Metamorphosis Myth as Reflected in Dharma Mirror

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Abstract

In Greco-Roman myths of metamorphosis, humans become other forms of being such as animals, plants and natural objects. The legends of the Narcissus flower, Laurel tree, and Arethusa spring involve the dissipation and alteration of human subjectivity and the fusing of human minds with nature. While the fantastic transformation in these tales was meant to explain natural phenomena, it can be interpreted as the reflection of psychological states instead of ontological reality. The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning of metamorphosis myths from the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, whose central concern is suffering and cessation of suffering. Metamorphosis implicates universal suffering and the yearning for liberation. Activated by ignorance, transformation points to the potential of liberation through the mingling of separate egos with the large whole. The contents of this study are divided into two parts: karma and interbeing. The first part illustrates the karmic law that reigns in the three tales. The existence of the flower, tree and spring has no inherent essence but gets involved in the causal nexus. The second part explores interbeing in metamorphosis, which dissolves the boundary of life and death as well as self and other. After the transformation, the isolated selfhood is expanded to an all-encompassing life system, evoking today's ecological consciousness. Dharma sheds a different light on metamorphosis myths, transcending the literal death and doom to the universal truth of human life and reconstituting their

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significance for the modern world.

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Ancient myths never die but stimulate rich speculations in the fields of art, literature and psychology. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* features the transfiguration of human bodies into the vegetal and material things, highlighting the interchangeability of life forms prevalent in mythic thinking. In the last book of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid introduces Pythagoras to summarize the philosophy of change that underlies this book:

> Nothing retains the form that seems its own,
> and Nature, the renewer of all things,
> continually changes every form
> into some other shape. Believe my word,
> in all this universe of vast extent,
> not one thing ever perished. All have changed
> appearance. Men say a certain thing is born,
> if it takes a different form from what it had;
> and yet they say, that certain thing has died,
> if it no longer keeps the self same shape.
> Though distant things move near, and near things far,
> always the sum of all things is unchanged.[1] (15. 252-263)

Metamorphosis as Ovid delineates implies the immortality of life. Eternity pervades the world of transformation, wherein nothing "ever perished" but everything is incessantly altered and renewed. The perpetual process of bodily transmutation blurs the boundary of life and death, picturing an animated and interconnected world which modern science may disqualify as magical. On the surface, the fantastic legends are meant to explain natural phenomena, like how a certain flower, tree or spring comes into existence. In a deeper sense, they reflect the psychic responses to the conditions of human existence.

According to David McMahan's *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, "demythologization," "detraditionalization" and "psychologization" are the cultural products of western modernity.[2] Interrelated with one another, the three key aspects of modernization banish the demonic and

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[1] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Brookes More. Retrieved February 12, 2017, from http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0029%3Abook%3D1%3Acard%3D452. All further quotations are based on the book and line in this text.

[2] David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 42

superstitious elements in myth and religion, replacing ontological realities with psychological states. “Demythologization,” as McMahan explains, is “the process of attempting to extract—or more accurately, to reconstruct—meanings that will be viable within the context of modern worldviews from teachings embedded in ancient worldviews.”[3] Through distilling psychological implications from the gods, heaven and hell in myth and religion, Joseph Campbell exhibits the “demythologization” and “psychologization” as illustrated by McMahan. Myths, as Campbell remarks, are the world’s “archetypal dreams” to deal with crucial human problems: “Mythology has a lot to do with the stages of life, the initiation ceremonies as you move from childhood to adult responsibilities, from the unmarried state into the married state.”[4] Campbell’s ideas about myth and its involvement in real life are heavily influenced by Carl Jung’s theory of archetypes.[5] The collective unconscious of human mind, in Jung’s view, is composed of archetypes: “There is a rich world of archetypal images in the unconscious mind, and the archetypes are conditions, laws, or categories of creative fantasy, and therefore might be called the psychological equivalent of the samskara [memory traces].”[6] Jung’s conception of archetype is related to the Indian notion of karma. “Samskara,” or memory traces in Hinduism points to the psychic heredity like the predisposition to certain diseases or traits of character. Jung’s thought impacts Campbell’s mythic study, whose significance lies in discerning spiritual values in the fantastic tales.

As Campbell detects the psychological meaning of mythology, Buddhist modernizers strip away the external forms like ritual and dogma, turning religion into an “ahistorical essence of spirituality” that addresses the needs of modern man.[7] Chogyam Trungpa, one of the westernized Buddhist teachers, reformulates the six realms of rebirth as the emotional and psychological states we go through in our daily life: “As human beings, we may, during the course of a day, experience the emotions of all of the realms, from the pride of the god realm to the hatred and paranoia of the hell realm.”[8] Through the assimilation into the Romantic ideals of spontaneity, creativity and love of nature, Buddhism has transcended from cultural specificity into universal spiritualism.[9] Adopting

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[3] Ibid., 46.

[4] Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth: With Bill Moyers*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1988), 11.

[5] The word, “archetype” means the existence of definite forms in human psyche. See Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetype and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. Richard F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), 42.

[6] Harold Coward, *Jung and Eastern Thought* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985), 97.

[7] David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 72.

[8] Chogyam Trungpa, *The Myth of Freedom and the Way of Meditation* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1976), 24.

