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# 7

## “The Epitome of the Ascetic Life”: The Controversy over Self-Mortification and Ritual Suicide as Ascetic Practices in East Asian Buddhism

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In 692 C.E., on his return from India to China, Yijing 義淨 (653–713), the famous pilgrim monk, translator, and expert in monastic discipline, wrote a book on Buddhism in the homeland of that religion and in the Malay archipelago, which was to be sent to the court of Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (627–705; reigned, 690–705). The main purpose of this book, entitled *Nanhai jigui neifa zhuan* 南海寄歸內法傳 (A Record of the Inner Teachings [i.e., Buddhism] to be Sent Back [to China] from the Southern Seas), was to realign Chinese Buddhism to the authentic Vinaya, or monastic rules, of the Mūlasarvāstivāda school. In order to achieve his objective, Yijing described (or pretended to describe) the practice of monastic Indian Buddhism of the seventh century, which, as he wants his readers to believe, for the most part followed the traditional monastic rules allegedly established by the Buddha himself. At various points, Yijing is harshly critical of the practice of his fellow Chinese monks. No less than two chapters of the book (38 and 39) are devoted to the question whether self-immolation by Buddhist monks or nuns was lawful or not. This clearly indicates that Yijing considered that ritual suicide committed by Buddhist monastics

was a serious problem for Chinese Buddhism. And indeed, cases of self-mutilation and ritualized suicide are exceptionally well documented in historiographic and hagiographic sources from China.<sup>1</sup> In the three classic collections of “biographies of eminent monks”—Huijiao’s 慧皎 (497–554) *Liang gaoseng zhuan* 梁高僧傳, Daoxuan’s 道宣 (596–667) *Tang or Xu gaoseng zhuan* 唐/續高僧傳, and Zanning’s 贊寧 (919–1001/1002) *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳, from the sixth, seventh, and tenth centuries respectively—suicides and self-immolators form an independent group of protagonists as opposed to translators, exegetes, meditators, and so on. The *Gaoseng zhuan* of the Liang dynasty records eleven, its sequel in the Tang dynasty records twelve, and the *Song gaoseng zhuan* records twenty-two monks who “abandoned their bodies” (*shishen* 捨身, *yishen* 遺身, or *wangshen* 亡身). Almost 10 percent of the protagonists in the only extant collection of biographies of nuns, that is, Baochang’s 寶唱 (n.d.) *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 of the early sixth century, are to be regarded as women who forsook their lives on religious grounds. Non-Buddhist sources clearly indicate that reports on religiously motivated suicides were not merely blood-curdling stories made up by clerics for the edification of the pious. There can be no doubt that practices such as cutting off or burning one’s own fingers, toes, or limbs, in addition to self-immolation, jumping from mountains and trees, drowning oneself in water, gouging out one’s eyes, feeding animals with one’s own blood or flesh, copying *sūtras* by use of one’s own blood or skin, etc., were well-established practices in Chinese Buddhism.

These practices are indeed striking, given that Buddhism is typically thought of as a religion of moderation that readily avoids all extremes. We should therefore briefly consider the attitude of early Buddhism towards self-mutilation and ritual suicide and deal with the question of how this relates to the problem of asceticism.

### Traditional Buddhist Attitudes towards Asceticism

Although the lifestyle of Buddhist monks or nuns as prescribed in the Vinayas, or monastic rules, appear to be rather ascetic to Westerners of the twenty-first century, measured by the standards of Indian ascetics of the Buddha’s day, it was quite moderate in nature. As demonstrated by Oliver Freiberger in this volume, according to tradition, the Buddha himself had failed to reach the goal of his spiritual quest by means of extreme ascetic practices, which he barely survived. Consequently he taught his disciples that mortification of the flesh was utterly useless and harmful. In the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* the Buddha draws the following conclusion from his experience with painful asceticism:

This, Aggivessana, occurred to me: “Some recluses and brahmans in the past have experienced feelings that were acute, painful, sharp, severe; but this is paramount, nor is there worse than this. And some recluses and brahmans in the future will experience feelings that are acute, painful, sharp, severe; but this is paramount, nor is there worse than this. And some recluse and brahmans are now experiencing feelings that are acute, painful, sharp, severe; but this is paramount, nor is there worse than this. But I, by this severe austerity, do not reach states of further-men, the excellent knowledge and vision befitting the ariyans. Could there be another way to awakening?”<sup>2</sup>

In the Chinese translation of Aśvagoṣa’s (ca. 80–150) *Buddha-carita*, the famous hagiographic account of the Buddha’s life and deeds, the Buddha states that painful asceticism as practiced by some Brāhmins leads to birth in heaven at best and concludes that such asceticism implies “much pain but little gain” (*ku tuo er guo shiao* 苦多而果少).<sup>3</sup> According to some early Buddhist texts, members of the Buddhist order of monks and nuns are explicitly defined as “those who neither torment themselves [*attantapa*] nor others [*parantapa*].”<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, an ordained Buddhist called himself a “*śramaṇa*,” that is, “one who performs acts of mortification or austerity.” The noun *śramaṇa* is derived from the verb *śram*, “to make effort, exert one’s self” (esp. in performing acts of austerity).<sup>5</sup> The noun *śramaṇa* thus refers to “one who performs acts of mortification or austerity”<sup>6</sup> and may well be translated as “ascetic.” A *śramaṇa* was expected to live modestly with regard to food, clothing, and housing. Sexual activities of any kind were strictly prohibited. However, no mortification of the flesh was prescribed. Even when, according to tradition, the notorious troublemaker Devadatta proposed a set of five comparatively moderate additional ascetic practices to be compulsory for monks, the Buddha refused to accept them. According to the *Cullavagga* (VII 3,14) Devadatta said:

It would be good, Lord, if the Bhikkhus should be, their lives long,  
[1] dwellers in the woods [. . .], [2] beg for alms, [3] clothe themselves  
[. . .] in cast off rags, [4] dwell [. . .] under the trees, [. . .] [5] abstain  
from [meat and] fish.<sup>7</sup>

The Buddha refused these five demands, but allowed that the monks may keep any one of these ascetic rules—with certain restrictions<sup>8</sup>—if they wish to do so voluntarily. Four of these ascetic rules were integrated in a list of twelve or

thirteen ascetic options called *dhūtas*, *dhūtāṅgas*, or *dhūtaguṇas*, which may be chosen individually, temporarily, and voluntarily by ambitious practitioners.<sup>9</sup> The term *dhūta* means “shaken off, removed, destroyed,”<sup>10</sup> which refers to the act of shaking off one’s passions and afflictions by means of self-restraint. Interestingly, the Chinese habitually translated this as “painful practice” (*kuxing* 苦行), thereby treating the term as an equivalent of *duṣkara-caryā* (Pāli *dukkara-kārikā*), which is another technical Sanskrit term that literally means “arduous practice” or “hard penance.”<sup>11</sup> The term “*kuxing* 苦行” may well be defined as the Chinese equivalent of the Western term *asceticism*. But be that as it may, none of the ascetic options called *dhūta* demand any kind of self-mutilation, let alone suicide. On the contrary, with regard to suicide, the monastic rules are absolutely unambiguous.

