

As a Snake Sheds • 蛻變

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Ten years ago I worked for three years at IWR and DRBU in Berkeley, before going back to graduate school. I finished my PhD in May and joined DRBU this semester as an assistant professor of Sanskrit and Indian Classics.

One of the things that I wrote about in my dissertation was the trope of a serpent shedding his skin, a motif common to both Vedic and Buddhist thought. For example, the refrain at the end of every verse in the *Uraga Sutta* of the Suttanipāta reads: so bhikkhu jahāti orapāram, urago jinnam iva tacam purānam. The refrain means, “That bhikkhu leaves behind the near and far shore as a snake sheds old, worn out skin.” To understand what the ancient sages observed in nature that prompted them to apply this metaphor, I studied scientific reports and watched the process myself.

Herpetological research has shown that because the skin does not grow with its body, the snake grows into a new skin¹. Periodic shedding permits an increase in skin surface and facilitates somatic growth and repair through a concomitant epidermal renewal². With lepidosaurian reptiles, like snakes and lizards, the cyclic formation of a new epidermal generation occurs throughout the entire body, not just individually or in small patches as with mammals, birds, crocodiles, and turtles³. According to Lorenzo Alibardi, during renewal phases, “a new inner epidermal generation is produced beneath the old outer generation, which is shed later⁴.” In short, to accommodate the constantly expanding body of the young snake, its outer skin periodically falls away. This process may be compared with the cultivator, whose body and mind are transforming, giving way to the emergence of a more expansive body and mind.

The beginning of shed is the most difficult for the snake. The loosening skin covers his eyes, rendering him somewhat blind and defensively oversensitive to potential danger. Without any hands, the snake rubs himself against a stone or some object to start the slough from the head. Once the epidermis on the head has started to peel, the snake is then no longer visually impaired and can arduously pull himself through the old skin, which peels backward. There is nothing a snake can hold onto during this process; shedding is sheer labor of a gradual, but complete self-removal bit by bit. The snake often stops to rest as a result of the enormous amount of effort required to come out from the skin.

十年前在回學校念研究所之前，我曾經在法界宗教研究院以及法界佛教大學柏克萊校區工作過三年。因此今年五月份完成博士學位後，開始在法大擔任梵文和印度文學的助理教授。

我的博士論文其中一項研究，是關於吠陀和佛教思想裏經常引用的一個譬喻「蛇蛻皮」。例如在南傳大藏經《蛇經》裏，每首偈誦後面的疊句寫道：「so bhikkhu jahāti orapāram, urago jinnam iva tacam purānam」，意思是「比丘捨棄此岸和彼岸，猶如蛇蛻去老舊的皮。」為了瞭解這個古代聖者從觀察到的自然現象所做的譬喻，我不但研究相關科學資料，同時也實際去觀察蛇蛻皮的過程。

爬蟲類動物研究指出，蛇皮並不會跟著蛇的身體一起成長，而是隨著體型增加而不斷脫落更新。這種週期性蛻皮除了增加表皮面積，同時讓身體得以成長與修復。鱗片類的爬蟲動物例如蛇或蜥蜴，是全身進行週期性蛻皮，跟哺乳類動物例如鳥類、鱈魚和烏龜的局部蛻皮完全不同。勞倫佐的研究發現，換皮過程是「新皮在舊皮裏增生，等新皮完全長成，舊皮也隨之脫落」。簡言之，一條成長中的幼蛇，牠的外皮會定期脫落以適應日趨長大的身體。這個蛻皮的過程，可以譬喻為修行者身心的轉變；每一次轉變，都代表修行者身心的提升。

對蛇來說，蛻皮一開始是最困難的。鬆脫的舊皮覆蓋雙眼，讓牠處於半瞎的狀態，因此會對周圍的潛在危險過度防衛。因為沒有手，所以只能靠在石頭或是物體的表面摩擦，讓舊皮能從頭部慢慢剝落。一旦頭部的表皮開始剝落，視線不再受到影響，就可以開始把身體從老廢的舊皮中往後拉出。這是一項艱鉅的任

Just a few months of being at CTTB has been intense. Just as the snake, whose body is growing, must remove his outer skin, I too constantly face situations in which my skewed perception is exposed to me, revealing emotional patterns, insecurities, and habit energies that are to be let go of. In the last few months it became apparent that what made me a good student makes me a horrible teacher: always a self-motivated learner, deep down I feared that not performing well would make me less worthy in the eyes of my professors. I was driven to succeed in a difficult subject no matter the cost to my wellbeing and personal life. I even forgot how to relax—so great was my fear.

