

Exchanging Self for Others: The Bodhisattva & the Sokushinbutsu

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他者の為の悟り：菩薩と即身仏

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〈摘要〉

この研究の目的は、古代インドや日本の仏教の視点から日本文化をより深く理解する為である。インド仏教中間派の僧侶 Śāntideva（寂天）の *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*（入菩薩行論）で説明した菩薩の概念と日本近代の即身仏に焦点をあてることで、これらの研究から、歴史や宗教、文化の繋がりのほか、「他者の為の悟り」という哲学的な価値観を見出す。この研究による成果は、三重大学国際交流センターの「世界遺産と私たち」（英語で行う国際共修授業）での参考文献として使用される。

キーワード：寂天、入菩薩行論、弥勒菩薩、即身仏、他者の為の悟り

Introduction

Is Buddhahood attainable in one's lifetime? And what does this concept of perfection have to do with cultivating humility and compassion for all sentient beings? In other words, if one is 'perfected' then why would one need to concern themselves with anything or anyone else? A collection of verses known as the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (*The Way of the Bodhisattva*) by the Indian Buddhist monk Śāntideva (c. 8th century CE) gives rise to the notion that Buddhahood is but in fact a denial of the self-pursuit of enlightenment in favor of an ultimate intention to bring benefit to all through an exchange of self and other.

Originally transcribed from lectures for an audience of Buddhist monks in ancient India, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* verses coalesce around a central idea that moves past the individual Buddhist monks' focus on personal enlightenment and towards a far more altruistic pursuit; the salvation of all. Interestingly, while these ancient verses provide a kind of template for the bodhisattva's (those intent on following the Buddha's path) in training, however, the actual transfiguration of the bodhisattva is but left only to the imagination. It could be said that we indeed have words or scripture per se, but what of an example of those individuals

who have attained Buddhahood, a living buddha in the flesh?

In this paper, I will look closely at several key verses in chapter eight where Śāntideva explores the notions of self and others concerning present and future lives, his views on suffering and of enlightenment. It is important also to note, that these ideas as expressed by Śāntideva to his followers have permeated Mahāyāna Buddhist thought and culture throughout Asia. I will thus conclude with a brief introduction to the phenomenon of self-mummification by Buddhist monks (sokushin-butsu) from medieval to premodern times in Japan. With one specific example of a self-mummified monk, Myo-Shin-Jo-Nin of Yokokuraji temple, I wish to present an extraordinary example of what the pursuit and self-sacrifice required of Buddhahood in fact looks like.

2. Śāntideva's Perfection of Meditative Absorption

Beginning with chapter eight, *Perfection of Meditative Absorption* (Crosby & Skilton, trans., 1995), Śāntideva explores the role of insight meditation (*vipaśyanā*) and the various steps which follow the isolation of the body and mind, with a focus on the death and decay of the human body (pgs. 79, 80).

In Sanskrit the term *tathatā*, translated as “suchness”, is what one who has become ‘awakened’ actually comes to realize, specifically that, “all material and mental phenomena are characterized by three ‘marks’, *lakṣaṇa*, i.e. impermanence, dissatisfaction, and insubstantiality.” Śāntideva explains:

Therefore a wise person would not desire it. Fear arises from desire, yet it goes of its own accord. Be firm and bear it impartially (v. 19).

Suchness, is thus the realization of “the way things really are” (Crosby & Skilton, pg. 76). It is throughout the verses in chapter eight that Śāntideva pursues this point to its penultimate conclusion, that life is no longer, no more than that interval between one’s last and one’s next breath.

When shall I live free from fear, without protecting my body, a clay bowl my only luxury, in a robe that thieves would not use? (v. 29).

This exhausting effort is made for all time for the sake of a puny body which inevitably dies, which falls into hells and other low realms (v. 82).

