾，盛衰有常數。

人生之浮年若朝露兮，泉壤興衰。

朱華易消歇，青春不再來。

These verses not only illustrate Li’s preoccupation with the impermanence of life, but also capture the universal human contemplation of change, decay, and the brevity of youth (Lin 2010, p. 53). The careful examination of Li Shutong’s poetry from this period not only highlights his literary prowess but also provides a deeper understanding of the personal challenges and philosophical reflections that shaped his later life and artistic expressions.

Looking back at this phase, going abroad to study in Japan and returning to teach did not make Li Shutong forget about the events of impermanence in the past. It is no wonder Li characterized the days following his mother’s passing as being filled with unceasing sorrow and melancholy (Feng 2010). Feng Zikai mentioned the following: “At that time I was just 17 or 18 years old, studying at the Hangzhou Normal School. My art teacher Mr. Li seemed to feel the power of art was too weak to satisfy his cravings for spiritual life (Feng 1992, p. 202)”. During his teaching career, Li Shutong yearned for an even higher level of spiritual existence, and seemed to have started seeking answers about life’s meaning.

2.4. Stage 4 (37–39 Years Old): Seeking Solutions to Impermanence

At the age of 37, through the introduction of his friend, Xia Mienzun (夏丏尊), Li Shutong learned from a Japanese magazine about the health benefits of fasting and thought it may help improve his neurasthenia (Chen 2021, p. 223). He decided to undergo a 17 days fasting at the Hupao Temple (虎跑寺) in late November (Chen 2021, p. 239). This fasting experience allowed him to gain an in-depth understanding of monastic life and practices

for the first time, which he found deeply appealing. After returning home, he continued a vegetarian diet, made offerings to the Buddha, and read Buddhist scriptures (Lin 2010, pp. 53–59). Along with continually consulting the scholar Ma Yifu (馬一浮) to learn more about Buddhist philosophy, Li Shutong gained much enlightenment, which also spurred his desire to become a monk (Chen 2021, p. 257).

In early 1918, during the New Year school break, rather than going home, the 39-year-old Li Shutong stayed at Hupao Temple. As described in his memoir, “At that time, I became even more fascinated, and thus resolved to become ordained while thinking of taking the monk residing in the abbot’s quarters as my master (Hongyi 1937)”. However, due to monastic circumstances, he could only take refuge in Buddhism at first. Finally, on July 13 at Hupao Temple, Li Shutong formally had his head tonsured under Master Liaowu. (了悟和尚) (Lin 2010, pp. 60–61).

Li Shutong’s motivation to become ordained was difficult for many people at that time to comprehend, and was often misunderstood. Abandoning his wife and children to become a monk was seen as a shocking violation of traditional values. His friend Jiang Danshu (姜丹書) queried, “As you are a man of deep affections, how could you bear to discard your own kin”? Li Shutong replied, “If one were suffering from typhoid fever and on the verge of death, what could be done (Jiang 2010)?” He was saying when death is imminent, even one’s family cannot help. What concerned Li most was still the impermanence of life. His answer was simple yet profound. Li had deep faith that Buddhism could address this issue of impermanence. As Jiang Danshu observed, “I thus realized his actions were not out of world-weariness or deceit, but rather insights into the transient nature of life and transcendence of the mundane world (Jiang 2010)”.

There is further evidence that becoming a monk was indeed to grapple with impermanence for Li Shutong. At age 52, he reflected:

After my mother’s passing, I became even more aware the body were not my true self but the source of suffering. My subsequent ordination in Hupao temple was entirely due to past causes and conditions. At that time, it seemed I had to be tonsured, though I myself did not know why. Disregarding all other concerns, I only sighed that my wife would not give consent, yet still resolutely departed from worldly life (Cai 2010).

母歿，益覺四大非我，身為苦本。其後出家虎跑，全仗宿因，時若非即披剃不可，亦不知其所然也。一切無他顧慮，惟以妻子不許為憂，竟亦一嘆置之，安然離俗。

This passage indicates that Li had long been tormented internally by the quandary of impermanence, especially following his mother’s death. While it may seem that he turned to Buddhism and monastic life as a means to resolve his existential questions, his own words suggest a deeper, more complex motivation. His ordination was described as an inevitable act, driven by past causes and a profound, albeit not fully understood, compulsion. Despite societal expectations and his wife’s disapproval, he pursued a monastic life, driven by these internal forces rather than a deliberate decision to seek refuge from life’s impermanence. This complexity is further elucidated in a reflection he shared with his master during a solitary retreat at age 46: “I became a monk not for clothing and food, but purely for the fundamental matter of life and death. Even my wife was discarded, let alone friends” (Ding 2010).

In summary, Li Shutong’s perspective on the impermanence of life underwent significant evolution during his secular life leading up to ordination, as illuminated through the four stages explored here. From his intuitive awareness triggered by death in childhood to the intense trauma of losing his mother, followed by restless expression through poetry and finally the active pursuit of Buddhist practice, the theme of impermanence wove through Li Shutong’s experiences and drove his spiritual seeking. His encounters with mortality evolved from initial helplessness to deeper reflection, culminating in the life-altering decision to renounce worldly life. This examination of the origination and development of Li Shutong’s view on life impermanence in his secular years reveals the

extent to which impermanence shaped his path towards ordination. It was both the problem that tormented him through much sorrow and melancholy as well as the gateway to eventual wisdom and liberation.

3. Evolution of Master Hongyi's Perspectives as a Monk

After entering monastic life at age 39, Master Hongyi continued to contemplate and integrate the truth of impermanence through his study of Buddhist scriptures, teachings to people around him, and personal encounters with illnesses and wars. This section will explore how his insight into impermanence kept evolving and was applied during his 24 years as a monk.

3.1. Learning from the Relevant Sutras of Impermanence

After his ordination, Master Hongyi intended to undertake a solitary retreat at Xincheng Beishan (新城貝山) in 1920, with the aim of studying Vinaya texts. However, upon his arrival, he was compelled by circumstances to first focus on chanting and studying the Sutra on Impermanence, continuing this practice until the construction of his living quarters was completed (Chen 2021, p. 313).

He wrote an extensive preface for this sutra, which had been neglected in Chinese Buddhism at the time. In the preface, Master Hongyi explained that the sutra analyzes life impermanence through the three aspects of aging, sickness, and death. Chanting this sutra reminds one of the ever-changing nature of this phenomena, spurring diligent Buddhist practice (Hongyi 2010a). Reciting this sutra can help one progress on the Buddha's path and free oneself from the suffering of impermanence, which is the foremost benefit of learning this sutra (Hongyi 2010a). Master Hongyi was concerned with the suffering of life impermanence since childhood and naturally placed special importance on this sutra. For his deceased parents' Memorial Day, he hand-copied this sutra to dedicate the merit to them (Lin 2010, pp. 66, 70).

