

Self-immolation and Climate Change*

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On Friday, April 22, 2022—Earth Day—Wynn Bruce, a climate activist and Buddhist practitioner, died after setting fire to himself on the steps of the United States Supreme Court. In 2018, David Buckel, a lawyer and environmental advocate, auto-cremated in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, New York. Although the actions of Bruce and Buckel seem to be inspired in part by Buddhist auto-cremators of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Buddhist self-immolation has a long history in East Asia. The following explores some of the deeper historical connections between Buddhist self-immolation and climate change.

In keeping with my usual practice,¹ I am going to use the term “self-immolation” for acts of self-sacrifice in which the body in part or as a whole is given up by various means. I’ll use “auto-cremation” for the intentional destruction of the body by fire. Before we get too far, I should make it clear that self-immolation by Buddhists is statistically rare—we know of only a few hundred cases over the last 1700 years. It is also controversial within the Buddhist tradition: while some learned monks have written in defence of the practice, there are many voices within the tradition that are critical of self-immolation.

It is very difficult to reconstruct the motivations of auto-cremators. This is especially true for historical actors, but it remains the case even for contemporary figures. I do not know either of the people I just named, and my knowl-

* Editor’s note: This piece is a transcription of Dr. James Benn’s keynote address at the international conference, “The Dharma-Ending Age: The Climate Crisis through the Lens of Buddhist Eschatology, Past and Present,” hosted at the University of British Columbia in 2022. Benn has since added some additional material and the piece has been lightly edited for flow. The *Yin-Cheng Journal of Contemporary Buddhism* wishes to thank the author for sharing his work.

¹ See Benn, *Burning for the Buddha: Self-Immolation in Chinese Buddhism*.

edge of their lives and deaths comes only from what is publicly available in the media. I can therefore offer no deep or informed insight into how Mahāyāna Buddhist notions of abandoning the body, or the significance of extreme giving on the bodhisattva path, played into the actions of Wynn Bruce and David Buckel. I think we can say that their actions, and perhaps also their motives, seem to match well with the definition of “suicide protest” proposed by the sociologist Michael Biggs, who has made extensive studies of modern forms of political auto-cremation around the world. The cases of Wynn Bruce and David Buckel conform to the four criteria for “suicide protest” laid out by Biggs:

1. The individual intentionally kills herself or himself, or inflicts injury likely to cause death;
2. The individual does not intend to harm another or cause material damage;
3. The act is conducted in a public place and/or accompanied by a statement addressed to policy makers or the general public;
4. The indicated cause for the act is a collective one rather than a personal grievance.²

David Buckel actually used the term “protest suicide” in his final communication to the world, while at the same time indexing Tibetan Buddhist auto-cremators of the early twenty-first century.³ I think it is likely that we will see more examples of suicide protest directed at the collective cause of the climate emergency, but what role Buddhism may play in those suicides seems difficult to determine at this point.

Bruce and Buckel

Let us turn to what we know about the cases of Bruce and Buckel. On April 22, 2022, Wynn Alan Bruce set himself on fire in the plaza of the US Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C. Bruce was an American climate activist

² Biggs, “How Repertoires Evolve: The Diffusion of Suicide Protest in the Twentieth Century,” 407–8.

³ Levenson and Milian, “Prominent gay rights lawyer sets himself on fire in protest suicide.”

from Boulder, Colorado who practiced Shambhala Buddhism. By early 2022, warnings that humanity was now facing a climate emergency were increasing, not only taking the form of reports raising the alarm about the need for immediate action to mitigate the worst effects of climate change, but also of climate-related natural disasters. Colorado, where Wynn Bruce lived, experienced its most destructive wildfire ever in December 2021, and its three largest ever wildfires in 2020. In February 2022, the United States Supreme Court heard oral arguments in the case of West Virginia versus the Environmental Protection Agency, and there were indications that the court could rule against the EPA's ability to regulate carbon dioxide emissions. There were also other issues on the court's docket that were relevant to climate change and the environment.