Underlying this discourse though is a sense of hope, for even the ninety-nine percent evil have a one percent opportunity to bring about a one hundred percent change within

themselves. It is no longer the domain of the bodhisattva who alone seeks the Buddhist Path, that all can serve a greater purpose and free themselves of incessant pain and suffering with a faith and commitment to the training in the cultivation of *bodhi*, enlightenment. Śāntideva states:

With a fraction of even one hundredth of a billionth of that effort one obtains Buddhahood. For those who follow their passions the suffering involved is greater than the suffering on the Path, and there is no Awakening (v. 83).

Śāntideva begins verse ninety with a profound statement, “All equally experience suffering and happiness. I should look after them as I do myself.” In asking us to meditate on the identification of our self with others, and by doing so, come to understand that everyone also wants to live with joy, and happiness and at peace, then we must know that we are all fundamentally equal in our thoughts and actions. While seeking peace and happiness seems a common thread, Śāntideva makes clear that our suffering and that in others is of paramount concern. Furthermore, if we all indeed suffer to varying degrees or another, is my suffering more important than another- be it a loved one, or a stranger, or even an enemy? For the bodhisattva in training, prioritizing another’s suffering over one’s own personal suffering is at the heart of this exchange of self with others. And is necessary to realizing the ultimate truth. For it is at this point where selfishness dissipates and compassion arises in its place.

Even though suffering in me does not cause distress in the bodies of others, I should nevertheless find their suffering intolerable because of the affection I have for myself (v. 92).

In the same way that, though I cannot experience another’s suffering in myself, his suffering is hard for him to bear because of his affection for himself (v. 93).

Reflecting directly upon the Buddha’s own words, Śāntideva expresses the point of the Lord Buddha that an individual should love and care for oneself so that their love can be spread to others. However, that by having lived a life free from all attachments without concern for worldly affairs, does the Buddha not seemingly advocate seclusion from, over inclusion with, self and others? Ultimately, desires and suffering directly caused by craving are of an individualistic making, therefore, the Buddha shared his knowledge that, “All suffering partakes of illusion, the only way to deal with it is inwardly, not outwardly” (De Bary, pg. 69). Gaining control over one’s passions comes from within and this action, as

Śāntideva expresses, is first and foremost for everything else will flow directly from it:

I should dispel the suffering of others because it is suffering like my own suffering. I should help others too because of their nature as beings, which is like my own being (v. 94).

Myself and others, my suffering and their suffering, it is this division between the conceptualizations of “I am” and “I alone exist” as a special entity that forever distances one from the multitude of the world of strangers. We are not a singular, special entity, which only forces us to take sides, to desire, to envy, to rage and spite one another. Śāntideva understanding so clearly our most base contradictions that mark the mind that sees everything as dual, works to connect us through our shared wish to have happiness, to avoid pain and suffering by understanding our own, and others’ as well. But for Śāntideva, while his discussions are taking place in that present time, sharpens his focus on the idea of a future self, he asks the question:

If I give them no protection because their suffering does not afflict me, why do I protect my body against future suffering when it does not afflict me? (v. 97).

The idea expressed here is that one’s current situation is not affected by one’s future situation for that has yet, if at all, to come. Interestingly, this space that exists between the multitude of strangers is sort of like this space that divides one’s time here in the present with one’s future being. If we understand that Śāntideva believes that there is no enduring self which is stable then the “I” who am present now will be different from the “I” who experiences the future result. So, why should we be concerned with our future self and future events if this is the case? Śāntideva furthers the argument:

The notion ‘it is the same me even then’ is a false construction, since it is one person who dies, quite another who is born (v. 98).