The problem is dealt with in the section on the third of four *pārājika-dharmas*<sup>12</sup>—that is, major offences that result in the expulsion from the order.<sup>13</sup> In the discussion of the prohibition to kill human beings in the *Vinaya-vibhaṅga*, the canonical commentary on the rules, the story is told about a mass suicide among the disciples of the Buddha. After the Buddha had taught his disciples how to meditate upon impurity (Skt. *aśubha-bhāvanā*; Ch. *bujiṅguan* 不淨觀), a large number of monks developed an extreme aversion against their bodies and longed to get rid of them. Some of them plunged into the depths, some swallowed poison, yet others used knives. They even killed each other and asked the “sham recluse” Migalaṇḍika to kill them. In the end, sixty monks lost their lives, much to the discomfort of the Buddha who told the diminished assembly that “it is not becoming for a monk [. . . to] deprive himself of life.”<sup>14</sup> However, since a dead monk or nun cannot be punished according to the monastic regulations, the respective rule in the *Vinaya*, or monastic code, can only prohibit the act of instigating someone to suicide by praising the nature of death.<sup>15</sup> If the instigation does in fact cause the death of the addressed person it is a *pārājika*, and the instigator is to be expelled. If the person does not commit suicide or commits suicide for other reasons, the monk’s offence is reduced to a *sthūlātṭyaya* (Pāli *thullaccaya*),<sup>16</sup> a grave offence which is intended or planned but not actually executed.

The Buddha does not explicitly state here why he rejects suicide, but a number of passages found elsewhere suggest that there were two main reasons for the prohibition:

- Suicide does not lead to emancipation, because a living being that has not yet overcome his passions and afflictions will simply be reborn after his suicide and not reach *nirvāṇa*. And in this case, the *sthūlātṭyaya* offence, which one has become guilty of by committing suicide, now

proves to be an obstacle. As it is believed to be extremely difficult to obtain a human body—that is, a state of existence most conducive to final liberation—one should preserve it and not throw it away.

- Buddhist monks or nuns are responsible for the survival, the spreading, and the flourishing of Buddhism; and it is their duty to live as long as possible to work for the benefit of the world.<sup>17</sup>

## The Shift to Mahāyāna Ethics

If the position of early Buddhism was clear, how could it be that self-mutilation and ritual suicide were committed and regarded as legitimate ascetic options in East Asia, and probably in India as well? As scholars of religion we may, of course, refer to the fact that religious people often do not care much for lofty doctrines and petty rules and that doctrines and moral laws are in most cases adjusted to the actual religious practice and social customs, not vice versa. But this explanation is too general and simplistic.

I rather propose that self-mutilation and ritual suicide fitted perfectly into the ethical program of the strand of Buddhism called Mahāyāna, “the Great Vehicle,” which became dominant in East Asia early on.

It is widely believed that the monastic rules of early Buddhism, as fixed in the Vinaya texts, are still valid for Mahāyāna monastics, and theoretically—with a few exceptions—this is true, with one important reservation: The monastic rules are to be observed only if they do not conflict with the higher moral goals of the Great Vehicle. Technically speaking, the conflict was between the monastic rules that minutely regulated the daily conduct of monks and nuns, on the one hand, and the so-called *pāramitās*, or “perfections,” on the other. The most common list of *pāramitās* contains six or ten virtues or practices to be perfected by Mahāyāna followers:

1. charity (Skt. *dāna*; Ch. *bushi* 布施)
2. morality (*śīla*; *chijie* 持戒)
3. patience (*kṣānti*; *renru* 忍辱)
4. vigor (*vīrya*; *jingjin* 精進)
5. contemplation (*dhyāna*; *chanding* 禪定)
6. insight (*prajñā*; *zhahui* 智慧)
7. [the employment of] skillful means (*upāya*; *fangbian* 方便)
8. pious vows (*praṇidhāna*; *luan* 願)
9. power of fulfillment (*bala*; *li* 力)
10. knowledge (*jñāna*; *zhi* 智)

To put it in simple terms, in Mahāyāna Buddhism the monastic rules are not to be observed literally and under all circumstances, as in early Buddhism, but only as long as they were conducive to the perfection of these qualities.

*Dāna-pāramitā: Suicide as the Perfection of Giving*

OFFERINGS TO THE BUDDHA. Among the *pāramitās* it was the “perfection of charity or giving” (*dāna-pāramitā*) and the “perfection of patience” (*kṣānti-pāramitā*) that were frequently aimed at when Buddhists killed or mutilated themselves. Zanning, the famous scholar and hagiographer of the Chinese Tiantai school of Buddhism, for instance, in his “Song Dynasty Collection of Biographies of Eminent Monks” praises those who abandoned their bodies in the following verse:

Easily to throw away that which is hard to give up is the best among gifts. Thereby the filthy corpse is turned into an adamant body.<sup>18</sup>

The most famous paradigmatic example of a partial auto-cremation as a “perfection of giving” is presented in the famous *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra* (*Lotus sūtra*). The twenty-third “chapter on the original deeds of the bodhisattva Medicine King” (*Yaowang pusa benshi pin* 藥王菩薩本事品) in this extremely influential text must be regarded as the *locus classicus* in which self-sacrifice is praised and recommended. It is in this *sūtra* where we find the story of the Bodhisattva Sarvasattva-priyadarśana, the future “Medicine King” (Skt. Bhaiṣajyarāja), who burned his arms in homage to the relics of the Buddha. When his disciples lamented that their teacher’s body was now terribly deformed, the bodhisattva made a vow, saying:

Having given up both my arms, I shall [yet] assuredly obtain a buddha’s golden body. If this [assurance] be true and not false, let both my arms be restored as they were before.<sup>19</sup>

Not surprisingly, the bodhisattva’s vow was fulfilled immediately:

As soon as he had made this vow, [his arms] were of themselves restored, [all] brought to pass through the excellence of this bodhisattva’s felicitious virtue and wisdom.<sup>20</sup>

Buddha Śākyamuni comments upon this self-sacrifice in the following way:

His self-sacrifice and gifts were of such countless hundred thousand myriad *koṭis* of *nayutas* in number as these. [. . .] If anyone with his mind set on and aiming at Perfect Enlightenment is able to burn the fingers of his hand or even a toe of his foot in homage

to a Buddha’s *stūpa* he will surpass him who pays homage with his domains, cities, wives, children, and his three-thousand-great-thousandfold land with its mountains, forests, rivers, pools, and all its precious things.<sup>21</sup>

Even though in this case the bodhisattva has not committed suicide proper (which he did in a previous incarnation), the message was clear: to offer one’s own body in homage to the Buddha is the highest gift. It is great to offer only a finger or a toe, but it is even better to sacrifice your arms, and it is best to sacrifice your whole body.<sup>22</sup> A considerable number of East Asian Buddhists followed this example and burned their fingers, toes, arms, or their whole bodies in front of the Buddha’s relics and thus turned—as they believed—into holy relics themselves.<sup>23</sup> In many cases, the self-immolators recited the chapter on the bodhisattva Medicine King while burning.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, the chapter was also known as the “chapter on giving up one’s body” (*shishen pin* 捨身品).<sup>25</sup>

SELF-SACRIFICE FOR THE SAKE OF LIVING BEINGS. Another motivating force for self-sacrifices among Buddhists were the *jātaka* stories about the Buddha who, in his former incarnations as a Bodhisattva, offered his body to feed starving animals.<sup>26</sup> Eager to follow the model of the Buddha, practitioners in China offered their flesh to wolves, tigers, and even starving humans or exposed themselves to blood-sucking animals such as mosquitoes.<sup>27</sup> This latter form of self-sacrifice clearly connects the “perfection of charity” with the “perfection of patience” and thus with asceticism proper. But even the ritual self-sacrifice to relics of the Buddha was in fact regarded as *kuxing*, or “painful practice,” which we have defined as the Chinese equivalent of the Western term *asceticism*. For instance, in the early sixth-century Baochang 寶唱, the author of the biographies of nuns, praises the self-immolations of Shanmiao 善妙 (fifth century) and Jinggui 淨珪 (d. 494) as “the epitome of the ascetic life (*kuxing zhi jie* 苦行之節).”<sup>28</sup> Also, the dubious but influential *\*Brahmajāla-sūtra* (*Sūtra* of Brahma’s net; Ch. *Fanwang jing* 梵網經), to which I will return later, calls the burning of one’s body, arm, or finger *kuxing*—an “ascetic practice” that a bodhisattva must be ready to perform.<sup>29</sup>

