

Dukkha: In Light of Buddhism
Examining Spirituality, Materiality, Symbolism, and Time in the Film Entitled *Dukkha*

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Abstract

This thesis exhibition, *How Calm the Ocean*, features my long-term video project, *Dukkha*, along with a large-scale sand hill installed in the Special Project Gallery at York University. In Buddhism, suffering is one of the four noble truths that an individual cannot avoid in life. There are eight sufferings: birth, aging, sickness, death, separation of the loved one, denial of one's desire, the long-lasting and unpleasant, and over-reliance on five aggregates. The first four sufferings are focused on the physicality of the human body (the pain that most people experience); the latter four sufferings focus on the inner pain caused by endless desire and obsession.

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Preface

This thesis exhibition, *How Calm the Ocean*, features my long-term video project, *Dukkha*, along with a large-scale sand hill installed in the Special Project Gallery at York University.¹ In Buddhism, suffering is one of the four noble truths that an individual cannot avoid in life. There are eight sufferings: birth, aging, sickness, death, separation of the loved one, denial of one's desire, the long-lasting and unpleasant, and over-reliance on five aggregates. The first four sufferings are focused on the physicality of the human body (the pain that most people experience); the latter four sufferings focus on the inner pain caused by endless desire and obsession. The title, *How Calm the Ocean*, refers to the Japanese poet Tessho's death poem, a genre of literature that takes up the author's meaningful observations on life and imminent death. Tessho's poem is informed by Zen Buddhism, which states that this material world is transient and impermanent, and that attachment to it causes suffering.

Growing up in a Buddhist family, I have been exposed to Buddhist teachings from my grandparents since I was little. I can hardly say that I am a very devout Buddhist, yet I am deeply attracted to the spiritual and mystical aspects of it. Although, in many of my works, I have explored Buddhist concepts like emptiness, the life and death cycle, sufferings, and reincarnation, I have never regarded myself as a religious artist who would embrace Buddhism as a kind of faith. My spiritual practice is not only based on Buddhist doctrines but it also originates from encounters with Asian art, ancient literature, poets, mantra, manuscripts, films, and various traditions rooted in East Asian culture and contemporary Asian art. In my mind, Buddhism is not simply a religion—it provides me with a way of looking at the world and a way

¹ *Dukkha*, a Pali word that describes humans' inevitable sufferings, according to Buddhism (Teasdale 90).

of thinking. In his book, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, Mark Siderits argues that even though each Buddha (enlightened person) finds their own way to nirvana, the teaching of Buddhism is based on observation on objective facts about the nature of this material world (Siderits 7). Even spiritual concepts, like liberation or nirvana, are all attained through investigation of the nature of the world. Therefore, in my film production, I have always adopted this way of thinking, to explore the relationship between one and nature, and the relationship between consciousness and the material world.

The project *Dukkha* explores the concept of the types of sufferings that are experienced by all human beings. It consists of eight independent video chapters, and for each chapter, it portrays a specific type of suffering. When interpreting this concept, I used many symbols as a metaphor such as the image of a fish, which, in Asian culture, symbolizes a wish, or the colour red, which is used to express desire, and the hair, symbolizing extreme attachment to the materialized world. I also received genuine love and compassion from many traditional and religious rituals from Buddhism and Asian culture, such as writing calligraphy, drawing with ink, shaving bald, reciting mantra, and praying. These ritualistic gestures empowered me to form my own spiritual practice.

According to Buddhism, accepting impermanence and setting aside obsession with things is an important way to return to a meditative state. Therefore, when exploring the concept of suffering, I work with ephemeral objects in nature to epitomize the materialization of spiritual truth. For example, in the video of *Bardo: Death*, the waves repetitively rush to the shore, which seem to be caught in an endless time frame. In *River: Separation of the Loved One*, when the ice melts, the flow of river water takes away the goldfish drawn with ink. In *Ash: Suffering of Sickness*, the collected ashes are blown away by my breath.

In some chapters, my performative actions are informed by encounters with Asian rituals and practices introduced in Buddhist teaching. In the videos of *My Body: Birth, Hair: Over-reliance on Aggregates*, and *Tree: Aging*, I was inspired by the sacred and caring rituals from the East, such as practising calligraphy of the Heart Sutra on the body (symbolizing protection and baptism for newborns), practising tonsure by myself (as a metaphor of cutting off the attachment to worldly desires), and tying strips of red cloth to the tree branches in winter (as a practice of expressing blessings for growing maturity and wisdom). In *Sickness*, the ashes I collected from the Buddhist temple were blown flat from a small mound; this durational performance also reflected the physical suffering that is usually experienced by a practitioner when seeking the mystical truth.

Lastly, I compiled these short, written vignettes as supporting material for my thesis exhibition. This supporting paper is organized in sections, each describing the video work following the order of eight sufferings. Written in various formats, these vignettes reflect the poetic nature of the work itself. In some vignettes, especially in the three vignettes *My Body*, *Bardo*, and *River*, the writing is conducted in a poetic way to illustrate the connection between my consciousness and the concept of suffering. And in the other five vignettes like *Tree*, *Ash*, *Stone*, *Desire*, and *Hair*, I speak more about theoretical references behind the concepts, and discuss the use of representations, symbols, material, and ritual acts that are in relation to my own spiritual practice. Key elements in my work—*dukkha*, emptiness, *samsara*, impermanence—will be further evaluated in the text through the lens of Buddhist philosophy.

Rhenix Shi

My Body: Suffering of Birth

My body is born.

My body is suffering.

My body is burning.

My body is having no control of my mind.

My body is growing.

My body is dying.

My body is not a form in this universe.

My body is not my own domination.

My body is made of dust.

My body is an illusory reflection of this world.

My body is the carrier of the pain.

My body is the extension of my insight.

My body is blessed.

My body is no different from the rocks.

My body is a gathering of particles.

My body is no concrete form.

My body is the receiver of sound, smell, taste, colour, and touch.

My body is not an end until death.

My body is an illusion.

My body is not an illusion.

My body is the terminal of reality.

My body is travelling to nowhere.

My body is protected.

My body is a transitory shelter of a spirit.

My body is sore.

My body is a signifier.

My body is the Bardo.²

My body is an ephemeral vessel.

My body is the linkage between my soul to this world.

My body is the cure.

My body is being washed away.

My body is transferring the inner energy.

My body is an ethereal burden.

My body is being signified.

My body is independent from my soul.

My body is a collective sensation.

My body is not touchable.

My body is lost in delusion.

My body is everything.

My body is nothing.

My body is the shadow.

My body is mature.

² Bardo: the transitional state of one's consciousness between death and rebirth.

My body is surpassing the bondage of time and space.

My body is like the moon in a pond.

My body is the outcome of solitude.

My body is searching for enlightenment.