It seems fair to say that Śāntideva does not mean that there is no association between our present and future self only that we will be different both physically and mentally, and our life’s conditions and factors will also be much different. What Śāntideva seeks here is to dispel the myth surrounding the concept of the person, the individual as a special entity, existing for their own gain amongst their circle of relations. Then, we must ask, if “I” the individual amongst the “others” does not endure nor even last as the exact same person from one moment to the next, then what if any impact could my actions have on others? As His Holiness the Dalai Lama (1999) commenting on Verse 98 writes:

Indirectly there is a connection between others' wellbeing and one's own wellbeing. If others suffer one also suffers as a result. Furthermore, individuals live in societies in relation with other beings and so if the collective society suffers then of course the individual members of that collection also suffer. From these points of view one realizes that in fact there is a relationship between one's own interests and others' interests so that caring for others' interests is also in the interest of individuals themselves (pg. 29).

Continuing with these ideas, how then if one accepts this as we must consider ourselves members of a collective, a community or larger society, can we also accept the worst elements within it. Those elements that constitute our enemies, for example. Śāntideva challenges this by attesting to the very fact that our own physical body is constructed in ways that may in a sense appear to be unrelated. In Verse 99 he writes, "a pain in the foot is not of the hand" but instinctually these unrelated parts will act to assist in a time of suffering, just as the hand will quickly work to soothe the pain that is felt in the foot. Therefore, others, even enemies, all sentient beings, feel pain and suffer and need help under difficult circumstances.

As Śāntideva has indicated, the attachment to this idea of self as unique, personal and enduring through time is the most difficult concept for persons to become free of. The view of self as the center of one's individual universe is made even more difficult when one considers the five components, or *skandhas*, which constitute our very personalities. Are these components not special, or unique to us, are they not components of the self- with the self at the center?

In exchanging self for others, Śāntideva goes to the root of the problem by addressing the very phenomena that constitute everything and our dependency upon all that exists. His example of an army, whereas one imagines a large group of soldiers that can only exist if a group of individual soldiers assemble in such a way. An army is not the same as a soldier but an army cannot exist without one, or many in this case. Therefore, the army as a construct is dependent upon each soldier and vice versa. Śāntideva says:

The continuum of consciousnesses, like a queue, and the combination of constituents, like an army, are not real. The person who experiences suffering does not exist. To whom will that suffering belong? (v. 101).

His Holiness the Dalai Lama also brings about two other examples (pg. 11), that of a Buddhist rosary and a forest. A Tibetan Buddhist rosary is made up of one hundred eight

individual beads and a string. A forest, of course, being made up of a great many individual trees. In each case, as the Dalai Lama details, a rosary and a forest are dependent upon a specific number of beads, a string, or a great many number of trees. As for a rosary, the Dalai Lama explains:

If one were to try to deconstruct the identity of a rosary, one will find a hundred and eight beads and a string. However, none of these beads by themselves individually can be said to constitute the rosary. So, it is only on the basis of the collection of the beads structured in a particular way that one can talk about a rosary. So, a rosary is not identical to the beads which are its constituents nor does the rosary exist independent of the beads that constitute the rosary (pg. 11).

The one hundred eight beads, like trees, or soldiers, are only constructs which together form a Buddhist rosary, a forest, and an army, respectively and therefore the self is also just a construct which is dependent upon a great many things, not least of which are the five components, or *skandhas*. I believe Śāntideva's point here is one that nothing is truly independent, having intrinsic nature, in other words, all matter in the universe is but dependent upon another for its nature to exist. Therefore, all things arise dependently which is to say that they are 'empty' of intrinsic nature.

In the following verses (102-104), Śāntideva speaks passionately about the possibility that one can bring an end to suffering as much as one can perpetuate happiness. I believe Śāntideva is making the point as the Buddha himself expressed, that the end of suffering is possible due to the premise that the cycle of suffering, as everything else, is always in a state of flux. If anything, the impermanence of everything gives rise to the opportunity for change. Furthermore, the dependent nature of all underlines the point that when this change (an end to suffering) is brought about, all shall receive its benefit.

