

Categories of the Suicide Cases and Their Characteristics and Implications in the Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist Canonical Text

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1. Introduction This article takes the Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist canonical classics as the object of investigation. Through the classification of the motives and causes of suicide, it attempts to outline the overall characteristics of the suicide phenomenon captured in the scriptures in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

2. Religious suicide The cases excerpted in this section are classified as suicide for religious purposes, that is, a person kills himself to attain liberation, or to practice the Buddhist ethics. These religious suicides involve at least five motives: “pursuit of the Dharma,” “rebirth in the Pure Land,” “bodily offering to the Buddhas by self-immolation,” “strict conformity to precepts,” and “protecting the Dharma.”

2.1. Pursuit of the Dharma

In the Mahāyāna scriptures, it is not difficult to find instances of people relinquishing the body for the sake of pursuing the Dharma. The most well-known of these is the story of Xueshantongzi 雪山童子 depicted in the *Sūtra of the Great Decease* 大般涅槃經.¹⁾ Xueshantongzi, a young ascetic of the Himalayas, is a former incarnate of Śākyamuni Buddha. When he heard the first half of a verse from a *rākṣasa*, he was overjoyed and asked to hear the remaining half of this verse. The *rākṣasa* did not grant his wish, and so he offered his body to feed the *rākṣasa* in exchange for the other half of this verse.

Another story of the same theme is from *Longshinūjing* 龍施女經.²⁾ Motivated by her bodhi mind, Longshinū was extremely zealous in attaining Buddhahood at an early time. A *māra* approached her and lured her to throw onto the ground from a height so as to become a Buddha. Without the slightest hesitation, Longshinū immediately sacrificed her life by throwing herself from a building. Before reaching the ground, however, she turned into a man.

The perseverance and sincerity of Xueshantongzi and Longshinū are highly praised in the Mahāyāna scriptures. Indeed, their stories highlight the greatness of Buddhist Dharma,

which is worthy of people's assiduous efforts to seek, even if they have to give up their lives for it.

2.2. Rebirth in the Pure Land

The practice of committing suicide in order to be reborn in the Pure Land is not uncommon among the adherents of Pure Land Buddhism in China.

As recorded in the *Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks* 續高僧傳, when the second patriarch of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism, Shandao 善導, propagated the Dharma at Guangming Monastery 光明寺, a man asked him whether chanting Amitābha's name will bring about rebirth in the Pure Land. After getting Shandao's assurance, the man climbed up a willow and kept on chanting the Buddha's name. He then joined palms, looked to the west, and threw himself down. He died upon reaching the ground.³⁾ A similar incident in *A Chronicle of the Buddhas and the Patriarchs* 佛祖統紀 records that a butcher surnamed Jing received a sermon from Shandao. Afterwards, he climbed up a tree, chanted the Buddha's name and jumped to the ground.⁴⁾

The practice of sacrificing one's life so as to be reborn in the Pure Land was once prevalent in ancient China. Sacrifice of life is a very peculiar form of soteriology in the Pure Land, which is called "sacrifice for rebirth" 捨身往生 in the Japanese Jodo School. As far as the author knows, the various forms of "sacrifice for rebirth" in the Pure Land have never been specifically mentioned in the Chinese Mahāyāna scriptures,⁵⁾ but appear quite often in the biographies of the patriarchs and accounts of rebirth in the Pure Land in Chinese Buddhism.⁶⁾ From this we may know that this ascetic method of "sacrifice for rebirth" is probably a unique and local custom that emerged from the interpretation and promotion of the followers of the Chinese Pure Land Buddhism.

2.3. Bodily offering to the Buddhas by self-immolation

There is a special type of religious suicide in the Mahāyāna scriptures, that is, "burning one's body to make offerings to the Buddhas" in order to express religious piety. Examples of Chinese self-immolators include Huishao 慧紹, Sengyū 僧瑜, Huiyi 慧益, Fayü 法羽,⁷⁾ Jiangwangbuqū 蔣王部曲,⁸⁾ Fanguang 法光, and the bhikṣuṇī sisters of Jingzhou 荊州比丘尼姊妹 in *Accounts of the Lotus [Sūtra]* 法華傳記. As seen in the historical records, these self-immolators all admired the religious piety of Bhaiṣajya-rāja Bodhisattva 藥王菩薩 in the *Lotus Sūtra* 法華經 and were determined to imitate what the Bodhisattva had done.⁹⁾ Besides, they had one thing in common, that is, they had a strong

tendency of asceticism. For example, Huiyi, Faguang, the bhikṣuṇī sisters of Jingzhou, and Tanjian 曇簡 are all devout ascetics.¹⁰⁾