[9] David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 132.

the language of western psychology, contemporary Dharma emphasizes the cultivation of a genuine self to be liberated from institutional constraints. As the modern society is plagued by fragmentation and isolation, the gate of Dharma that embraces the ideals of "interconnectedness," "wholeness" and "ego-transcendence" gains worldwide popularity.[10] The tendency of "psychologization" and "demythologization" carves out a space for the dynamic interaction between Buddhism and myth. While eastern religion and western mythology seem so far apart, they form spiritual alliance in the conceptions of karmic consequence and interbeing. The first part of this study analyzes the causal factors of the existence of Narcissus flower, Laurel tree and Arethusa spring. The second part explores the interconnectedness of self and other as the solution to suffering. The death and doom in metamorphosis embody suffering and karma as illustrated in Dharma. The transmutation of human life into natural objects implicates the emptiness of human subjectivity and the interdependence of all life forms. Dharma opens another window to perceive the reality of worldly phenomena concealed in mythic tales.

Karma

The three metamorphosis myths discussed in this study involve the transfiguration of human bodies into a flower, tree and spring. Although the transformation is predicated on suffering, it regenerates human life and soothes the grief of personal loss. Metamorphosis dramatizes the Buddhist insight that there is no inherent selfhood or the distinction of life and death, as everything is impermanent and dependent-arising.[11] The protagonists in the three tales are afflicted with sorrow and pain, which arise out of their thoughts and behavior. It is character that decides their destiny despite the intervention from the external world. The way karma applies the cause and effect relationship to all things fits the scientific temper.[12] Karma is compatible with the tendency of demythologization in western modernity because all things come into existence through the complex operation of causes and conditions instead of the capricious dictates of deities.[13] In Buddhist thought,

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[10] Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *The Roots of Buddhist Romanticism*. Retrieved October 13, 2017, from http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/rootsofbuddhistromanticism.html

[11] The term, "depedndent-arising" is the principle used by the Buddha to explain the phenomenal world wherein nothing has a permanent and eternal entity. In Buddhist philosophy, worldly phenomena is impermanent, always involving change and movement. Life is suffering, and suffering is founded on the notion of dependent origination and impermanence without self-nature. See David J. Kalupahana, *Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), 34.

[12] Christmas Humphreys, *Buddhism: An Introduction and Guide* (London, UK: Penguin, 1990), 100.

[13] David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 69.

human beings are not a special creation of a personalized god but "a product of an impersonal universe" conditioned by ever-changing factors.[14]

The Buddhist saint, Nāgārjuna elucidates the causal relationship of the phenomenal world, wherein nothing exists substantially or independently. His theory of the Middle Way, as Benjamin A. Elman indicates, is the influential doctrine that avoids the extremes of "nihilism" and "eternalism."[15] "Sūnnyatā," now translated as "emptiness," is the central conception of the Middle Way. Instead of the flight into nothingness, Nāgārjuna's śūnyatā or emptiness views the world as "conditional, transitory, and devoid of a permanent self or substance."[16] As the Middle Way explicates the non-substantiality of everything, the entrapment of humans in suffering is not inherent but caused by self-created karma. For Nāgārjuna, the continuation of cyclic existence is a dependent consequence of one's actions. It is ignorance that triggers one's actions and initiates the chain reaction of suffering:[17]

> So, in a mental continuum,
> From a preceding intention
> A consequent mental state arises,
> Without this, it would not arise.[18]

Based on Nāgārjuna's theory of non-substantiality, the misery of all mortals is attributed to their own deeds, even in the teeth of fate. The causal view on suffering anticipates Nietzsche's skeptical attitude toward truth. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche states that "[f]oolishness, not sin, is the source of much evil and disaster: the Greeks, even during the heyday of their prosperity and strength, allowed that foolishness, lack of discretion, slight mental aberrations."[19] The ancient Greeks, as Nietzsche conceives, are a noble and proud race that enjoys freedom by keeping "bad conscience"

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[14] Daniel Henning, *A Manual for Buddhism and Deep Ecology* (Bangkok, Thailand: World Buddhist University, 2002), 79.

[15] Benjamin A. Elman, "Nietzsche and Buddhism," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 44.4 (1983): 682.

[16] Ibid., 682.

[17] In Nāgārjuna's formulation, there are twelve interlocking factors that cause suffering: ignorance, volitions, consciousness, namarupa, six sense organs, contact, feeling, desire, appropriation, being, birth, suffering. Not until the initiating factor of ignorance is eradicated can people be liberated from suffering. The cessation of ignorance cuts off the arising of the consecutive factors that lead to suffering. See Mark Siderits and Shoryu Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publication, 2013), 308.

[18] Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*, trans. Jay Garfield (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995), 234.

[19] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 227.

at a distance. And the characters in their myth and tragedy never "lacerate or rage against themselves."[20] Nietzsche's phrase of "foolishness," "lack of discretion" and "mental aberrations" corresponds to Buddhist ignorance. That they are the "source" of "evil and disaster" implies that human suffering results from their own thoughts and deeds. Following Nietzsche's argument, a great accord exists between Hellenistic and Buddhist mindset, both of which endorse dependent origination and refute an inherent, original sin.