In order to illustrate the relationship between self-mortification as an expression of *ultimate patience* (*kṣānti-pāramitā*) and self-sacrifice as an expression of *ultimate charity* (*dāna-pāramitā*), it may be helpful to recall that the classical Sanskrit term for asceticism is *tapas*, “heat,” which is often interpreted as an internalization of the Vedic fire ritual.<sup>30</sup> Self-mortification enables the ascetic to produce an inner fire needed to perform an internalized



sacrifice. As we have seen, the Chinese Buddhist equivalent of *tapas* is again “*kuxing* 苦行,” or “painful practice.”

### *Cibei* 慈悲: Suicide as an Expression of Compassion and Benevolence

As is well known, the main identity marker of developed Mahāyāna Buddhism is its emphasis on active “compassion” (*karuṇā*) and “benevolence” (*maitrī*) as the most important qualities of a bodhisattva.<sup>31</sup> The two ethical requirements are purposefully meant to undermine the position of the allegedly selfish *śrāvaka*, or “hearer”—that is, a follower of the Hīnayāna, who, according to Mahāyāna polemics, cares only for his own liberation and whose morality is only limited to avoiding evil.

The general attitude towards the precepts in Mahāyāna Buddhism was that a bodhisattva could break minor rules if the breaking of the rule benefited others and was performed from irreproachable (*niravadya*) motives.<sup>32</sup> But even the violation of a major rule—such as the four *pārājikas*—was tolerable, even expected, if performed on the basis of the three supreme qualities of a bodhisattva, namely,

1. skill in means (*upāya-kauśalya*)
2. insight (*prajñā*)
3. compassion (*karuṇā*)<sup>33</sup>

Śāntideva in his famous *Bodhicāryāvatāra* (V.84) claims that “the bodhisattva should always be diligent in the interests of others. Even what is forbidden is allowable for one who seeks the welfare of others with compassion.”<sup>34</sup> With regard to self-mortification, he says:

Upon harming another for one’s own sake, one is burnt in hells  
and the like;  
but upon afflicting oneself for the sake of others, one has success  
in everything.<sup>35</sup>

### The Debate on the Legitimacy of Suicide in Chinese Buddhism: Mahāyāna Ethics versus the Vinaya Rules

In the seventh century no less a person than the founder and leading representative of the major school of Chinese studies in the monastic rules (i.e., the Nanshan lüzong 南山律宗, the “Vinaya School of the Southern Moun-

tain”), Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), harshly criticizes the “*śrāvakas* of the lesser teaching (*xiaoqiao shengwen* 小教聲聞)” for their merciless observation of the precepts. The Mahāyāna bodhisattvas, in contrast, he argues, make compassion their primary concern and are thus entitled to break any Vinaya precept, as long as the transgression is motivated by compassion.<sup>36</sup> We should note that this very Daoxuan was the most respected and influential East Asian expert in the traditional monastic code of the hīnayānistic Dharmagupta school, which he successfully adjusted to the ethical principles of the Mahāyāna. This was much to the displeasure of more conservative monks such as the above-mentioned Yijing, who tried in vain to re-install the monastic rules as the true guideline for the monastics’ conduct. Although Yijing never mentions his name, it is obvious that Daoxuan is the main target of his harsh criticism of Chinese Buddhism, including the unlawful practice of self-immolation. However, Daoxuan, who was also a prolific hagiographer, not only sanctions the breaking of monastic rules for the sake of higher goals in an abstract way, but in his famous “Biographies of Eminent Monks of the Tang Dynasty” he explicitly praised those protagonists he had classified under the category of “[practitioners] who abandoned their bodies (*yishen* or *weishen* 遺身).” Without even mentioning that they had in fact violated the monastic rules, he claimed that they understood the truth that the human body had no substance, as it was only a combination of empty constituents. There was no reason for a wise man to maintain this illusionary body. Those who abandoned their bodies tore out the unwholesome root of the ego and thus demonstrated that the human body was an abominable empty vessel of the ego. By destroying this abode of decay, they received an “adamantine *dharma* body” (*jingang zhi fashen* 金剛之法身), that is, they turned into a holy relic.<sup>37</sup>

In the ninety-sixth chapter of his *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林, Daoshi 道世 (d. 683), another main representative of the Chinese Vinaya school and contemporary of Yijing, deals with the problem of “abandoning one’s body” in great detail, and it is thus illuminating to quote a long passage verbatim.

QUESTION “When a bodhisattva abandons his body, does this not result in the offence of killing?”

ANSWER “According to the monastic code, one is guilty of a *sthūlātāyaya*,<sup>38</sup> or a minor offence that is [only] planned [but not executed], before one has actually abandoned the body. After one has abandoned his body, there is no [category of] offence[s] this [deed] could be assigned to. Therefore, one is not guilty of the grave offence of killing. If a bodhisattva who follows the Mahāyāna offers [himself] to the Buddha because he is tired of [the circle of] life and death and frees himself

from it, or if he [offers himself] out of great compassion with the living beings and has no intention to harm others, but on the contrary brings about happiness, how could this be called an offence? For this reason the Buddha says in the *Mañjuśrīpariṣcchā-sūtra* [sūtra of Mañjuśrī's questions]: 'If one kills himself, this does not result in an offence.' Why is that so? It is so because the bodhisattva kills only to gain religious benefit. [. . .] Why is that so? Because a bodhisattva by abandoning his body does not act ethically neutrally [*wuji* 無記; Skt. *avyākṛta*], but only gains happiness and virtue. Because he extinguishes his passions, he extinguishes his body and therefore he obtains a pure body."<sup>39</sup>

Daoshi's argument can be divided into two parts: In the first part he argues in a rather legalistic way, claiming that before the suicide is actually committed, there is only an offence of planning a violation of the rules. The Vinaya does in fact classify a grave offence, which is only planned but not executed, as a *sthūlātyaya*, as Daoshi correctly maintains. In this respect, Yijing fully agrees with Daoshi. Formally, Daoshi is also right when he says that someone who has committed suicide successfully is no longer subject to the legal procedures of the Buddhist order. Being aware of this tricky argument, Yijing warns that even if the one who commits suicide is only guilty of a *sthūlātyaya* offence, his supporters and the bystanders become guilty of a *pārājika* offence, because they directly or indirectly instigated him. However, elsewhere in his *Fayuan zhulin* Daoshi takes a rather unorthodox stance, claiming that a suicide—despite being a *sthūlātyaya* offence—does not bring about bad karmic results.<sup>40</sup> Traditionally, a *sthūlātyaya* was defined as a grave offence (*sthūla*, "massive, coarse, gross, rough"), which constitutes a serious obstacle to the practitioner's spiritual development, even though it cannot be punished by the assembly of monks. Daoshi's position may be summed up as follows: According to the monastic law, suicide cannot be defined as the grave offence (*pārājika*) of killing a human being, because a dead man is not subject to monastic legislation. By making a resolve to kill himself and thus commit a *pārājika* offence, however, he becomes guilty of a *sthūlātyaya* offence. This would normally bring about unwholesome retribution in the future, but as the suicide was committed from irreproachable motives and did not involve any negative mental attitude (e.g., anger), there is no such danger. In other words, the monastic rules are irrelevant, it is the intention that counts, and this leads us directly to the second argument.