Additionally, Master Hongyi's propagating this sutra might have been a way to serve as a response to public critiques of him abandoning his wives and children. As the sutra states (Fó Shuō Wúcháng Jīng 1924–1934, T801, p. 746):

Like trees by the roadside, a brief rest not a lasting stop, horses, carriages, wife and children, will soon be gone.

Like a flock of roosting birds, gathering in the night, but flying away at dawn, death leads to departure from family and friends, as there is separation in life.

譬如路傍樹，暫息非久停，車馬及妻兒，不久皆如是。

譬如群宿鳥，夜聚旦隨飛，死去別親知，乖離亦如是。

This passage eloquently explains Master Hongyi's decision to renounce his worldly life. He, known for his deep emotional connections, often expressed his feelings of melancholy at farewells with friends and family in his poetry. Works such as "Seeing Someone Off (送別)" and "Spring Outing Song" (春游曲) are poignant examples of this. In "Spring Outing Song", he writes, "鶯啼陌上人歸去，花外疏鐘送夕陽" (On the path where orioles sing, people return home; beyond the flowers, sparse bells send off the setting sun), capturing the transient beauty of a moment tinged with the sorrow of parting. This sensitivity to the fleeting nature of life and relationships is deeply connected with his spiritual journey. He perceived the impermanence of all worldly attachments and sought solace in Buddhism, believing that enlightenment offered a lasting refuge far removed from the ephemeral sorrows of earthly life. This understanding led Master Hongyi to embrace a monastic life, wherein he found the peace and sanctuary that the temporal world could not provide.

In the following years, Master Hongyi broadened his scriptural studies substantially. When he turned 51 years old, at a celebratory meal for his friend Xia Mienzun's 45th birthday, Master Hongyi was moved to tears recalling treasured times gone by that could never be regained (Chen 2021, p. 517). He wrote down the two verses about impermanence

and emptiness from the Prajñāpāramitā sutra of Benevolent Kings (仁王般若經) and gave them to Xia Mienzun (Chen 2021, p. 517). The verses explain how all kinds of impermanence in life go against human wishes, leaving ordinary beings ceaselessly distressed. Yet, all arise due to causality, everything being like a phantom. At this time, Master Hongyi seemed to have started employing the “contemplation of conditioned arising” from the Prajñāpāramitā teachings to regard impermanence.

In the final years of Master Hongyi’s life, the Diamond Sutra, one of the Prajñāpāramitā scriptures, was often cited by him when encountering incidents of impermanence. He once said, “the Diamond Sutra is the supreme vehicle, perfectly expressing the ultimate truth and embodying the mark of reality (Hongyi 2010b)”. When he saw a distressed look on his good friend Xia Mienzun’s face, Master Hongyi said, “remember what the Diamond Sutra says—all conditioned phenomena are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow, like dew or lightning. One should contemplate in this way. This is the time for you to awaken (Xia 2010)”. Clearly, Master Hongyi used this Prajñāpāramitā thought to face the impermanence of life, and also to encourage Xia to be positive. At age sixty, Master Hongyi even wrote this verse from the Diamond Sutra to dedicate merit to his mother (Chen 2021, p. 881).

3.2. Integrating the View of Impermanence into Daily Life and Practice

After becoming ordained, Master Hongyi suffered from serious illness on multiple occasions. This section reviews Master Hongyi’s mindset and methods when facing mortality, contrasting it with the helplessness and grief towards impermanence before ordination.

Three years after ordination, at age 43 (1922), Master Hongyi contracted severe dysentery. He told the monk Jishan (寂山):

Minor illnesses may be treated, but major ones should be left for death. Since this is a grave disease, it is better to let death take its course. I only ask that the Venerable, when my end is near, lock the room door and invite several monks to chant Buddha’s name for me. After I breathe my last beyond six hours, wrap my body in bedding and cast it into the river, to form affinities with aquatic life (Yinhong 2010).

小病從醫，大病從死，今是大病，從他死好。惟求師尊，俟吾臨終時，將房門扃鎖，請數師助念佛號，氣斷逾六時之後，即以所臥被褥纏裹，送投江心，結水族緣。

Confronting the prospect of death, his mindset relied completely on rebirth in the Pure Land through Buddha-remembrance. Thus, he handled funeral arrangements in a detached manner, even aspiring to connect with beings in the water. Fortunately, Master Hongyi eventually recovered.

At 45 (1924), he contracted chill–heat illness (a condition characterized by alternating episodes of chills and fever, similar to malaria) and blood deficiency in Quzhou (衢州) due to an unclean environment. Though his health gradually improved, his existing neurasthenia worsened severely. Facing this, Master Hongyi’s approach was “single-mindedly reciting the Buddha’s name, no longer engaging in vexatious tasks (Chen 2021, p. 387)”. In subsequent years, illnesses persisted, especially worsening neurasthenia. In 1930, sharing a ship with the military and unable to truly rest amidst various pressures and filth, his nerves were severely damaged. Residing at the Qingfu Monastery (慶福寺), which often held military drills, the noise and unclean chaos led Master Hongyi to remark “in my life I have not experienced such aggravating circumstances (Hongyi 2010c)”. At that time, he suffered from a weakened body and mind, trembling hands, blurred vision, loss of consciousness, and difficulty lifting his arms (Chen 2021, p. 509). These were very trying circumstances. However, Master Hongyi wisely recognized his suffering as retribution for past negative karma, saying “although physically and mentally subjected to all kinds of misery, my progress on the Path has increased substantially. The Buddha said that the eight kinds of suffering are the eight teachers, truly an accurate conclusion (Hongyi

2010c)”. This acceptance and understanding of suffering not only exemplified his deep Buddhist faith but also marked a significant deepening of his spiritual practice.

At 52 (1931), Master Hongyi contracted high fever from malaria in Wenzhou (溫州) that made his body feel like it was on fire. At this time, he single-mindedly recited the Verses of Aspiration from the Chapter on the Practices and Vows of Samantabhadra (普賢行願品偈贊) without ceasing, vowing to be reborn in the Western Pure Land (Lin 2010, p. 100). While chanting wholeheartedly, he suddenly entered an unusual state and said “mountains or land disappeared in my mind, objects or self either”, and also mentioned his body and mind felt refreshed (Cai 2010). Once again facing the threat of death, Master Hongyi not only remained focused on his Pure Land aspiration, but channeled the experience to enter deeper concentrative states, increasing his confidence in the Buddha’s teachings.

