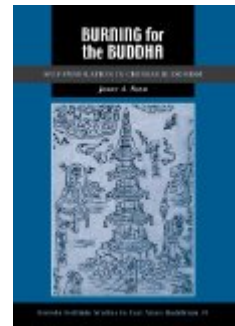


James A. Benn. *Burning for the Buddha: Self-Immolation in Chinese Buddhism*. Studies in East Asian Buddhism. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007. 376 pp. \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-2992-6.

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Buddhism and Self-Immolation

James A. Benn's first monograph begins with a spectacular death. In the year 527, after a series of striking miracles (rays of light, augural wonders, and numinous vapors), the monk Daodu 道度 strikes a chime, recites verses on emptiness, and burns himself to death. His remains are honored, placed in a sacred reliquary by the local ruler, and a laudatory funerary inscription is carved. In the space of a few pages after this anecdote, Benn concisely traces the religious motivations of Daodu as well as his political connections, placing the monk squarely within the long arc of a broader Buddhist religious history while firmly locating him in his specific Chinese context. This little story is beautifully chosen, for it contains the essence of *Burning for the Buddha*. In a series of chronologically and thematically arranged chapters, Benn expands on every element of this anecdote: on the long history of Chinese Buddhist self-immolation (a category that contains not only auto-cremation but also any form of religious self-harm or suicide), on the role of the body in Buddhism, on the power of scripture, and on the influence of biographical writing in Chinese Buddhist history.

In his first chapter, "Mounting the Smoke with Glittering Colors," Benn surveys early biographies of eminent monks and nuns by Baochang 寶昌 (463–after 514) and Huijiao 慧皎 (497–554). These sources provide our earliest evidence of Chinese self-immolation, and they lay the foundation for future doctrine and action. Benn shows how the early self-immolators often combined

Daoist dieting practices with explicit mimicry of Buddhist *jātaka* and *avadāna* tales. But already in these early moments Benn sees a kind of somatic sinification: the body of the self-immolator is not just an offering to relieve the suffering of another (as is usually the case in Indian texts), but rather is a "site of transformation." For Chinese self-immolators from the very beginning, religious suicide has been "an active means of deliverance" (p. 40). Benn shows how early self-immolation was often constructed and construed as an explicitly political act, a way of getting an emperor's attention and forcing him to act for the benefit of the Buddhist community.

In chapter 2, we learn how Chinese acts of auto-cremation were often modeled specifically on the template of the Bodhisattva Medicine King's auto-cremation in the twenty-third chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Here, Benn makes a striking and provocative claim, that whereas Indian readers would have easily recognized the hyperbole and rhetorical movements of the *Lotus*, Chinese readers were conditioned by their own traditions of reading to take the scripture quite literally. And it was not just the *Lotus Sūtra* depicting self-immolation in a positive light; the Chinese Buddhists also were importing and translating scroll after scroll of Indian scriptures and treatises which gave "almost constant affirmation of the act" (p. 69). In turn, the Chinese began generating their own genres of Buddhist literature, a kind of second layer of texts built on their encounters with the newly imported canon. Natively written Chinese tales proclaim-

ing the miracles of Guanyin 觀音 or of the *Lotus Sūtra* gave a kind of proof that acts of self-immolation generated powerful results.

Chapter 3 examines the *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 (Continuation of the Biographies of Eminent Monks) written by Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), highlighting in particular stories dealing with the relationship of the Buddhist order and the Chinese state. Here, Benn shows how anxieties about the decline of the dharma and imperial patronage of the *saṅgha* could lead monks to threaten and commit ostentatious and public acts of self-injury. The story of Dazhi 大志 (567–609) of Lushan 廬山 is especially useful. After the emperor, Sui Yangdi 隋煬帝, decided to begin limiting the growth of the Buddhist order, Dazhi wailed loudly, remonstrated with the emperor, burnt his arm to a crisp with a hot iron, peeled off his flesh to reveal the bones underneath, and then charred the bones themselves. Benn deftly shows how monks were “bargaining with their bodies,” engaging in a kind of “moral blackmail” (pp. 81, 87). Most important, Benn frames all these stories within the larger context of Daoxuan’s life and work, and his political imperative to advance the interests of the Buddhist order under the reign of Tang Emperor Taizong 太宗. Not only does Benn pay attention to the political context of individual monastic acts depicted in biographies of eminent monks, but he also keeps the reader focused on the creative projects underlying the composition of the biographies themselves.

In chapter 4, Benn discusses two attempts by Chinese exegetes to deal with the ethical and doctrinal implications of self-immolation: Daoshi’s 道世 (596–683) *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林 and Yongming Yanshou’s 永明延壽 (904–75) *Wangshan tonggui ji* 萬善同歸集. He shows how these monks react to accusations that self-immolation constitutes a violation of the monastic prohibition on suicide. Daoshi summarily used Mahāyāna scriptures to trump any concerns from the Vinaya, and then gave vivid stories from *jātaka* tales to back up his points. Benn helpfully tracks down and explains all of Daoshi’s occasionally obscure references. Yanshou, in contrast, worked a bit harder to draw out all the ramifications of self-immolation. While critics like Yijing 義淨 (635–713) believed that Chinese monks were spiritually immature, and not capable of acting like heroic *bodhisattva-mahāsattvas*, Yanshou held out the possibility that monks on Chinese soil could act freely in emptiness, transcending all dualisms. Yanshou argued in the “mature” tradition of Chinese Huayan exegesis, wielding arguments about principle and phenomena (*li* 理 and *shi* 事), and substance and function (*ti* 體 and *yong* 用).