My body is returning to what it was formed.

My body is existing in a web of causes and conditions.

My body is not an object.

My body is hearing all the noise.

My body is part of nature.

My body is innumerable.

My body is quiet.

My body is being baptized.

My body is unreal.

My body is where the essence of all things comes from.

My body is in the midst of nirvana.

My body is protected by the Heart Sutra.

My body is reaching the shore of peace.

My body is in an endless circulatory system.

My body is just a capsule.

My body is a changing state.

My body is decaying.

My body is welcoming its new form.

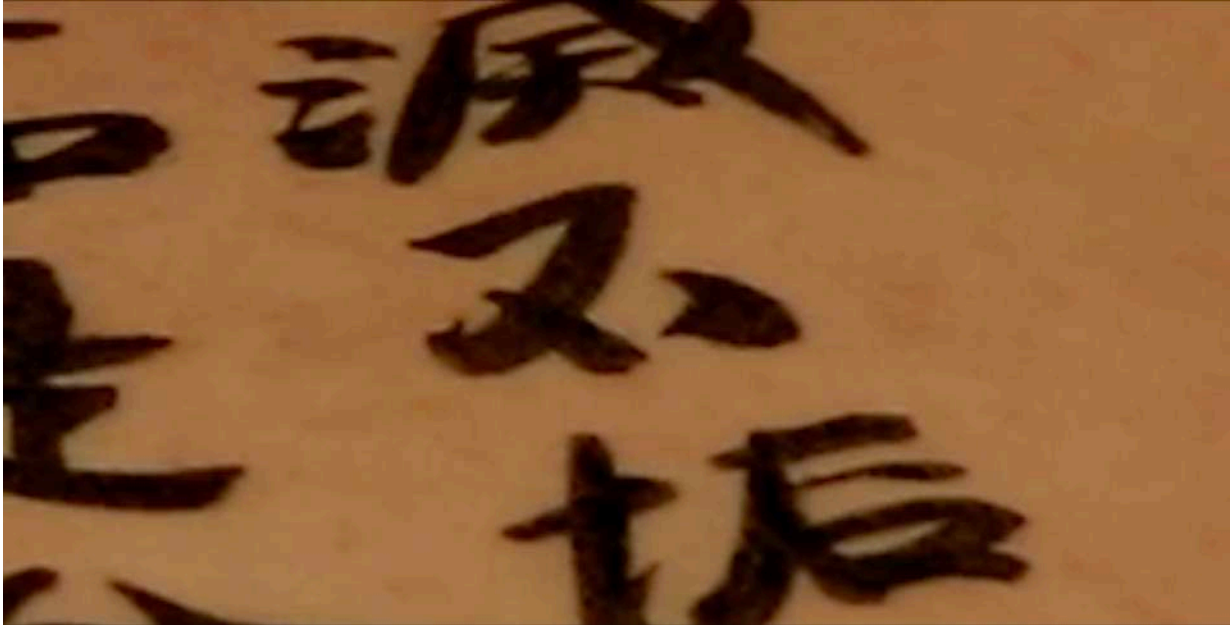


Fig. 1. Shi, Rhenix. Still image from *Birth: My Body*, 2016.

Notes

In the video, the body is covered with the text of the Heart Sutra, one of the most important Buddhist manuscripts. I often listened to my grandmother reciting it when I was little. The core of the Heart Sutra emphasizes the Buddhist concept of “emptiness,” a meditative state in which all phenomena are non-dual. All forms, feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness (the ways by which we relate to the world) are interdependent and each cannot exist on its own. Therefore, the state of emptiness is an understanding of the interdependence between oneself and the universe, and the transient nature of this relationship.

The writing of “My Body” is my own interpretation of the content of the Heart Sutra, but it is not a translation of the text itself. My understanding of the concept of *emptiness* is rudimentary, and I am still constantly learning it.



Fig. 2. Shi, Rhenix. Production photo from *Birth: My Body*, 2016.

Tree: Suffering of Aging

Talking about the suffering of aging reminds me of trees. We would never sigh for the growth of a tree. We feel calm when we see a big tree, and we are respectful of the old age of a tree. It seems that a tree is the least fearful thing in the face of time; it has nothing to worry about getting old.

There are two kinds of suffering of aging in the Buddhist scriptures: one is growth. In the Buddhist context, growth means changing from little to strong, from strong to weak, from being energetic to having little strength, little energy, and being restless. The second type of suffering in aging is decay. It is said that during gradual decay, the prosperity declines, the spirit depletes, and the spirit's life is about to end.

However, the growth of the tree is just the opposite. The older a tree, the thicker the branches, the more lush the foliage, and the more strong its durability against regional disasters. If all natural factors are eliminated, the growth of the tree seems to be endless, like time. When compared with human aging, such ability is undoubtedly a superpower. In the minds of Buddhists, the tree is a very respected living creature, and the act of hurting the tree is considered a great disrespect because, in many circulated Buddhist stories, the tree always exists in the role of inspiring the gods. For example, the pippala tree in India became known as the Bodhi tree because it is said that Shakyamuni (more commonly known as the Buddha) practised under the Bodhi tree and suffered from the wind and rain. Eventually, he received enlightenment and became a Buddha. Bodhi, a Sanskrit word, means reincarnation of life and death, which leads to

nirvana's consciousness and wisdom³. In English, the tree of Bodhi, known as “peepul,” “bo-tree,” or large tree, symbolizes generous hearts, mercy, and justice.



Fig. 3. Tsai, Charwei. *Olive Tree Mantra*. 2006, www.charwei.com/projects. Accessed Mar 2020.

In contemporary art, artists also deeply perceive the growth of the tree as a spiritual existence. Trees interact with their humanistic spirit with the laws of natural growth, and these behaviours are also full of romanticism. In the Taiwanese artist Charwei Tsai's *Mantra Series*, she practised calligraphy of the Heart Sutra onto the trunk of an olive tree planted in 1785 on one of the small islands in Greece (see fig. 3). Extending from the root of the tree to the higher branches, the body of the tree is covered with small scriptures. Due to the dry, Mediterranean climate on the island, these scriptures remain

preserved on the trunk and they grow with the tree over time. Since her writing is slow and peaceful, Tsai sees this gesture as a way of meditation, and she feels the connection between her consciousness and the spirits of the tree. The poetic gesture also symbolizes the encounter between the memory of her as a person, that of a millennial thought, and that of an old tree, who is aged more than two centuries.

³ Nirvana is the ultimate goal of this Noble Eightfold Path, is the complete cessation of dukkha. (Teasdale 100).