The second argument may be called an "ethical" argument. It is based on the specifically mahāyānistic way of judging deeds. In Mahāyāna the intention is all, the action itself is (almost) nothing. If the intention is pure, the deed is

pure; if the intention is impure, the deed is impure. As the bodhisattva always acts with a good intention, grounded in his universal compassion, his suicide results in religious benefit, in the extinction of his passions, and in the transformation of his impure fleshly body into an indestructible pure body.

Even at this point Yijing would not principally disagree. A bodhisattva may indeed offer his body to the Buddha or to living beings as described in the *Lotus sūtra* and the *Jātakas*. However, all the bodhisattvas who—according to the authoritative scriptures—mutilated or killed themselves out of devotion or compassion were laymen, and as such they were not bound to keep the monastic precepts. The implications of Yijing’s position are more far-reaching than they appear to be at first sight. Without even mentioning the text, he clearly rejects the authority of the most important of the so-called bodhisattva-precepts *sūtras*, the above-mentioned *\*Brahmajāla-sūtra*. This “indigenous scripture,”<sup>41</sup> probably written in the latter half of the fifth century in China, has been used as the scriptural basis on which East Asian Buddhists undergo a second ordination. First, they are ordained by accepting the traditional Hīnayāna precepts of the Fourfold Vinaya (*Sifen lü* 四分律) of the Dharmagupta school. In doing so they become fully ordained monks or nuns, that is, *bhikṣus* or *bhikṣuṇīs*. After this so-called *upasampadā* ceremony, they receive the ten major and forty-eight minor “bodhisattva precepts” (*pusa jie* 菩薩戒), according to the *\*Brahmajāla-sūtra*, and thus become “renunciant bodhisattvas” (*chujia pusa* 出家菩薩) in contradistinction to “lay bodhisattvas” (*zaijia pusa* 在家菩薩). The problem is that some of the bodhisattva precepts evidently contradict the Hīnayāna precepts.

As to the problem of self-mutilation and self-immolation, the sixteenth minor bodhisattva precept in the *\*Brahmajāla-sūtra* demands:

A son of the Buddha must first, with a wholesome mind, study the rules of deportment, *sūtras* and moral codes of the Mahāyāna tradition and understand their meanings in depth. Then, whenever novices come from afar to seek instruction, he should explain, according to the Dharma, the ascetic Bodhisattva practices, such as burning one’s body, arm or finger. [. . .] If a novice is not prepared to follow these practices, he is not truly a Bodhisattva monk [*chujia pusa* 出家菩薩]. Moreover, a Bodhisattva monk should be willing to sacrifice his body and limbs for all the Buddhas as well as for starving beasts and hungry ghosts. [. . .]<sup>42</sup>

Thus, according to this “bodhisattva precept,” burning one’s own body as an offering is not only an ascetic option but compulsory for all renunciant bodhisattvas (i.e., for Mahāyāna monks and nuns, not only for laypeople). In

counterbalance to the general flexibility of the Mahāyāna with regard to the observance of minor rules, the \**Brahmajāla-sūtra* emphasizes that every single rule established in the Bodhisattva-*prātimokṣa* must be observed under all circumstances.<sup>43</sup> Strictly speaking, every Mahāyāna follower must therefore, to a certain extent, practice auto-cremation. This may be the reason for the custom of Chinese and Korean monks and nuns up to the present day to burn small cones of *moxa* on their heads at the ordination ceremony.<sup>44</sup> In Korea even laypeople who receive the Bodhisattva precepts “administer a light burn on the arm.”<sup>45</sup>

The Vinaya expert Yuanzhao 元照 (1048–1116), who lived about 400 years after Yijing, is fully aware of the incompatibility of the bodhisattva precept that prescribes auto-cremation with the Hīnayāna precepts. The Hīnayāna precepts, he concedes, regard self-immolation and the burning of one’s fingers as a grave offence (*daguo* 大過), while the “great teaching” of the Mahāyāna praises such ascetic practice as “profoundly meritorious” (*shengong* 深功). Yuanzhao tries to solve the problem by distinguishing three types of Buddhists, which are addressed differently by the authoritative scriptures:

- The first type of Buddhists are laypeople (lit. *fei chujia pusa* 非出家菩薩, “bodhisattvas who have not left the household”), who are thus not obliged to abide by the monastic rules. For them the devotional act of offering even one toe produces more merit than the offering of countries and cities, as the *Lotus sūtra* explains. Furthermore, laymen may also receive the bodhisattva precepts and follow the instructions of the \**Brahmajāla-sūtra* and burn themselves in accordance with that scripture.
- The second type of Buddhists are fully ordained monks, or *bhikṣus* (*biqiu* 比丘), who have accepted the Hīnayāna precepts and are thus not allowed to burn themselves.
- The third type of Buddhists are those Mahāyāna monastics who have both received the Hīnayāna precepts *and* the bodhisattva precepts (*chujia pusa* 出家菩薩, “bodhisattvas who have left the household”). For such “renunciant bodhisattvas” the bodhisattva precepts have priority. For them, burning themselves means to keep the precepts; not burning themselves means to break the precepts.<sup>46</sup>

As virtually all Chinese monks received both the Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna precepts, the traditional monastic code of the “Lesser Vehicle” had thus become invalid when it conflicted with the precepts or ethical principles of the “Great Vehicle.”

The Tiantai scholar Congyi 從義 (1042–1091) argues precisely in the same manner as his contemporary Yuanzhao, and he openly criticizes Yijing, who had, he says, “made a false analysis, which is neither Hīnayāna nor Mahāyāna.”<sup>47</sup> He blames Yijing for quoting the *Lotus sūtra*, a Mahāyāna text, but neglecting the \**Brahmajāla-sūtra*, another principal Mahāyāna sūtra.

If one sides with the Hīnayāna, how can one recognize Sarvasattvapriyadarśana [the bodhisattva who burned himself according to the *Lotus sūtra*]? Likewise, if one sides with the Mahāyāna, how can one not cite the sūtra of Brahma’s net, but perversely use the *Hīnayāna Vinaya*?<sup>48</sup>

Although clearly in a minority position, Yijing was not the only one to ignore the text’s commandment to burn oneself. Daocheng 道誠 (fl. 1017), a contemporary of both Congyi and Yuanzhao, for instance, in his “Essential Readings for Buddhist Monastics” (*Shishi yaolan* 釋氏要覽; comp. 1019) strongly criticizes the practice of self-immolation with reference to the monastic code. Quite unmistakably, he reminds his readers of the fact that to instigate someone to burn himself results in no less than a *pārājika* offence, which implies the immediate and irreversible expulsion from the order.<sup>49</sup> According to this view, then, Daoxuan, Daoshi, Yuanzhao, Congyi, and many others would in fact have to be expelled.