In December next year (1932), Master Hongyi wrote an article, *The Very End of Life* (人生之最後), mainly offering counsel for sickness and dying drawn from ancient Buddhist adepts and his own experiences (Hongyi 2010d). This outlined Master Hongyi’s advice for how one may remain unperturbed when gravely ill or dying. It emphasizes the primary practices of Buddha-recitation and letting go of attachments (Hongyi 2010d). The most important part is this passage (Hongyi 2010d):

By wholeheartedly focusing on Buddha-recitation and aspiring for rebirth in the West, if one’s life is destined to ending, rebirth will certainly be attained. However, if life has not yet ended, though one aspires for rebirth, the illness can in fact quickly improve, because the mind is focused with utmost sincerity, thus eradicating negative karma from past lives.

專意念佛，一心希冀往生西方。能如是者，如壽已盡，決定往生。如壽未盡，雖求往生而病反能速愈，因心至專誠，故能滅除宿世惡業也。

Master Hongyi refrained from the perspectives of life being finished or not yet finished. Letting go and wholehearted Buddha-recitation when one’s life is ending enables rebirth in the Pure Land. Otherwise, it facilitates the elimination of negative karma and reduced karmic retribution if life continues. Not adopting this approach will only lead to anxiety and terror, hindering rebirth or aggravating illness (Hongyi 2010d). Master Hongyi advised the same wholehearted recitation and letting go whether the sickness was severe or mild. Medicines could be taken but not treated as cures, for he said “Amitabha Buddha is the unsurpassed king of physicians. To fail to rely on him is utter foolishness. The word “Amituofo” is sublime medicine. To fail to take it is a grave mistake (Hongyi 2010d)”. Regardless of illness severity, entrusting body and mind to Amitabha and single-minded recitation are most crucial. If life is not meant to end, negative karma will naturally diminish and health will improve.

At 56 (1935), in early December, Master Hongyi traveled to the countryside for Dharma propagation. Due to unsanitary accommodation, he again contracted a major illness, a severe fever internally and extremely contagious sores externally (Hongyi 2010e). In just one day, the sores rotted away over half of the flesh on his lower arm, oozing thick blood. The infection spread to his upper arm as well, gradually rotting away the flesh. Enormous sores also erupted on his feet, causing severe swelling. Master Hongyi said, “Never in my life have I experienced such ordeals (Hongyi 2010e)”. He was delirious from the raging fever, while the external sores were festering and rotting his limbs. For several days, he was on the brink of death (Hongyi 2010e). However, just as elucidated in *The Very End of Life*, Master Hongyi skillfully let go of everything and focused wholeheartedly on Buddha-remembrance to face the dire situation. Master Hongyi even asked the visiting monk Guangqia (廣洽), “Don’t ask me if I’m getting better, ask if I’m reciting the Buddha’s name or not (Wanquan 2010)”. This demonstrated the Master’s powerful faith in Amitabha Buddha. Since his karma was not yet exhausted, once the karmic retribution lessened, the critical illness turned around and he recovered. Right up until his passing at age 63, Master Hongyi never suffered another major sickness.

At 58 (1937), when Master Hongyi traveled to Xiamen for Dharma propagation, chaotic wartime conditions arose in September. Though urged to flee, Master Hongyi said “To protect the Buddha’s teachings, do not fear artillery shells” and “Should turmoil occur, I am willing to sacrifice myself (Lin 2010, p. 134)”. This shows how even amidst turbulent times, Master Hongyi’s personal conduct remained pure and unsullied. He was fully prepared to sacrifice himself for the sake of Buddhism, facing impermanent circumstances with ease, completely unattached to his life. In the years after this, he often told people “always remember to recite the Buddha’s name while working to save the nation; also saving the nation must involve reciting the Buddha’s name (Lin 2010, p. 149)”.

At 59 (1938), Master Hongyi felt his remaining time was short, telling Xia Mienzun “similar to the setting sun, brilliantly red before swiftly sinking in the West. My life is also thus, worldly years nearing their end, let this be the final memento (Xia 2010)”. At 60 (1939), he repeatedly told others his famous deathbed verse (Shi 2021): “Whither am I going? Vast emptiness beyond speech. The spring blossoming flowers, the full moon in the sky”. Four months before his passing, Master Hongyi wrote a letter to his lay disciple, Gong Shengxin (龔勝信), informing him of his impending death and admonishing him to strictly adhere to the Buddhist precepts (Chen 2021, p. 994; Jin 1997, p. 663). On October 13, 1942, Master Hongyi passed away at 63, having predicted the arrival of his life’s end, writing farewell letters to some friends beforehand, and leaving behind death poems (Lin 2010, p. 154). Before his departure, Master Hongyi meticulously orchestrated every aspect of his final arrangements, displaying not a trace of fear. He took the initiative to instruct his attendant, Master Miaolian (妙蓮), on the specifics of managing his posthumous affairs and passed on his will to him (Chen 2021, pp. 1002–3; Jin 1997, p. 666). In the closing years of his life, Master Hongyi serenely faced imminent death with a profound sense of peace and readiness.

In review, when confronting impermanence after ordination, Master Hongyi initially relied on Buddha-recitation, then changed to the Verses of Aspiration, before returning to Amitabha-recitation, but his aspiration for the Western Pure Land remained constant. Not only were major illnesses no impediment, but with each he made progress and reflected afterward, even attaining concentrative states. For all impermanence in life—whether sickness, turmoil, or death—Master Hongyi’s unwavering secret weapon was wholeheartedly letting go, reciting the Buddha’s name, and aspiring for rebirth. He also said one should always prepare provisions for the end of life, otherwise one would be frantic in the final moments (Hongyi 2010d). Thus, being able to face impermanence with equanimity certainly requires regular Buddhist practice and learning. In the end, Master Hongyi’s serene and predicted passing demonstrated the reliability of his methods, thoroughly accomplishing what he had set out to resolve regarding the impermanence of life when becoming ordained.

4. Insights from Master Hongyi’s Life Experiences for Death Education

Current death education practices have made progress in areas like grief counseling and death anxiety reduction (Neimeyer et al. 2011; Harrawood et al. 2011). However, the integration of spiritual perspectives represents an area needing further investigation (Kastenbaum 2000). Buddhism’s reflections on impermanence and existence can substantially enrich death education. This study elucidates significant insights from Master Hongyi’s life experiences that could inform contemporary death education practices.

