

Culture Notes

An's Seed

By Zaozao Wang

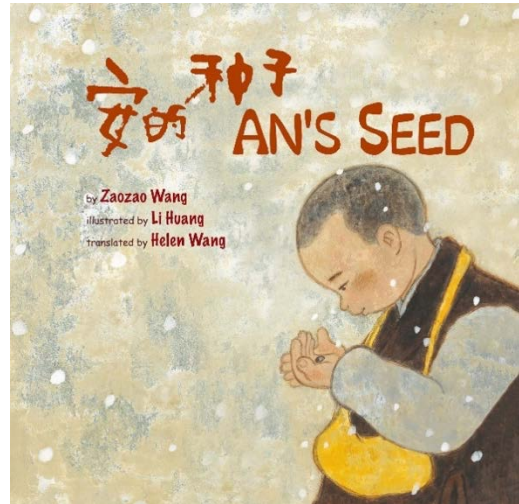
Translated by Helen Wang

Illustrated by Li Huang

Candied Plums; bilingual edition, 2017 **Fiction, Set in China**

2017 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

An's Seed is a picture book written by Zaozao Wang and illustrated by Li Huang. It tells the story of three young Buddhist monks—Ben, Jing (pronounced: Gihng), and An—each given a lotus seed by their master. The master tasks each of them with growing the seeds into full lotus flowers in the best way that they can. The novice monks go their separate ways, and each thinks about the best way to make their seed grow. A brief tale is then told of each little monk:



- Ben immediately goes to find a hoe and plants his seed in the snow-covered ground. He waits and waits for it to sprout, but nothing ever happens.
- Jing goes to find a flowerpot, soil, and a book that would teach him how to properly take care of the lotus seed. The seed starts to sprout, but to protect it, Jing puts a lid over the pot, which cuts off the oxygen and sunlight the plant needs to continue growing.
- Throughout the winter months, An does not plant the lotus seed given to him by his master. He focuses on the tasks at hand—going to market, sweeping, fetching water—until spring arrives. Then he plants his lotus seed in a pond, where it blossoms and thrives.

An's Seed did not have to be set at a Buddhist temple or feature explicitly Buddhist characters, but the author is setting this story and its lessons within a particular cultural and philosophical paradigm. The story itself is a parable that could come right out of one of the most venerated Buddhist scriptures of all time, the *Lotus Sutra*. The imagery of the lotus seeds at the center of the story may even be offered as textual proof of this connection; however, the connection does not end there. Not only is *An's Seed* a parable alluding to weightier philosophical texts that clearly influenced the author, but



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the book also offers lessons on particular Buddhist values as well. Given the book's title, a reader might expect the main protagonist, An, to be the focus of the story. This is intentional, in that An displays two specific philosophical virtues that a Buddhist monk would be thinking about.

The first virtue is *wuwei* (pronounced: WOO-way), a concept translated as "non-action" that originated in Chinese Philosophical Daoism (formerly spelled Taoism and pronounced: DOW-ism) but was later absorbed by the Chan (pronounced: chahn) school of Buddhist thought as Buddhism took root in China. *Wuwei* is less about doing literally nothing and more about going with the natural flow of our circumstances and the world around us. This emphasizes that bending aspects of the world around us to our will is not always healthy or necessary, especially if we wish to be in harmony with the natural world. In this regard, it's not surprising that most of the story does not focus on An's actions. Ben's and Jing's actions take precedence to show their disregard for the philosophy of *wuwei*. They are more interested in quick results than acting in accordance with nature. An, however, understands *wuwei* intuitively, and he commits to plant his lotus seed in an environment where it will live and thrive. An's everyday actions can be seen within the context of understanding the natural flow of events and the environment around him.