If one finds himself calm and meditative in front of a tall and mature tree, one would feel vitality and hope when standing in front of a young tree that is growing. For example, the interactive project *Wish Tree* by Yoko Ono certainly makes us feel the warmth of this great love (see fig. 4). The project was first executed in 1981. She selects small trees that are native to where the installation takes place, ranging from lemon, eucalyptus, and crepe myrtle. She invites viewers from all over the world to write down their wishes on a customized paper and tie them onto the tree. She will not read the wishes from the viewer, but will later collect the cards with their wishes for them to be buried under the Imagine Peace Tower, located on Viðey Island in Iceland.



Fig. 4. Ono, Yoko. *Wish Tree*, 1981.

Yoko Ono's blessing practice reminds me of the midnight when I went to the Zhanshan temple to watch the chanting in the Spring Festival⁴. Inside the chamber of the temple, a group of elder masters was chanting. Outside, visitors lined up in front of the bell in the yard, and each of them tied a piece of red strip onto the rack of the bell. They then prayed and struck the bell. The blessed red cloth will be maintained there for a year until the next year's festival, and new red stripes will be tied.

I was inspired by this tradition and expressed my admiration of the wisdom accumulated in the growth of the tree with this ritualistic act. I found a bald tree in the field of snow. This was a very ordinary tree, withered and thin. I could not recognize what kind of tree it was because its leaves are all gone. I hung the red strips of cloths one by one onto the branches. This process was slow, but full of respect and blessing. I remembered listening to the elder masters, piously chanting in the chamber that night, as if their voices were echoing in my mind. When I hung the last piece of red cloth on the branch, the bald tree was completely wrapped in red. The red strips fluttered in the winter wind, and a red tree stood in the snow (see fig. 5).

One of my favourite Taiwanese writers, Lin Qingxuan, said that he hopes to be a wise old man rather than a wealthy man when he becomes old, even though this wisdom is the most difficult to find. According to Quinxuan, a wise old man should be able to see through the limitations of time and space, knowing that the universe is way broader than we can perceive. Only in this way can the old man have no fear of death.

⁴ Spring Festival: Chinese New Year.



Fig. 5. Shi, Rhenix. Still image captured from video from *Aging: Tree*, 2020.

Ash: Suffering of Sickness

The tradition of burning the incense has been in existence since when Buddhism was first introduced to China during the Han dynasty (202 BC-220 AD). It is considered as a sincere ritual, expressing one's respect to the protecting Buddha. The incense we often use is made of burned wood and powder from plants that we easily find in nature. And, the ashes of the burned incense are also considered as spiritual subjects, according to the ancient saying that "mortals eat grains and gods eat incense." The prosperity of burning incense represents the merit, in which incense ash has become a sacred thing, the crystallization of the holy fire.

I started to become obsessed with ash because it is such a fundamental particle that can be found in anything in the world. It is so ephemeral because it is so weightless; it can be blown away so effortlessly by a breath of air. However, the ash is such an insignificant thing that can withstand such a long period, accumulating little by little, and finally forming the base of the incense vessels to support the incense. As the leftover of the burned incense, ash also symbolizes the sense of vulnerability, tragedy, and sacrifice. For several months, I have collected the ashes of the burned incenses from Zhanshan Temple with the help of a friend, who volunteered to clear out the excess ashes from the vessels every day.⁵

The suffering of sickness is the third of the eight sufferings in Buddhism. It is a universal fact that the suffering of sickness is experienced by every human being. This suffering involves both physical pain and mental illness that an individual cannot deny, and in most of the cases, is quite evident. In the video, *Ash (Sickness)*, ashes are piled up as a little mound on the ground (see

⁵ Zhanshan Temple is a Buddhist temple located in Toronto at Bayview Ave. and Steeles Ave.

fig. 6). I kneel on the floor and bend my body to approach the pile of ashes, like a pilgrim who is so humbly prostrating to his god. As I blow the dust, a burst of smoke rises. Not soon after, space is filled with the rising mist; small particles and dust are floating in the air. I do not stop blowing the ashes, even though the mist makes it so difficult to breathe and causes me to cough so badly. As the process continues, the hill of piled ashes slowly dissipates and decomposes. Gradually, it becomes like a thin and flat layer of dust covering the floor, upon which the trace of my movements and my prints of hands and knees are everywhere.



Fig. 6. Shi, Rhenix. Still image captured from *Sickness: Ash*, 2019.

The whole process lasted for almost four hours. In this long durational performance, breathing and blowing are two critical gestures here. In many meditation practices, we all value the role of breathing, which is highly connected to one's illness and death. The ability to correct the rhythm and frequency of human breathing, so that people who sit in meditation can maintain

a high degree of concentration and eventually reach the state of meditation, is important. A similar use of breath is found in Thai conceptual artist Montien Boonma's large-scale interactive sculpture, *Nature's Breath*. An open space is formed with three pillars of cages that arch inwards. Viewers are invited to go inside to get a sense of the embodied experience of vipassana (Ly 270).⁶ As viewers look at and smell the sculpture, their lungs are stuffed with medicinal herbs as they inhale and exhale the scent of the herbs, which makes them aware of their breathing. As a result, they are on their way to healing their mind and body through the act of awareness of breathing. Boonma himself stated that the purpose of this piece was "to cleanse and cure the mind in order to experience the condition of relaxation and mindfulness." Although the form between two acts is quite different, similarly, we all use the body's perception function, whether it is the visitor's body or my body, through the role of breathing, and becoming a container, or frankly, a converter.

In this durational performance, I not only consider myself as a performer but also a spiritual practitioner. In Asian Buddhist culture, endurance is often connected with spiritual practice. Buddhists, who treat meditation as a spiritual practice, eliminate their miscellaneous thoughts and enter into a peaceful state of mind. In India, Buddhists practice *tapas*, also known as asceticism (it is also known as "austerity" and "body modification"). The *tapas* practice often involves solitude and pain, and is believed to be as a part of monastic practices to liberation (Ricahrd 44). Such similarity draws a connection between Buddhist endurance practice to the art of endurance. In her endurance performance *99 Needles*, Chinese performance artist He

⁶ Vipassana, a Buddhist term, is often translated as "insight."

Chengyao, utilized performance to ponder her mother's tragic experiences, including the effects of the Revolution and the trope of the hysterical women needing treatment.⁷ He performed her mother's treatment in *99 Needles* by inserting acupuncture needles into her upper torso and head (see fig. 7). She eventually faints due to overstimulation caused by increased blood circulation from the multiple punctures of her skin. He's *99 Needles* performance concerning the Buddhist custom of mediation offers a sense of self-practice that tempers understandings of intentionality and critique to her presence. The stimulation on the flesh becomes part of her present moment rather than an external challenge she must endure. She does not have to wait until an end to present her resistance, but she lingers, sits, and breathes with such haptic sensations to cultivate a deeper grasp of being in the present moment (Yapp). Such a single act repetition of behaviour, prominent in endurance art, aids the concentration of the practitioner in the current moment. Roshi writes that "He realizes the 'now, full of consciousness' in which traditional notions of time, along with how subjects exist within time, are destabilized" (Roshi 12).