As Nāgārjuna expounds the anti-essentialist worldview, Nietzsche regards human subjectivity as a fiction: "[T]he subject is only a fiction: the ego of which one speaks when one censures egoism does not exist at all."[21] For Nietzsche, not only subjectivity but truth is an illusion created by humans: "What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms... . truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that is what they are."[22] Both Nāgārjuna and Nietzsche harbor deconstructive thoughts about the inherent essence in existing things. Nietzsche's assertion of truth as metaphor and subjectivity as fiction reverberates with Nāgārjuna's perception of emptiness. As Elman notes, "There are similarities between Nietzsche's claim that there are only perspectives of reality and Nāgārjuna's contention that everything we say about the world or ourselves is empty of permanence. Both are views contained within a descriptive system."[23] Based on Nāgārjuna's emptiness, there is no abiding self but only the "mental and physical states" to be located in this illusory world.[24] Emptiness and karma are two aspects of the same thing. Emptiness illustrates the impermanence of worldly phenomena, while karma explicates the causes of the emergence of everything in the cosmos. Human suffering, accordingly, is not an inherent entity but the result of karmic consequence.

A close scrutiny of Ovid's account of metamorphosis reveals that the emergence of the Narcissus flower, Laurel tree and Arethusa spring is the consequence of karma. The happenings in their life are not preordained but conditioned by interlocking factors. The root cause of transformation is ignorance, whose constituents include fear and desire. For Narcissus, his beautiful countenance generates arrogance, which in turn arouses the rejected lover's revenge. As he despises and refuses his suitors heartlessly, he incurs the fateful curse of self-love and Nemesis' consent to it. Arrogance is the internal factor while the resentful curse is the external one; both work together to

[20] Ibid., 227.

[21] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, NY: Vintage, 1967), 370.

[22] Walter Kaufmann, ed., *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1976), 46.

[23] Benjamin A. Elman, "Nietzsche and Buddhism," 685.

[24] Ibid., 685.

bring forth Narcissus's falling in love with his own image. In fact, Narcissus's suffering is attributed to his attachment to sensual pleasures. The craving for the beautiful reflection deepens his delusion, imprisoning him in a hellish state of existence:

> He knows not what
> he there beholds, but what he sees inflames
> his longing, and the error that deceives
> allures his eyes. (3.424-427)

Narcissus's ignorance does not consist in mistaking the fictional image for the real person, but in indulging himself in the desire for the appealing form. His aesthetic impulse, while bringing him transitory rapture, deteriorates to a defiled craving to possess what pleases his eyes. He is entangled in the web of desire once he cannot part with the beautiful image. Herein lies the meaning of ignorance as formulated in Buddhism. Ignorance generates immense suffering. Narcissus is tormented not only by the unrealizable wish to have physical intimacy with his fictional lover, but by the fleeting image that will disappear anytime. A spasm of horror seizes him when the beautiful reflection is blurred by his tears:

> [A]nd as he grieved his tears disturbed the stream,
> and ripples on the surface, glassy clear,
> defaced his mirrored form. And thus the youth,
> when he beheld that lovely shadow go;
> "Ah whither cost thou fly? Oh, I entreat
> thee leave me not. Alas, thou cruel boy
> thus to forsake thy lover. Stay with me
> that I may see thy lovely form, for though
> I may not touch thee I shall feed my eyes
> and soothe my wretched pains." (3.495-504)

The desire of ownership corrupts the rapture begotten from the first glimpse of real beauty. Besides the grasping of sensual pleasures, the delusion of the eager response from his beloved is another cause of suffering:

> Surely he desires my love
> and my embraces, for as oft I strive
> to kiss him, bending to the limpid stream
> my lips, so often does he hold his face
> fondly to me, and vainly struggles up.
> It seems that I could touch him. (3.457-462)

The desire to kiss and touch his beloved shows the gross way of retaining beauty just like tourists carving names on stones or trees to declare their possession of the beautiful scenery. Physical contact turns out a futile way to unite himself with his beloved. Whenever he reaches for it, it is doomed to decay and destruction. Ovid comments about his folly of clinging to the ephemeral image as follows:

> But why, O foolish boy,
> so vainly catching at this flitting form?
> The cheat that you are seeking has no place.
> Avert your gaze and you will lose your love,
> for this that holds your eyes is nothing save
> the image of yourself reflected back to you.
> It comes and waits with you; it has no life;
> it will depart if you will only go. (3.427-434)

The vanity of "catching at this fleeing form" implies Narcissus's ignorance or self-attachment. The "flitting form" reflected in water equates the transitory and illusionary selfhood. The sentence, "Avert your gaze and you will lose your love" chimes with karma, indicating that the attachment to the beloved is caused by the sensory and ephemeral impressions. In Buddhism, the "gaze" belongs to one of the six sense organs that will lead to craving or aversion. To avert the gaze is to sever the clinging to the pleasant things and thus be released from love entanglement, just as a flame will expire without fuel. The appealing image is the fuel of Narcissus's craving; to leave it is to extinguish the flame of desire. Ovid's remark fits in Buddha's teaching that sensual pleasure causes pain: "Sensual pleasure causes sadness and troubles, // sensual pleasure causes longing. Sensual pleasure causes a hundredfold suffering, // sensual pleasure is the root of all suffering."[25] In the case of Narcissus, the

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[25] Marcus Bingenheimer, *Studies in Āgama Literature* (Taipei, Taiwan: Shin Wen Feng, 2011), 163.

longing for the lovely image is the manifestation of Buddhist ignorance, which entraps him in the whirlpool of sadness and bitterness.