The practice of adherents' self-immolation was full of controversy even in their time.¹¹⁾ One of the opponents was Daoxuan 道宣, the first patriarch of the Vinaya School of Nanshan 南山律宗. He once clearly expressed his disapproval of ordinary (unenlightened) people's self-immolation to worship the Buddhas. The reason is that Bhaiṣajya-rāja Bodhisattva burned himself as an enlightened sage; however, if the ordinary people follow suit, they would very likely lose control of their mind.¹²⁾ In contrast to Daoxuan's criticism, Huijiao 慧皎 eulogized Bodhisattvas' self-immolation as a sublime act of saving the sentient beings, so their good reputation would last for hundreds of thousands of generations.¹³⁾

In spite of the vehement criticisms from prominent Buddhist scholars, many self-immolators of that time believed that their offering of lives by self-immolation did follow closely the teachings of Mahāyāna sūtras. In their opinion, although there exist some conflicts between harming oneself and the Theravāda precepts, there is room for compatibility between the Bodhisattva precepts and Theravāda precepts, provided that the Bodhisattva path is venerated in the first place.¹⁴⁾

2.4. Strict conformity to precepts

Another motive for religious suicide is to conform resolutely to the precepts even in times of tribulation and adversity. There are accounts in the Mahāyāna scriptures of Buddhist devotees showing no hesitation in giving up their lives in order to uphold their received precepts.

One of these narratives is from the *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom* 大智度論: someone who had entered the stream of holy living (*śrota-āpanna*) was reborn into a butcher's family. When he reached adulthood, his parents requested him to inherit the family's business. He refused and was confined in a room and compelled to kill a goat with a knife. However, he would rather kill himself than violate the precept of not killing living beings. In the end, he committed suicide with a knife. In his next life, he was reborn in a heaven, which shows that his persistence in upholding precepts had finally brought him good rewards.

2.5. Protecting the Dharma

The sūtras of the True Eternalism stream of Mahāyāna Buddhism, such as *Śrīmālā-*

devīṣiṃhanāda-sūtra 勝鬘經 and *Sūtra of Aṅgulimāla* 央掘魔羅經,¹⁵⁾ strongly advocate giving up one's life to protect the Right Dharma. It is said in *Śrīmālādevīṣiṃhanāda-sūtra* that Queen Śrīmālā had three wishes, the third of which is sacrificing her life in support and preservation of the Right Dharma.¹⁶⁾

One of the relevant accounts of this type of religious suicide is Hongxiu's 鴻休 story. Towards the end of the Tang Dynasty, Huangchao's 黃巢 rebel forces swept the country and severely weakened the central power of the imperial court. At that time, Hongxiu was staying at Jianfu Monastery 建福寺, which was under the siege of the bandits. One day Hongxiu walked out the front gates and said, "I hereby vow not to sully the pure grounds [of the monastery] with my blood," before slitting his own throat.¹⁷⁾ Since Hongxiu was fearless in face of danger, Zanning 贊寧, the author of *the Song-Dynasty Collection of Biographies of Eminent Monks* 宋高僧傳, commented that he would be blessed with right retribution. Therefore, although Hongxiu abandoned his life on his own initiative, his action was far from disgraceful.¹⁸⁾

3. Altruistic suicide: bodily sacrifice to relieve other living beings Perhaps the type of suicide most widely known in Buddhist scriptures is altruistic suicide. It refers to abandoning one's life in order to save other sentient beings. Because of its compassionate motive, this type of suicide is usually regarded as an exemplary Bodhisattva practice. The two most famous accounts of this kind are the story of Shipi Wang 尸毘王, who cut off his flesh to feed an eagle and to save a pigeon,¹⁹⁾ and that of Saduo Wangzi 薩埵王子, who gave up his body to feed a tiger.²⁰⁾ Both of them are believed to be the past lives of Śākyamuni Buddha.

The theoretical basis of altruistic suicide can be found in *the Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*. According to this important *sāstra* ascribed to Nāgārjuna on the greater *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, *dāna* (almsgiving) *pāramitā* is developed into three classes, of which giving up one's head, eyes, blood, flesh, nation, property, wife, and sons is the first class.²¹⁾

4. Relinquishing the body with perfect ease: passing away while sitting in meditation In Chinese Zen Buddhism, there is an unusual form of abandoning one's life, that is, passing away while sitting in meditation 坐化往生 (*zuohua wangsheng*). Though it is called "sitting" (*zuo*), this kind of abandoning one's life does not necessarily refer only to sitting still. It can also mean dying while meditating in the postures of

standing up, lying down, or handstanding. Regardless of the posture at the time of death, the peculiarity of *zuohua wangsheng* is that the deceased can choose the proper time and preferred way to pass away beforehand.