4.1. Master Hongyi’s Transformation

Master Hongyi’s life journey, particularly his profound transformation from the traumatic grief following his mother’s death to the enlightenment and transcendence he attained after ordination, provides invaluable insights for the field of death education. His experiences underscore the crucial role of confronting impermanence in facilitating personal growth and renewal in the face of loss.

The sudden passing of Master Hongyi's mother when he was 26 years old plunged him into a state of intense sorrow and existential crisis (Chen 2021). As his friend and famous writer Feng Zikai observed, "After losing his mother, he was like a drifting wisp of silk, aimless and rootless" (Feng 2010). This traumatic bereavement shattered Master Hongyi's world, rendering him unable to find solace in his previous life and pursuits. His profound grief and disorientation following this loss echo the experiences of many individuals struggling to cope with the death of a loved one.

Theories of grief counseling and post-traumatic growth (PTG) provide a framework for understanding Master Hongyi's transformative journey. PTG refers to the positive psychological changes that can occur in the aftermath of highly challenging life circumstances, such as the death of a significant other (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004b). Researchers have identified several domains of PTG, including a greater appreciation of life, more meaningful interpersonal relationships, increased personal strength, changed priorities, and a richer existential and spiritual life (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996). Master Hongyi's experiences following his mother's death and his subsequent spiritual pursuit exemplify this process of post-traumatic growth.

Faced with the reality of impermanence and the limitations of worldly life, Master Hongyi embarked on a quest for deeper meaning and understanding (Birnbaum 2017). His decision to become monastic and devote himself to Buddhist practice can be seen as a manifestation of the existential and spiritual growth that often characterizes PTG. By confronting the truth of impermanence head-on, Master Hongyi was able to transcend his initial despair and find a new path towards personal transformation.

Master Hongyi's journey highlights the importance of directly engaging with the reality of death and loss, rather than avoiding or suppressing these experiences. His honest grappling with the pain of his mother's passing and his subsequent spiritual awakening demonstrate the potential for profound growth that can emerge from the depths of grief. This insight is particularly relevant for death education, which seeks to help individuals develop the skills and perspectives needed to navigate the challenges of mortality.

Moreover, Master Hongyi's life story underscores the value of faithfully recording and reflecting on one's experiences with death and loss. The detailed accounts of his emotional struggles and spiritual breakthroughs, preserved in his own writings and the recollections of his contemporaries, offer a rich resource for understanding the transformative potential of confronting impermanence. By studying and sharing such authentic narratives, death educators can help others to see the possibilities for growth and renewal in the face of life's most difficult passages.

Overall, Master Hongyi's remarkable journey from the depths of grief to the heights of spiritual realization provides a powerful case study for the field of death education. His experiences illustrate the transformative potential of directly engaging with the reality of impermanence and the importance of finding meaning and purpose in the face of loss. By faithfully recording and reflecting on such experiences, we can gain invaluable insights into the processes of post-traumatic growth and the pathways towards personal renewal in the face of life's greatest challenges.

4.2. Embracing Impermanence through Personal Illness

Throughout his monastic life, Master Hongyi encountered numerous serious illnesses that tested his physical, mental, and spiritual resilience. However, rather than succumbing to despair or self-pity, he approached these challenges as opportunities for spiritual growth and realization. By applying Buddhist wisdom and practices to the experience of illness, Master Hongyi demonstrated a unique and inspiring way of transforming suffering into a path of awakening. His experiences are particularly relevant in the context of facing death, as illness often serves as a poignant reminder of life's impermanence and the inevitability of mortality.

4.2.1. Mindfulness and Buddha-Recitation: Cultivating Equanimity and Resilience

One of the key aspects of Master Hongyi's approach to illness was his practice of mindfulness and Buddha-recitation. Even in the midst of intense physical suffering, he remained committed to maintaining a state of present-moment awareness and spiritual devotion. By focusing his mind on the repetition of Amitabha Buddha's name, he was able to anchor himself in a sense of peace and stability, and cultivate a deep sense of equanimity in the face of adversity.

Research in psychology and neuroscience has shown that mindfulness practices, such as meditation and focused attention, can have significant benefits for mental health and well-being. Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have been found to be effective in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as improving overall quality of life in individuals with chronic illnesses (Gotink et al. 2015; Hilton et al. 2017; Niazi and Niazi 2011). By cultivating a non-judgmental awareness of the present moment, mindfulness practices can help individuals develop greater emotional regulation, resilience, and acceptance in the face of challenging circumstances (Kabat-Zinn 2003; Park and Pyszczynski 2019). Master Hongyi's practice of Buddha-recitation can be seen as a form of focused attention meditation, which involves concentrating the mind on a single object or phrase. This practice has been shown to have similar benefits to other forms of mindfulness meditation, such as reducing stress and promoting relaxation (Bostock et al. 2019; Jain et al. 2007). Moreover, the devotional aspect of Buddha-recitation can provide an additional source of spiritual support and comfort, helping individuals to find meaning and purpose in the midst of suffering.

From a psychological perspective, Master Hongyi's approach to illness can be understood through the lens of resilience and post-traumatic growth. Resilience refers to the ability to adapt and cope effectively in the face of adversity, while post-traumatic growth involves the experience of positive psychological changes as a result of struggling with challenging life circumstances (Brooks et al. 2020; Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004a). Master Hongyi's ability to maintain a sense of peace, purpose, and spiritual connection in the midst of illness can be seen as a manifestation of his remarkable resilience and capacity for growth in the face of adversity.

4.2.2. Finding Meaning and Purpose in the Midst of Suffering

One of the most striking aspects of Master Hongyi's approach to illness was his ability to find deep meaning and spiritual significance in the midst of his suffering. Rather than viewing his physical afflictions as mere obstacles or misfortunes, he saw them as precious opportunities for spiritual growth, self-reflection, and transformation.

This perspective resonates strongly with the ideas of existential and humanistic psychology, which emphasize the human capacity for finding meaning and purpose even in the face of life's greatest challenges. In particular, Viktor Frankl's logotherapy asserts that the primary motivation in human life is the search for meaning, and that even in the direst circumstances, individuals have the freedom to choose their attitude and response to suffering (Frankl 1992; Wong 2016).