Karma also finds powerful expressions in the tree and spring myths. Laurel tree and Arethusa spring are twin myths that bear striking resemblances with each other. Both deal with the consequence of unrequited love; both have a passionate male lover in pursuit of an aloof virgin who abhors love and marriage. Apollo and Alpheus are the passionate male lovers obsessed with the beauty of Daphne and Arethusa respectively. The desire of possessing the female body leads to the chase and the subsequent transformation of Daphne into a tree and Arethusa into a spring. In Ovid's narrative of the spring metamorphosis, Alpheus is the river god attracted by the sight of Arethusa bathing in the river. His intention of seduction fails and she flees in horror. The chase is quickened as her nakedness inflames his desire:

> Just as I was, I fled without my clothes,
> for I had left them on the other bank;
> which, when he saw, so much the more inflamed,
> more swiftly he pursued: my nakedness
> was tempting to his gaze. (5. 619-623)

Based on the female victim's statement, Alpheus' sexual craving is caused by the sight of her nakedness, while in the tree myth, Apollo's obsession with Daphne results from Cupid's revenge: "'Twas not a cause of chance / but out of Cupid's vengeful spite that she [Daphne] / was fated to torment the lord of light" (1.454-456). The fated love in the tree myth does not come by "chance" but "out of Cupid's vengeful spite." And Cupid's revenge comes from Apollo's pride, as Apollo congratulates himself on his valor and shows his contempt of Cupid's bow. Infuriated by Apollo's scorn, Cupid takes revenge by shooting Apollo with a gold arrow to ignite his passion for Daphne. Apollo's sexual desire is not inherent but conditioned by the external force, which is substantiated in the form of Cupid's arrow. The internal factor that causes Apollo's infatuation with Daphne is pride, while the external factor is Cupid's anger. The co-functioning of the internal and external factors leads to Apollo's suffering from unrequited love. As a constituent of ignorance, pride triggers the anguish of the lover and his beloved. Despite his fame as the lord of light, Apollo lives in the darkness of ignorance. Ironically, the omniscient god knows every truth in the world except his own fate, which is subject to the reign of karma.

Besides the sensual desire of the male gods, the fear of the two female victims plays a crucial

part in the transformation. Ignorance on the part of the two virgins consists in their sticking to a separate and isolated selfhood. Both of them worship the goddess of the moon, enjoy hunting and wandering in the woods and detest love and marriage. Daphne cannot endure the glance of man, as Ovid describes: "Beloved and wooed she wandered silent paths, / for never could her modesty endure / the glance of man or listen to his love" (1.497-499). Likewise, Arethusa considers external beauty worthless and refuses to please others with her appearance:

> 'So worthless Seemed the praise, I took no joy
> in my appearance—as a country lass
> I blushed at those endowments which would give
> delight to others—even the power to please
> seemed criminal. (5.589-593)

The preference for celibacy and solitude leads to her repulsion towards love, turning romance into the fierce struggle between the predator and prey as shown in Apollo's chase:

> As when the greyhound sees the frightened hare
> flit over the plain:—With eager nose outstretched,
> impetuous, he rushes on his prey,
> and gains upon her till he treads her feet,
> and almost fastens in her side his fangs; (1.535-539)

Here, Apollo is compared to the greyhound with "eager nose" and fangs" while Daphne is the "frightened hare." As for the couple of Alpheus and Arethusa, the male chaser is the "hawk" relentlessly pursuing the "frightened dove":

> And thus I ran;
> and thus relentlessly he pressed my steps:
> so from the hawk the dove with trembling wings;
> and so, the hawk pursues the frightened dove. (5.623-626)

The clinging to detached selfhood is the internal factor of the two females' transformation. On the part of Arethusa, Ovid has no explanation for such a tendency. But for Daphne, it is the lead

arrow shot by Cupid that deadens her heart, which parallels the gold arrow shot towards Apollo to kindle his passion. From the perspective of Dharma, the dead arrow means the "load of previous karma" gathered unknowingly over countless lifetimes: "The ongoing proliferation of these deluded constructs has as its causes and conditions not only in the thought processes in which one is engaged at the present moment, but also the flowing river one's entire multi-lifetime load of previous karma."[26] Daphne's inclination to a hermetic life, therefore, can be interpreted as the outcome of the forces generated in the past. It is also the embodiment of her "multi-lifetime" karmic load concretized in the form of Cupid's arrow. Daphne is driven by the karmic energy to shun love and marriage, and Apollo is propelled by the same energy to pursue and possess her. Cupid's arrow in the mythic world amounts to the karmic load in Dharma.