⁷ Revolution, here, is referring to the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976 in China.



Fig. 7. He Chengyao , *99 Needles* , 2002

Regarding my act of blowing away ashes for four hours as a challenge for my own endurance, I feel and endure the pain of breathing within my body. It is my attempt to push the limits of the physicality of my body and explore the idea of interactivity between sensory and material in art practice. In fact, cultivating the Buddha and the training of endurance patience are of extraordinary significance. It is emphasized that practitioners should endure the natural forces from the heat, wind and rain, thirst and hunger, as well as the pain of birth, sickness, and death, because it is considered to be training one's control over volition.

Practising endurance at the physical level ultimately transforms one's endurance at the spiritual level; the wisdom of endurance is obtained, so as to break away from the shackles of desire and attachments to the material world.

Bardo: Suffering of Death

If death occurs only once, we have no chance to recognize it. Fortunately, life is a dance of life and death, impermanent rhythm.

—Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Book of Living and Dying*

I guess this is what dying looks like.

Perhaps, I have gone through this millions of times. But now, this is the only time I could feel it and remember it.

Where is this place? And who is that?

Is that me? Or is that my body? That should be me, sleeping so peacefully.

I am observing this world with a perspective that I never had before. I am looking at my own body, lying there, on the beach, a seemingly very soft beach.

I no longer feel my breath. I no longer feel any organs that used to grow on my body. I guess I lost all my control over them. Except...except... for my sight. I can still see those things, right? Or, I am not seeing them, I am feeling them.

“Please don’t be afraid. You are in transit. You will recognize whatever imagery that appears as a projection of your own mind.”

I *feel* a voice.

This is an ocean. Also a projection of my mind?

I have never seen an ocean like this, so calm and so quiet as a mirror, but it is not reflecting anything.

I could not see its end. Does it have an end? Like a horizon, as I recall, a very thin line that lies between the sea and sky? But I could not. The sea is as if it falls from the universe. It is a total haze at the far end, but shining lights are coming through the vague.

I heard the wave is coming. The waves covered with glittering shine are coming toward me.

“Don’t be afraid. You are in transit of Bardo. Whatever you feel is all projection from your own mind.”

When the waves get closer to my body, the world starts to glow. As soon as it touches my body, I am wrapped by a strong, dazzling light. The world is shaking. I saw everything misaligned. The sky suddenly fell to the ground, the rocks became layers of thin pieces, the waterfall began to flow backward to the top of the mountain, and the feathers grew like petals...

“Please don’t be afraid. Whatever appears to you is the only projection of your mind.”

The tide is going away. The world is returning to calmness.

And my body is wet and faint.

“The four great elements in your body are disintegrating.”⁸

My field of vision was once again filled with a void of light when the waves touch my body.

This time, I felt oppression, pulling, and twisting. It was like a mountain pavement had come upside down, the flame wrapped around my neck, the strong wind rolled me up, and the turbulent water dragging me into the whirlpool.

“You are not alone. Everyone who has come before you has died.”

The grotesque scene gradually disappeared as the seawater receded. Everything calmed down again. My body no longer has a form. It does not seem to be solid or liquid. It shines like seawater. My consciousness also began to weaken. The sea disappeared a little bit in front of my eyes, only the light beating in front of my eyes...

“The Bardo has arrived. You will abandon your fear and worries.”

⁸ The four great elements (Pali: *cattāro mahābhūtāni*) are earth, water, fire and air.

"Now we are at a critical point. You have completely loosened the bondage of the flesh and the world. Please accept the light in front of you. These lights come from your past heart and from where you are going. You need to open to authenticate these lights in your own heart—these hot lights are themselves liberation. "

The so-called sea is dragging me, swallowing me...

"Your five senses will be reborn in this light. You will feel the wind, fire, water, and air again in the light...You will continue to shuttle in this illusion. Maybe you will encounter familiar people. You may see the faces of gods or beasts and demons. Don't be afraid. You can't stop here. You will continue to shuttle. All this comes from your past salvation and will be resolved in the new world."

"Your old body is now completely faint and has disappeared. And your new body is becoming clear. Here, you will have to let it go, all your grasping mind."

"You are on the path of reborn. You will continue to listen to your mind. Let it relax completely and get calm. Then let your nature choose a place for you to reborn. Perhaps, you wish a warm home. Perhaps, you would stay at the bottom of the lake, or in a tree hole. Find a good place, so that you can continue to recognize the nature of your mind."



Fig. 8. Shi, Rhenix. Still image captured from *Death: Bardo*, 2019.

Notes:

This writing was inspired by the Tibetan belief of the conscious journey between death and rebirth. From the perspective of the first person, I re-enacted the entanglement of consciousness through the experience of dying, which refers to the two elements interacting in the video *Suffering of Death*—the sea as death, and beads as the body (see fig. 8). Bardo means the transition from the completion of a certain situation to the beginning of a certain plot. *Bardo*, the title of this writing, describes the intermediate state between death and rebirth. When one's consciousness leaves the body, one will experience various phenomena while experiencing death. The characteristic of Bardo is instability. At this stage, it means putting people in a state of choice: sobriety and confusion, confusion and wisdom, certainty and uncertainty, calmness and madness. The voice that appears in the writing is my interpretation of the content from the Tibetan Buddhist teacher and author Sogyal Rinpoche's *The Book of Living and Dying*, in which the spirits are guided to get through the stage of Bardo.

River: Suffering of Separation of the Loved Ones

When the Shakyamuni Buddha walked with a few disciples by the Ganges, he suddenly stopped and asked, “The water from the sea of four, or the tears when leaving for a lover—which is more?” “Of course, since the beginning of life, there have been more tears for lovers,” one disciple responded. The Buddha listened to his answer and was very satisfied, but he did not say anything else. They continued to walk together.

This anecdote was told such a long time ago. Whenever I think of this conversation, I always feel very emotional. Among the eight sufferings, parting from love is probably the most devastating one. “Love and parting” refers not only to the separation of lovers but also to all loved ones. All good causes will eventually dissolve.⁹ This is fated.

The dissolution of causes does not necessarily cause tears, but reluctance, attachment, and craving for *nidana* will certainly make people cry.¹⁰

Fortunately, I have not experienced any sufferings from the separation of life and death. But, since I am living far away in a foreign country, the distance from my family and close friends is often difficult. In the era when communication tools had not yet been invented, the ancients found their way to express their longing for the loved one. I thought of this poem by Li Zhiyi¹¹ (1048–1117) when I visited the valley somewhere in Scarborough, where I saw this

⁹ Cause is a Buddhist concept referring to principal and subsidiary causes.