For years prior to his death, Wynn Bruce used his Facebook account to share his concerns about the climate emergency. In October 2020, he shared a link to an online course about climate change. He subsequently added comments to that link several times: adding "4-1-1" in April 2021, a fire emoji on October 21, 2021, and on April 2, 2022 he posted the date 4/22/2022. In January 2022, Bruce posted an image of the Vietnamese monk Thích Nhất Hạnh who had passed away on January 22. He later commented on that post with a quotation he attributed to Thích Nhất Hạnh, "The most important thing, in response to climate change, is to be willing to hear the sound of the earth's tears through our own bodies." Bruce's posts to Facebook were the only public indication that his auto-cremation was intended as a response to the climate emergency. In the early morning of April 22, 2022, Wynn Bruce arrived on foot at the plaza of the US Supreme Court. He silently sat down and set himself alight, remaining seated upright for about sixty seconds until police officers extinguished the flames. He was airlifted to hospital soon after, and died of his injuries the following day.

David Stroh Buckel was an American lawyer who worked on LGBTQ+ rights and was also an environmental activist. At around 6 a.m. on April 14, 2018, aged sixty, he set himself on fire in Prospect Park, near his home in Brooklyn, New York. An eyewitness called emergency services, who arrived at 6:08. He was pronounced dead at the scene. Just a few minutes prior to his act, he had emailed a statement to several US media outlets which included these words: "Most humans on the planet now breathe air made unhealthy by fossil fuels, and many die early deaths as a result—my early death by fossil fuel reflects what we are doing to ourselves." Near to the site of his death, Buckel

had left a lanyard with his identification and a shopping cart with a plastic bag containing his business card, a copy of his suicide note, and another note apologizing for the mess. The area around him was burned in a perfect circle, perhaps because he had made a ring of soil in order to prevent the flames from spreading. Buckel had a long-standing interest in Buddhism and his statement to the media, which is several pages long, alluded to recent acts of auto-cremation by Tibetan Buddhists.

Self-immolation by Buddhists as Suicide Protest

How are we to understand what Bruce and Buckel did, and what is Buddhist about their deaths? Although there are certainly proximate examples of auto-cremation by Buddhists, I think we have to go back further than the recent wave of Tibetan Buddhist auto-cremators. The manner and intended impact of Bruce and Buckel's actions can better be traced back nearly sixty years to one act of auto-cremation by a Vietnamese Buddhist monk. This highly mediated event decisively impacted the nature of suicide protest around the world and continues to be the visual touchstone for auto-cremation as a political act.

In 1963, Buddhist resistance to the government of Ngô Đình Diệm—the President of South Vietnam backed by the government of the United States—was gaining momentum. On May 8, Diệm's forces shot and killed eight Buddhist demonstrators in the city of Huế. Huế was Diệm's hometown, but the city was also an important Buddhist centre. In early May, Diệm visited Huế to celebrate Ngô Đình Thúc's twenty-fifth anniversary as Catholic archbishop. In honour of his brother's visit, Thúc flew the yellow and white flags of the Vatican in the streets. When Buddhists were banned from flying their own flags in honour of the Buddha's birthday, they staged large-scale street demonstrations. Soon, one woman and seven children lay dead, apparently shot by government forces deployed against the demonstrators.

By May 28, the protests had moved to Sài Gòn. Buddhists went on hunger strike and, on June 5, government forces injured sixty Buddhist protestors in Huế. At 9 a.m. on June 11, a procession of monks set off from Xá Lợi pagoda in Sài Gòn, carrying signs denouncing the Diệm regime. The demands of the Buddhist movement centred on the following five points. The Diệm regime should:

1. Lift its ban on flying the traditional Buddhist flag;
2. Grant Buddhism the same rights as Catholicism;
3. Stop detaining Buddhists;
4. Give Buddhist monks and nuns the right to practice and spread their religion;
5. Pay full compensation to the families of those who had been killed in Huế and punish those responsible for their deaths.⁴