In the western world, karma has been understood negatively as mechanistic fatalism. Suffering is regarded as the "justly measured requital" of past sins so that there is no way to avoid it.[27] However, karma is not pessimistic determinism to account for fate. It is a foresight that each event is at once the result of all that has preceded it and a contributing cause of all to come.[28] Ananda Coomaraswamy argues that karma has a lot to do with the free will of each individual: "Buddhism is fatalistic in the sense that the present is always determined by the past; but the future remains free. Every operation we make depends on what we have come to be at the time, but what we are coming to be depends on the direction of the will."[29] The transformation myths dramatize the sustainability of karmic energy. In the present existence reside not only the past but also the future lives. Although the present life bears the karmic load accumulated in previous lives, it also determines the future forms of existence. Daphne becomes a tree instead of a beautiful flower or something else because of her present life as a virgin and huntress. The transformation is not so much a punishment as a recompense for her strong will, as the tree resembles the virgin in the sense that the tree is hard, immobile, and solitary, which is similar to the personality traits that Daphne possesses. Cupid's dead arrow may help shape a resolute and unwavering mind that rejects Apollo's passion. Yet, the love of the forest and the longing for tranquility are not pre-ordained but the outcome of free will. A detailed inspection of the tree myth reveals that karma is never callous fatalism. Granted that external intervention is one of the factors of transformation, there is always the free choice that determines

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[26] A. Charles Muller, "Introduction," *The Diamond Sutra*, trans. A. Charles Muller. Retrieved November 11, 2016, from http://www.acmuller.net/bud-canon/diamond_sutra.html

[27] Harold Coward, *Jung and Eastern Thought*, 95.

[28] Christmas Humphreys, *Buddhism: An Introduction and Guide*, 103.

[29] Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism* (New York, NY: Harper, 1964), 233.

the future state of being. For suffering to arise, there must be the co-functioning of the previous load of karma and the present choice out of one's free will.

Like Daphne, Arethusa's present life determines the future path of transformation. She worships Diana and insists on preserving virginity. Her faithfulness to the goddess is rewarded by the transfiguration into a sacred spring:

> "Diana, therefore, opened up the ground,
> in which I plunged, and thence through gloomy caves
> was carried to Ortygia—blessed isle!
> To which my chosen goddess gave her name!
> Where first I rose amid the upper air!" (5.670-674)

The divinity of the spring is caused by her unshakable willpower to live an autonomous life like her idol goddess. The transformation into the spring rather than something else has much to do with her present state of existence. She swims in the river and later flees in terror. Swimming, running, and fear make her drenched in sweat. Drops of water gather around the body, dissolving and transfiguring it into the spring:

> [A] cold sweat gathered on my trembling limbs.
> The clear-blue drops, distilled from every pore,
> made pools of water where I moved my feet,
> and dripping moisture trickled from my hair.
> Much quicker than my story could be told,
> my body was dissolved to flowing streams. (5. 660-665)

The vivid scene of transformation reflects the continuity of karmic energy in the way that the form of recompense in the future corresponds to the present existence. What people will reap depends on what they sow now. As Narcissus is a beautiful lad in the present life, he becomes a lovely flower after death instead of a lion or vulture. His name and behavior are imprinted on the yellow and white flower, which bends over the pond and gazes at its own reflection forever. The strong self-attachment also makes his spirit perpetually gaze at his own image in Hades: "And now although among the nether shades his sad sprite roams, he ever loves to gaze on his reflection in the Stygian wave" (3.496-498). The habitual thought and behavior of an individual do not end in the present lifetime

but permeate the future consciousness. The sustainability of life force in metamorphosis resonates with the continuity of karmic energy in Dharma.

Interbeing

Transfonnation myths suggest the impermanent nature of all living beings in their incessant alternation and disintegration. Human beings as represented by Narcissus, Daphne and Arethusa are unstable entities without inherent essence. While karma determines their transformation into natural objects, it also points to the ecological notion of reciprocity and interdependence. As Padmasiri DeSilva argues, Buddhist ethics has a lot to do with environmentalism:

> Since the inherent value of life is a core value in Buddhist ethical codes, the notion of reciprocity and interdependence fits in with the Buddhist notion of a causal system. A living entity cannot isolate itself from this causal nexus, and has no essence of its own. Reciprocity also conveys the idea of mutual obligation between nature and humanity, and between people.[30]

The mythic world of change and dissolution expands the ego-self to the eco-self interconnected with other forms of lives. The non-essentialist nature of human subjectivity suggests a living and evolving organism forever responding to external conditions. Transformation tales display the sustainable life force without decay and death.

The prominent Mahayana scripture, *The Heart Sutra* conveys the no birth and no death doctrine of emptiness as follows: "Therefore, Sariputra, in emptiness there is no form, nor feeling, nor perception, nor impulse, nor consciousness... there is no decay and death, no extinction of decay and death."[31] The conception that there is no death but change and continuity finds another powerful expression in *The Diamond Sutra*: "[T]here is no such thing as a self, a person, a living being, or a universal self—all things are devoid of selfhood, devoid of any separate individuality."[32] Devoid of true existence, human body is like "a bubble in a vast ocean, momentarily forming, rising to the

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[30] Padmasiri DeSilva, "Buddhist Environmental Ethics," in *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. A. H. Badiner (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1990), 18.