For Master Hongyi, the significance he derived from his illness was deeply intertwined with his fervent dedication to the Buddhist path. He approached his physical and mental sufferings not merely as burdens, but as unique opportunities for practice and profound self-transformation. This perspective allowed him to perceive his ailment not as a mere obstacle, but as a pivotal spiritual crucible. In 1930, when Master Hongyi faced a severe illness that presented both internal and external symptoms and brought him to the brink of death, he remarked "This is an experience I have never encountered before in my life, lasting nearly half a year and bringing me nine deaths and one life. Although my body endured great pain, I gained substantial benefits and unparalleled real-world experience in Dharma. Indeed, as the Buddha said, the eight sufferings are the eight great teachers, a statement of precise and accurate determination" (Hongyi 2010c).

This ability to find transcendent meaning and purpose in the face of suffering is a hallmark of what humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow called “self-actualization”: the realization of one’s fullest potential and the pursuit of higher values and goals beyond mere self-gratification (Maslow 1971). For Master Hongyi, self-actualization took the form of his tireless dedication to the Buddhist path and his commitment to embodying the virtues of wisdom, compassion, and equanimity in all circumstances.

4.2.3. Cultivating a Positive State of Mind: The Role of Faith and Vows

Master Hongyi’s approach to coping with illness through faith and vows demonstrates a profound application of positive psychology. This branch of psychology, as identified by Seligman (2011), focuses on the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive, emphasizing attributes like optimism, hope, and resilience. Master Hongyi’s deep commitment to his spiritual practice served not only as a method for navigating physical ailments, but also as a pathway to psychological resilience and well-being.

As Master Hongyi once articulated:

By focusing one’s thoughts on the Buddha and harboring the single-minded aspiration for rebirth in the Western Paradise, one can achieve such an end. Should one’s time on earth conclude, rebirth is certain. Conversely, if one’s time has not yet ended, though one wishes for rebirth, the illness may instead quickly dissipate. This occurs as the intense and sincere concentration of the mind eradicates the negative karma accrued over past lives (Hongyi 2010d).

His unwavering belief in the transformative power of mindfulness practice (the recitation of Buddha’s name) and the aspiration for rebirth in the Western Pure Land exemplify a remarkable utilization of faith as a tool for personal growth and emotional stability. This practice allowed him to transform the adversity of illness into an opportunity for spiritual deepening, illustrating the principle that one’s mindset can significantly influence their experience of suffering. The notion that intense focus and sincere belief can mitigate the effects of negative karma underscores the potential for mental states to impact physical health and recovery.

In the context of Master Hongyi’s life and teachings, this synthesis of faith, vows, and positive psychological principles serves as a powerful testament to the capacity of the human spirit to transcend the confines of physical affliction through spiritual and psychological fortitude. His example offers invaluable insights into how faith and focused intention can serve as vital components in cultivating a resilient and optimistic state of mind, providing a source of strength and solace in the face of life’s inevitable challenges.

4.3. End-of-Life Care: Master Hongyi’s Embodiment

As a Buddhist monk who deeply contemplated and consciously prepared for his own death, Master Hongyi’s end-of-life journey offers invaluable insights into how Buddhist principles and practices can be integrated into the realm of palliative and hospice care. His remarkable equanimity, mindfulness, and spiritual devotion in the face of impending death serve as a powerful testament to the transformative potential of Buddhist teachings in helping individuals achieve a peaceful and meaningful end-of-life experience.

4.3.1. Master Hongyi’s Preparations and Passing

Master Hongyi’s approach to his own end-of-life care, as revealed through the detailed account of his final days, provides a useful model for integrating Buddhist principles and practices into the realm of palliative and hospice care. His journey from sensing his impending passing to his peaceful departure is marked by a series of deliberate preparations, a strong emphasis on spiritual practice, and a profound acceptance of impermanence (Chin 1992; Jin 1997, pp. 661–75), offering valuable insights into the potential for a more holistic and compassionate approach to supporting individuals through the dying process.

As Master Hongyi sensed his impending death, he engaged in a series of deliberate preparations that reflected his deep understanding of impermanence and his commitment

to facing the end of life with clarity and grace. He wrote farewell letters to a select circle of close friends and disciples, among them notable figures like Xia Mianzun (夏丌尊) and Liu Zhiping (劉質平). The essence of these letters was encapsulated in a couple of poetic verses he chose to share, which illustrate his philosophical stance and emotional state as he faced the end of his life (Chen 2021, p. 1000; Wang 2017):

The friendship of gentlemen is as pure as water; Grasping merely at appearances,
even a whisper's distance turns into a thousand miles.

Whither am I going? Vast emptiness beyond speech; The blossoming flowers in
spring, the full moon in the sky.

君子之交，其淡如水；執象而求，咫尺千里。

問余何適，廓爾亡言；花枝春滿，天心月圓。

These letters were more than mere farewells; they were his final lessons, steeped in the wisdom of impermanence and detachment. The verses beautifully capture Master Hongyi's tranquil acceptance of life's fleeting nature and the ephemeral quality of relationships, underscoring his belief that genuine bonds surpass the realm of the physical and material. Furthermore, they express Master Hongyi's own sense of a life well-lived—blossoming like a flower and coming to fruition as perfectly as a full moon (Fu 2010). This imagery not only indicates the completeness of his journey but also provides guidance and encouragement for friends and disciples.

In addition to these farewell letters, Master Hongyi took a significant step in his end-of-life preparations by writing his will and entrusting it to Master Miaolian on October 8 1942. In this document (Miaolian and Sengrui 2010), he provided clear instructions regarding the handling of his death and funeral arrangements, emphasizing the importance of simplicity and non-interference. According to the account of his final days, Master Hongyi requested that his body be cremated and his ashes divided into two portions: one to be enshrined at the Putong Pagoda of Chengtian Temple, and the other at the Putong Pagoda of Kaiyuan Temple. He also specified that his body should remain in his room for a period of time after his passing, depending on the weather conditions, before being moved to Chengtian Temple for cremation. These detailed instructions reflect Master Hongyi's wish for a simple and unadorned approach to his funeral, in line with his understanding of the impermanent nature of the physical body.

In addition, Master Hongyi offered detailed guidance to Master Miaolian on how to support him spiritually in his final moments. He requested assistance with reciting specific Buddhist texts and mantras, such as the Huayan Sutra: Praise for Samantabhadra's Actions and Vows 華嚴經普賢行願品贊 and Namó Amitabha 南無阿彌陀佛, emphasizing the importance of timing and approach. These instructions reveal the central role of spiritual practice in Master Hongyi's end-of-life care and his view of death as a crucial opportunity for liberation and rebirth in the Pure Land.

