

# “Sacrificing One’s Life for Righteousness”:

A Mahāyāna Buddhist Ethics Perspective

TONG Sau-Lin

## 1. Introduction

“Sacrificing One’s Life for Righteousness” is not a phrase derived from Buddhist teachings. Rather, it originates from classical Confucian text *Book of the Mengzi*, under the title *Gaozi*, which recounts multiple debates between Mengzi and Gaozi. The phrase “Sacrificing One’s Life for Righteousness” infers action that one takes to realize fairness and justice. This paper focuses on fairness and justice (“righteousness”) as the fundamental component in ethics theory, as well as the Buddhist understanding of righteousness and how Buddhism-based ethics view the act of sacrificing one’s life for the notion.

## 2. The concept of righteousness in Buddhism

For a long while, Buddhist teachings have given a stereotypical impression of advocating detachment from the mundane world while singularly focusing on the pursuit for personal serenity and bliss at the supramundane level.<sup>1)</sup> In fact, Buddhist teachings also draw attention to the relationship between individual and society, offering views on topics related to fairness and justice. For instance, in the discourse on implementing righteousness at the level of political administration,<sup>2)</sup> the Buddha offers a renewed interpretation of India’s caste system in an attempt to overturn its theological basis. Furthermore, *Chakravarti* (meaning “Wheel-Turning Sage King”) is described in early Buddhist texts as governing the universe via the “Wheel” of the Dharma, i.e., justice and law. In other Buddhist scriptures, people are depicted as equal and free in the blissful world of the *Uttara Kuru*, which is akin to primitive human society in the absence of a property-based economy.<sup>3)</sup> Such textual examples testify to the Buddhist concern over fairness and justice in society.

In Pali Theravāda Buddhism, a term for Impartiality, *Yutti*, can refer to *Dhammikatta*

(“a man of virtue”).<sup>4)</sup> “*Yutti*” can be affixed to “*Dhamma*” or “*Dharma*” to make the Pali words “*Yuttidhamma*” and “*Yuttidharma*” in Sanskrit, which both represent the principle of impartiality.<sup>5)</sup>

Buddhism does hold a specific view on issues of “fairness and justice.” However, the conclusion that “Buddhism supports righteousness” per se does not provide any ideas of the Buddhist perspective on “Sacrificing One’s Life for Righteousness.” Therefore, before answering questions on “Sacrificing One’s Life for Righteousness,” it is necessary to first look at the standards by which good and evil are viewed under Buddhism, and from there we can infer a value judgment on “executing righteousness” in Buddhist teachings.

### 3. The metatheory and fundamental spirit of Buddhist ethics

Buddhism advocates a doctrine of conditioned arising. Under the premise that all things are essentially transient beings, Buddhism holds that everything exists temporarily and depends on interacting conditions. Therefore, all things exist on interdependent relationship, forever faltering, and are susceptible to change. Even the rules of ethics are no exception to the universal law of dependent origination.

Nevertheless, it is agreed in Buddhism that ethics is to a degree understood as *Tathatā*, a word indicating the way things are, or the truth of all things,<sup>6)</sup> and that a person should strive to be virtuous (*Sīlavā*). Still, the central teaching of Buddhist dharma is not for a person to become a sage or saint, but to relinquish suffering, which is what the Buddha is concerned with throughout his life.<sup>7)</sup> Therefore, all human activities are classified as good or bad based on the principle of whether or not a given action will achieve the goal of extinguishing suffering.<sup>8)</sup> Subsequently, within the Buddhist axiology system, the standards of ethics and concepts of morality are not rigidly defined. Instead, they exist as a constituent of the highest value in life, that is, uprooting suffering and obtaining liberation.

The metatheory of Buddhist ethics is rooted in the core value of Buddhist teachings, and such core values refer to *Nirvāṇa*. It is stated in the *Samyukta-āgama* that *Nirvāṇa* is achieved by “forever transcendence from greed, hatred, ignorance and all afflictions.”<sup>9)</sup> We therefore deduce that *Nirvāṇa* is largely embedded in a state of impurity-free tranquility achieved upon relinquishing greed, anger, ignorance, wrong views, and distress.