[31] *The Heart Sutra*, trans. Edward Conze. Retrieved July 22, 2014, from http:// kr.buddhism.org/zen/ sutras/ conze.htm

[32] *The Diamond Sutra*, trans. Edward Conze. Retrieved July 22, 2014, from http://www.buddhistische-gesellschaft-berlin.de/downloads/diamantsutraconze.pdf

surface, then bursting and merging with the water again."[33] The Buddhist analogy of human life with waves and ocean mirrors mythological worldview. As Anne Carson observes, mythology is preoccupied with the processual existences that "crash into other lives or brush against gods."[34] The mythic characters manifest the inexhaustible becomings that don't vanish but move into something else and affect the new environment they inhabit. The perpetual renewals in the mythological world parallel the ever-changing forms of waves in Buddhist thought. Substitutable and continuous, personhoods are like temporary bubble or waves on the water that are connected with the oneness of the infinite ocean. They emerge to continue into other existences, embodying the empty, dependent-arising self. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, death "never interrupts life but is instead a change, a process of rearticulation of forms whereby parts of a being get differently mingled."[35] The death of human existence finds recurrence in other life forms in nature, just as Pythagoras insists that the sum of all things is never changed.

The classical Buddhist doctrine of emptiness is renewed in modern times through the assimilation into the psychological vocabulary of interconnectedness. Thich Nhat Hanh proffers the idea of "interbeing,"[36] claiming the inseparability of people from their environment by the example of a sheet of paper:

> If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow.... and if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper.... the fact is that this sheet of paper is made only of "non-paper elements." ... As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.[37]

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[33] Sheng Yen, *The Sword of Wisdom* (New York, NY: Dharma Drum Publications, 2002), 30.

[34] Anne Carson, *Grief Lessons* (New York, NY: New York Review Books Classics, 2006), 8.

[35] Branka Arsić, *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 363.

[36] The conception of interbeing is related to the movement of "Engaged Buddhism," a term coined by Thich Nhat Hanh in 1963 when Vietnam was ravaged by war. He founded the "Order of Interbeing," promoting worthy causes to rectify social injustice and political oppression as a response to the charge that Buddhism had been too passive and aloof to offer practical solutions to human suffering. See Damien Keown, *Dictionary of Buddhism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 86.

[37] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*, ed. Peter Levitt (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988), 3-4.

According to McMahan, Thich Nhat Hanh's interbeing replaces the traditional doctrine of rebirth with "the dispersion of a being at death into the vast, interrelated cosmos to be 'reborn' as any (and all) of the other forms while at the same time being one with the whole."[38] Even though people may transform into other forms of being, each single being reflects the whole cosmos and the cosmos is reflected back in it. The nature of self encompasses all lives and becomes interrelated in a complex life system. Therefore, death is not to be feared as it is simply the transformation of one form of life into another:

> We cannot conceive of the birth of anything. There is only continuation. ... Look back further and you will see that you not only exist in your father and mother, but you also exist in your grandparents and in your great grandparents.... This is the history of life on earth. We have been gas, sunshine, water, fungi, and plants.... Nothing can be born and also nothing can die.[39]

Thich Nhat Hanh's assertion that "nothing can be born and also nothing can die" points to an organic and egalitarian worldview. Human life shares commonality with other forms of existence, all of which play a significant part in the complex system.

In metamorphosis myths, death is shown as an agent of change instead of the cessation of life. The grief over the finitude of human life is soothed with the entry into other forms of existence. As Branka Arsić points out, "Eastern and Greek thought conceived of eternity not as stagnant but closer to the logic of human time, as incessantly agitated."[40] That eternity is "incessantly agitated" means the flux of subjectivity in the perpetual process of alteration and dissemination. The vitalistic stance in mythic world chimes with the Buddhist conception of interbeing as Thich Nhat Hanh explicates: "[I]n our lives, we were rocks, clouds, and trees.... This is not Buddhist; it is scientific. We humans are a young species. We were plants, we were trees and now we have become humans.... We are continually arising from Mother Earth, being nurtured by her, and then returning to her."[41] Either the corporeal regeneration in western myth or Buddhist interbeing reverberates with ecological awareness. "When we try to pick out anything by itself," as John Muir argues, "we find it hitched to

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[38] David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 176.

[39] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*, 21.

[40] Branka Arsić, *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau*, 34.

[41] Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Sun in My Heart," in *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, eds. Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2000), 85-86.

everything else in the universe. The mystical poet, Francis Thompson stated, 'Thou canst not stir a flower without troubling a star.'"[42] Metamorphosis myth unites man with nature, instilling sublime and noble elements into both entities. The flower manifests exquisite beauty, the tree represents intellectual and artistic achievement and the spring symbolizes purity and divinity. The natural world in Ovid's account possesses intrinsic values with a reciprocal and harmonious relationship with humans, thus evoking the core value of Deep Ecology.[43]

Joanna Macy is one of the popular Buddhist writers devoted to the issue of environmentalism. She formulates the "ecological self" or "eco-self" which coexists with other lives of our planet:

> [A]s open, self-organizing systems, our very breathing, acting and thinking arise in interaction with our shared world through the currents of matter, energy, and information that move through us and sustain us. In the web of relationships that sustain these activities there is no clear line demarcating a separate, continuous self.[44]

Macy regards a separate and isolated self as illusion, emphasizing the organic wholeness of nature and our correlation with it. The enlightenment of the Buddha, in her new interpretation, lies in "the dependent co-arising of phenomena, in which you cannot isolate a separate, continuous self."[45] Macy's "eco-self" is dependent-arising without an inherent essence. The human identities of Narcissus, Daphne and Arethusa are transitory and linked with the cosmic lives of flowers, trees and rivers. The interrelatedness embodies the ecological idea that a separate and isolated being is nonexistent but interwoven into "the web, the network, the matrix, the nexus, the system, and the complex."[46] The flow of life energy between humans and nature suggests that the preservation of human lives equals the protection of the environment. As Macy comments, "self [is] widened and

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[42] John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 95.