Four monks travelling in a grey car led the procession. At a busy intersection, the car stopped and one of the monks took a five-gallon container of petrol from beneath the bonnet. It is perhaps worthy of note here that the use of modern fuels made auto-cremation a much more rapid affair than it had been prior to the twentieth century. The monk Thích Quảng Đức, who was then sixty-seven years old and a senior respected member of the *sangha*, sat in the lotus position on a small brown cushion in the middle of the intersection. The fuel was poured over him. He lit a match and went up in flames, burning for five minutes until his body finally fell over. The American photographer Malcolm Browne took pictures that were later seen around the world and continue to be the best known images of Buddhist auto-cremation.

The print media in the United States represented the eminent monk's auto-cremation as part of the story of religious persecution in Vietnam, a country in which the majority Buddhist population was ruled by a very small and intolerant Catholic clique. On June 27, 1963, a prominent group of American religious leaders published a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* entitled "We Too, Protest." It featured the now world-famous photograph of Quảng Đức (which the *New York Times* had not published in its original report) and called for support for the Vietnamese Buddhists.⁵

Auto-cremation during the Vietnam War did not end with the spectacular death of Quảng Đức. Another six Buddhists burned themselves to death during the 1963 crisis, including one monk who rather pointedly did so in front

⁴ Beverly Deepe Kever. Journalism Papers (MS 0363). Archives & Special Collections, University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Box 94.

⁵ An archived record of this edition of the *New York Times* can be found in McMaster University's research collections. Number 320.182907; file 177; box 9.56. <https://digitalcollections.mcmaster.ca/pw20c/ministers-vietnam-committee-newspaper-clipping-27-june-1963>.

of the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Sài Gòn, and even more Buddhist monks set themselves ablaze in subsequent years. The sixth monk to burn himself, on October 5, 1963, was filmed doing so by NBC News.

It was Thích Nhất Hạnh—the monk so respected by Wynn Bruce—who, writing many years later and for an audience that was not familiar with Vietnamese Buddhism, conflated protest against persecution with the quest for peace and the path of the (Christ-like) bodhisattva. He wrote:

By burning himself, Thich Quang Duc awakened the world to the suffering of the war and the persecution of the Buddhists. When someone stands up to violence in such a courageous way, a force for change is released. Every action for peace requires someone to exhibit the courage to challenge the violence and inspire love. Love and sacrifice always set up a chain reaction of love and sacrifice. Like the crucifixion of Jesus, Thich Quang Duc's act expressed the unconditional willingness to suffer for the awakening of others.⁶

Whatever the sixty-seven-year-old monk had intended by his auto-cremation, the effects far outlasted the immediate situation of 1963. His act has long since been extricated from the environment of resistance to Diệm's pro-Catholic policies and reinterpreted in multiple other contexts. There is no evidence that Quảng Đức intended to protest against the war in Vietnam or thought that his death could bring peace. His was an act directed against a specific regime that repressed Buddhism through specific policies. In the immediate aftermath, his intention was understood both in Vietnam and in the United States as an act of political protest. As the situation in Vietnam changed after the overthrow of the Diệm family and the increased involvement of US forces in the war, the strategy of auto-cremation was applied to anti-war protest. Quảng Đức's auto-cremation, which provided the most spectacular and widely-reproduced image of self-immolation, was now reinterpreted as the prime example of self-immolation for peace. We should bear in mind, then, that auto-cremation itself has no fixed meaning, Buddhist or otherwise. It is dependent on context and interpretation.

Quảng Đức's auto-cremation had significant immediate impact within

⁶ Hạnh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change*, 43.

South Vietnam. Suicide protest continued throughout the 1960s and '70s until Buddhist monasteries were completely suppressed after unification. More significantly for us, Quảng Đức's highly mediated action added auto-cremation to the repertoires of global protest. The photograph of a Buddhist monk seated in the lotus position, consumed by flames, became almost the default image for suicide protest. Most people who know the image could not name the monk in it.