When I started teaching, I wrongly assumed that my students would be driven to perform like me, like many other students with whom I studied at UC Berkeley. But I came across harsh and demanding in the classroom at DRBU, where the students want to study Dharma and cultivate. I had a difficult time listening to their needs because my own rung so loudly in my ears. I would like to publically apologize for any suffering that I caused to Sanskrit students by way of my expectations and rigidity—and to thank them for their kindness and patience while I become aware of these obstacles and transform them.

Transforming the karmic conditions in my own process requires acknowledging them when they arise, without reinforcing their energy. I believe that one of the strongest assets of DRBU is the spiritual cultivation supported by the many cultivators here at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. The Guan Yin Session provided an opportunity to work through some of these conditions and to train my attention. I took the session very seriously because I recognize the kind of transformation that is possible in the sessions. Many things transpired in the Buddha Hall last month, but I won't recapitulate an experience common to most people in this assembly.

Let me instead share a few things that reading the Sanskrit version of the *Universal Door Chapter* of the *Saddharmapundarīka Sūtra* in the advanced Sanskrit class at DRBU is teaching me. The Sanskrit version contains key technical terms in Buddhism that emphasize a psychological dimension to the recitation practice. For example, when it says that if beings should fall into a mass of fire, the term used is *agniskandha*, which in other Buddhist texts is used interchangeably with *upādāna-skandha* or the five aggregates of grasping⁵. Using the metaphor of fire, *upādāna* is the fuel required to maintain the existence of dharmas that arise in consciousness. The Sanskrit version clarifies that the fire being experienced, then, is not an external fire, but rather the conditioned arising of what has been previously grasped. People being carried away by rivers evokes the idea of streams of karma dragging us down conditioned existence in a current commensurate with the force of our habitual tendencies. Reciting “Avalokiteśvara,” the Sanskrit equivalent of Guan Yin, releases us from all fears, not just from external dangers.

Like the Sanskrit chapter, in the section titled “The Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī's Recommendation” in the *Śūrangama Sūtra*, Guan Yin's practice

務，因為整個過程必須靠自己努力，一點一點地將身體從舊皮中抽離。這需要花費很多的力氣，所以牠經常得停下來休息。

來到聖城的這幾個月，帶給我很多劇烈的變化。就像為了長大，蛇必須換掉外皮一樣，我也不斷面對一些狀況，那就是自我的偏見，其中包括情緒反應、內心的不安全感 and 很多習氣都需要被捨棄。過去幾個月裏，我發現自己好學生的特質，讓我變成一位差勁的老師：我積極主動學習的背後，其實是內心深處的不安全感——擔心表現不好會不受教授的重視。因此，為了能在困難科目上得到好成績，我不惜投入所有的精力和時間。內心深處的恐懼，甚至讓我忘了如何放鬆。

開始任教之後，我誤以為學生的態度，都會像我自己或者大部份加州大學柏克萊分校的學生一樣。我對上課的學生要求很嚴格，但這裏學生想要的是學習佛法和修行。我無法傾聽他們在學習上的需求，因為我的耳朵塞滿了自己的想法。因此我想在此公開向梵文班的學生道歉，因為我的自我要求和缺乏彈性傷害了他們；同時也感謝他們，在我意識到以及突破這些自我障礙之前，對我的包容與耐心。

就我個人的經驗，轉化業緣首先要意識到它們的出現，並且不去強化它們的能量。我認為法界佛教大學最強大的資產之一，就是聖城這個修行環境，這是來自許多城內修行人的護持。最近的這個觀音七，給我一個轉化業緣、練習攝心的機會。我非常認真參加打七，因為我意識到這可能會讓事情有所轉變。觀音七剛結束，佛殿裏有許多參加者的故事，在此我不想重複大多數人在法會常有的體驗。

這裏想分享在法大梵文進階班裏，研讀梵文版《法華經》〈普門品〉的一些收穫。梵文本的經文，保存佛教裏強調稱念名號在心理層面的作用。例如若有眾生設入大火的「大火」，梵文用 *agniskandha*，這個字在其他佛經裏和 *upādāna-skandha*（受陰）或五蘊是相互替用的。這裏用火來做譬喻，因為 *upādāna*（取）是心識諸法（dharmas）產生

is recommended to get rid of outflows and to turn sense perception around. Reading these texts taught me that the recitation practice trains my attention so that I do not continue to pay attention to what has been karmically conditioned, so that what arises from causes and conditions, including all fears, does not take over my mind. The recitation practice works to uncover the knowing that is not karmically conditioned.

In the two weeks following the session, I became aware that it feels incredibly strange to let go of old habit energy, the karmic tendencies causing me to misperceive what is going on around me. It feels more natural to hold onto what is familiar, even though I know that it covers over the capacity to see things as they are. Change is uncomfortable. There is resilience, stickiness, struggle. Much like the snake trying to remove his outer skin.