The celebrated Chinese Zen masters who chose to die in *zuohua* include Danxiatianran 丹霞天然²²⁾ and Yinfeng 隱峰²³⁾ in the Tang Dynasty. Another renowned figure of the time is Layman Pang Yün 龐蘊居士. He was a successful merchant with a wife, son, and daughter. It is reported that the whole of Pang family left the world in an extraordinary manner, either sitting, lying or standing. Apparently, they could manage to enter *nirvāṇa* on their own decision, and at their chosen time and place. The Pang's way of determining their own way of passing revealed their magnanimous attitude towards death, which won them the admiration of people far and wide.²⁴⁾

5. Conclusion In principle, Buddhism rejects suicides caused by suffering and disgust at the secular world. This is because these kinds of suicides are not in compliance with Buddhist teaching.²⁵⁾ However, specific types of suicides are considered to be in compliance with the Dharma, and are therefore highly praised, or even encouraged at times, by the Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrines. These include the religious suicides and altruistic suicides, both of which are deemed as manifestations of “Bodhisattva’s bodily sacrifice” in line with *bodhisattvacaryā*. From this we may know that the more a suicidal behaviour is dissociated from ties of self-love and acted for the benefit of sentient beings, the more it is recognized by Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Finally, it is noteworthy that two types of religious suicides are solely found in the local biographies and indigenous writings of Chinese Buddhism, with no correspondence in the Buddhist canonical texts originated in India.²⁶⁾ They are the sacrifice of life aiming at “rebirth in the Pure Land,” and “relinquishing the body with perfect ease” practiced by Chinese Zen masters. One could argue that these two types of religious suicides are the distinct products of indigenous beliefs in Chinese Buddhism.

Notes

1) *Sūtra of the Great Decease*, CBETA (Chinese Electronic Tripiṭaka Collection), T12, no. 374, pp. 449b13–451b5. 2) *Longshinūjing*, CBETA, T14, no. 557, p. 910a7–10. 3) *The Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol. 27, CBETA, T50, no. 2060, p. 684a15–19.

4) *A Chronicle of the Buddhas and the Patriarchs*, Vol. 28, CBETA, T49, no. 2035, p. 288c10–14.

5) The term “sacrifice for rebirth” 捨身往生 is found in a few Chinese Mahāyāna scriptures, such as *Fodingzunshengtuoluoni* 佛頂尊勝陀羅尼 (CBETA, T19, no. 967, p. 351c23) and *Pusashanjiejing*

- 菩薩善戒經 (CBETA, T30, no. 1582, p. 1005b2-3). However, the usage of the term is not specifically correlated with the various forms of “sacrifice for rebirth” narrated in the biographies of the Chinese Pure Land Buddhism.
- 6) *Shinsan Jodoshu daijiten* 新纂淨土宗大辭典. <http://jodoshuzensho.jp/daijiten/index.php/%E6%8D%A8%E8%BA%AB%E5%BE%80%E7%94%9F>. Accessed April 26, 2021.
- 7) *The Biographies of Eminent Monks* 高僧傳, Vol. 12, CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 404c11-18; p. 404c19-405a7; p. 405a8-b1; p. 405b2-c1.
- 8) *Accounts of the Propagation and Praise of the Lotus [Sūtra]* 弘贊法華傳, Vol. 5, CBETA, T51, no. 2067, p. 26a10-18.
- 9) *Accounts of the Lotus [Sūtra]*, Vol. 10, CBETA, T51, no. 2068, p. 93c3-9; p. 94a18-28.
- 10) *The Bhikṣuṇī Biographies* 比丘尼傳, Vol. 3, CBETA, T50, no. 2063, p. 943c1-13.
- 11) *The Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol. 12, CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 405b2-4.
- 12) *The Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol. 27, CBETA, T50, no. 2060, p. 684c20-21.
- 13) *The Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol. 12, CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 406a25-b13.
- 14) See Yuanzhao’s 元照 criticism on Yijing’s 義淨 opposition to religious self-immolation, *Sifenlüxingshichaozichiji* 四分律行事鈔資持記, Vol. 2, CBETA, T40, no. 1805, p. 285a8-24.
- 15) *Sūtra of Aṅgulimāla*, Vol. 4, CBETA, T2, no. 120, p. 542a14-16.
- 16) *Ramakūṭa-sūtra* 大寶積經, Vol. 119, CBETA, T11, no. 310, p. 673c12-16.
- 17) *The Song-Dynasty Collection of Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol. 23, CBETA, T50, no. 2061, p. 856b25-c8; Kieschnick 1997, 40.
- 18) *The Song-Dynasty Collection of Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol. 23, CBETA, T50, no. 2061, pp. 856c28-857a4.
- 19) *Jinguangmingzuishengwangjing* 金光明最勝王經, Vol. 10, CBETA, T16, no. 665, p. 450c22-454b22.
- 20) *The Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*, Vol. 1, CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 88a20-88c26.
- 21) *The Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*, Vol. 12, CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 150a28-b3.
- 22) *Zhiyüelu* 指月錄, Vol. 9, CBETA, X83, no. 1578, p. 507a14-16.
- 23) *Zhiyüelu*, Vol. 9, CBETA, X83, no. 1578, p. 499b8-15.
- 24) *Zhiyüelu*, Vol. 9, CBETA, X83, no. 1578, p. 503a14-b4.
- 25) Tong 2020, 146.
- 26) For the suicide cases in Indian Buddhist canonical texts, see Wang 2006, Chapter 2.

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