Michael Biggs has compiled the figures and found that, compared to the period of 1919–1962, the annual rate of suicide protest was seventeen times higher in the period of 1963–1970.⁷ If figures for South Vietnam are excluded, the annual rate was still eight times higher. Auto-cremation now became the preferred method of suicide protest. Suicide protests prior to 1963 had used other means of death. But after Quảng Đức's auto-cremation in 1963, 85% of such individuals have burned themselves to death.

The auto-cremation of a Vietnamese Buddhist monk thus had a decisive influence on suicide protest in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but is also a bridge to the deeper history of Buddhist self-immolation in East Asia. Quảng Đức was a deeply learned monk, an expert in Vinaya, a devotee of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and fully aware of the precedents for his act within the tradition. Looking at the historical records of Chinese Buddhism from the late fourth century to his own day, he would have read accounts of several hundred monks, nuns, and laypeople who made offerings of their own bodies for a variety of reasons and in different ways. Buddhist self-immolators came from across the spectrum of the *saṃgha* in China: Chan masters, distinguished scholars, preachers, wonder-workers, and ascetics. They often ended their lives in front of large audiences. Officials of state, and sometimes even rulers, witnessed the final moments, interred the sacred remains, and composed eulogies that extolled their acts. The act of burning the body in particular was frequently a dramatically staged spectacle, and its performance and remembrance took a strong hold on the Chinese Buddhist imagination.

When we examine the representations of self-immolators in the sources, we discover that self-immolation, rather than being an aberrant practice, was commonly understood as a bodily path to awakening and, ultimately, to buddhahood. "Abandoning the body" (*wangshen* 亡身), to use a common term from

⁷ Biggs, "How Repertoires Evolve," 413–15.

the sources, featured not just the mode of auto-cremation but also a range of other extreme acts: feeding one's body to insects, slicing off one's flesh, burning one's fingers or arms, burning incense on the skin—not all of which necessarily result in death—and starving, slicing, or drowning oneself, leaping from cliffs or trees, feeding the body to wild animals, and self-mummification.

Auto-cremation as a mode of self-immolation seems to have been a Sinitic Buddhist creation which first appeared in late fourth-century China. It was probably not a continuation or adaptation of an Indian practice, but constructed on Chinese soil. Chinese Buddhist auto-cremation drew on a range of ideas, such as a particular interpretation of an Indian text (the *Lotus Sūtra*, which features the auto-cremation of the Bodhisattva Medicine King) and indigenous traditions, such as burning the body to bring rain, which long predated the arrival of Buddhism. In China, auto-cremation became a practice that was accessible to Buddhists of all kinds and was part of a serious attempt to make bodhisattvas on Chinese soil. Thích Quảng Đức was conversant not just with the scriptural sources for self-immolation—he chanted the *Lotus Sūtra* every day—but also with the historical details of Chinese auto-cremators who had gone before him.

Much of our historical data about auto-cremation is preserved in collections of the genre known as *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳). Biographies in these collections were commonly based on the funerary inscriptions composed for their subjects. Self-immolation as a defined practice remains a somewhat elastic category that is not very well articulated in the individual biographies of self-immolators. The compilers of biographical collections also took a rather circumspect approach to the topic. Biographers often represented individual acts of self-immolation as if they were predicated on a literal reading of certain texts, particularly tales of the past, such as *jātakas* and *avadānas* that often feature gifts of the body made by Śākyamuni in previous lives, and the *Lotus Sūtra*. Attempts to imitate those scriptural models are not unreasonable in the context. In the Mahāyāna literature especially, Chinese Buddhists were presented with the blueprints for turning ordinary beings into advanced bodhisattvas, and those blueprints stressed repeatedly and explicitly that such acts of extreme generosity were a necessary part of the process.