Huijiao, who is rather ambiguous as regards ritual suicide, mentions one argument against self-immolation that appears to be a little less legalistic and more ethical. He refers to the fact that, according to the Buddha’s teaching, there are 80,000 worms inhabiting the human body. Now, when one burns himself, these worms are killed and thus the self-immolation may be regarded as the sin of killing living beings. When a person dies, however, the worms also die naturally.<sup>50</sup> Therefore the Buddha allowed only the burning of dead bodies. Only fully enlightened *arhats* are, by virtue of their supernatural powers, capable of burning themselves while appearing to be alive, because in actuality they have already abandoned their lives. Huijiao complains that, being ignorant of the problem of the killing the worms, some people tear apart the bodies and scatter the remains of *gotra-bhūmi*, bodhisattvas of the first stage (*xingdi* 性地), who have burned themselves but who have not yet received a subtle *sambhoga-kāya*, “reward body” [?] (*baoqu* 報軀).<sup>51</sup>

Let me now briefly summarize the results of my investigation. Although prohibited by the monastic rules, self-mutilation and ritual suicide were not only customary among East Asian Buddhists, but were even praised and

recommended as the “epitome of the ascetic life” by leading Chinese thinkers, including those who were specialized in the study of the traditional monastic code. These scholar monks, however, defined themselves as followers of the Mahāyāna and regarded the traditional monastic code as hīnayānistic. Whenever the Vinaya rules obstructed the practice of the *pāramitās* (i.e., the perfection of giving and the perfection of patience in the case of self-sacrifice) or if they conflicted with the demands of Mahāyāna ethics (i.e., compassion), they were to be suspended. The demotion of the traditional monastic code to a purely ritual matter was best signified and legalized by the introduction of a second and higher bodhisattva ordination on the textual basis of forged “bodhisattva-precepts *sūtras*.” The “legalistic” approach of Hīnayāna Buddhism towards the precepts was replaced by an ethical approach that stressed intention rather than action. The outcome of this new approach was somewhat ambiguous:

- On the one hand, we observe that the invalidation of the traditional monastic code led to a certain laxity, which reached its extreme in Japan where monks marry, drink alcohol, and do all sorts of things that are strictly prohibited in the Vinaya.
- On the other hand, we find in Mahāyāna a tendency to practice extreme asceticism that may culminate in the ritual suicide of the practitioner.

It is hard to tell why such extreme mortification of the flesh became so popular in East Asian Buddhism. We may surmise that a number of internal and external factors contributed to this development. Pre- and non-Buddhist customs such as the rainmaking ritual of “burning a shaman” (*fenwu* 焚巫)<sup>52</sup> may have been one factor; exaggerated devotion and religious fanaticism as a universal “anthropological constant”<sup>53</sup> yet another.

Nevertheless, we must concede that ascetic practices such as self-mortification, self-mutilation, and self-immolation were from the beginning inherent in Mahāyāna ethics, with its emphasis on extreme altruism and extreme devotionism. For particularly ambitious Mahāyāna practitioners, such ascetic practices were simply an irrefutable logical consequence of the core values of their creed.

This does not mean that extreme asceticism was an undisputed element of the bodhisattva path, as the examples of Yijing and Daocheng and, to a lesser extent, of Huijiao show. In my view, the weak point of the critics is their inability to present ethical arguments. The only basis of their argumentation is the question of whether self-mortification, self-immolation, or other forms of ritual suicide comply with the monastic code. Besides this, they seem to be

unable to tell their audience why such extreme asceticism is wrong. We may even assume that they actually did not think that it was wrong for any moral reasons. This becomes quite clear in Yijing's commentary on that issue. He leaves no doubt that he sees no problem in religiously motivated suicide as such if committed by a layperson (i.e., someone who is not bound by the monastic rules of the Vinaya). As Chinese adherents of the Mahāyāna valued their bodhisattva ethics far more than obeisance to the "Hīnayāna" precepts, they would not care much for legalistic arguments if they were in conflict with the ethical demands of the bodhisattva path.

NOTES

1. For further reading on Buddhism and suicide, see E. B., "Self-Immolation by Fire," in *International Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, vol. 33 (India), ed. Nagendra Kr. Singh (New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1997), 4308–33; James A. Benn, "Where Text Meets Flesh: Burning the Body as an Apocryphal Practice in Chinese Buddhism," *History of Religions* 37.4 (1998): 295–322; Hubert Durt, "Two Interpretations of Human-Flesh Offering: Misdeed or Supreme Sacrifice," *Kokusai bukkyōgaku daigakuin daigaku kenkyū kiyō* (*Journal of the International College for Advanced Buddhist Studies*) 1 (1998): 57–83; Hubert Durt, "Du lambeau de chair au démembrément: Le renoncement au corps dans le bouddhisme ancien," *Bulletin de l'École-Française d'Extrême-Orient* 97.1 (2000): 7–22; Jean Filliozat, "La Mort Volontaire par le Feu et la Tradition Bouddhique Indienne," *Journal Asiatique* 251 (1963): 21–51; Jacques Gernet, "Les Suicides par le Feu chez les Bouddhistes Chinois du Ve au Xe siècle," *Mélanges publiés par l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises* 2 (1960): 527–58; Yün-hua Jan, "Buddhist Self-Immolation in Medieval China," *History of Religions* 4.2 (1965): 243–68; Damien Keown, "Buddhism and Suicide: The Case of Channa," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 3 (1996): 8–31; Sallie B. King, "Self-Immolation, Buddhist," in *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, ed. William M. Johnston (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), 1143f.; Christoph Kleine, "Sterben für den Buddha, Sterben wie der Buddha: Zu Praxis und Begründung ritueller Suizide im Ostasiatischen Buddhismus," *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 11 (2003): 3–43; D. S. Macgowan, "Self-immolation by Fire in China," *The Chinese Recorder* 19.10 (1988): 445–51, 508–21.

2. "Tassa mayhaṃ Aggivessana etadahosi: 'ye kho keci atītamaddhānaṃ samaṇā vā brāhmaṇā vā opakkamikā dukkhā tippā kaṭukā vedanā vediyiṃsu, etāvaparamaṃ, nayito bhiyyo. Yepi hi keci anāgatamaddhānaṃ samaṇā vā brāhmaṇā vā opakkamikā dukkhā tippā kaṭukā vedanā vediyissanti, etāvaparamaṃ, nayito bhiyyo. Yepi hi keci etarahi samaṇā vā brāhmaṇā vā opakkamikā dukkhā tippā kaṭukā vedanā vediyanti, etāvaparamaṃ, nayito bhiyyo. Na kho panāhaṃ imāya kaṭukāya dukkarakārikāya adhigacchāmi uttarimanussadhammā alamariyaṇāṃ adassanavisesaṃ. Siyā nu kho añño maggo bodhāyā' ti.'" *The Majjhima-Nikāya*, ed. V. Trenckner, vol. 1 (1888; reprint, Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1993), 246. Translated



as *The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima-Nikāya)*, by I. B. Horner, vol. 1 (1954; reprint, Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1993), 301.

3. 如是等種種

梵志修苦行	壽終得生天
以因苦行故	當得安樂果
兩足尊賢士	
聞此諸苦行	
不見真實義	
內心不欣悅	
思惟哀念彼	
心口自相告	
哀哉大苦行	
唯求人天報	
輪迴向生死	
苦多而果少	

(*Fosuo xingzan* 佛所行讚, ed. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 (hereafter listed as T), Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎, and Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡邊海旭. 100 vols. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1934 [T] 04, no. 192, 13a06–13a13).