The *Uraga Sutta* describes the bhikkhu who crosses over as a snake sheds his skin. The sutta maps this metaphor onto the cultivation of the bhikkhu in three important ways. First, such a bhikkhu is free from being bound to the energies that give rise to conditioned experience. These are expressed in the sutta as latent tendencies (*anusaya*), things arising from conditions, and things born from craving. As a result, the bhikkhu is characterized as having no anger, pride, passion, thirst, confusion, or aversion.

Second, the bhikkhu finds no substantiality in existences. About whatever he may apperceive, he understands, “All this is false,” and he does not have any discursive thoughts (*vitakka*) or conceptual proliferation (*papañca*). Third, the bhikkhu follows the Middle Way. He sheds afflictions, past karmic energies, and apperception based on conditioned arising. These qualities make him one who leaves behind the near and far shore as the snake casts off his skin.

Nyanaponika Thera addresses the trope of the snake shedding his skin in the *Uraga Sutta*⁶. He notes the continuity of one’s inherent nature in the process of releasing attachments and afflictions. In his words:

By such an act of ‘shedding the old skin’, no ‘violence against nature’ is done; it is a lawful process of growing, of outgrowing that which is no longer an object of attachment—just as the old skin is no longer attached to the snake’s body. Only in such a way can man vanquish those passionate urges and deceptive notions of his, which are so powerful and so deeply rooted. In the act of ultimate liberation, nothing is violently broken which was not already detached from the living tissues of mind and body or only quite loosely joined with them. Only a last effort of the powerful muscles will be needed to shake off the empty sheath—this hollow concept of an imaginary self which had hidden for so long in the true nature of body and mind. Here it lies before the meditator’s feet—just like the serpent’s worn-out skin—a lifeless heap of thin and wrinkled tissue⁷.

In Buddhist thought, attachment to the five aggregates (*skandhas*) obstructs seeing clearly the nature of the body and mind. Nyanaponika Thera explains that such attachment must be given up gradually and cannot be broken by force. Our personalities have been built up by the gradual intake of physical and mental nourishment, approaching and absorbing

所需的燃料，因此清楚說明了這種大火的感受，不是來自外面的火，而是心識裏法執和我執產生的熾熱。若為大水所漂的「大水」，則暗喻眾生被業習牽引而流轉生死。所以眾生稱唵Avalokiteśvara，也就是觀音菩薩的名號，能遠離一切的恐怖，不僅只是外面的危險。

就像梵文本的《楞嚴經》「佛勅文殊揀選圓通」一節裏面提到，觀音菩薩修的圓通法門是入流亡所。讀完這些經文，我了解到唵誦這個法門是訓練我的注意力，讓我不再把心思放在這些業緣上，包括所有的恐懼感，這些都不再控制我的心。唵誦幫助我觀照不為業緣所繫的無為法。

打完觀音七後的兩個禮拜，我意識到摒除習氣並不容易，這些習氣毛病讓我對周遭的事物做錯誤的判斷；保持現狀反而比較自然，儘管知道它會遮蔽我看清真相的能力。改變是不舒服的，因為過程是一連串的反彈、糾纏和掙扎，就像蛇試圖褪除老舊的外皮一樣。

《蛇經》裏描述，比丘到解脫彼岸的過程就像蛇蛻皮。經文用這個譬喻說明比丘修行中所經歷的三個重要層面。首先，從自身的習氣毛病束縛中解脫。經文中用*anusaya*（隨眠）這個詞形容潛伏在意識流中的習性，遇境緣而起，隨貪愛而生。解脫隨眠的比丘，不再有憤怒、驕傲、激情、渴愛、困惑或厭惡這些束縛。

第二個層面，是發現所有境界都不是真實存在，無論感覺經驗或是瞭解認知，一切都是虛妄的，因此比丘沒有妄想（*vitakka*）或執著（*papañca*）。第三個層面，就是依止中道而行，因為比丘此時已經解脫了因緣所生的業力跟煩惱。上述這些特質，讓比丘能遠離煩惱此岸，猶如蛇蛻去了舊皮一般。

向智尊者（Nyanaponika Thera）闡述《蛇經》裏蛇蛻皮這個比喻時，提到了修行者在自性中不斷放下執著與煩惱。尊者如是說：

「蛻皮」這種行為，沒有任何暴力介入違反自然；相反的，這是一個自然的生長過程，不需要的部份從本體脫離，就像老皮不再附著在蛇身。只有這樣的方式，才能擊敗

objects, making them our own or believing them to be our own. This process, he argues, must be reversed by a gradual process of detachment and stopping the false identifications because, “The unreality lies in what we attribute to the world, not in the world itself.”⁸ The snake skin, meaning the attachments and afflictions that cover over the mind, falls away through cultivation.