The bodhisattva, we learn, has to surrender dispassionately his own body and even his loved ones long before he reaches awakening. Chinese Buddhists

read stories of Prince Mahāsattva who fed his body to a hungry tigress, King Sibi who gave away his eyes, and Prince Candraprabha who gave his blood and marrow to cure a leper, or chopped off his own head and offered it to an evil brahmin. There are many more examples. These extraordinary heroes are presented in a matter-of-fact manner as paradigms of true generosity. But these were not just fairy tales. Chinese Buddhists were acutely aware that these and similar precious teachings had emerged from the golden mouth of the Buddha himself. They could point to many places in the sūtras where the Buddha more or less explicitly instructed them to do what they or their compatriots did with such enthusiasm.

Buddhist self-immolators were said to have preserved the saṃgha in times of persecution, or to have averted the disasters at the end of an eon, ended warfare, brought rain in times of drought, and turned back floods. Thus, their acts were not simply a departure from the world, but an active involvement in it.

Auto-cremation by Buddhists in traditional China was not a form of suicide protest for the most part. Generally speaking, auto-cremators did not burn themselves to draw attention to a political cause. If suicide protest is not the appropriate analytical model here, then what is? Self-immolation in medieval Chinese Buddhism was primarily understood to operate according to the mechanism of “stimulus-response” or “sympathetic resonance” (*ganying* 感應), a paradigm that was all-pervasive in every aspect of medieval thought. As Robert Sharf writes, “The notion of sympathetic resonance is deceptively simple: objects belonging to the same class resonate with each other just as do two identically tuned strings on a pair of zithers.”⁸ The miracles that were said to occur before, after, and during acts of auto-cremation indicated that self-immolators were stimulating (*gan* 感) a response (*ying* 應) from the cosmos. Self-immolation, far from being a disruptive force as it seems to be in the context of modern globalized protest, was thus an act that was supremely in harmony with the universe in which medieval people lived.

To think about self-immolation in the context of climate change we need to bear in mind that this sympathetic resonance is thought to operate at several levels simultaneously. First, within human society, interactions between inferior and superior social ranks are predicated on the idea that rulers should

⁸ Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise*, 83.

respond to the needs of the people. This aspect of sympathetic resonance may help us to understand why officials and rulers often treated self-immolators with such reverence in death by writing inscriptions for them, interring their relics, and bestowing posthumous titles on them. They could not afford to ignore or disparage the sincerity of their actions, lest they be seen to violate the cosmic and human order.

Second, *ganying* determines the relationship between the human realm and the celestial one: human actions and emotions are thought to cause cosmic response and transformation. Acts which are the most sincere will cause the cosmos to respond in accordance with the petitioner's intention. Abandoning the body in a selfless manner is the epitome of a sincere act. This particular aspect of sympathetic response is brought to the fore in accounts of Chinese Buddhist self-immolators who burned themselves to bring rain, to end famine, or to mitigate other human disasters. It would presumably be a key factor in any theory of Buddhist self-immolation and climate change.

Third, in Chinese Buddhism, the relationship between beings and the Buddha was often presented in the form of *ganying*. Buddhas and bodhisattvas are understood to be capable of assuming different forms and manifesting among humans in response to their needs. In some accounts of self-immolators there are frequent suggestions, and sometimes even overt declarations, that a particular figure was in fact an advanced being who had manifested in order to teach the dharma in a way appropriate to the age. Self-immolation as a Buddhist practice also offered a way of becoming a buddha, a response to the stimulus of the selfless gift of the body.

Chinese Buddhism and Climate Change: A Historical Perspective

Over the past twenty years or so, climate change has increasingly been seen as a factor in historical change in medieval China. How climate change was actually perceived by medieval people, especially as seen through the lens of religion, remains understudied. In an important and ground-breaking article from 2007, "Climate Change and Religious Response: The Case of Early Medieval China," T. H. Barrett suggested that a climate event in the mid-sixth century may have fuelled religious reflections on the fragility of the human condition and spurred an increased interest in eschatology from both Buddhist

and Daoist quarters.⁹ This suggestion seems to be borne out if we look at trends in Buddhist auto-cremation across the same time period.