This brings up a compelling question, "Who should be tasked with this effort?" Śāntideva as we know was not directing his message towards the masses, or even Buddhist laypersons. This task was only reserved for the most adept and courageous monks of his time. I do believe that Śāntideva did not mean that we are irrational or ignorant if we choose to value our life over those of others, but that we are, the greater human race, in need a redeemer figure, a bodhisattva. This does not mean though that we should not help those in need, or care for children as we care for our own, or to have our organs donated at the time of our death. It is only that Śāntideva is calling upon the faithful to pursue the Path which will

prepare them to engage in the ultimate exchange; to sacrifice themselves for the salvation of all others. He assures his audience that these persons will become “oceans of sympathetic joy when living beings are released” (v. 108). And by “acting for the good of others, there is neither intoxication nor dismay, nor desire for the resulting reward, with a thirst solely for well-being of others” (v. 109). In verse 105, Śāntideva lays out a very important principle, he says:

If the suffering of one ends the suffering of many, then one who has compassion for others and himself must cause that suffering to arise.

3. Becoming a Buddha in One's Very Own Body

Following the introduction of Confucianism in the 4th century CE, Buddhism was first brought to Japan in the middle 6th century. According to Hori (1967), “Confucianism and Buddhist universalism and rationalism had a great influence on the spiritual attitude of Prince Shōtoku (574-622) and his adherents” (pg. 204). The Lotus Sūtra (Sanskrit *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*) was the Buddhist text that Prince Shōtoku admired greatly for its well-spring of altruistic spiritual messages of kindness and fairness towards every living being. The Buddhist scriptures also described, as in Chapter 20, the previous life of the Historical Buddha as a bodhisattva (snkt. *Sadāparibhūta*), and in Chapter 25, the bodhisattva Kannon (snkt. *Avolokiteśvara*) and his 33 manifestations of compassionate being. As Hori comments, “The Lotus Sūtra’s promise of salvation for all mankind was in sharp contrast

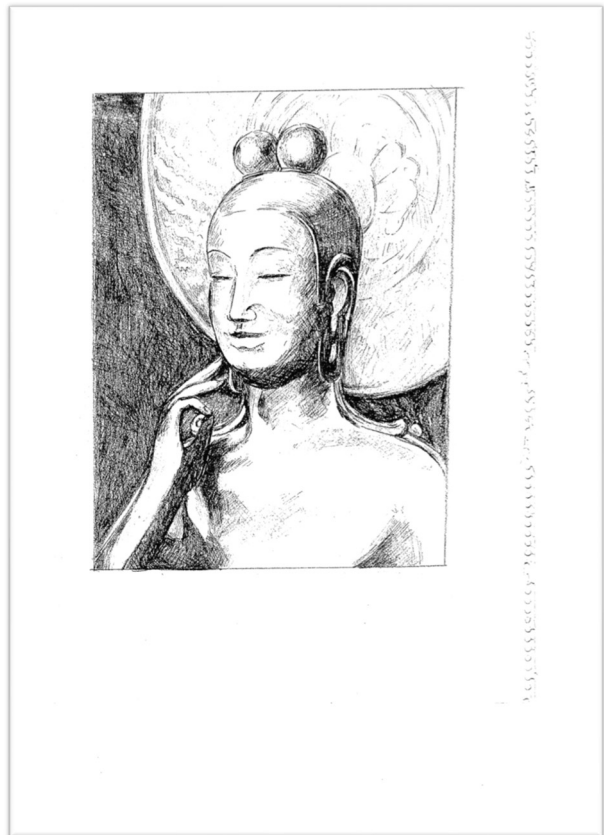


Figure 1: Miroku Bosatsu (弥勒菩薩), Asuka period 7th CE, Chūgūji. Sketch by Watari Kaori.

with pre-Buddhistic religious conceptions in Japan” (pg. 205).