4. The Buddha here distinguishes four kinds of persons: (1) persons who torment themselves (*attantapa*; i.e., people who practice extreme asceticism), (2) persons who torment others (*parantapa*; e.g., butchers, hunters, robbers, warders, etc.), (3) persons who torment themselves and others (e.g., kings and rich brahmins who undergo severe austerities in order to prepare for bloody sacrifices), and (4) persons who do not torment themselves or others (i.e., *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* of the Buddhist order). *The Majjhima-Nikāya*, ed. V. Trenckner, vol. 1 (Kandaraka-sutta), 341–48 (1888; reprint, Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1993). The same distinction is made in the *Saṅgīti-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*: “Cattāro puggalā: idhāvuso ekacco puggalo attannapo hoti attaparitāpanānuyogamanuyutto, idhāvuso ekacce puggalo parantapo hoti paraparitāpanānuyogamanuyutto, idhāvuso ekacco puggalo attantapo ca hoti attaparitāpanānuyogamanuyutto parantapo ca paraparitāpanānuyogamanuyutto, idha panāvuso ekacco puggalo neva attantapo hoti na attaparitāpanānuyogamanuyutto na parantapo na paraparitāpanuyogamanuyutto.” *The Dīgha Nikāya*, ed.

J. Estlin Carpenter, vol. 3 (1911; reprint, Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1992), 232. In the Chinese translation of a commentary to the corresponding Sanskrit *Saṅgīti-sūtra*—which was originally contained in the *Dīrghāgama* of the northern school of the Sarvāstivādin/Mūlasarvāstivādin—the term *tapa* in the quotation from the *sūtra* is rendered by “ku 苦”: 自苦等四補特伽羅者。一有補特伽羅。自苦自勤苦非苦他非勤苦他。二有補特伽羅。苦他勤苦他非自苦非自勤苦。三有補特伽羅。自苦自勤苦亦苦他勤苦他。四有補特伽羅。非自苦非自勤苦。亦非苦他非勤苦他 (*Apidamo jiyi menzu lun* 阿毘達磨集異門足論; \**Abhidharma-saṅgīti-paryāya-pāda*; T26, no. 1536, 406a07–406a11). In the commentary to this passage, it is again clearly stated that the Buddha and his followers belong to the fourth category of men, who neither torment themselves nor others. For the reconstructed Sanskrit text and a German translation of the Chinese commentary, see Valentina Stache-Rosen, *Das Saṅgītisūtra und sein Kommentar Saṅgītiparyāya* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1968), 122–25. Interestingly,

the term used here (translated as "torment") is *tapa*, which as the noun *tapas* is also the technical term that denotes "asceticism" in Indian religion. We will return to this subsequently. See also Lambert Schmithausen, "Zum Problem der Gewalt im Buddhismus," *Krieg und Gewalt in den Weltreligionen*, ed. Adel Theodor Khoury et al. (Freiburg: Herder, 2003), 83f.

5. Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), 1096a.

6. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 1096b.

7. T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg, *Vinaya Texts: Part III, The Cullavagga, IV–XII* (1885; reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965), 252. Oldenberg and Rhys Davids interpret the Pāli *macchamamsa* as "fish" or more precisely "the flesh of fish." It is, however, more likely that *macchamamsa* refers to "fish" (*maccha*) and "meat" (*mamsa*). This interpretation is clearly supported by the Chinese translation of the *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* (*Saṅghāvaśeṣa* 3), which reads: 提婆達言。如來常稱說頭陀少欲知足樂出離者。我今有五法亦是頭陀勝法少欲知足樂出離者。盡形壽乞食。盡形壽著糞掃衣。盡形壽露坐。盡形壽不食酥鹽。盡形壽不食魚及肉 (*Sifen lü* 四分律; T22, no. 1428, 594a28–594b04).

8. For more on this matter, see Oliver Freiberger's contribution in this volume.

9. There are a few differences in the lists of the various schools. In the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* (*Genben shuo yiqieyoubu pinaiye* 根本說一切有部毘奈耶; T23, no. 1442, 723a19–723a23), one who practices the *dhūtāṅgas* is characterized as a person who (1) wears robes made of rags (*paṃsukūlika*; 糞掃衣人); (2) wears only three robes (*traicivarika*; 但三衣人); (3) permanently lives on begging alms (*paṇḍapātika*; 常乞食人); (4) goes from door to door to ask for alms (not omitting any house while going for alms and not choosing only rich men's houses) (*sāvadāna-piṇḍapātika*; 次第乞食人); (5) eats only once a day (*ekāsānika*; 一坐食人); (6) eats from his bowl (and not from plates and dishes) (*\*pātrapiṇḍika*; 鉢乞食人); (7) does not accept food again (after he has filled his bowl once) (*khalupaścabhātika*; 不重受食人); (8) lives in a forest (*āraṇyaka*; 住阿蘭若人); (9) dwells under a tree (*vṛkṣa-mūlika*; 樹下居人); (10) lives under the open skies (*ābhyavakāśika*; 露處住人); (11) accepts any place offered him (*yathāsaṃstarika*; 隨處住人); (12) lives in cemeteries (*samāsānika*; 屍林住人); and (13) only sits (to rest, never lying down) (*naiṣadyika*; 常坐人).

10. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 517c.

11. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 487c.

12. The other three are (1) to indulge in sexual intercourse, even with an animal; (2) to take things not given; (4) to boast of having superhuman faculties. See, for instance, Charles S. Prebish, *Buddhist Monastic Discipline: The Sanskrit Prātimokṣa Sūtras of the Mahāsaṃghikas and Mūlasarvāstivādins* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996), 50–53.

13. The exact origin and meaning of the term *pārājika* are dubious; Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary*, 2 vols. (1953; reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998), 342. Most authors interpret it as "defeat" (see Charles S. Prebish, *A Survey of Vinaya Literature*, The Dharma Lamp Series 1 [Taipei: Jin Luen, 1994], 3)—that is, someone who has committed one of the four

major offenses and is thus expelled from the order, is regarded as having suffered a defeat.

14. I. B. Horner, *The Book of Discipline (Vinaya Piṭaka)*, vol. 1 (Suttavibhaṅga), ed. Pali Text Society (London: Luzac, 1949), 123.

15. By saying: "O man, what use is this dreadful, impure, sinful life to you? O man, death is better than life for you." Prebish, *Buddhist Monastic Discipline*, 52f.

16. Ch. *toulanzhe* 偷蘭遮. The category of *sthūlātīyaya* offences does not appear in the *prātimokṣa* but in the canonical commentaries on the monastic rules—that is, the *Sūtra- or Vinaya-vibhaṅga*. See Hubert Durt, "Chūranja 偷蘭遮," in *Hōbōgirin* 法寶義林: *Dictionnaire Encyclopedique du Bouddhisme d'après les Sources Chinoises et Japonaises*, ed. Paul Demiéville, vol. 5 (Tokyo: Maison Franco-Japonaise, 1979), 507–22.

17. See Milindapaṇha (IV,4): "It was in order that one who was moral like that might not perish, sire, who was of many special qualities, [. . .] and bringing welfare to creatures, that the Lord, sire, out of compassion for creatures, laid down this rule of training: 'Monks, one should not destroy oneself; whoever should do so should be dealt with according to the rule.'" I. B. Horner, *Milinda's Questions*, vol. 1 (London: Luzac, 1963), 281f.

18. 難捨易捐。施中第一。以穢漏體。迴金剛身 (*Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳; T50, no. 2061, 710a19).

19. *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, ed. Bunnō Katō, Yoshirō Tamura, and Kōjirō Miyasaka, 6th ed. (Tokyo: Weatherhill; Kosei, 1984), 307.

20. *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, 307.

21. *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, 307. 若有發心欲得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提者。能燃手指乃至足一指供養佛塔。勝以國城妻子及三千大千國土山林河池諸珍寶物而供養者 (*Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經; T09, no. 262, 54a12–54a16).