As his condition continued to deteriorate, Master Hongyi remained committed to his spiritual path. On 12 October 1942, when urged by Master Miaolian to take medicine and prolong his life, he responded with a clear affirmation of his readiness for death and his aspiration for rebirth in the Western Pure Land (Miaolian and Sengrui 2010). He gently admonished his attendant, reminding him of the Buddhist understanding of impermanence and the importance of supporting the dying process rather than clinging to life (Chin 1992; Miaolian and Sengrui 2010).

In his final hours on October 13, Master Hongyi received visits from fellow monastics and lay disciples who came to pay their respects and offer support. His passing at 8:00 p.m. that night is described as peaceful, with Master Hongyi resting in an auspicious posture, as illustrated in Figure 1. Master Hongyi was surrounded by his disciples and accompanied by the recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name (Chin 1992; Miaolian and Sengrui 2010).



Figure 1. Master Hongyi’s peaceful passing in auspicious posture.

4.3.2. Evaluating Master Hongyi’s Death Acceptance through Psychological Frameworks

Master Hongyi’s remarkable equanimity and acceptance in the face of death, as evidenced by his final words, actions, and the accounts of those around him, provide a compelling case study for evaluating his level of death acceptance through the lens of psychological frameworks. By applying established theoretical models and drawing on relevant research findings, we can gain a deeper understanding of the factors that contributed to Master Hongyi’s peaceful and meaningful end-of-life experience.

One reliable and widely used tool for assessing an individual’s level of death anxiety is the Templer Death Anxiety Scale (DAS) (Templer 1970; Royal and Elahi 2011). Comprising 15 items, the scale delves into various facets of death-related fears, encompassing apprehensions about the unknown, dread of suffering, and the sorrow of parting from loved ones. Research leveraging the DAS consistently reveals that individuals with profound religious or spiritual convictions often exhibit significantly lower levels of death anxiety compared to those without such frameworks (Fortner and Neimeyer 1999; Harding et al. 2005).

Applying the DAS to Master Hongyi’s documented final words and actions suggests an exceptionally low level of death anxiety, as detailed in Table 1 below. His calm and composed acceptance of mortality, as evidenced through his farewell poems and letters, underscores a profound peace with the inevitability of death, devoid of evident fear or distress. Further, Master Hongyi’s steadfast devotion to his Buddhist practices and his focused aspiration towards rebirth in the Pure Land suggest a deep-seated spiritual conviction and purpose. This not only enriched his life with meaning, but also likely served as a significant buffer against the existential turmoil commonly associated with the prospect of death.

To elaborate, Master Hongyi’s journey reflects a contemplative acceptance of life’s impermanent nature, a cornerstone belief in Buddhism that arguably facilitates a reduction in death anxiety. His articulation of a desire for rebirth in the Pure Land—an expression of his belief in an ongoing spiritual journey beyond physical death—exemplifies an embrace of transition rather than an end, further mitigating fear associated with death’s finality. Such perspectives underscore a harmonization with Buddhist teachings that view death not as a cessation but as a pivotal moment of transition, offering profound solace and liberation from existential dread.

Another relevant framework for understanding Master Hongyi’s approach to death is the concept of “death acceptance”, as developed by Ray and Najman (1974). According to their perspective, death acceptance involves a positive and open attitude towards one’s mortality, characterized by a lack of fear, a sense of peace, and a willingness to let go. Studies have found that individuals who score highly on measures of death acceptance tend to report greater psychological well-being, less depression and anxiety, and more

positive attitudes towards end-of-life care (Klug and Sinha 1988; Morgan and Gazarian 2022; Routledge et al. 2010).

Table 1. Speculative evaluation of Master Hongyi’s death anxiety.

DAS Item Themes	Assessed Levels	Rationale
Fear of the Unknown	Low	Strong belief in rebirth and the Pure Land, indicating a low fear of what comes after death.
Fear of Pain and Suffering	Low	Viewed physical pain through the lens of impermanence, suggesting a reduced fear of suffering.
Fear of Ceasing to Exist	Low	Embraced the cycle of samsara, showing little fear of ceasing to exist after death.
Fear of Leaving Loved Ones Behind	Low	Prepared disciples for his departure compassionately, reflecting a mindful approach to leaving loved ones.
Loss of Life’s Joys	Low	Lived a life of spiritual pursuit, likely viewing the end of life as a transition rather than a loss of joy.

The details of Master Hongyi’s final days, as recorded in the accounts of his disciples and contemporaries, strongly suggest a high level of death acceptance. His clear instructions regarding his funeral arrangements, his emphasis on simplicity and non-attachment, and his poetic reflections on the impermanence of life all point to a deep understanding and acceptance of death as a natural part of existence. His ability to maintain a sense of peace, clarity, and even joy in the face of his own mortality is a testament to his level of death acceptance.

Research on the relationship between spirituality and death acceptance provides further support for understanding Master Hongyi’s end-of-life experience. Studies have consistently found that individuals with a strong sense of spiritual well-being and a belief in an afterlife tend to report a greater acceptance of death and less death anxiety (Harding et al. 2005; Surall and Steppacher 2020). In particular, the belief in a positive afterlife, such as the Pure Land in Buddhist tradition, has been associated with greater psychological well-being and coping in the face of death (Ellison et al. 2009; Hynson et al. 2006).

Master Hongyi’s lifelong devotion to Buddhism and his specific practice of Buddha-recitation in his final days can be seen as a powerful source of spiritual support and meaning that facilitated his extraordinary level of death acceptance. His deep faith in the promise of rebirth in the Western Pure Land and his unwavering commitment to the Buddha’s teachings likely provided a sense of ultimate refuge and liberation, even in the midst of physical decline and the challenges of dying.

In conclusion, evaluating Master Hongyi’s death acceptance through the lens of psychological frameworks provides valuable insights into the factors that contributed to his remarkable end-of-life experience. By applying theoretical models such as the Templer Death Anxiety Scale and the concept of death acceptance, and drawing on research on the relationship between spirituality and coping with mortality, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the role of Master Hongyi’s Buddhist faith and practice in facilitating his peaceful and meaningful death. His case serves as an example of how spiritual cultivation and a strong sense of purpose can transform the experience of dying, offering hope and inspiration for individuals facing the challenges of mortality.

4.3.3. Master Hongyi’s Death Acceptance: A Dialogue with Thanatology Theories

Master Hongyi’s remarkable journey towards accepting his own mortality and achieving a peaceful death offers valuable insights that can enrich contemporary thanatology theories. By placing his end-of-life experiences in dialogue with key concepts and frameworks from the field of death studies, we can gain a deeper understanding of the psychological, spiritual, and social dimensions of his death acceptance.