In the early 9th century, the two great masters of Japanese Buddhism, Saichō and Kūkai, had developed their individual Buddhist sects, Tendai (centered at Mt. Hiei) and Shingon (centered at Mt. Koya) respectively, finding a great variety of commingling between Buddhism and that of Japanese folk religion, or Shinto (Japanese *honji suijaku*). While the Tendai school favored the belief in the teachings of the Lotus Sūtra, Kūkai’s Shingon sect drew direct inspiration from the Great Sun Buddha 大日如来 (jpn. *Dainichi-Nyorai*). Ultimately, both the Tendai and Shingon sects held to the ideal that with one’s passing in this world the spirit after death must be entrusted to a most merciful power. For Saichō and the Tendai faithful, this power rests in the hand of Amida Buddha 阿弥陀如来 (jpn. *Amida Nyorai*). As for Kūkai and the Shingon faithful, it is with the Future Buddha 弥勒菩薩 (jpn. *Miroku Bosatsu*, snkt., *Maitreya*).

What is of most interest is the belief in the theory described as “becoming a Buddha in one’s own body” or in Japanese as *sokushin-jōbutsu*. Whereas the practitioner who has attained this ultimate reality, the term *sokushin-butsu*, or “one who has become a Buddha in one’s own body” is applied. First to describe this theory of *sokushin-jōbutsu* in Japan was Kūkai, who had studied Esoteric Buddhism (snkt. *Vajrayana*) in China at Ch’ang-an (Xian) under the guidance of Master Hui-kuo (746-805). By the late 9th century the Tendai sect had fully incorporated this belief system as had the Nichiren sect in the 13th century. What Kūkai’s theory stressed is that once one attains Buddhahood in this very life, in this very body, then upon death one is either reborn in Tsuita Heaven where the Future Buddha resides, or remains here on Earth until the coming of the Future Buddha to this world some 5,670,000,000 years from the passing of the Historical Buddha (Buddha Śākyamuni). It is just this ladder principal which compelled Japanese Buddhist monks to self-mummify awaiting the return of the Future Buddha, as a Buddha in the flesh.

4. Mummified Monk, Myo-Shin-Jo-Nin at Yokokuraji Temple.

In total, twenty-one monks self-mummified spanning a time frame from the first in the Kamakura era (1192-1333 CE) by the Buddhist monk Rinke (淋賢) at Kongōbuji Temple atop Mt. Koya to the final account in 1903 in Northern Niigata prefecture. Of these twenty-one, sixteen self-mummified in the full-lotus seated position. During my visit with Head Monk Dr. Sakamoto of Yokokuraji Temple located in Ibigawa town, Gifu prefecture,

I learned about the local boy who became a Buddhist monk and at the age of 36 in the year 1817 self-mummified (Personal Communication, Head Monk Dr. Sakamoto, Dec. 17th, 2018). The boy was born into a large farming family in 1781 and had several brothers and sisters. His family would often assist with work at the temple and when he was around eight, the children lost both their parents. Unable to care for themselves, the temple helped take care of the children eventually the boy joined the temple as a young novice monk (See Figure 2). His learning grew rapidly as he made long and often challenging pilgrimages to sites such as the *Saikoku Sanjūsansho* 西国三十三所 which is the circuit of 33 sacred sites connected with the worship of the Kannon Bodhisattva (See Figure 3).



Figure 2: The boy enters Yokokuraji Temple.



Figure 3: Visits sacred sites of Kannon Bodhisattva.

By the age of fifteen the novice monk traveled to Nagano to study at Zenkoji Temple. And by the time he was twenty he was already practicing mountain asceticism at Mt. Mishotai located in Yamanashi prefecture not far from Mount Fuji. His daily life consisted of maintaining a strict routine of seclusion, prayers, intermittent fasting and the occasional meal of just buckwheat flour. He never cooked with fire, ate his buckwheat flour cold, and drank nothing but water. Eventually, he would subsist on grass and consume the resin from trees to remove all impurities from his body. Steadfast in his belief that to remain here in the flesh

awaiting the advent of the Future Buddha, for the next sixteen years the young monk prepared himself for self-mummification (See Figure 4). Sensing that death was near, the young monk with help from adherents was sealed inside a wooden box while in full lotus and placed underground in a small stone chamber. With just a bamboo reed to provide what little oxygen it could, the monk chanted and rang his bell until at one point it stopped- the monk now passed. The stone chamber was sealed and covered over with earth. Three years and three months from the date of his death the body was exhumed. The monk, Myo-Shin-Jo-Nin, had self-mummified in perfect full lotus seated position, hands clasped in prayer, mouth open in full chant (see figure