22. It is imaginable that this story may have been inspired by an anecdote in the section on medicine (*Bhaiṣajyavastu* or *Bhesajjakkhandhaka* in the Pāli Mahāvagga [hereafter listed as Mv]) of the Vinaya in which a laywoman feeds a sick monk with a broth made of her own flesh. Upon meeting the Buddha—who strictly prohibits the eating of human flesh—the laywoman's wound was healed by the supernatural powers of the Awakened One (Mv VI, 23.1–6). For more on the issue of offering one's own flesh for the sake of sick persons, see Durt, "Two Interpretations of Human-Flesh Offering."

23. Apparently, to transform the filthy fleshly body into a pure adamantine body (i.e., a relic) was one major objective of Buddhist self-immolators in China. John Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography*, Studies in East Asian Buddhism 10 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 44; Kleine, "Sterben für den Buddha," 22.

24. See, for instance, *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (T50, no. 2059, 405a18, 405b24); *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 (T50, no. 2060, 683c22); *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 (T50, no. 2061, 860b16–860b17).

25. *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (T50, no. 2059, 404c16).

26. The most famous story is probably the one of the Bodhisattva (i.e., the future Buddha) offering himself to a tigress and her starving cub. See J. S. Speyer,

*The Jātakamālā: Garland of Birth-Stories of Āryaśūra* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971), 1–8.

27. Kleine, “Sterben für den Buddha,” 14f.

28. 善妙淨珪。窮苦行之節 (*Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳; T50, no. 2063, 934b20); see Kathryn Ann Tsai, *Lives of the Nuns: Biographies of Chinese Nuns from the Fourth to Sixth Centuries: A Translation of the Pi-ch'u-ni chuan—Compiled by Shih Pao-ch'ang* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 16.

29. 若佛子。應好心先學大乘威儀經律。廣開解義味。見後新學菩薩有從百里千里來求大乘經律。應如法為說一切苦行。若燒身燒臂燒指。若不燒身臂指供養諸佛非出家菩薩。乃至餓虎狼獅子一切餓鬼。悉應捨身肉手足而供養之。後——一次第為說正法。使心開意解。而菩薩為利養故應答不答。倒說經律文字無前無後謗三寶說者。犯輕垢罪 (*Fanwang jing* 梵網經; T24, no. 1484, 1006a16–1006a24).

30. Axel Michaels, “Opfer: VIII. Vedische Religion,” in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 4th ed., vol. 6, ed. Hans Dieter Betz et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 593; Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Unsterblichkeit und Freiheit*, trans. Inge Köck (Frankfurt a. M.: Insel, 1977), 120–22; see also Hermann Oldenberg, *Die Religion des Veda* (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1917), 401ff.

31. H. Dayal assumes that “in the early Mahāyāna, Wisdom and Mercy are regarded equally important. [ . . . ] But the later Mahāyāna emphasises Mercy more than Wisdom. [ . . . ] As the ideal gains ground, the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara increases in importance till he becomes the supreme and unique *bodhisattva*.” H. Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1932), 44ff. Quoted from Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (Houndmills, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1992), 160.

32. Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 149.

33. According, for example, to Prajñākaramati's commentary to Śāntideva's *Bodhicāryāvātāra*; Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 151f.

34. Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 151.

35. Vesna A. Wallace and B. Alan Wallace, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryavatara) by Santideva*, translated from the Sanskrit and Tibetan (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1997), 104. Cf. 以自利害他 || 地獄而別生 || 自害而利他 || 諸功德具足 (*Putixing jing* 菩提行經; T32, no. 1662, 555b09–555b10). The Chinese “*hai* 害” may also be interpreted as “to kill,” but in the Sanskrit the verb is apparently “to hurt” (*parōpaghāta?*). Steinkellner's German translation reads: “Hat man um des Selbst willen den anderen gequält, wird man in den Höllen usw. gekocht. Hat man aber um des Anderen willen sich selbst gequält, ergibt sich Glück in allem.” See Śāntideva, *Eintritt in das Leben zur Erleuchtung*, trans. Ernst Steinkellner, Diederichs' Gelbe Reihe 34 (Düsseldorf: Eugen Diederichs, 1981), 106.

36. *Sifenlü hanzhu jieben shu* 四分律含注戒本疏. Maeda Eun 前田慧雲 and Nakano Tatsue 中野達慧, eds. *Manji zokuzōkyō* 卅續藏經, vol. 62 (reprint, Taipei: Shinwenfeng, n.d.). This is a reprint of the original *Dainihon zokuzōkyō* 大日本續藏經 (Kyoto: Zōkyō Shoin, 1905–1912), 768b.

37. *Xu gaoseng zhuan*; T50, 684c.

38. There are some variations in the Vinayas with regard to this question. The *Mahīśāsakas*, for instance, clearly judge suicide as a *sthūlātīyaya* offence: “If someone

kills himself, this is a *sthūlātīyaya* offence” [若自殺身得偷羅遮罪] (*Mishasebu hexi wufen lü* 彌沙塞部和醯五分律; T22, no. 1421, 7c05). According to the *Mahāsāṅghika-vinaya*, on the other hand, planning a suicide results in a *sthūlātīyaya* offence, whereas committing suicide results in a *pārājika* offence: “To make such a plan with the intention to commit suicide is a *sthūlātīyaya*. If one [actually] kills oneself, this becomes a *pārājika*” [彼作方便欲自殺。得偷羅罪。若自殺已得波羅夷] (*Mohesengqi lü* 摩訶僧祇律; T22, no. 1425, 255c18–255c20).

39. 問曰。菩薩捨身得自殺罪不。答曰。依律未捨命前得方便小罪偷羅遮。若捨命已無罪可屬。所以不得殺人大罪。若依大乘菩薩。厭離生死為供養佛。及為一切眾生興大悲心。無害他意反招其福。何容得罪。故文殊師利問經云佛言。若殺自身無有罪報。何以故。如菩薩殺身唯得功德。我身由我故。若身由我得罪果者。剪爪傷指便當得罪。何以故。自傷身故。菩薩捨身非是無記。唯得福德是煩惱滅故身滅故得清淨身。譬如垢衣以灰汁澣濯垢滅衣在(自外經明。菩薩捨身。非唯一二。如月光捨頭。尸毘割股。或作師子象王捨牙與皮或作鹿身禽王濟厄樵人。或作大龜大鼈救人水難。或作大魚肉山施飢拔苦。如是具列非一。並散配別篇。恐以文繁不可重述 (*Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林; T53, no. 2122 (51–100), 991b26–991c09).

40. 問曰。何故名他。答曰。非自命故。若有他人是可殺者。能殺人得殺生罪。以自殺者無可殺境故。自斷命不得惡報。又阿羅漢自害其身。斷己命故而彼無罪。何以故。已離瞋心等故。是自殺不得殺罪 (*Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林; T53, no. 2122 (51–100), 803b17–803b21).

41. I have chosen to avoid the term *apokryphon* here because it does not fit well in the Chinese Buddhist context for several reasons, the most obvious being that there was no such thing as a fixed canon of Buddhist scriptures in China. I will discuss this matter in more detail in a forthcoming article. See also Robert E. Buswell, Jr., ed., *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), especially Buswell’s introduction and Tokuno Kyoko’s article “The Evaluation of Indigenous Scriptures in Chinese Buddhist Bibliographical Catalogues” in the same volume (pp. 31–74).

