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ASCETICISM AND ITS CRITICS
Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives
Edited by Oliver Freiberger

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OLIVER FREIBERGER

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Acknowledgments

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

Christoph Kleine

In 692 C.E., on his return from India to China, Yijing 裘淨 (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 jingui nei fa zhu (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 Mulasarvastivada 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. In the three classic collections of "biographies of eminent monks"—Huijiao’s 《慧皎 (497–554) Liang gaoseng zhuàn 梁高僧傳, Daoxuan’s 《道宣 (596–667) Tang or Xu gaoseng zhuàn 唐或蠻 高僧傳, and Zanning’s 《讚寧 (919–1001/1002) Song gaoseng zhuàn 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 zhuàn of the Liang dynasty records eleven, its sequel in the Tang dynasty records twelve, and the Song gaoseng zhuàn records twenty-two monks who “abandoned their bodies” (shishen 拾身, yishen 亡身, or wangshen 亡身). Almost 10 percent of the protagonists in the only extant collection of biographies of nuns, that is, Baochang’s 《寶常 (n.d.) Bigiuni zhuàn 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 sītras 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?”

In the Chinese translation of Asvaghōsa’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 Brähmans leads to birth in heaven at best and concludes that such asceticism implies “much pain but little gain” (ku tuo er guo shiao 虎多爾果少). 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].”

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 śramaṇa “to make effort, exert one’s self” (esp. in performing acts of austerity). The noun śramaṇa thus refers to “one who performs acts of mortification or austerity” 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:


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

which is intended or planned but not actually executed. A number of passages found elsewhere suggest that there were two main reasons why Buddha did not explicitly state why he rejected suicide, but a third reason is 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 monks and nuns, 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 pāramītās, or “perfections,” on the other. The most common list of pāramītās contains six or ten virtues or practices to be perfected by Mahāyāna followers:

1. charity (Skt. dāna; Ch. bushi 布施)
2. morality (śīla; chìjìe 持戒)
3. patience (kṣānti; renru 忍辱)
4. vigor (vīrya; jìngjìn 精進)
5. contemplation (dhyāna; chángdìng 冥定)
6. insight (prajñā; zhìhuì 智慧)
7. [the employment of] skillful means (upāya; fāngbiàn 方便)
8. pious vows (prāṇidhāna; yuàn 頌)
9. power of fulfillment (bala; lì 力)
10. knowledge (jñāna; zhì 智)

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.

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9. power of fulfillment (bala; lì 力)
10. knowledge (jñāna; zhì 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.

Dānā-pāramītā: Suicide as the Perfection of Giving

OFFERINGS TO THE BUDDHA. Among the pāramītās it was the “perfection of charity or giving” (dānā-pāramītā) and the “perfection of patience” (kṣānti-pāramītā) 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 adamantine body.

The most famous paradigmatic example of a partial auto-cremation as a “perfection of giving” is presented in the famous Saddhārma-pुjñārītika-sūtra (Lotus sūtra). The twenty-third “chapter on the original deeds of the bodhisattva Medicine King” (Yaowang pusa benshi pin英王菩薩本事詩) 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. Bhāsaṣyatāja), 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.

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 felicitous virtue and wisdom.

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.

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. 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. In many cases, the self-immolators recited the chapter on the bodhisattva Medicine King while burning. Accordingly, the chapter was also known as the “chapter on giving up one’s body” (shishen pin 捐身品).

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. 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. 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 碧巖, the author of the biographies of nuns, praises the self-immolations of Shanmiao 善妙 (fifth century) and Jinggui 淨珪 (d. 454) as “the epitome of the ascetic life (kuxing zhi ji 行之簡)”. Also, the dubious but influential “Brahmajāla-sūtra (Sūtra of Brahma’s net; Ch. Fanwáng jìng 燕國經)”, 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.

In order to illustrate the relationship between self-mortification as an expression of ultimate patience (kṣānti-pāramītā) and self-sacrifice as an expression of ultimate charity (dānā-pāramītā), 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. 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 般悲: 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” (maitri) as the most important qualities of a bodhisattva.31 The two ethical requirements are purposefully meant to undermine the position of the allegedly selfish śrāvaka, or “hearer”—that is, a follower of the Hinayāna, 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.32 But even the violation of a major rule—such as the four parājikas—was tolerable, even expected, if performed on the basis of the three supreme qualities of a bodhisattva, namely,

1. skill in means (upāya-kausālya)
2. insight (prajñā)
3. compassion (karuṇā)33

Śāntideva in his famous Bodhicaryāvatāra (V.8.4) 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."34 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.35

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 (xiàojiào shèngwén 小教弊聞)” 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.36 We should note that this very Daoxuan was the most respected and influential East Asian expert in the traditional monastic code of the Hinayānistic 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 金刚之法身), that is, they turned into a holy relic.37

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 sthālatyaya,38 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 Mañjuśrīparipuṣṭa-sūtra [sūtra of Mañjuśrī's question]: '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 [suiji 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."