¹⁰ *Nidana* is a Sanskrit word that means “cause, motivation, or occasion.” Here, *nidana* refer to the uncertain bonding between two lovers.

¹¹ Li Zhiyi (李之仪, born Wudi County, Shandong ca. 1048 ~ 1117) was a Song Dynasty Chinese poet.

frozen river. I accidentally broke the ice surface and had my feet steeped in the chilling water (see fig 9). Here is the poem:

I live upstream;

You live downstream.

Daily I miss you so.

We drink from the same flow.



Fig. 9. Shi, Rhenix. Still image captured from video *Separation of The Loved Ones: River*, 2015.

This song cí by Li portrays couples in love.¹² In the face of the cruel reality, they are separated at the two ends of the river. Even if they are separated from each other, they cannot meet each

¹² Song Cí is an ancient type of poetry from China in the Song Dynasty in the 1200s.

other, but this endless stream of the river is the link that connects them. The suffering of separation is never be resolved, but the yearning between lovers is delicate and deep.

In the frozen valley, everything seemed to be so quiet and still. Only the water under the ice was flowing, as if invisible energy was surging. Kneeling on the snow-covered ice, I drew a goldfish with ink, a symbol of good wishes (see fig. 10). The white, ice surface was like a piece of rice paper, and the ink infiltrated into the snow. Soon, the sun came out, and the dark ink colour was flickering with the light spots, shining and gleaming. The black, golden fish was slowly melting. The iced surface melted down as well, and the river became turbulent, at which point the drawing of fish became blurred and dissolved. The ink started to flow into the river along the melting ice. They were like a plume of smoke, so soft and so stretched, following the river, flowing far away.

When will the river no more flow?

When will my grief no more grow?

I wish your heart will be like mine,

Then not in vain for you I pine.

In the second half of the poem, Li Zhiyi asks, “Where is the end of the river? And when can the pain of separation be stopped?” He can only hope that his lover can understand his feelings, and that she can think of him as he does. The pain of separation is hard to resolve, and the lover's tears, like the melted drawing of golden fish, will drift along the river toward her.

Now going back to the beginning story, I think the disciple's answer to Shakyamuni's question is comprehensive. Buddhism has a very broad view of time. It believes that all causes and conditions are caused by *kalpa*—that is, an infinitely long period.¹³ In time, the tears we shed for the parting of the loved ones are indeed more than the seawater of the four seas in the world. The torture and collision we feel during the suffering of love and parting will eventually far surpass the raging waves.



Fig. 10. Shi, Rhenix. Still image captured from *Separation of the Loved Ones: River*, 2015.

¹³ *Kalpa* is a Sanskrit word, meaning a relatively long period of time (by human calculation) in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology.

Stones: Suffering of the Long-lasting and Unpleasant

The root of the suffering of the unpleasant is associated with our attachments to either things or emotions; the long-lasting, unpleasant emotion eventually turns into a burden in our mind. The answer of how to solve such suffering may be found in the concept of impermanence, also known as *anicca*. It is central to Buddha's teachings that "all things arise must change and decline, and they are but false appearances without any stable essence" (Yun, 27). We live in a world where everything that is conditioned comes into being and passes away. All things in the causal flux come to be when causes and conditions are ripe, and cease to be when causes and conditions so conspire. They are in a constant state of *pratītyasamutpāda*, dependent arising and ceasing.¹⁴

To give a simple example, atoms constitute our physical world. Different combinations of atoms will produce different substances. So, these atoms can be combined because of causes and conditions. Then when the object is gone, on a practical level, the substance does not exist anymore, but the atoms that make it up will not disappear. They just leave each other, but they will still exist in this world independently. Contemporary science has certainly sided with them on this matter. Everything, from the stars and galaxies, at one end of the spectrum of size, to the subatomic particles at the other end, comes into being in the evolution of the cosmos and goes out of being in the same way. The cosmos itself came into being at the Big Bang. If it starts to contract, it will go out of existence in its mirror image. And if not, it will become a void: empty space/time, with the matter of density as near zero as makes no difference.

¹⁴ *Pratītyasamutpāda*: Pali word, often translated as dependant origination, or dependant arising, is a key concept in Buddhist philosophy that all phenomena is arisen in dependence upon other phenomena.

Therefore, the world that Buddha believes in is impermanent and has no fixed form. Only the change itself is permanent. Furthermore, when it comes to our emotional world, our attachment to anything, obsession, hatred, sorrow, or happiness, is ultimate impermanence.

In many Chinese mythologies, stones have always been portrayed as spiritual objects. In ancient history, there was a legend that Nüwa melted the five-coloured stones to patch up the azure sky.¹⁵ Thousands of years later, the stone that Nüwa left also experienced decades of reincarnation, and finally turned into the jade worn by Jia Baoyu¹⁶ in the *Dream of the Red Mansion*.¹⁷ In another mythological story, *Journey to the West*, a spiritual stone absorbed the essence of the sun and the moon and gave birth to the Monkey King.¹⁸ Stones also believed to absorb the essence of nature and gestate new lives. Even in contemporary Japanese culture, stones are often used to create a miniature stylized landscape, especially in the design of *karesansui*, a type of Zen garden where various stones are laid into the shape of mountains. They are believed as living creatures that are often considered avatars of mountain spirits and turtles. A recent study by Gert van Tonder and Michael Lyons shows that the rocks of Ryōan-ji form the subliminal image of a tree.¹⁹ The researchers claim the subconscious mind is sensitive to a subtle association between the rocks. They suggest this may be responsible for the calming effect of the garden.

¹⁵ Nüwa, the mother goddess in Chinese mythology.

¹⁶ Jia Baoyu is the main character of the novel *Dream of the Red Mansion*; his name is interpreted as a “previous stone”.

¹⁷ *Dream of the Red Mansion* (1791), written by Xueqin Cao (1791), is one of China’s Four Great Classical Novels.

¹⁸ Monkey King is one of the main characters from book *Journey to the West* by Naian Shi, published in 1592.

¹⁹ A Zen temple located in northwest Kyoto, Japan.

Thus, I was attracted by the mythical nature of the stone and tried to connect the spiritual characteristics of the stone—its power to absorb spirits and essence from nature, with the suffering of the long-lasting, unpleasant emotions. Unpleasant emotions and hatred are ongoing processes, which take a toll on a person's health. They can be demonstrated in different forms such as rage, dislike, worry, complaining, getting disturbed by an issue, bothering other people, or getting bothered by something.