Even though I sometimes feel like a mess, a miserable swarm of afflictions, constantly in conflict, unsettled, uncomfortable, and confused—something is working. After the Guan Yin session I attended a Pāli workshop at UC Berkeley, where multiple people commented on my “changed appearance.” First it was a professor, and I thought to myself, “What is she talking about?” Then other people noticed, too. A post-doc from Taiwan, whom I met earlier this semester, wrote me a message, saying that it was good to see me and, “You look great, so CTTB must have treated you well.” What could this mean? With great effort, the uncomfortable snake, wiggling himself out of old skin that tightly clings to his body, gives way to a new layer of skin, lustrous and ravishing, which fits for some time, until this layer too is outgrown.

Despite my growing pains, I already see changes in my ability to listen attentively, my relationships with people, and my willingness to confront deeper levels of coverings or obstacles. Thank you to the community here for your effort and patience as I shed my skin, over and over again, until there are no longer any attachments and afflictions left to release. Amitābha. ❀

那些強大而根深蒂固的欲望跟妄想。最究竟的解脫，並不是猛烈地破壞尚未脫離習性的身心狀態，而是不費力地跟它們合作。長久遮蔽自性的空洞我相，就像一只空殼，在禪修者的面前，只需強壯的肌肉做最後的努力就能擺脫，就像蛇褪去那沒有生命、皺摺的舊皮。

從佛法的觀點來看，對五蘊（skandhas）的執著障礙我們看清身心的本質。向智尊者解釋，我們必須一步一步慢慢捨棄這些執著，而不是暴力性的破壞。我們的個性或是人格特質，是身心各方面一點一滴慢慢吸收養成，讓我們相信這些就是我們的個性或者我們的人格特質。因此尊者強調，改變的過程必須以漸進的方式，逐步捨棄和停止對自己錯誤的認知，因為「這個世界的不真實，來自我們對它的認知，並不是世界的本身」。蛇皮代表覆蓋心中的執著與煩惱，隨著修行終會漸漸剝落。

儘管有時我覺得自己糟透了，一大堆的煩惱，心裏的衝突、不穩定、不舒服和困惑不斷—但是，某些東西正在轉變。打完觀音七之後，我參加一場在加大柏克萊分校的巴利文研討會，先後遇到一些人，他們都覺得我看起來不一樣了。首先是一位教授這麼說，我當時心想：「她在說什麼？」然後其他人也注意到了。一位我這學期初認識、來自台灣的博士後研究員，寫短訊告訴我很高興遇到我，並且說：「妳看起來好極了，萬佛聖城一定對妳很不錯。」這是什麼意思？用盡全身的氣力，不舒服的蛇終於將自己從緊貼的老皮中掙脫出來，取而代之的是一身光亮迷人的新皮，雖然這層新生的皮只會維持一段時間，直到裹不住變大的軀體。

儘管成長的過程是痛苦的，我卻看到自己的轉變，變得更專心傾聽，人際關係漸漸改善，同時願意面對內心更深處的障礙與煩惱。我相信自己也會一次又一次的蛻皮，直到究竟解脫一切的煩惱與執著。非常感謝這裏的人，在這個蛻變過程中對我的支持與耐心。阿彌陀佛！❀

1. I am grateful to Raul E. Diaz for his correspondence on reptile molting. Diaz, Assistant Professor of Biology at La Sierra University. Personal correspondence. October 25, 2014.
2. Lorenzo Alibardi, “Adaptation to the Land: The Skin of Reptiles in Comparison to That of Amphibians and Endotherm Amniotes,” in *Journal of Experimental Zoology (Mol. Dev. Evol.)* 298B: 12-41 (2003), 21.
3. Ping Wu, Lianhai Hou, Maksim Lplinkus, et al., “Evo-Devo of amniote integuments and appendages,” in *Int. J. Dev. Biol.* 48: 249-270 (2004), 252.
4. Lorenzo Alibardi, “Ultrastructure of the Embryonic Snake Skin and Putative Role of Histidine in the Differentiation of the Shedding Complex,” in *Journal of Morphology*, Vol. 251. (2002): 149-168, 149.
5. Richard F. Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings.* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1996), 65-72; Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought* (London: Equinox, 2009), 114-115.
6. Nyanaponika Thera, “The Worn-out Skin: Contemplations on a Buddhist Poem The Serpent Simile, Uruga Sutta of the Sutta Nipāta,” in *The Wheel Publication.* no. 241/242. (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1977).
7. Nyanaponika, 12.
8. *Ibid.*, 14, 53.
9. *Ibid.*, 52.