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 sthūlatyaya, 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 sthūlatyaya 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 sthūlatyaya offence—does not bring about bad karmic results. Tradition ally, a sthūlatyaya was defined as a grave offence (sthāla, "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 sthūlatyaya offence. This would normally bring about unwholesome retribution in the future, but as the suicide was committed from irreplaceable 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 mahāyānist 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 Jatakas. 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," probably written in the latter half of the fifth century in China, has been used as the scriptural basis on which East Asian Buddhists have drawn to the Hinayāna precepts of the Fourfold Vinaya (Sīfen lü 四分律) of the Dhamagupta school. In doing so they become fully ordained monks or nuns, that is, bhikṣus or bhikṣunis. 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 Hinayāna 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. [. . .]"
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. Strictly speaking, every Mahāyāna follower must therefore, to a certain extent, practice auto-cremation. This may be the reason for the small cones of *moxa on their heads at the ordination ceremony. In Korea even laypeople who receive the Bodhisattva precepts “administer a light burn on the arm.”

The Vinaya expert Yuanzhao (1048–1119), who lived about 400 years after Yijing, is fully aware of the incompatibility of the bodhisattva precept that prescribes auto-cremation with the Hinayāna precepts. The Hinayāna 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 chūjia 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 one’s whole body.
- The second type of Buddhists are fully ordained monks, or bhikṣus (jiqiu 比丘), who have accepted the Hinayāna precepts and are thus not allowed to burn themselves.
- The third type of Buddhists are those Mahāyāna monastics who have both received the Hinayāna precepts and the bodhisattva precepts (chūjia 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.

As virtually all Chinese monks received both the Hinayāna 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 Hinayāna nor Mahāyāna.” 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 Hinayāna, 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 Hinayāna Vinaya?

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. 1079), a contemporary of both Congyi and Yuanzhao, for instance, in his “Essential Readings for Buddhist Monastics” (Shishi yaolan 給氏要覽; 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. 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. 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 saññhēga-kāya, “reward body” [P] (baoqu 報體).

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 hinayānistic. Whenever the Vinaya rules obstructed the practice of the pāramīltās (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 Hinayāna 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” (fóngwù 荒巫) may have been one factor; exaggerated devotion and religious fanaticism as a universal “anthropological constant”[39] 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 devotionality. 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 Huìjìao 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 obedience to the “Hinayāna” precepts, they would not care much for legalistic arguments if they were in conflict with the ethical demands of the bodhisattva path.

NOTES


The term used here (translated as “torment”) is tapas, 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.


7. T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg, Vinaya Texts: Part III, The Cullavagga, IV–XII (1885; reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1965), 352. Oldenberg and Rhys Davids interpret the Pali maccamanassas as “fish” or more precisely “the flesh of fish.” It is, however, more likely that maccamanassa refers to “fish” (maccas) and “meat” (manna). This interpretation is clearly supported by the Chinese translation of the Dharmaguptaka-vinaya (Saṅghavasāga), which reads: 提説魚, 如來常稱說隨陀羅魚是棄業出離者。我今以此魚亦是說説法者知是棄業出離者。若形色亦食, 形色若色施貧者。形色若色不食施者, 形而食不食與魚肉 (Sīlen 1428, 59.42a8–59.42b4).

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 Mālasaṅvatīśāvatī-vinaya (Genben shuo jáiyêowu pinaiyu) 根本一切有為學要 to T21, no. 1442, 723a19–723a23, one who practices the dhātuvāsā is characterized as a person who (i) wears robes made of rags (pānąlickāca); (ii) eats only three robes (trīcātaka); (iii) primarily lives on begging alms (pañḍapātika; 極貧人); (iv) 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) (yamānapindapāta); (v) is poor (patrojīdāna; 穷困人); (vi) accepts any place offered him (yamānapindapātika; 施貧人); (vii) does not accept food again after he has filled his bowl once (klāhapat Maharśabhikkha; 不重受食人); (viii) lives in a forest (ātanyaka; 布施人入); (ix) dwells under a tree (pānąmāla; 树下居); (x) lives under the open skies (ābhavakāṣṭha; 無蓋居); (xi) accepts any place offered him (yamānapindapātika; 施貧人); (xii) lives in cemeteries (pāṇāmālā; 墓林住人); and (xiii) only sits to rest, never lying down (tāpiyādika; 常林人).


12. The other three are (i) to indulge in sexual intercourse, even with an animal; (ii) to take things not given; (iii) to boast of having superhuman faculties. See, for instance, Charles S. Prebish, Buddhist Monastic Discipline: The Sanskrit Prātimokṣa Šūtras of the Mahāsāṅghikas and Mālasaṅvatīśāvatī (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1965), 50–53.