[43] The term "Deep Ecology" is first introduced by Arne Naess, a Norwegian activist and philosopher in the early 1970's. Later, Aldo Leopold, an American wildlife professor, developed from it some other related concepts, such as land ethic, living community and the web of life. Different from scientific ecology that emphasizes the detached observation of nature, Deep Ecology deals with spiritual dimensions of the environment, regarding the earth as a community wherein all lives have deep and reciprocal relations with each other. See Daniel Henning, *A Manual for Buddhism and Deep Ecology*, 26-27. With far-reaching impact on human culture, the values of Deep Ecology find resonances in Romantic communion with nature, Transcendentalist reverence for nature and Buddhist protection of nature.

[44] Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1991), 187-188.

[45] Ibid., 189.

[46] David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 181.

deepened so that the protection of nature [is] felt and perceived as protection of our very selves."[47]

Through transformation, the mythic characters become part and parcel of nature, embodying Macy's "ecological self" that dissolves the ego boundary to merge with the world. For Macy as for other Buddhists concerned about ecology, it is crucial that humans deepen the sense of connection with life and strengthen the ability to respond to global environmental problems.[48] Gregory Bateson, another influential figure of Buddhist interdependence, sees the symbiotic relationship between individuals and their environment in which each reciprocally constitutes the other.[49] Similar to Macy's ecological self, Bateson's interwovenness of self and other highlights the importance of the dynamic system like the rainforest, cells and community. Both Dharma and Deep Ecology look at nature from an ecocentric instead of an anthropocentric viewpoint. Together, they emphasize spirituality and humanity in the understanding of nature, calling for the appreciation of its sacredness and the appropriate relationship with it.[50] In his last book, *Island*, Aldous Huxley wrote that "'Do as you would be done by' applies to our dealings with all kinds of life in every part of the world. We shall be permitted to live on this planet only for as long as we treat all nature with compassion and intelligence. Elementary ecology leads straight to elementary Buddhism."[51] The trans-species experience in metamorphosis myth evokes the reciprocal consciousness in Dharma and Deep Ecology. As everything in nature is alive and animated, they are human counterparts with the same feelings and thoughts. To appreciate the existence of flowers, trees and rivers is to affirm human dignity and vice versa. The perfect union of humans and nature debunks the binary antithesis, unifying matter with spirit, the finite with the infinite, the dead with the living. In the mythic world dwell the ecological values of sustainable environment and organic wholeness.

Metamorphosis replaces the isolated life of the beautiful lad and lass with the communal identity that accommodates all elements in nature. The interdependent life of Narcissus flower includes the tangible elements such as water, woods and stag. The flower called Narcissus cannot exist without the water of the pond, through which Narcissus opens his eyes to beauty. He stays near the pond to rest because he hunts stags in the woods. Nature nourishes him and he returns to it through the transformation. Human life pulsates through the living plant; Narcissus and the flower share the same life energy. The interchangeability of life forms blurs the boundary of self

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[47] Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self*, 191.
[48] Daniel Henning, *A Manual for Buddhism and Deep Ecology*, 28.
[49] Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York, NY: Dutton, 1979), 169.
[50] Daniel Henning, *A Manual for Buddhism and Deep Ecology*, 81.
[51] Aldous Huxley, *Island* (London, UK: Vintage, 1962), 249.

and other. Narcissus's selfhood never dies but merges with the external world. The disappearance of his body doesn't end his life but immortalizes his beauty in poetic lines. He lives forever in art, healing the spiritual woes of the aesthetic souls. William Wordsworth is the paradigmatic Romantic that experiences exquisite beauty through the encounter with Narcissus flower. In the poem "The Daffodils," the poet persona wanders like a cloud over hills and valleys. When he catches sight of a field of daffodils beside a lake, he is overwhelmed with ecstatic joy. From then on, whenever he is "vacant" or "pensive," the memory of those golden daffodils flashes upon his inward eye and his heart is filled with the "bliss of solitude."[52]

Not only the flower myth, but the tree and spring myths involve the whole world. More than a separate entity, they incorporate a macrocosmic world of male hegemony and female resistance. Apollo and Alpheus represent the dominant patriarch that wields powers through coercion and physical force. Daphne and Arethusa exemplify the unyielding minority that refuses to adopt cultural norms and insists on a free and independent life. Their passive and nonviolent resistance triumphs over the aggressive male penetration. The power struggle between the male lover and female beloved is a microcosm of social reality. While the females' transformation seems a punishment, it is also a magnanimous solution proffered by the Greek culture to keep their will of not being a wife and mother intact. The transfiguration of female bodies is the antidote to the cultural reification of an essentialist womanhood. Unconfined in the household chores, they exert their influences more extensively and benefit people physically and spiritually. Hidden in the tree and spring myths is the collective consciousness of female freedom and spontaneity to challenge the patriarchal power.