The second virtue is the Buddhist concept of *upaya* ("skillful means"; pronounced: ooh-PAH-yuh). Skillful means are usually interpreted as particular tools or ways of thinking that Buddhist practitioners can use in their meditation practice to mature further in a shorter amount of time. The author brilliantly turns this concept on its head through the actions of Ben and Jing: by relying on expediency, these two are the opposite of skillful. By rushing to grow their lotus seeds as quickly as possible, they doom themselves to failure. An wisely demonstrates skillful means by using his knowledge to provide a healthier environment for his lotus seeds. His patience in tending to the day-to-day activities of his temple is the best use of expediency in his practice; instead of rushing to plant his lotus seed, he uses every moment wisely.



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Vocabulary Terms for *An's Seed*

Four Noble Truths: Included in the first sermon the Buddha preached after achieving enlightenment, the Four Noble Truths express basic truths about existence in the material realm. These truths, which the Buddha discerned through his meditations, are as follows:

1. All existence is *dukkha* (suffering; pronounced: DOOK-kuh).
2. The cause of suffering is *tanha* (craving; pronounced: TAN-ha).
3. The cessation of suffering comes from the cessation of craving.
4. There is a path that leads out of suffering and that path is the Noble Eightfold Path.

Taken together, the Four Noble Truths sum up the human condition.

Eightfold Path: The Eightfold Path is the Buddha's remedy for the suffering and craving that are at the heart of the ignorance he identified in his Four Noble Truths. Buddhists believe that anyone who follows the principles prescribed by the Eightfold Path will eventually work their way through their ignorance and achieve a greater realization of their inherently wise and compassionate nature:

1. Right View
2. Right Intention
3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

Karma: Karma (action; pronounced: car-mah) is the Buddhist doctrine by which samsara (rebirth or reincarnation; pronounced: sam-sahr-ah) is perpetuated in the life of an individual being. Karma refers to individuals undertaking mental or physical actions or states of being, either intentionally or unintentionally, that lead to a future



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consequence. An individual's rebirth relies on the type of karma they have accumulated over the course of their previous life.

The Three Kinds of Practice

- **Samadhi:** Usually translated as "concentration," *samadhi* (pronounced: suh-MAA-dee) refers to the ideal meditative state where a practitioner is not attached to ideas, thoughts, or concepts as they focus on their breath and are able to center their mind and emotions.
- **Prajna:** A Sanskrit word that translates as "best knowledge/knowing," *prajna* is used to refer to the Buddhist concept of wisdom and usually refers to the type of wisdom a Buddhist practitioner attains after gaining insight through meditation. *Prajna* (pronounced: pu-RAH-ju-nah) is seen as intuitive, natural wisdom that someone starts to embody or realize after attaining a certain state in meditation.
- **Sila:** Referring specifically to precepts, *sila* (pronounced: SHEE-la) is the Buddhist practice of keeping and maintaining precepts to cultivate more wholesome states of mind and being. The precepts are seen as a way to give a Buddhist clearer direction in their life as either a monk or a layperson, given that they are training in virtue. According to the *Vinaya Pitaka* (literally, Basket of Discipline) of the Buddhist Pali Canon, there are 227 precepts for male monastics and 311 for female monastics.

Lotus Flower: One of the more iconic Buddhist symbols, the lotus flower represents many different aspects of Buddhist philosophy:

- The purity of the enlightened mind amid the suffering of samsara
- Nonattachment
- Spiritual growth and/or perfection
- The stages on the path of enlightenment
- Faith



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Chan (Sanskrit: *dhyana*; Japanese: Zen): This is a state of calm attentiveness in which one's actions are guided by intuition rather than by conscious effort. The term is known more widely throughout the world in its Japanese form, Zen.

Wuwei: An important Daoist concept that heavily influenced Chan Buddhism (known as Zen in Japan), the term roughly translates to mean "non-action." To practice *wuwei*, a person might renounce all worldly possessions and power, and commit themselves to acting in accord with the natural world, interpreted as acting in accord with the universe, the Way—the Dao. Other Daoist philosophers and practitioners seek to act out *wu-wei* in society, meaning that they study and pursue spiritual practice in a way that will help their secular actions accord with "natural action" (meaning that they are not out of step with the Dao).

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