A number of Buddhist auto-cremators in sixth-century China seem to have been inspired in their actions by what they perceived to be new and urgent threats that their religion faced.¹⁰ These threats were not primarily related to state repression of Buddhism, but rather to larger eschatological fears that the religion was losing its potency and that the overall environment was deteriorating. Such fears, coupled with a sense that new forms of Buddhist teaching were required in such dire circumstances, inspired Sengyai 僧崖 (488?–559), a monk from a non-Chinese tribe in Sichuan, to burn himself publicly on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of Wucheng 武成 of the Zhou 周 (September 2, 559). The choice of date was probably not accidental; it was the day of *yulanpen* 盂蘭盆, the so-called “Ghost Festival.” Since large crowds traditionally assembled at Buddhist monasteries to make offerings on that day, Sengyai would have found a ready-made audience for his act. The choice of the ghost festival may also be related to Sengyai’s expressed intention “to enter hell to suffer vicariously for all sentient beings.”¹¹ But if we examine Sengyai’s farewell speech, a rather more specific and eschatological vision is unveiled:

At the end of the kalpa people are lightweight and sluggish, and their minds become attenuated and weak. When they see images [of the Buddha] they are just blocks of wood and when they hear sūtras it is like the wind blowing through a horse’s ear. Now, in order to inscribe (*xie* 寫) the teachings of the Mahāyāna sutras, I burn my hands and will destroy my body, since I wish them to respect the Buddhadharma with faith.¹²

Sengyai seems to have been suggesting here the need for exceptional direct action in a time when people’s capacity to understand the dharma through the normal means of images and texts was severely restricted. A specific moment in history probably made evident the urgency of this need: the fall of the

⁹ Barrett, “Climate Change and Religious Response: The Case of Early Medieval China.”

¹⁰ Some of the following discussion also appears in Benn, *Burning for the Buddha*, 90–2 and in Benn, “Written in Flames: Self-Immolation in Sixth-Century Sichuan.”

¹¹ Benn, “Written in Flames,” 454.

¹² Benn, “Written in Flames,” 430.

pro-Buddhist Liang dynasty in the late 550s. In 553, Sichuan, formerly under Liang control, had been taken over by the Western Wei 西魏 (535–556), actually a puppet regime run by the polity that would become the Northern Zhou 北周 dynasty in 557. Sengyai may have had the sense that things were about to get a lot worse for Buddhism in China, since these rulers were less supportive of the religion.

Similar beliefs articulated in a similar way at around the same time may be detected in the career of the man known as Mahāsattva Fu 傅大士 (Fu Dashi). He is remembered now as a rather unthreatening and benign figure, but the reality is probably somewhat different. In 548, during the disorder of a massive rebellion, Fu, who was regarded by many of his contemporaries as an incarnation of the Buddha Maitreya, vowed to burn himself as a living candle. Rather than allow him to do so, large numbers of his disciples burned themselves alive; others burned off fingers, cut off their ears, and fasted. They were convinced that the period of the counterfeit dharma (*xiangfa* 像法) had come to an end, and they wanted their leader to remain in the world in order to save sentient beings. In 555, the situation had not improved and the people were faced with constant warfare, banditry, disease, and starvation. Fu appealed to his followers to offer their bodies “in order to atone for the sins of sentient beings and pray for the coming of the saviour.”¹³ Three more of his disciples burned themselves to death, making flaming lamps of themselves by hanging themselves from metal lantern frames. In 557, when the Liang dynasty was on its very last legs, Fu asked his disciples to burn off their fingers “to invoke the Buddhas to save this world.”¹⁴ In 587, long after Fu’s death in 569, one of his sons burned himself to death. One source claims that as many as forty-eight of Fu’s followers burned themselves alive. We can see, then, that the fall of the Liang dynasty resulted in a veritable orgy of blood and fire, not just in Sichuan but also in Zhejiang, where Fu and his devotees were based.

Body-burning was a consistent feature of the practice of Fu and his community, and their self-immolation had some doctrinal underpinnings related to Fu’s identification with the future Buddha, Maitreya. In 560, Fu claimed, “I attained awakening forty kalpas ago, but because Śākyamuni was able to perform the austerity of giving away his body, he was able to become a Buddha

¹³ *Xuzang jing* 120.4c–d.