42. *Brahma Net Sutra: Moral Code of the Bodhisattvas*, ed. Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 1999), 23; slightly amended. It is interesting to note that the translators of the Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation have omitted the passage “sacrifice for all the Buddhas” (*gongyang zhufu* 供養諸佛). This is probably because they thought that demanding such an extreme form of devotion to “god-like” beings might repel potential Western converts as irrational religious fanaticism. This would thus counteract their missionary efforts, whereas self-sacrifice with the intention to save living beings seems to be compatible with “Western morals.” The original Chinese reads: 若佛子。應好心先學大乘威儀經律。廣開解義味。見後新學菩薩有從百里千里來求大乘經律。應如法為說一切苦行。若燒身燒臂燒指。若不燒身臂指供養諸佛非出家菩薩。乃至餓虎狼師子一切餓鬼。悉應捨身肉手足而供養之。後一一次第為說正法。使心開意解。而菩薩為利養故應答不答。倒說經律文字無前無後謗三寶說者。犯輕垢罪 (*Fanwang jing* 梵網經; T24, no. 1484, 1006a16–1006a24). Likewise, the Buddha in the \**Upāli-saṃnipāta* states: “A Bodhisattva who has achieved the Realization of the Nonarising of Dharmas should always be ready to give in three ways. What are the three? To give his throne; his

wife and son; and his head, eyes, and limbs. To give thus is great, most wonderful giving." *A Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras: Selections from the Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra*, ed. Chen-chi Chang (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), 265. 無生法忍菩薩。應住三施。何等為三。所謂王位布施。妻子布施。頭目支分悉皆布施。如是施者名為大施。名極妙施 (*Dabaoji jing* 大寶積經; T11, no. 310(61-120), 515c05-515c08).

43. Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 156.

44. Benn, "Where Text Meets Flesh," 301ff.

45. *Ibid.*, 303. For further details and a theory of why the burning at ordination has become customary, see Benn, "Where Text Meets Flesh," 303-10. According to tradition, the custom of burning at ordination had been introduced by Emperor Wu (reigned 502-549) of the Liang dynasty on the basis of the \**Brahmajāla-sūtra* but was officially abandoned in the People's Republic of China in 1983. For a description of burning at ordination in Chinese monasteries before the revolution, see Karl Ludwig Reichelt, *Der chinesische Buddhismus: Ein Bild vom religiösen Leben des Ostens*, trans. W. Oehler (Basel/Stuttgart: Missionsbuchhandlung Basel/Evangelischer Missionsverlag Stuttgart, 1926), 177f.; Johannes Prip-Møller, *Chinese Buddhist Monasteries: Their Plan and Its Function as a Setting for Buddhist Monastic Life* (1937; reprint, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1967); Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism, 1900-1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); Robert Buswell, *The Zen Monastic Experience: Buddhist Practice in Contemporary Korea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

46. This is a paraphrase. The entire passage in the Chinese text reads: 律明自殺方便偷蘭燒指然香。違制得吉梵網所制。若不燒身臂指。非出家菩薩犯輕垢罪。此蓋小機急於自行期盡報以超生。大士專在利他歷塵劫而弘濟。是以小律結其大過。大教歎其深功。況大小由教俱是聖言。一抑一揚豈容乖異。且經明出家菩薩。那云不許比丘(彼云。捨身非沙門所為)。傳列苦行遺身。豈是專存通俗(彼云。經中所明事存通俗)。荆溪所謂依小不燒則易。依大燒之則難。保命貪生物情皆爾。今以義判且為三例。一若本白衣不在言限。或全不受戒。此依經中足指依養勝施國城。若依梵網直受大戒。順體奉持然之彌善。二若單受小戒位局比丘。不燒則順本成持。燒則依篇結犯。三若兼受大戒名出家菩薩。燒則成持不燒成犯。或先小後大。或先大後小。並從大判不犯律儀 (*Sifen li xingshi chao zichi ji* 四分律行事鈔資持記; T40, no. 1805, 285a09-285a24).

47. *Fahua jing san da bu buzhu* 法華經三大部補注; Maeda and Nakano, *Manji zokuzōkyō*, 44:156b-157a (313b-314a); Benn, "Where Text Meets Flesh," 313.

48. *Ibid.* *Fahua jing san da bu buzhu*; Maeda and Nakano, *Manji zokuzōkyō*, 44:156b-157a (313b-314a). Congyi presumes that Yijing had simply not read the \**Brahmajāla-sūtra* (*Sūtra* of Brahma's net). This, however, is most unlikely since that text was rather popular and influential in China even in the seventh century. It is much more likely that Yijing—well informed about the Indian canon as he was—regarded the text as what it actually was: a Chinese forgery.

49. 捨身十住斷結經云。佛言。過去無數劫。有一大國。名裴崩闍。有一女人名提謂。夫喪守寡。家富無子。有婆羅門謂曰。今身之厄。由汝前世罪故。若不修福滅罪。後墮地獄。悔無所及。提謂問作何福得罪滅耶。婆羅門曰。莫非積薪自燒身。提謂依教積薪次。有一道人。名鉢底婆(漢言辯才)問曰。辦具薪火。而欲何為女人答曰。欲自燒身滅罪。辯才告曰。先身罪業。隨逐精神。不與身合。徒自燒身。安能滅罪。何於苦惱求善報耶。於理不通。譬如牛厭車。欲使車壞。前車若壞。續得後車。假使燒壞百千萬身。

罪業因緣。相續不滅○勸人捨身者。律犯波羅夷罪 (*Shishi yaolan* 釋氏要覽; T54, no. 2127, 281b07–281b19).

50. This is clearly stated in the monastic rules of the Mūlasarvāstivāda school. When the Venerable Upāli asked the Buddha whether or not the 80,000 kinds of worms in the human body were killed at the cremation of a dead person, the Buddha replied: “Upāli, as soon as a man is born, those worms are also born, so, at the moment of death, they too surely die. Still, only after examining the opening of any wound, is the body to be cremated.” Translated from the Tibetan text by Gregory Schopen, “On Avoiding Ghosts and Social Censure,” in Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 217. The corresponding Chinese version reads: 具壽鄔波離請世尊曰。如佛所說於此身中有八萬戶蟲如何得燒。佛言。此諸蟲類人生隨生若死隨死此無有過。身有瘡者觀察無蟲方可燒殞 (*Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya-kṣudraka-vastu; Genben shuo yiqie youbu pinaye zashi* 根本說一切有部毘奈耶雜事; T24, no. 1451, 286c23–286c27).

51. 又佛說身有八萬戶蟲與人同氣。人命既盡蟲亦俱逝。是故羅漢死後佛許燒身。而今未死便燒。或於蟲命有失。說者或言。羅漢尚入火光。夫復何怪。有言入火光者先已捨命。用神智力後乃自燒。然性地菩薩亦未免報軀。或時投形火聚。或時裂骸分人。當知殺蟲之論其究竟詳焉 (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳; T50, no. 2059, 406a25–406b03).

52. See Benn, “Where Text Meets Flesh,” 310f.; Robert H. Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise*, Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism 14 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 86–88.

53. It is quite obvious that self-mortification is a universal phenomenon or cultural expression. Striking similarities can be found between Buddhism and Christianity (see Martha Newman’s contribution to the present volume) but self-mortification and religious suicide are also known to many other traditions such as Islam and Hinduism. While the practice of extreme asceticism is thus universal and rather constant, the interpretation of this practice varies from tradition to tradition and even within one single tradition in accordance with the general social circumstances, the socioreligious affiliation of the ascetic, the “Zeitgeist,” and the prevalent religious discourse.

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