13. The exact origin and meaning of the term pāṭikas are dubious; Franklin Edgerton, Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary, 2 vols. (1953; reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1998), 342. Most authors interpret it as “deaf” (see Charles S. Prebish, A Survey of Viniyoga 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.


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.


17. See Milindapañha (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: ‘Moles, one should not destroy oneself; whoever should do so should be dealt with according to the rule.’” I. B. Horner, Milinda’s Questions, 1 (London: Luzac, 1965), 28ff.

18. 素性易朽，施中第一以成福德，迴金剛身 (Song gāosēng zhuan 宋高僧傳; T30, no. 2061, 710a10).


22. It is imaginable that this story may have been inspired by an anecdote in the section on medicine (bhaisajyavastu or bhaisajabhāndaka) in the Pali Mahāvagga [hereafter listed asMV)] of the Vinayas 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, 31–6). 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-mortifiers 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 (T30, no. 2059, 40b18, 40b24); Xu gaoseng zhuan 高僧傳 (T30, no. 2060, 68c22); Song gaoseng zhuan 宋高僧傳 (T30, no. 2061, 86c6–86c9).

25. Gaoseng zhuan 高僧傳 (T30, no. 2059, 40c416).

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 Jātakamāla: Garland of Birth-Stories of Aśvāmita (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997), 1–8.


28. 善妙淨行十惡害行之行 (Biqiān zhuan 比丘尼傳; T30, no. 2063, 33b20); see Kathleen Ann Tsai, Lives of the Nuns: Biographies of Chinese Nuns from the Fourth to Sixth Centuries: A Translation of the Pi-ch’i-ni chuan—Compiled by Shih Pao-ch’ing (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 16.


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

33. According, for example, to Prajñākaramati’s commentary to Sāntideva’s Bodhicaryavatara; Keown, The Nature of Buddhist Ethics, 15ff.

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


36. Sifón hanzhu liüebei shu 分身七月念佛疏, ed. Maeda Eun 万葉集, 52 (reprint, Taipei: Shinwenfeng, n.d.). This is a reprint of the original Dainihon kuzokuzyō 大日本雑話集 (Kyoto: Zōkyō Shoin, 1905–1912), 768b.

37. Xu gaoseng zhuan; T30, 68c4c.

38. There are some variations in the Vinayas with regard to this question. The Mahābhāsakas, for instance, clearly judge suicide as a shitalāyuţa offence: “If someone
killing himself, this is a sādhāraya offence [if you kill yourself in a religious act] (Mishashebu heksi wofen lai) in the Sinhalese text (p. 142, 7:05). According to the Mahāśāṅkha-vinaya, on the other hand, planning a suicide results in a sādhāraya offence, whereas committing suicide results in a pariṇājika offence: "To make such a plan with the intention to commit suicide is a sādhāraya. If one [actually] kills oneself, this becomes a pariṇājika."

40. Hence, if you kill yourself, this becomes a pariṇājika. Similarly, if you commit suicide, this is a pariṇājika.

41. Hence, if you kill yourself, this becomes a pariṇājika. Similarly, if you commit suicide, this is a pariṇājika. This would thus counteract their missionary efforts, whereas sacrificing himself, this becomes a pariṇājika. If you kill yourself, this becomes a pariṇājika.

42. Benn, The Nature of Buddhist Ethics, 156.


46. This is a paraphrase. The entire passage in the Chinese text reads: "工作时方使金戒结香。即以所施之香衣而把香。" Hence, it is clear that the burning at ordination is not a fixed ritual, but rather an act of devotion that can be performed at different times and places. The custom of burning at ordination was officially abandoned in the People’s Republic of China in 1953, but it has since been reintroduced in some Chinese monasteries.


48. Ibid. Fuhou jinshen da bu zu bao: Maeda and Nakano, Manji zokuzokyo, 44:156b–157a (313b–314a). Congyí presumes that Yijíng had simply not read the *Brahmajāla-sūtra (Sūtra of Brahma’s Neigh). This, however, is most unlikely since that text was rather popular and influential in China even in the seventh century. It was much more likely that Yijíng—well informed of the Indian canon as he was—regarded the text as what it actually was: a Chinese forgery.
This is clearly stated in the monastic rules of the Mūlasarvāstivādī 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: 譬如殺生者世世受福, 如佛所說於此身中有八萬四千蠕動之蟲, 如其所殺。此説蟲類人生皆有若死必死此無遠邇。身有蟲者觀無蟲方可為遠 (Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya-kudraka-vastu; Genben shuo yi jie you bu pinaye zashi) 骨木說一切有部諸部藥王卷 T42, no. 1451, 286c23-286c27.

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 Hinduism and Judaism. 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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