One influential theory in thanatology that resonates with Master Hongyi's approach to death is terror management theory (TMT). Developed by [Greenberg et al. \(1986\)](#), TMT posits that the awareness of mortality can trigger existential anxiety, which individuals seek to manage through various psychological defenses and cultural worldviews. According to TMT, religious beliefs and practices serve as a key buffer against death anxiety by providing a sense of meaning, permanence, and connection to a larger spiritual reality ([Vail et al. 2010](#); [Vail et al. 2019](#)).

Master Hongyi's deep engagement with Buddhist practices, particularly his dedication to the recitation of Amitabha Buddha and his aspiration for rebirth in the Western Pure Land, can be understood as a powerful terror management mechanism. His unwavering faith in the promise of spiritual liberation and his daily practice of mindfulness and meditation likely fostered a sense of transcendence and equanimity in the face of death. As scholars like [Hui and Coleman \(2012\)](#) have noted, Buddhist teachings on impermanence, and the cycle of birth and death can help individuals develop a more accepting and peaceful attitude towards mortality.

Another key concept in thanatology that sheds light on Master Hongyi's death acceptance is the notion of a "good death". According to [Kellehear \(2007\)](#), a good death is characterized by elements such as awareness, acceptance, preparation, completion, and meaningfulness. Master Hongyi's final days, as documented in the accounts of his disciples and contemporaries, exemplify many of these qualities. His clear instructions regarding his funeral arrangements, his poetic reflections on the transience of life, and his serene demeanor in the face of physical decline all suggest a high degree of awareness, acceptance, and preparation for death.

Moreover, Master Hongyi's ability to find meaning and spiritual fulfillment in his dying process reflects the importance of existential well-being in the face of mortality. As Viktor [Frankl \(1992\)](#) argued in his seminal work on logotherapy, the search for meaning is a fundamental human drive that can sustain individuals even in the most extreme circumstances. For Master Hongyi, his dedication to Buddhist practice and his role as a teacher and spiritual guide imbued his life and death with a sense of purpose and significance. His final words and gestures, such as his parting verses and his calligraphy of "Sadness and Joy Intermingled", demonstrate the depth of meaning he found in his journey towards death ([Qian 1991](#); [Hai 2010](#)).

The social and cultural dimensions of Master Hongyi's death acceptance also warrant attention from a thanatology perspective. Some studies indicate that Western societies have tended to marginalize and medicalize death, leading to a culture of denial and avoidance ([Gómez 2017](#); [Zimmermann and Rodin 2004](#)). In contrast, Master Hongyi's approach to death was deeply embedded in the Buddhist tradition, which acknowledges impermanence as a fundamental truth and encourages individuals to confront mortality with mindfulness and non-attachment.

Furthermore, the way in which Master Hongyi's disciples and the wider Buddhist community rallied around him in his final days exemplifies the importance of social support and ritual in facilitating a meaningful death. Death rituals serve to affirm social bonds, provide emotional catharsis, and reintegrate the deceased into the cosmic order ([Houlbrooke 2020](#); [Klass 2014](#)). The collective chanting, offerings, and reverence shown to Master Hongyi during his dying process and after his passing demonstrate the power of communal practices in helping individuals and communities cope with loss and find solace in shared spiritual beliefs.

Overall, Master Hongyi's death acceptance offers a rich case study that can both affirm and extend key theories in the field of thanatology. His journey towards a peaceful and meaningful death promotes us to consider the transformative potential of spiritual practice, the importance of cultivating acceptance and meaning in the face of impermanence, and the vital role of community in supporting individuals through the dying process. As such, Master Hongyi's death acceptance stands as a testament to the enduring wisdom of Buddhist teachings and their capacity to enrich our contemporary discourse on mortality.

4.4. Artistic Realm of Life and Death

In his final years, Master Hongyi continued to engage in artistic creation, particularly calligraphy, as a means of exploring and expressing his evolving understanding of life and death. His practice of calligraphy served as a profound spiritual discipline, a way of embodying and transmitting the essence of Buddhist teachings, and a powerful medium for processing his own experiences and emotions as he approached the end of his life (Jin 1997, pp. 291–92). One of the most striking examples of Master Hongyi's late-life calligraphy is his work "Sadness and Joy Intermingled (悲欣交集)", as illustrated in Figure 2 below, which he created just three days before his passing. The term "Bei Xin Jiao Ji", originating from the Shurangama Sutra, is fully utilized with the ambiguity of Chinese characters and the intertextuality of Chinese literature, allowing each character to play its fullest role (Wang 2013).

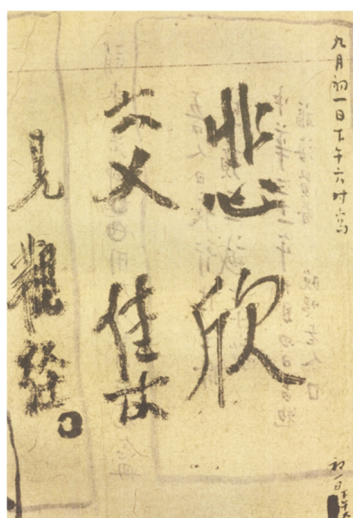


Figure 2. Master Hongyi's final calligraphy—Sadness and Joy Intermingled.

From an artistic perspective, "Bei Xin Jiao Ji" is a masterpiece that showcases Master Hongyi's exceptional calligraphic skills and profound Buddhist insights. Sun (2023) observes that the character "Bei" is written with centered brushstrokes, creating a sense of solemnity and power, while appearing slender and empty. The character "Xin", on the other hand, is clear and serene, light yet deeply rooted. The overall composition is unconventional, with "Bei" descending and "Xin" ascending, symbolizing the bodhisattva's compassion for sentient beings and the joy of being reborn in the Pure Land. Jiang (2018) points out that the character "Bei" is steady and powerful, reflecting the master's great compassion for the suffering of sentient beings. The character "Xin" is dynamic and joyful, revealing the master's aspiration for rebirth in the Pure Land. The two characters are integrated harmoniously, demonstrating the master's state of mind, which combines compassion for sentient beings with the joy of liberation. The piece also reveals the non-duality of emptiness and form, principle, and phenomenon in Buddhist truth. Wang (2013) interprets the characters "悲" (sadness) and "欣" (joy) in Master Hongyi's calligraphy as a masterful expression of the Buddhist duality of existence, where each brush stroke not only reveals Hongyi's deep meditative state, but also visually articulates the core Buddhist concepts of compassion and enlightenment. Through analyzing the fluid and balanced brushwork, Wang (2013) shows how the characters embody a harmony between sorrow and joy, mirroring the Buddhist understanding of life's transient nature and the pursuit of spiritual liberation, thereby highlighting Hongyi's ability to infuse profound philosophical meanings into the art of calligraphy.

