



The Imagery of Emptiness in the Poetry of Wang Wei

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For several miles, entering cloudy peaks.
Ancient trees, paths without people;
Deep in the mountains, where is the bell?

Empty mountains, white clouds, a voice or bell in the forest, water running or falling: it is in imagery such as this, and in poetry as pithy and enigmatic as that above, that Wang Wei (699-761) elucidates Buddhist concepts without recourse to discursive argument. A government official in the Tang dynasty, Wang Wei was also a scholar, painter, and perhaps above all a devout Chan Buddhist and poet who is sometimes referred to in China as 'the Buddha of the Poets.' This paper will explore the ways in which the imagery at work within his poetry expresses Buddhist notions of emptiness (Skt. sunyata, Ch. kong) as the ultimate reality underlying the visible world, in line with the Mahayana universalization of the earlier notion of no-self.

The role of related notions such as non-duality, impermanence and dependent origination will also be examined. The Chan emphasis on a transmission outside of explicit teachings led Wang Wei, it will be argued, to eschew the exposition of doctrine in favour of a poetry which, in its simplicity and silence, embodies the very absence of the poet himself.