As the entirety of Buddhist teachings are driven towards *Nirvāṇa* as the ultimate goal, Buddhist ethics is primarily concerned with the cessation of suffering and attainment of

spiritual enlightenment. The principle of judging whether an ethical act is right or wrong, good or evil, from the perspectives of Buddhist teachings, concerns whether the act itself drives a person towards *Nirvāṇa* (a state of gaining insight into the truth, renouncing suffering for happiness, breaking free from the shackles of *Saṃsāra*), bringing people benefit and happiness or causing them suffering and pain. In this regard, it is stated clearly in *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* 大智度論 that “Suffering and happiness is derived from the deeds of good and evil.”<sup>10)</sup> To reiterate, suffering and happiness arise from acts of good and evil. The result of either happiness or suffering therefore determines whether an act is good or evil in nature. As such, we arrive at the standards by which one determines something as either good or evil, right or wrong, according to Buddhist ethics. That is, all actions that lead to suffering, ignorance, and unwholesomeness are wrong and unvirtuous, while actions that bring about wisdom, wholesomeness, and an end to suffering are right and virtuous.

#### 4. Dharma and Justice: How is “Sacrificing One’s Life for Righteousness” viewed in Buddhism?

Buddhism has devoted considerable attention to issues such as justice and fairness, and has expressed clear stances on guidelines to creating a fair society such as class equality, a just and open parliamentary system, responsible governance, and the obligations of the citizenry.<sup>11)</sup> In terms of Buddhist normative ethics, particularly with regard to the bodhisattva path under Mahāyāna Buddhism, is “Sacrificing One’s Life for Righteousness” therefore indicative of strict ethical character holding normative significance in moral practice? This question is explored further under the Mahāyāna Buddhist ethical view.

As is widely known, the Theravāda tradition objects to almost all kinds of suicide.<sup>12)</sup> In contrast, altruistic suicide is revered and encouraged under Mahāyāna Buddhism, and praises of sacrifice for the benefit of others are overflowing in the relevant texts. For instance, *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* commends the donation of one’s head, eyes, blood, and flesh as the first-class *Dāna* (almsgiving).<sup>13)</sup> Thus, Mahāyāna Buddhism does not view self-harm or self-mutilation as necessarily violating the precepts. In particular, the act of “Sacrificing one’s life to preserve the Dharma” encompasses the notion of martyrdom for the sake of humanity and religion, and is profusely exalted in the *Tathāgatagarbha* and Buddha-nature scriptures such as *Lion’s Roar of Queen Śrīmālā* 勝鬘

夫人經 and *Āṅgulimāliya Sūtra* 央掘魔羅經.

The earliest recorded Buddhist martyr in Chinese history is Dao Ji 道積 during the persecution of Buddhists carried out in the Northern Zhou dynasty. Dao Ji once admonished Emperor Wu against decimating Buddhism, but to no avail. He then went on a hunger strike with seven of his Buddhist peers and ultimately died.<sup>14)</sup> During this same historical period, a monk named Jing Ai 靜霽 became aware that the Dharma was heading towards destruction. He then led his disciples on a retreat into Mount Zhongnan 終南山 and built 27 temples. Later, Jing Ai saw that the Dharma had entered another decline, leaving Buddhists and laypeople alike bereft of religious guidance. Jing Ai ultimately felt he could no longer contribute to this world. Loathing such an existence and squashed by oppression, he subsequently killed himself by way of slicing through his own flesh.<sup>15)</sup>

Another notable, early Buddhist martyr is Hong Xiu 鴻休, who lived during the latter half of the Tang dynasty in Jianfu Temple 建福寺 on Mount. Huang Bo 黃蘗山. At the time, Huang Chao 黃巢-led rebels were a threat to the Buddhist establishment. One day, Hong Xiu went outside of his temple to reprimand the rebels. Upon finishing his words, he peacefully extended his neck ready to be slayed. As he was being killed, no blood was visible under the blade, leaving the rebels astonished.<sup>16)</sup>

However, it is worth noting that Jing Ai’s protection of the Dharma does not recount the whole story. In his biography, other reasons for his ultimately fatal self-mutilation were revealed. These reasons include a sense of worthlessness and loathing for his oppression. This shows that Jing Ai’s sacrifice is not only the result of religious zest and moral calling, but also of woeful angst and despairing wrath. It is possible that Jing Ai’s tiring of this world was the primary factor driving him towards suicide.