Benn also places Yanshou’s arguments in historical context, guessing that they may have been a response to Later Zhou Emperor Shizong’s 世宗 955 edict condemning self-immolation in the north, or to Wu-Yue Emperor Zhongyi’s 忠懿 refusal to allow the monk Shaoyan 紹巖 to self-immolate.

Chapter 5, “Local Heroes in a Fragmenting Empire,” works from the *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 (Biographies of Eminent Monks Written in the Song Dynasty) of Zanning 贊寧 (ca. 919–1001). Benn shows how the practices of self-immolation have by now worked themselves into a self-confident and thoroughly Chinese Buddhist practice, a world where the sacred mountain Wutaishan 五台山 was a religious center. Auto-cremation was no longer accompanied by simple Chinese markers of the uncanny, such as purple vapors or screeching birds. Instead, the suicides of monks produce thousands of precious relics, to be distributed and honored just like the relics of the Buddha. Benn shows how the tenth century was a time of “relic inflation,” with “an almost entirely closed system in which relics produced in China bred more relics” (pp. 144–145). The memory and remains of self-immolators became the focus for local religious cults, and the legends of self-immolators began to focus on aesthetic concerns, such as the comportment and serenity of the monk at the moment of his death.

In chapter 6, Benn works on important sources of the late imperial period, the *Bu xu gaoseng zhuan* 補續高僧傳 (Supplement to the Continuation of the Biographies of Eminent Monks) of the late Ming and the *Xin xu gaoseng zhuan siji* 新續高僧傳四集 (Four Collections of New Continuations of the Biographies of Eminent Monks) of the Qing and early Republican periods. Benn’s survey of these materials demonstrates just how thoroughly embedded in Chinese Buddhism self-immolation had become. Monks could now spontaneously combust, removing any issue of agency or sin so prominent in earlier debates. The traditions of self-immolation were cumulative, and monks had available to them a continuously expanding repertoire of practices and traditions from which to draw. With new literary forms, such as poems praising self-immolators and death-verses composed by the practitioners themselves, Benn shows how the Chinese no longer depended on the *Lotus Sūtra* and *jātaka* tales to justify the practice; they “had produced nothing less than indigenous literature of self-immolation” (p. 194).

Benn’s most frequently mentioned goal is to show that religious suicide was “not the random act of a disturbed individual” and “not a marginal or deviant prac-

tice indulged in by a handful of suicidal losers” (pp. 2, 195). He wants his readers to believe that monks who burn themselves alive or throw themselves before tigers in hopes of being eaten “were not completely misguided or deluded” (p. 202). Benn accomplishes this goal not only through solid scholarly analysis but also through a careful structuring of the book itself. Benn’s rhetorical approach involves a nearly unending parade of vivid and grisly scenes, each followed by a careful unraveling of the self-immolators’ textual precedents, religious inspirations, and political motivations. This serves to numb the reader to the raw emotional impact of these gruesome suicides. By the end of the book, I felt like a medical student in anatomy class, probing these generously donated corpses with keen interest.

The long succession of detailed anecdotes also serves another broader argument made in this work: that self-immolation was not a single practice but the result of constant ferment and personal religious creativity. Benn is not seduced by the synthetic classifications of the biographers; he wants to recover individual stories, to pluck them out of the specific agendas of the Daoxuan and Zanning of the world and restore them to their rightful place in local religious and historical contexts. In this work, Benn shows us not only how Buddhist awakening in China was thoroughly somatic, but also how it was inseparable from local politics.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the book lays

in how carefully Benn traces the layered accumulations of the tradition. He shows how early self-immolation is based quite explicitly on Chinese reenactments of deeds performed by bodhisattvas in the *Lotus Sutra* and other translated scriptures. These mimetic suicides give rise to ancillary literature, to Chinese doctrinal and ethical analyses of the practices, to uncanny tales praising the practices, and to whole genres of poetry. Benn is narrating not just the growth of local traditions, but a kind of history of Buddhist awakening in China, a chronologically ordered catalog of the various ways monks transformed themselves into bodhisattvas and sages. This is yet another place where the structure of the book underwrites his broader argument.

Burning for the Buddha should be required reading in any graduate program in Chinese Buddhism. The vivid scenes and lively writing will make individual chapters of the work useful in undergraduate courses. Benn provides two appendices that are delightful reading for specialists: appendix 1 contains a magisterial summary of each instance of recorded self-immolation in the Chinese biographies, and appendix 2 contains translations of the critical evaluations of self-immolation written by the biographers Huijiao, Daoxuan, and Zanning. There are only a few trivial errors, such as **siddhānta* for *siddhānta* (p. 118). This is a most impressive first monograph, setting a high standard for broad thematic studies in Chinese Buddhism.

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