Figure 4: Myo-Shin-Jo-Nin meditating in cave at Mt. Mishotai. Artwork (#2,3,4) by Fujita Mirai.

5). For some years after, he would be venerated at the local temple near to Mt. Mishotai as a Buddha in the flesh. It wasn't until 1890, that Myo-Shin-Jo-Nin was finally returned to his home and his home temple, Yokokuraji, where he has been venerated by generations of believers.

As Dr. Sakamoto described to me, the theory and practice of self-mummification was never purely a Japanese Buddhist concept, as it had been practiced in Tibet and in China from very early times. However, when Kūkai was laid to rest in 835 and upon opening his grave some years after, his body had miraculously mummified itself, not only was a legend thus born but an entire religious movement- that of becoming a Buddha in one's very own body. And when the young monk Myo-Shin-Jo-Nin self-mummified at 36 years he was the youngest monk to have done so, a fact that remains to this day.

As Śāntideva writes in verse 107, and as the example of the monk Myo-Shin-Jo-Nin testifies, the exchange of self for others is the beginning of the end, where compassion and service for humanity supplants selfishness and where comfort is rendered meaningless:

Those who have developed the continuum of their mind in this way, to whom the suffering of others is as important as the things they themselves hold dear, plunge down into the Avīci hell as geese into a cluster of lotus blossoms.

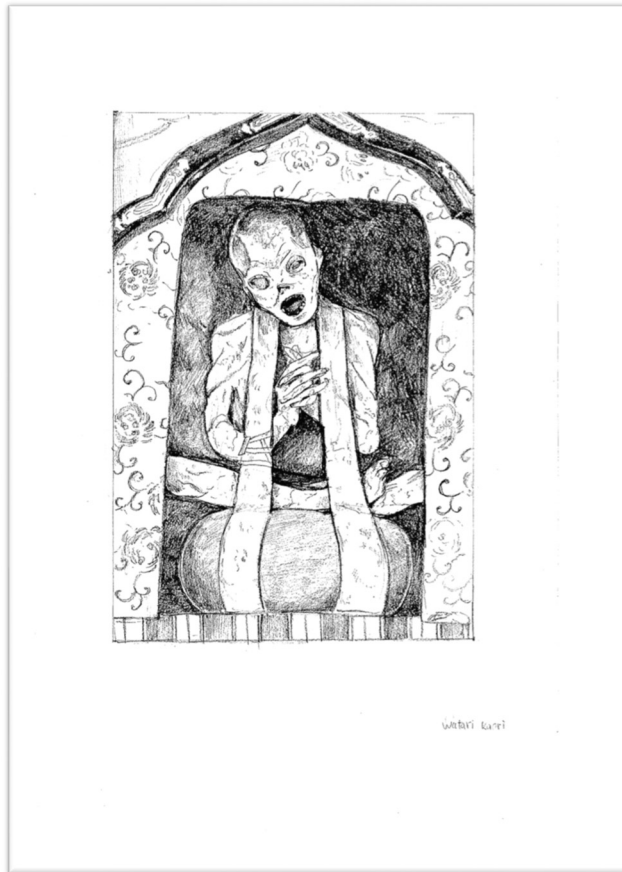


Figure 5: Mummified Monk, Myo-Shin-Jo-Nin at Yokokuraji Temple, Gifu. Sketch by Watari Kaori.

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