Though protectors of Buddhist Dharma often claim to discard their own lives for the sake of “guarding the three treasures: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha”, Dharma protection may not be the singular reason for their sacrifice. For this reason, discussion of “Sacrificing One’s Life for Righteousness” during periods of persecution towards Buddhists make conclusions regarding the motivations of martyrs difficult. Moreover, we cannot discuss martyrdom ethics based on the martyr’s proclaimed objectives alone. An analytic approach will better reveal the truth while providing a transparent perspective on divergent events in individual cases of self-sacrifice in the name of protecting religion. We shall therefore try to avoid the distracting notion of “Dharma-Protector Martyrdom” that leads one to overlook

critical yet opaque events and their impact.

In Buddhism, although moral knowledge is about telling right from wrong and making moral decisions, the knowledge and judgment required for moral practice is born out of psychological activities. Regardless of whether a person chooses to commit a good or bad deed, the moral decision he/she makes is the result of multiple, inter-related psychological factors. In Buddhism, moral knowledge therefore goes beyond that which is obtained through rationality alone. Rather, moral knowledge is gained through a combination of intuition, differentiation, and reflection to moral concepts formed through the overall psychological process. As such, moral knowledge largely depends on subjective psychological experience. For this reason, recently scholars such as Jay Garfield have classified Buddhist ethics as a type of moral phenomenology.<sup>17)</sup>

The close relationship between Buddhist ethics and psychology has also received attention by some Buddhist scholars. For instance, Rhys Davids and De Silva have stated that the primary approach to Buddhist ethics is through the analysis of the mind.<sup>18)</sup> Buddhist ethics is therefore inseparable from psychology. Understanding ethics is an exercise in observation blended with multiple mind-related functions such as intellect, perception, emotions and will as components of the surface consciousness, karmas and behavior patterns that reside on the subconscious level,<sup>19)</sup> and universal human emotions.<sup>20)</sup> We can thus conclude that a moral decision is not necessarily rooted in the perfect purity of one’s mind. Rather, moral judgment varies from person to person and is subject to the conditions of a given time and place.

In conclusion, while Buddhism does identify with certain principles in secular ethics, moral norms in the secular world are deemed in Buddhism merely as “Secular Constants” 世俗常數 (*shisu changsu*). This is because the human consciousness is in a state of perpetual fluctuation, thus “Secular Constants” are prone to constant change and oftentimes end up as “flawed good” that has deviated from the Right View, Right Intention and Right Action. In view of this, Buddhism is more concerned with whether moral laws and judgments are aligned with the Buddhist Dharma as opposed to earnestly complying with “flawed” moral norms and obligations. Also, of utmost concern to Buddhism is whether the moral laws and moral judgments guide one onto the path of *Nirvāṇa*. Therefore, even though Mahāyāna Buddhism does not outright renounce actions of “Sacrificing One’s Life for Righteousness” and that “Sacrificing one’s life to protect the Dharma” can be viewed as

righteous in Buddhism, Buddhist ethics give more weight to the Dharma than to “Sacrificing One’s Life for Righteousness.” Furthermore, the Dharma is seen as the yardstick by which action of “Sacrificing One’s Life for Righteousness” are measured. Evidently, this is the principle of moral judgment stemmed from a religious value system that puts liberation and enlightenment as its ultimate concern.

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- 1) Verma 2010, 57. 2) 「長部」16, 「漢譯南傳大藏經」, CBETA (Chinese Electronic Tripiṭaka Collection), N07, no. 4, pp. 21a05-25a8. 3) Yin Shun 2003, 71. 4) Buddhadatta 1995, 203. 5) Chaiyachat 2016, 47. 6) Kalupahana 1995, 94. 7) 「中部」22, 「漢譯南傳大藏經」, CBETA, N9, no. 5, p. 199a1-2. 8) Harvey 2012, 32. 9) 「雜阿含經」vol. 18, CBETA, T02, no. 99, p. 126b2-4. 10) *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, vol. 92, CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 708c24-25. 11) Cozort and Shields 2008, 385-406. 12) Tong 2020, 117-158. 13) *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, vol. 12, CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 150a28-b3. 14) *The Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks* 續高僧傳, vol. 23, CBETA, T50, no. 2060, p. 626c16-18. 15) *The Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks*, vol. 23, CBETA, T50, no. 2060, p. 626c18-21. 16) *The Song-Dynasty Collection of Biographies of Eminent Monk* 宋高僧傳, vol. 23, CBETA, T50, no. 2061, p. 856b25-c8. 17) Simonds 2021, 340-341. 18) Keown 1992, 59-60. 19) Keown 1992, 62. 20) Li 1989, 83.

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(Visiting Lecturer, The Chinese University of Hong Kong)