

EDITORIAL: Suicide in Buddhism

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On Friday April 22, 2022, Wynn Bruce of Boulder, Colorado, committed suicide by setting himself on fire in front of the American Supreme Court in Washington DC. According to a *New York Times* article of April 24,¹ Mr Bruce was a climate activist and his death was an “Earth Day” protest against climate change. Apart from environmental activism, however, Wynn Bruce’s suicide was apparently also motivated by Buddhism. In a tweet of April 24, Dr Kritee Kanko, a friend of Mr Bruce who is a climate scientist and Zen Buddhist priest, stated that:

This guy was my friend. He meditated with our Sangha. This act is not suicide. This is a deeply fearless act of compassion to bring attention to climate crisis. We are piecing together info but he had been planning it for at least one year.²

In response to those who replied that Mr Bruce’s death was indeed suicide, Dr Kanko posted a link to an old letter from the late venerable Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022) to Martin Luther King, which attempts to justify the self-immolation in Vietnamese Buddhism. Thich Nhat Hanh also claimed that such acts should not be regarded as suicide:

¹ See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/24/us/politics/climate-activist-self-immolation-supreme-court.html> (last accessed on November 24, 2022).

² See: <https://twitter.com/kriteekanko/status/1518102124713938948> (last accessed on November 27, 2022).

The self-burning of Vietnamese Buddhist monks in 1963 is somehow difficult for the Western Christian conscience to understand. The Press spoke then of suicide, but in essence, it is not. It is not even a protest. What the monks said in the letters they left before burning themselves aimed only at alarming, at moving the hearts of the oppressors and at calling the attention of the world to the suffering endured then by the Vietnamese. To burn oneself by fire is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance. There is nothing more painful than burning oneself. To say something while experiencing this kind of pain is to say it with the utmost of courage, frankness, determination and sincerity.³

This letter refers to the famous suicide of Thich Quang Duc, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who burnt himself to death on June 11, 1963 in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) [FIGS. 1-2]. No matter how one views the self-immolations of Thich Quang Duc and Wynn Bruce, and despite Thich Nhat Hanh's arguments, these deaths can hardly be regarded as anything other than suicide. But in what sense might they be considered Buddhist? And is the fact that they were committed by Buddhists sufficient for them to be regarded as "Buddhist", even if protesting about political problems?

³ See: https://www.aavw.org/special_features/letters_thich_abstract02.html. This webpage gives the following reference to Thich Nhat Hanh's letter as follows: "In Search of the Enemy of Man (addressed to [the Rev.] Martin Luther King)". In *Dialogue: Thich Nhat Hanh, Ho Huu Tuong, Tam Ich, Bui Giang, Pham Cong Thien addressing to Martin Luther King, Jean Paul Sartre, André Malraux, René Char, Henry Miller*. Saigon: La Boi, 1965, pp. 11-20.



FIGURE 1: Malcom Browne's photograph of Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation in 1963 (Photo © Public Domain)



FIGURE 2: Commemorative statue built in honour of Thich Quang Duc's suicide, Ho Chi Minh City (Photo © Brian Victoria)

There would seem to be little room for the violent act of suicide in any Buddhist motivated response to climate change. Non-violence (Skt.-P., *avihiṃsā*) is a fundamental Buddhist virtue, and canonical Pali texts such as the *Kandaraka Sutta* (MN 51) decry three types of suffering: that inflicted on oneself, on others, and on both oneself and others. There is also nothing obviously Buddhist about Thich Nhat Hanh's justification of Thich Quang Duc's suicide. In short, although one could argue that the Buddhist way of calm, compassion and insight will be an immensely useful resource to help us think clearly and act effectively in order to reduce any sufferings brought about by climate change or war, suicide would not seem to be an appropriate Buddhist response to these problems.

On the other hand, the ideas of self-immolation, the burning of bodily parts and abandoning one's body have a deep textual history, in Jātakas, Avadānas and Mahayana Sūtras.⁴ Self-immolation is found as early as the *Udāna* account of the spontaneous combustion of Dabba Mallaputta in the Pali Vinaya, at the time of his final Nirvana.⁵ How can we explain the apparent contradiction between Buddhist precept and practice? Perhaps one could say that suicide and self-immolation were developed in the first place as figurative motifs in narrative Buddhist literature. Although not meant to be taken literally they were taken as such in East Asia, where a rich Mahayana tradition of suicide through self-immolation has existed from the early medieval period down to the suicide of Thich Quang Duc in 1963.

It is doubtful that Ven. Duc's suicide, and that of Wynn Bruce, herald the emergence of a modern Buddhist ideology that rivals the rich array of immolatory and suicidal practices that helped define new forms of Mahayana in medieval China. Nevertheless, it is tempting to see the suicides of Thich Quang Duc and Wynn Bruce, as well as of Tibetan Buddhist nuns protesting against Chinese rule,⁶ as emblematic of the general transformation of traditional Buddhist values into a more politically motivated mode of Buddhist expression in the modern age.

⁴ See Chapter 1 of James A. Benn, *Burning for the Buddha: Self-Immolation in Chinese Buddhism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007.

⁵ Ud VIII 9 (Ee pp. 92–93).

⁶ See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-15571017> (last accessed on November 27, 2022).

Two articles in the present issue of JOCBS consider the problem of suicide in early Buddhism from different perspectives. Bhikkhu Sujato's article is a response to an article by Georgios T. Halkias in JOCBS 8 (2015), which argues that the Indian ascetic Kalanos, who travelled with Alexander the Great and committed suicide via self-immolation, was not a Buddhist monk. My own article analyses three important Pali Suttas on suicide and their Chinese parallels. It argues that although the texts condone an act of suicide committed by an arahant, this was not a normative position. That is to say, the position came about not so much through a process of ethical/spiritual deliberation and debate, but more likely was an unintended consequence of doctrinal debates about the nature of Nirvana. The combined impact of both studies is that although suicide by arahants is found in canonical Buddhist texts, self-immolation was not a practice of early Buddhism.