¹⁴ *Xuzang jing* 120.4c.

before me.”¹⁵ Thus, he had impeccable grounds for cultivating this type of extreme practice to advance himself along the path to buddhahood. Although, in theory, the body-burning actions were primarily devotional, in practice, they reinforced group identity around the figure of Mahāsattva Fu.

But the political disorder of the 550s and consequent religious panic which swept through South China may just have been a fairly local manifestation of a catastrophe which seems to have affected other parts of the world. Scholars have pointed to a systematic collapse that affected trade across much of Eurasia in the mid-sixth century. David Keys, for example, has suggested that a massive volcanic eruption in what is now Indonesia may have resulted in sudden and disastrous climatic change—the effects of which would have been hard to ignore in South China—and may well have been attended by crop failure, subsequent famine and disease, contributing to political instability.¹⁶ Whatever the causes for the deep sense of impending doom felt by Fu and his devotees, the situation for most people around the 550s and ‘60s must have appeared extremely bleak, especially if they remembered the much more prosperous, more civilised, and safer days of the reign of Liang Wudi 梁武帝 (464–549).

Sengyai’s auto-cremation, on the other hand, was not presented as an act of despair, but rather as the herald of a radical new direction in Chinese Buddhist practice that seemed to offer a total renewal of the dharma. Witness the following remarkable statement attributed to him,

Then he said to his attendant, Zhiyan, “After my extinction, it would be good to do homage (*pūja*) to sick people. It is hard to fathom all their roots, since many of them are buddhas and sages who have temporarily transformed themselves in response [to circumstances]. If one does not have great equanimity of mind, how can one honor and respect them? This is true practice.” 智炎曰。我滅度後。好供養病人。並難可測其本。多是諸佛聖人乘權應化。自非大心平等。何能恭敬。此是實行也。¹⁷

Sengyai promised that his auto-cremation would usher in a new age in which

¹⁵ *Xuzang jing* 120.10a13–16.

¹⁶ Keys, *Catastrophe: An Investigation into the Origins of the Modern World*, 149–60.

¹⁷ *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*, T 2060.50.680a1–3. English translation in Benn, *Burning for the Buddha*, 92.

the bodhisattvas known through scripture would manifest among those who had previously been separated from them by time and space. As a lowly illiterate barbarian himself who became known as “Bodhisattva Sengyai,” this monk offered a potent example of this new dispensation. He seems to have had an attentive and appreciative audience to judge from the length of his biography, the number of miracle stories it contains, and the other texts composed about him. Although Sengyai was illiterate and a member of an ethnic minority, he garnered a significant following and not just among the uneducated masses. The leader of the post-mortem cult to Sengyai was none other than the local governor, Yuwen Zhao 宇文招 (d. 580), a prince of the royal blood, who is depicted as personally handling and weeping over his relics. Also, elite scholarly monks known to us from other sources not only attended Sengyai’s auto-cremation but also donated costly robes and staffs to ensure their karmic connections to the popular wonderworker. Sengyai was remembered long after his auto-cremation. He was the subject of a lengthy independently circulating hagiography and a popular play called “The Bodhisattva Sengyai Appears in the World in Order to Make the Scriptures” along with a song based upon it. We can see that self-immolators could be powerful cult figures and that self-immolation—combined with millenarian ideas and ideas of immanent buddhas and bodhisattvas—was likely to be a potent political and social force.

Aside from the sixth-century wave of millenarian auto-cremation, we see some other telling patterns in the practices of auto-cremators. Weather is not climate, but we still should consider the connection between auto-cremation and praying for rain. In 991, the empire was suffering from drought and plagues of locusts. When praying for rain failed to work, the emperor himself, Song Taizong 宋太宗 (r. 976–997), vowed to burn himself alive. The next day it rained and the locusts died. Here, the threat of auto-cremation was enough to produce a result, but sometimes it did not rain in time, the vow was carried out, and the participant actually burned to death. Such acts did not remain the prerogative of the state; Buddhists also burned themselves in order to bring rain. In the year 1000, there was a great drought and two eminent Buddhist monks, Zhili 知禮 (960–1028) and Zunshi 遵式 (964–1032) performed repentance rites and vowed to burn one hand as an offering to the Buddha. Before they could do so, there was a great downpour of rain.