Like Narcissus, Daphne and Arethusa will never die but remain a symbol of honor and glory. The spring is associated with divinity for later generations to worship, while the tree has alliance with poets, musicians and artists. Apollo's grief of losing Daphne finds solace in her transformation into the "graceful" tree:

> Phoebus admired and loved the graceful tree,
> (For still, though changed, her slender form remained)
> and with his right hand lingering on the trunk
> he felt her bosom throbbing in the bark.
> He clung to trunk and branch as though to twine.
> His form with hers, and fondly kissed the wood

[52] William Wordsworth, "The Daffodils," in *A Concise Treasury of Great Poems*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1975), 209-210.

that shrank from every kiss. (1.560-566)

“His form with hers,” “as though to twine,” and “he felt her bosom throbbing in the bark”—these lines suggest the harmonious relationship between man and nature. Apollo lives in the tree and the tree in him. The lingering hand and the tender kiss on the tree gesture toward valuing nature as the source of creativity and inspiration. The one life that they share after the transformation forms a living community that encompasses people gifted in art. Metamorphosis breaks the ego boundary of the isolated individuals so that they merge with the populace. The communal sense of being cannot be experienced without the bodily transformation. The union of Apollo and Laurel tree is the light that dispels the darkest moment of their life. As Campbell observes, transformation brings forth salvation: “one thing that comes out in myths is that at the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation. The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light.”[53]

Death does not end a life but ushers in an admixture of self and other. Metamorphosis is the ancient way of mourning that lessens the grief of bereavement through the corporeal rebirth in the communal life. Narcissus revives in aesthetic souls, Arethusa relives in people who revere the sacred spring, and Daphne resides in the artistic talents who wear laurel wreaths on their brows. The pining away of Narcissus brings forth the beautiful flower to inspire awe and admiration. The absence of Daphne and Arethusa as a daughter and wife generates the presence of the tree and spring to benefit the living creatures. The vitalistic and holistic tendency in transformation myths imbues natural objects with life forces to debunk the polar oppositions of life and death, animate and inanimate. In these tales, nature becomes alive with human sensations, and human life becomes immortal through the communion with nature. The mythic worldview resonates with the Buddhist conception of selfhood as an ever-changing flux in the interrelated cosmos.

The tendency of psychologization in western modernity brings forth the mutual illumination between Dharma and mythology, revealing the shared logic of karmic consequence and the yearning for organic whole. The mirror of Dharma reflects universal human problems in the three metamorphosis myths. There is no inherent self but everything is conditioned and constituted by interlocking factors. It is not original sin but foolishness or ignorance that leads to the suffering of the mythic characters. The reckless and passionate lovers drive themselves and their beloved into despair. The sorrow and pain in the mythic world parallel those in the real world. They are attributed

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[53] Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 37.

to self-attachment, which finds expression in the male lovers' obsession with sensual pleasures and the female virgins' insistence on an isolated life. Karma determines the form and scope of suffering, and karmic energy is sustainable throughout future lifetimes.

While karmic law has an implicit presence in transformation myths, interbeing provides the solution to human predicament. Through the dissolution of personhood and the union with nature, the ego boundary is broken and substituted by the communal existence. The personalized identity is shown as a transitory bubble that arises, fades and returns to the infinite ocean. After the transformation, the isolated selves become the eco-selves that find their way back to the cosmic whole. Buddhist interbeing extracts from metamorphosis myths the ecological consciousness and the collective dream of liberation from suffering. The separate entities are united with the communal oneness by the entry of human life into natural objects. The fusion of the living and dead dismantles the binary distinction of self and other, pointing to the non-essentialist and egalitarian world where man and nature share one life. Dharma casts away the pathos of death and doom in metamorphosis myths, highlighting the principle of interconnectedness and interdependence as the key to the cessation of suffering.

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法鏡映照下的變形神話

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摘要

希臘羅馬神話中，人會轉化成其它的生命形式，如動物、植物或自然界的物質等。水仙花、桂冠樹及林仙泉皆描繪人的主體之流動及變化，以及心靈和自然之契合。這些奇幻的變形故事，除了試圖解釋自然現象以外，可解讀成心理狀態而非真實的形體改變。本研究旨在以苦和離苦為核心思想的佛法觀點，檢視變形神話的意義。變形具有反映人間痛苦及渴望解脫之深刻意涵。變形雖因無明而起，但透過獨立個體和外在大環境的相融合，反成為解脫的契機。本研究內容分業果及互攝存在二部分。第一部分解釋這三則神話故事中變形的業果法則，揭示花、樹與泉水的存在，涉及因果的關聯，並非固有的本質。第二部分探討變形中的互攝存在，是足以打破自我與他人以及生與死的界線，並呼應今日的生態意識。在變形之後，原來孤立的自我，拓展成和世間眾生相連的生命體。佛法給予變形神話另類的解讀，轉化實有的死亡與宿命，昇華為生命的實相，藉此重塑其現代意義。

關鍵詞：佛法、互攝存在、因果、變形神話

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