The forty-nine stones in the video are collected from the garden of Zhanshan Temple. Unlike the stones that are used to decorate the Zen garden, they are quite ordinary and unremarkable, and the largest stone is not even larger than the size of my palm. The number forty-nine, here, refers to the soul going through a seven-by-seven, which is a forty-nine-day transition period after death before reincarnation. The stones, distributed everywhere in the garden of the temple, have witnessed countless visitors coming and leaving. Temples, today, are often functioning as a place for its believers to pour out their feelings; they come here to express their wishes in front of the Buddha, to confide their own troubles, to confess their faults, and to find answers for their confusion. Their love and hatred are part of the natural aura, and they are injected into the stones where the aura gathers. If hatred is presented in the form of stone, then it means that hate is stable in a person's mind. Stones are also presented in this video because it is believed that stones tend to collect spirits from the visitors in the temple.



Fig. 11. Shi, Rhenix. 2020. Still image captured from *Long-lasting Unpleasant: Stones*.

Staged in a black background, each stone is being photographed (see fig. 11). At this moment, these inconspicuous stones are extracted from the original environment, and every detail, texture, undulation, colour, is carefully presented via the lens. The photos of the stone are displayed one slide after another. Whenever a new stone

appears, it follows the sound of a striking-bell. The sound of the bell gradually echoes, and the representational image stone is feathering in the background. The video is played endlessly as there will not be a noticeable pause in the middle, and you will also accidentally forget the stone you saw.

The stones are used to symbolize hatred or unpleasant emotions because they are also considered to be a burden in one's mind. An old Chinese saying comes to my mind: when people finally have their problems solved, they describe it as if the stone in their mind has been dropped. Such parabolic image can be identified in Jana Sterbak's sculpture *Sisyphus Sport*—a giant rock, equipped with two leather strips, is turned into a backpack (see fig. 12). The non-functional garment is performed by a man that is carrying the rock on his back and walking laboriously. The title *Sisyphus Sport* refers to the King of Corinth from Greek mythology who was punished

by Zeus to endlessly rolling a boulder up a hill in the depths of Hades. The endless cycle of life in his punishment shares similar a concept of reincarnation in Buddhism.



Fig. 12. Sterback, Jana. 1997. *Sisyphus Sport*, www.atsy.net. Accessed Apr 2020.

Here, giving the stone spiritual meaning is an expression of my consciousness. The literature that tends to address the phenomenon of an image from different perspectives tends to suggest that the nature of the image and issues generated by it are quite complex (Frentiu 111). Stones are considered to be the symbol of hatred, but at the same time, Buddhist followers from

different parts of the world tend to go into the Buddhist temples and absorb their burden of complaints into the stone statues present inside those temples. While studying the symbolic meaning of any object, one shall never overlook the material traits of that object. For instance, when the udumbara flower gained fame in China, people only became attracted to it due to its physical traits. However, later on, they learned about its miraculous traits and received the urge to see it (Joo 239). From this perspective, to dismiss stone as a symbol of hatred by simply referring to its physical traits is an injustice toward it. People shall not forget that where stones tend to be unbreakable, they also tend to absorb moisture. This notion is true if one ponders over the Buddhist temples throughout the world where thousands of people go and cry to get rid of their woes.

Desire: Suffering of Denial of One's Pursuit

Even though Buddhism teaches one to remain selfless, but first, it teaches a person to recognize desires. Having desire for something is not a problem since desire could include spiritual enlightenment as its object. It is actually the obsession that a person invests in desire that constitutes the problem. Denying one's desire is the seventh suffering out of the eight sufferings presented by Buddha. This suffering holds grave significance in Buddhism because most people think that to adopt the path of spirituality, they must get rid of their worldly desires and treasures. Buddhists cut off their attachments to the material world because they believe desire is one of the major causes of suffering.



Fig. 13. Shi, Rhenix. 2015. Still image captured from *Denial of One's Pursuit: Desire*.

The video starts with a large, wide-open view of the white snow and towering woods as the background (see fig. 13). I, as a tiny figure, enter from the left side of the image, and I am

flying a red kite. Then the lens slowly zooms in, and the kite is fluttering violently against the wind. The kite is flying higher to the sky, but at an unexpected moment, the thread of the kite is broken, and then the kite falls to the ground from the air. I then run toward the kite and tie the broken thread again. After that, I again continue running and flying the kite. Just after a few minutes, the scenario of thread-breaking repeats, and I come running back toward the kite and tie the string again. I, then resume flying the kite. The act is playing in an endless cycle. It sets a tragicomic tone: I am chasing my wish to fly a kite, but fail again and again. The tragic nature of the endless entanglement of human nature and desire is revealed through this repetition.

There are certain elements in this video that refer to human desire. For instance, in most Asian cultures, the red colour of the kite symbolizes desire and passion. The kite recalls a playful childhood object, and the act of flying the kite on a snowy day reflects my strong wish to pursue my desire. The way I repeatedly run after the broken thread symbolizes the sense of futility in fulfilling desire. This setting of the video loop confined me to this cycle forever, to metaphorically and endlessly compete between me and my desire. Although, it is perceived that to attain the path of enlightenment, it is mandatory that a person cast aside the worldly desires. However, to attain enlightenment, a person needs to gain nirvana which can only be gained if he gets rid of samsara.^{20, 21} For example, the film *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter...and Spring* directed by Kim Ki-Duk, if viewed through the lens of Zen Buddhism, shows a close connection between the desire of humanity and the cycle of destiny. The four seasons are used to represent the young monk's growing desires, such as the desire of children to play in spring, the erotic

²⁰ Nirvana is the ultimate spiritual goal in Buddhism.

²¹ *Samsara* is a Sanskrit word that means "wandering" or "world," with the connotation of cyclic, circuitous change.

sexual desire in summer, and the possessiveness exposed by the young monk's killing his wife in autumn and his redemption in winter. The returning spring indicates the fate of the two generations, who cannot escape from the desire to control with the cyclical four seasons. The old monk, using paper with the word "closed" obscuring his eyes and mouth, expresses his helpless struggle with human desires and chooses to burn himself to achieve self-liberation. With the arrival of another spring, a newborn comes to the life of a young monk, reflecting Kim's deep sorrow for the inability of humans to jump out of fate and nature.

A Buddhist follower can get rid of samsara by cutting off his desires because, without the detachment to worldly desires, a Buddhist will be stuck in the endless cycle of death and rebirth. In Buddhism, the relationship between life and death is quite confusing as they are not intertwined. According to Dogen, who was the Zen master from the thirteenth century, if one presumes that he will pass from life into death, then one is making a great mistake (Abe 5). It is a common perception of human life that the people who are alive today are definitely going to die, but the fact is that life and death are two different paths and one cannot simply pass onto death after living his life. In Buddhism, samsara refers to the wheel of life in which a person abounds until he finds his enlightenment or fulfillment. This occurs because a person is usually bound by his worldly desires such as greed, lust, or hatred. Plato's idea of catharsis is a perfect example of the notion of samsara. Catharsis refers to the purification of the body from all sorts of emotions. According to Plato, catharsis is the purification that a soul receives when it is being prepared for a better life. During the process of catharsis, the soul is rid of all sorts of contamination. Plato claimed that the soul receives purification when it is released from the body, in which case a person gets death (7).