Or consider the Ming monk, Mingxing 明星 (ca. 1478–1568), who was expelled from his monastery as a novice for feeding a beggar, who then taught

him how to pray for clear skies or rain. In 1568, there was a severe drought. Mingxing vowed that if it did not rain in three days, he would burn his body. A local official built an altar, put firewood on top, and ordered him to climb it. After three days, there was no sign of rain and the official ordered that the fire be lit. When the flames were a few feet from the altar, the wind picked up and rain fell, but Mingxing died in the fire. A monastery was founded to commemorate his offering and many high-ranking officials came to the monastery to pray for rain in times of drought.

These examples of burning the body to bring rain are not directly applicable to the topic of self-immolation and climate change but they do show how the logic of using the body to bring a cosmic response was thought to work. The appeal was made directly to the heavens rather than being routed through any human authority.

Conclusions

What may we conclude from this brief survey? Suicide protest is likely to remain the dominant model for people using their own bodies to highlight the climate emergency. Self-immolation by Buddhists or the Buddhist-adjacent in the context of climate change is likely to continue to take the form of suicide protest although it may be inflected by aspects from the deeper history of Buddhist self-immolation. Although in premodern times eschatological fears do seem to have driven at least one wave of self-immolation, eschatology has not yet featured very obviously in twenty-first century Buddhist self-immolation. However, we should always be alert for that possibility to arise.

The intersection of Buddhist self-immolation and climate change presents a complex tapestry of historical precedent and contemporary activism. While the auto-cremations of Wynn Bruce and David Buckel draw upon a long tradition of Buddhist bodily sacrifice, they also represent a modern evolution of this practice into a form of suicide protest aimed at addressing the global climate emergency. Their actions, although they gesture towards Buddhist ideas, seem to diverge from historical examples by focusing on a collective planetary cause rather than localized contexts. As the climate emergency intensifies, we may witness further instances of such extreme acts of protest, challenging society to grapple with both the ethical implications of self-immolation and the urgent

message it seeks to convey about our planet's future.

The highly mediated act of self-immolation by Vietnamese monk Thích Quảng Đức in 1963 has left an indelible mark on the global landscape of protest. His fiery death, captured in iconic photographs, drew some immediate international attention to the plight of Buddhists in South Vietnam and, in the long term, sparked a surge in suicide protests worldwide. In the years following Quảng Đức's act, the annual rate of suicide protests increased dramatically, with auto-cremation becoming the preferred method. This modern manifestation of Buddhist self-immolation, however, is rooted in a deep history stretching back centuries in East Asia. From medieval China to contemporary Tibet, the practice of offering one's body through fire has been a recurring theme in Buddhist tradition, often viewed as a supreme act of devotion, protest, or cosmic intervention.

The mid-sixth century in China witnessed a confluence of self-immolation practices, millenarian beliefs, and environmental anxieties that eerily echo contemporary concerns about climate change. In 559 CE, the monk Sengyai's auto-cremation marked a pivotal moment, as he articulated a vision of a new Buddhist era emerging from what he perceived as a time of spiritual and environmental degradation. This act was not isolated; it coincided with the activities of Mahāsattva Fu and his followers in 550-560 CE, who engaged in various forms of self-immolation, driven by apocalyptic fears and the belief that such extreme devotion could usher in a new age of salvation. Intriguingly, these practices of self-immolation were often connected to specific environmental concerns, particularly the need to pray for rain during periods of drought. This linkage between bodily sacrifice and weather manipulation highlights a longstanding belief in the power of human action to influence cosmic forces, a concept that perhaps resonates with modern discussions about human impact on climate systems.

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