From an interpretative standpoint, scholars diverge in their views; yet, they generally agree that "悲" (sadness) relates to compassion for all beings, embodying a religious sentiment. "欣" (joy), on the other hand, is associated with personal enlightenment, liberation,

and rebirth into the Pure Land, or a sense of contentment arising from a life without regrets (Chen 1997; Li 2000; Qian 1991; Wang 2013). The phrase “悲欣交集” (Sadness and Joy Intermingled) encapsulates a profound Buddhist philosophical principle of non-duality. It articulates that sorrow and joy are neither identical nor separate; there is no distinction between oneself and all beings. This suggests that achieving rebirth or liberation does not mean cutting ties with all beings. Instead, it highlights the enduring connection and compassionate spirit that Pure Land practitioners maintain with all living beings (Lin 2016; Jiang 2018; Wang 2013).

The therapeutic and transformative power of Master Hongyi’s calligraphy practice can be understood in dialogue with contemporary dignity therapy. Dignity therapy, developed by Harvey Max Chochinov (2012), emphasizes the importance of preserving and affirming the inherent dignity and worth of individuals as they approach the end of life. Through a process of guided reflection and narrative creation, dignity therapy helps patients to find meaning and purpose in their lives, express their values and beliefs, and leave a lasting legacy for their loved ones. In many ways, Master Hongyi’s calligraphy practice can be seen as a form of self-guided dignity therapy, allowing him to reflect on his life journey, express his deepest aspirations and insights, and leave a powerful message of wisdom and compassion for future generations.

In sum, Master Hongyi’s practice of calligraphy in his final years represents a remarkable example of the transformative power of artistic creation in the face of mortality. His masterpiece “Sadness and Joy Intermingled”, created just days before his passing, encapsulates his transcendent view of life and death, reflecting the profound wisdom and compassion he had cultivated through a lifetime of Buddhist practice. By connecting Master Hongyi’s calligraphy with dignity therapy, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the unique role that creative expression can play in helping individuals find meaning, purpose, and acceptance in the face of death. As such, Master Hongyi’s artistic legacy stands as a powerful testament to the enduring human capacity for growth, resilience, and transformation, even in the most challenging of circumstances.

4.5. Proposal for a “Hongyi Model” in Death Education

Based on the above discussions, Master Hongyi’s life journey offers a paradigm for reimagining death education by integrating spiritual cultivation, psychological resilience, and artistic expression. This holistic approach recognizes the multidimensional nature of the human encounter with mortality and invites us to cultivate a more expansive vision that honors the full spectrum of experience and potential in facing life’s ultimate mystery.

The “Hongyi Model” suggests the need for interdisciplinary dialogue among fields such as palliative care, existential psychology, contemplative studies, and the arts to develop educational programs that provide individuals with the necessary resources to navigate the challenges of aging, illness, and dying with greater wisdom and grace. By embracing the insights from Master Hongyi’s journey, we can envision a more holistic, compassionate, and transformative landscape of death education that alleviates suffering and unlocks profound opportunities for growth and awakening.

Central to this model would be a deep engagement with the wisdom and practices of contemplative traditions, such as Buddhism, which have long recognized the transformative potential of cultivating mindfulness, compassion, and non-attachment in the face of impermanence. By drawing on these rich spiritual resources, while also remaining open to insights from other wisdom traditions and contemporary scientific research, the “Hongyi Model” would seek to provide individuals with a comprehensive set of tools and practices for awakening in the face of death.

Ultimately, the “Hongyi Model” is not so much a fixed set of principles or techniques as it is a living, evolving exploration of what it means to be fully human in the face of death. It is a call to recognize the profound interconnectedness of all aspects of our being—body, mind, heart, and spirit—and to engage in the lifelong process of cultivating wholeness, resilience, and awakening. It would help discover, in the midst of the great mystery of mor-

tality, the boundless potential for growth, transformation, and liberation that lies within each of us.

5. Conclusions

This paper has explored the life and teachings of the eminent Chinese Buddhist monk Master Hongyi (1880–1942), focusing on his transformative experiences with impermanence and their implications for contemporary death education. Through a comprehensive examination of Master Hongyi's spiritual journey, the study has demonstrated how his encounters with mortality, particularly the loss of his mother, served as catalysts for his eventual renunciation and wholehearted embrace of the Buddhist path. The findings reveal that Master Hongyi's deep engagement with Buddhist teachings and practices, such as mindfulness, Buddha-recitation, and the contemplation of death, enabled him to transform his initial grief and existential crisis into a state of profound equanimity and spiritual freedom.

The insights gleaned from Master Hongyi's life and wisdom have significant implications for the fields of Buddhist studies, thanatology, and death education. His journey illustrates the transformative potential of Buddhist teachings and practices for fostering a more authentic, meaningful, and spiritually grounded approach to facing the challenges of mortality. Moreover, the "Hongyi Model" proposed in this paper offers a valuable framework for integrating the spiritual, psychological, and artistic dimensions of Master Hongyi's approach into contemporary death education programs, counseling, and end-of-life care. This innovative paradigm has the potential to enrich and expand current practices, providing new avenues for supporting individuals in navigating the complexities of aging, illness, and dying.

While this study has made contributions to the understanding of Master Hongyi's experiences with impermanence and their relevance for death education, there remain several areas for future investigation. Further research could explore the application of the "Hongyi Model" in diverse educational settings, assessing its efficacy and adaptability across different populations and cultural contexts. Additionally, comparative studies examining the intersections between Master Hongyi's teachings and other contemplative traditions could yield valuable insights into the universal aspects of spiritual transformation and death acceptance. Finally, interdisciplinary collaborations between Buddhist scholars, thanatologists, and practitioners could help refine and expand the theoretical and practical dimensions of the "Hongyi Model", fostering new approaches to death education that are both grounded in ancient wisdom and responsive to the needs of contemporary society.

Ultimately, Master Hongyi's journey—from the depths of grief and despair to the heights of spiritual enlightenment—serves as a beacon, illuminating the path towards a more compassionate, enlightened, and holistic approach to death education. By embracing the insights from his experiences, we can foster a more accepting, meaningful, and transformative dialogue around death, one that empowers individuals to face life's final chapter with courage, grace, and a sense of profound peace.

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Abbreviations

T: Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō 大正新脩大藏經. 85 vols., ed. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1934.

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