However, there is one thing significant in the entire process of catharsis, and that is it can only be achieved after the worldly desires of a person are fulfilled. If the worldly desires are not fulfilled, then just like the artist in the video, a person will recurrently come to tie a knot with this world and will not feel ready to die.



Fig. 14. Kim, Ki-duk. 2003. Still image from *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring*.

Hair: Suffering of Over-reliance on the Five Aggregates

In the studio, I set up a simple layout—a pure white drop cloth background and two LED lights. I was almost naked, standing in front of the camera. I shaved my hair with a mechanical shaver. I was unable to see the process because there was no mirror. I could only use the touch of my hands to ensure that every inch of hair was shaved. The shaved hair was finely crumpled and stuck to my face, neck, shoulders, and scattered around my feet.



Fig. 15. Shi, Rhenix. 2015. Still image from *Hair*.

The practice of cutting your hair or shaving your head for religious purposes is known as tonsure. Shaving one's head (and face) is part of *Pabbajja*, a ritual act that marks a person's detachment to world ego and fashion and the decision to live the life of a Buddhist. Hair growth is controlled by the liver of the human body. It also refers to the longings and fantasies for the man and woman. Such attachment is followed by infinite troubles and trivia; thus, hair is

interpreted as extraneous worries and stress. It is believed by Buddhists that when someone shaves their hair, abandons various decorations, and puts on simple clothes, they are completely cut off from secular life, so such ritual has important symbolic significance.

I performed this ritual to present the last, ultimate suffering—the over-reliance on the five aggregates—because the ritual of shaving one’s head suggests one’s commitment to enter the life of detachment. The suffering of the over-reliance on the five aggregates is considered as the sum of all our mental sufferings caused by unfulfilled desire and attachments to this worldly possession. In Buddhism, the five aggregates refer to the raging blaze of the five *skandhas*. There are five aggregates or heaps that need to be controlled if one wants to avoid this type of suffering. These heaps include material image or *rupa*, *vedana* or feelings developed as a result of pride over one’s personality, *samjna* or perception, consciousness or *vijnana*, and *sankhara* or mental activity. According to the Theravada Buddhist tradition, it is important to get rid of these heaps because sufferings arise for human beings when they tend to develop a strong attachment to these heaps. On the other hand, the Mahayana Buddhist tradition claims that these heaps are naturally void of independent existence. That is, everything is empty (*śūnya*) of intrinsic nature: everything is what it is in virtue of its relation to other things.



Fig. 16. Shi, Rhenix. 2015. Still image captured from *Over: Hair*

The first paragraph of the Heart Sutra says, “The Bodhisattva of Compassion, when he meditated deeply, saw the emptiness of all five skandhas and sundered the bonds that caused him suffering. *Here then, form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form. form is only emptiness, emptiness only form.* Feelings, thoughts, and choice, consciousness itself, are the same as this” (Pine 7). The idea of five skandhas is raised in the first paragraph of the Heart Sutra; it is the basis for understanding the correlations with emptiness and form. The concept of emptiness is revealed in the repetitive passage of ‘form is empty’ in the text. The words *empty* and *form* are not referring to the conventional property or material, but to a kind of reality that is more metaphysical. The relation between emptiness and form is described as non-duality that all forms (including one’s sense, feeling, perception, dispositions, and consciousness) are also empty. In the same sense, all phenomena are empty. They have no defining characteristics. They are un-arisen; they are unceasing. They are neither diminishing nor increasing.

This may sound very mystical, but it is true and very logical. A very vivid example is given by Charlie Tsai when she explains her work, writing Heart Sutra on various ephemeral objects, like decaying flowers, melting tofu, and growing mushrooms. Strong attachment to the beauty of a blossoming flower will cause one's suffering when one notices that the physical form of the flower is changing constantly, and the flower will eventually die. However, if one understands that the ephemeral nature of the flower is the condition of the flower's existence, one shall be relieved from the suffering that arises from such attachment to the transient form of beauty. At this point, the reason why the suffering of overreliance on five aggregates is summarized as the ultimate of all suffering is precise is because the five aggregates contain all the obsession and attachments that are generated by human nature. When all these obsessions and desires are not satisfied, one shall experience this ultimate pain; the only cure to it is to perceive the emptiness of this reality.

Postscript

It is such a nice coincidence that I ended up talking about the Heart Sutra in *Hair*, and it is echoing with the beginning section *My Body*, where I started using the Heart Sutra as a major implication. This writing seems to form a full circle, threaded by this “form and emptiness” idea, the heart of the Heart Sutra. However, in terms of Buddhist philosophy, the Heart Sutra has always been considered as a very sophisticated text, and the apparent repetitiveness of form and emptiness may certainly puzzle. In his commentary of the Heart Sutra, Garfield (2016) teases apart the quartet of claims.

1. “Form is empty” means that form lacks intrinsic identity, innate existence, essence. The reason for this is that all material phenomena are dependently arisen. Every material phenomenon is dependent on three important senses: dependence upon causes and conditions for its existence; dependence on its parts and on the “who else,” in which it figures for its existence and identity; and dependence on conceptual imputation for its identity. The details of each of these kinds of dependence are developed extensively in many Madhyamaka texts.
2. “Emptiness is form” means that although form is empty, this does not entail that emptiness is the *reality* lying behind an illusory material world. Emptiness is no more intrinsically existent or substantial than matter. Emptiness, that is, is only the emptiness *of form*. No form, no emptiness of form (*mutatis mutandis* for the other aggregates). Emptiness is hence also dependently arisen, dependent upon that of which it is the emptiness.

3. “Emptiness is not other than form” means that if one analyzes what it is to be material form—a thing that comes into existence as a result of causes and conditions, exists only dependently, exists only impermanently, depends on its parts, etc.—one has understood what it is to be empty. The relationship between emptiness—ultimate reality—and material form—standing in for conventional reality—is hence not accidental, but rather one of identity. To be conventionally real is to be empty.
4. “Form is not other than emptiness” makes the converse point. Emptiness is not a mysterious, self-existent void. To analyze what emptiness is—dependency on causes and conditions, impermanence, dependence on conceptual imputation, etc.—is to understand the nature of conventional reality. To be empty is to be conventionally real.

Once again, the form and emptiness philosophy sets the basic rule for Buddhists’ view of the world that all existences are impermanent. Viewing the material reality as an illusory and a space of void, the idea of depending dualism is also addressed in the presentation of the final production.

Instead of presenting the film in a conventional way, often projected onto a wall or played on screens, I decide to bring in artificial sand dunes into the gallery space to create an installation with videos. The use of sand dunes reflects the idea of an impermanent landscape in nature. Because of its fluidity, a sand dune is constantly changing its form. The shape of a sand dune can be easily altered by the forces of nature—wind, water, plants, and animals. These traits

determine that a sand dune is a transient and ephemeral existence. The sand dunes are built in their organic forms how they are usually identified in nature. Grass, dried plants, and small stones are planted into the sand dunes to create a “wasted” landscape. Similar to the Japanese tradition *karesansui* that Zen practitioners would build a mimicry of mountains and lakes in their garden, an artificial sand dune, built in the gallery space, can be read as a sign of misplacement of a landscape, which challenges the perception of a seemingly permanent entity or situation in its innate environment.

On the sand dunes, there are eight TV screens installed. To connect with the idea of an ephemeral landscape, the screens are put into the sand without any fixed supports. Due to the effects of gravity, the screens gradually sink into the sand, though such a shift would be extremely subtle during the exhibition period. On each screen, a specific video chapter of suffering is played from the film *Dukkha*. The sizes of screens are various, ranging from ten inches to forty inches, depending on the content. For example, the video of *Body (Suffering of Birth)* is played on a screen that is relatively small to recall a sense of intimacy, and that requires viewers to look at the work at a closer distance. The video of *Stone* is also viewed with a small screen, which shows its representational imagery that is close to its size in real life. The video of *Bardo (Suffering of Death)*, showcasing the wide horizon of the shore, is shown on a bigger screen, and the screen is lying almost flat in the middle of the sand dunes, where the depth of the sand is quite shallow.

The sound is another important part of the whole installation. In *Dukkha*, I collected the sounds from various sources, including sounds from nature: a river beating rocks; wind blowing; waves rushing to the shore; sounds from ritual practices such as bell striking, master’s chanting,

and echoes from Buddhist Patra; and sounds from my performative acts such as the monotonous sound of the mechanic shaver and my continuous sound of breathing and coughing.²²

Despite the various sources of sounds, each sound is quite minimal and rhythmic. I often feel very meditative when just listening to them. In the installation, I adjust each sound at different volumes to create a choir, like when a group of masters is chanting inside the chamber of the temple, and diverse levels of vocals and instruments are implicated.

All of these elements—the dissolving sand dunes, sinking screens, and meditative sounds, are created to embrace the poetic and mindful nature of the work itself, where a sense of spirituality would arise to a viewer's perception. Even though I said in the beginning in the preface that I am very much influenced by the philosophical and logical thinking provided by Buddhism, I have been always obsessed with the spirituality, and perceive it as an invisible power throbbing in art-making, including poetry, literature, music, and even religions. I found the connection with spirituality generates a force that is usually bigger than my ego, through which I could discover a world that is more inspirational and meaningful. I believe that the development of this material world and our exploration of this universe is inseparable from the scientific and objective observation and analysis of it, but we also cannot survive without the awakening of inspiration that exists in our consciousness and humanity. And such spirituality will evoke thinking, meditation, and great imagination, and will enable us to perceive genuine love and compassion that are not obtained through knowledge and training.

²² Buddhist Patra is the traditional alms bowl of a Buddhist monk.

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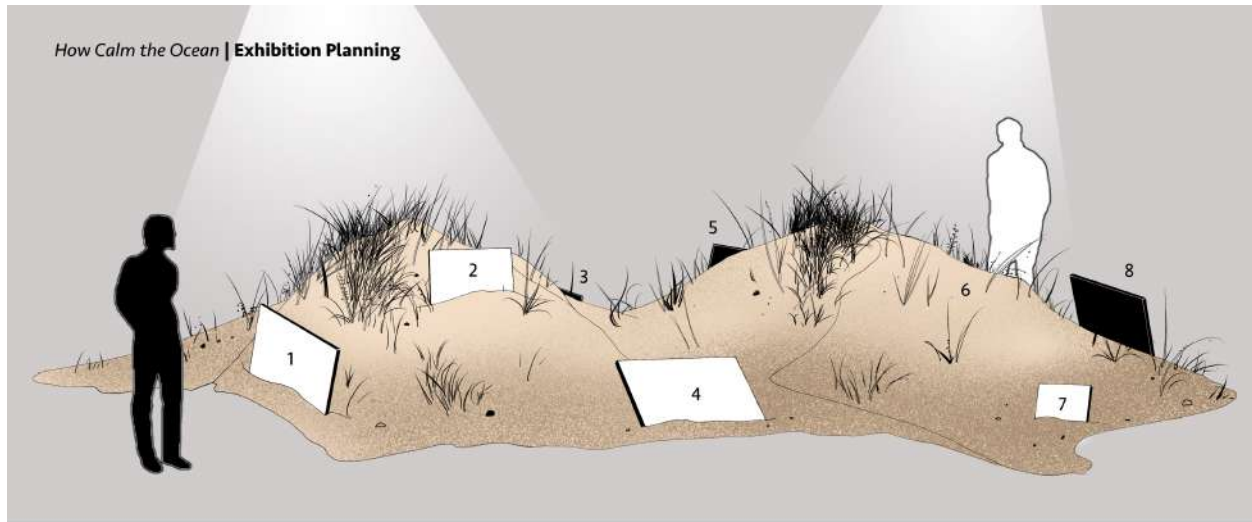
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Appendix



Sand Dunes

- height: 60 - 80 inches
- length and width depending on the space
- installed in the centre so viewers can walk around

Vegetations

- dried plants
- grass

LED screens

- different sizes: 10in, 13in, 24in, 40in
- cords will be hidden under the sand

Lighting

- overall dark
- two soft spot lights above sand dunes

Videos

1. (24 in) Tree - suffering of ageing
2. (13 in) Body - suffering of birth
3. (24 in) Ash - suffering of sickness
4. (40 in) Bardo - suffering of death
5. (24 in) River - suffering of separation of loved ones
6. (24 in) Desire - suffering of denial of one's desire
7. (10 in) Stone - suffering of long-lasting unpleasant
8. (24 in) Hair - suffering of over-reliance on five aggregates

*videos play loop on each screen

Sound

- speakers from the monitors
- different volumes

Exhibition Planning

The thesis exhibition of *How Calm the Ocean* will consist of the installation of large-scale sand dunes, various dried vegetations, small stones, and eight LED tv screens with speakers.

The sand dunes will be piled up in the centre of the gallery space so that viewers will be given opportunities to wander around the installation. The height of the dune will reach up to 60 to 80 inches, and the length and width will be depending on the space.

The eight TV screens will be installed into the sand dune without any fixed support, so they will be gradually sinking into the sand over time. Each screen will play a specific chapter of suffering from the film *Dukkha*, so the sizes of the screen are different depending on the content. Each video will be playing its sound individually from the speakers. The sound will be adjusted at different volumes to create a harmony.

3D rendered images of the virtual exhibition

