

# ***Sokushinbutsu: Esoteric Buddhism and the Ethics of Altruistic Suicide***

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He who practices this samadhi can immediately realize the enlightenment of the Buddha.

– *Vajraśekhara Sūtra*, T19.

## **1. Introduction**

From the twelfth to twentieth centuries, numerous ascetic Buddhist monks of Japan’s esoteric Shingon (真言) and closely related Shugendō (修験道) traditions attempted ritual self-mummification by engaging in lengthy periods of fasting followed by live interment in small underground crypts (Hori, 1962).<sup>1</sup> The small number that were successful are regarded as enlightened beings and enshrined at small temples, predominantly in Niigata and Yamagata prefectures, where their full body relics are known as *Sokushinbutsu* (即身仏). As these monks effectively committed an act of ritualized suicide, the practice raises a number of important ethical questions, relating to both to its admissibility within Buddhist ethics and to the wider issue of classifying acts of acceptable suicide or self-sacrifice.

In the first section of this paper, I argue that though suicide is a problematic issue in Buddhism due to its doctrinal condemnation, there is considerable ambiguity within the Buddhist canon and numerous practical precedents that clearly permit certain forms of suicide. In regard to the Mikkyō (密教; Japanese Esoteric Buddhism, literally: “secret teaching”) tradition to which Shingon and Shugendō belong, I conclude that the ascetic monks’ practice of ritual self-sacrifice is entirely compatible with—though not necessarily prescribed by—its philosophical precepts, in particular its strong underlying metaphysical holism and central ethical injunction to perform compassionate acts for the benefit of

sentient beings.

In the second section, I will consider the practice of ritual self-mummification and its accompanying ethical issues within the broader context of both secular and religious ethical norms of acceptable self-sacrifice. In this regard, discussion of a non-Western example is beneficial in drawing out some of the problematic issues surrounding the common application of the term suicide, as it is not influenced by Christianity's strict moral condemnation of suicide. With reference to prominent philosophical examples, I uphold the widely accepted view that intentionality is a key factor in appraising different acts as suicide or non-suicide, but argue that the issue of moral appraisal should not influence that of classification. That is to say, the term *suicide* is not reserved just for those cases that are morally condemned, allowing or excluding morally favorable acts to be redefined as something else. An act's status as suicide does not automatically condemn the agent; it is possible for suicide to be noble and honorable. I also contend that, despite the ostensibly macabre nature of the *Sokushinbutsu*, the ethical implications of ritualized self-mummification differ in no substantive way from other, broadly accepted instances of altruistic suicide.

## **2. Buddhism and Altruistic Suicide**

### **2.1 The influence of Kūkai and the Metaphysics of Mikkyō**

Before analyzing the specific ethical issues raised by the *Sokushinbutsu* it is necessary to first outline the motivation behind the act of self-mummification, and the relevant aspects of Japanese Esoteric Buddhist practice and doctrine, in particular the underlying metaphysical doctrines. The monks that successfully became mummies (Japanese: *miira* ミイラ) did so after up to nine years of fasting and stringent ascetic practices. The name *Sokushinbutsu* is used in recognition of their adherence to the teachings promulgated by the influential ninth century Priest Kūkai (空海, 779-835), posthumously known as Kōbō Daishi (弘法大師). In particular, the monks followed Kūkai's esoteric doctrine of

*Sokushin-jōbutsu* (即身成佛), the claim that enlightenment can be attained “in this very existence”. In emulation of Kūkai, the self-mummifying monks undertook austerities and ritual practices to achieve magico-religious powers which could be used to alleviate suffering in their communities. Though self-mummification was never explicitly advocated, and there are no records of how or why the practice arose, the practice has undoubtedly derived from a combination of the doctrines established by Kūkai and from the legends that developed in the centuries following his passing: it is believed that the famous priest achieved enlightenment in his body upon his passing and that his remains mummified. Having forsworn entrance into nirvana, Kūkai remains alive on a supreme plane of meditation, from where he continues to perform compassionate, benevolent acts towards others (Hori 1962, 227; Shiba 1978, 287).

The practice is thus deeply rooted in the practice of Esoteric Buddhism. Mikkyō was first disseminated in Japan by Kūkai through his Shingon (literally: “true word”) school after he had studied the doctrines of T’ien-T’ai in China (804-6) under the guidance of Hui-Kuo (746-805), the seventh patriarch of the East Asian Mantrayāna tradition. The tradition’s critical difference from traditional Mahāyāna doctrine lies in the explicit identification of the cosmic Buddha Mahāvairocana (Jpn: Dainichi-nyorai 大日如来) of the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* (Jpn: *Dainichikyō* 大日經) as the Dharmakāya (Jpn: *hosshin seppō* 発身説法). Previously, the term Dharmakāya had referred to the ultimate nature/reality from which Buddhas and all phenomena arose, and was not directly associated with any named Buddha. The connection is however made explicit by Kūkai in his introduction to the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*. “Mahāvairocana is the One whose own nature is the Dharmakāya, that is, the Body of Principle, which is intrinsic and original enlightenment” (Hakeda 1972, 86).<sup>2</sup> In this radical reinterpretation the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni, is but one temporal incarnation of the Mahāvairocana, the cosmic truth that the Buddha grasped at the time of his enlightenment.

The identification of Buddha Mahāvairocana as the Dharmakāya underpins Kūkai’s metaphysics. Dharmakāya is no longer abstract and impersonal. “He is,” Kūkai writes, “analogous to great space; he is eternal, being unobstructed, and embraces in himself all phenomena” (Hakeda 1972, 226). The intrinsic element of enlightenment is present in all sentient beings; it is a potentiality that lies dormant and, Kūkai teaches, is accessible immediately through esoteric practice. The ritualistic focus of Esoteric Buddhism is superior to—though nonetheless complimentary with—the textual focus of Exoteric (Theravada and Mahāyāna) Buddhism, and through the practice of esoteric ritual one can attain enlightenment quickly and directly.

This non-dualistic finding led Kūkai to formulating his most important doctrine (in relation to the *Sokushinbutsu*), that of *Sokushin-jōbutsu*, which can be understood as becoming Buddha in this very body or “attaining enlightenment in this very existence” (Hakeda 1972, 225). In contrast to the standard exoteric teaching that enlightenment is a gradual process achieved over numerous aeons, Kūkai posits that recognizing one’s originally enlightened nature enables immediate realization of “undifferentiated oneness” with the Dharmakāya. It is furthermore something that all humans are intrinsically capable of achieving, not merely a distinct religious class. As all material (and non-material) phenomena are emanations of the cosmic Buddha, teachings of the Dharma, there is no absolute difference between mind and body—both are equally emanations of the Mahāvairocana, part of the cosmic Body of Law. There is therefore no need to escape one’s body to achieve enlightenment.<sup>3</sup>

## **2.2 Buddhism, Mikkyō, and the Ethics of Ritual Self-Mummification**

Given this grounding in metaphysical holism and the promise of immediate embodied enlightenment, the specific religious goals of the self-mummifying Shingon and Shugendō monks can be better understood. Nonetheless, the ascetic practices of these monks and their aim to auto-mummify are difficult to reconcile with traditional Buddhist ethics, which is critical of self-annihilation type mystical

practices. The historical Buddha was strongly opposed to both ascetic practice and suicide,<sup>4</sup> an injunction carried into monastic regulations. Other Buddhist sources are far more ambiguous, often making allow allowances for altruistic suicides, suicides lamenting loss, and suicide as a religious offering. The Mahāyāna edition of the *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra*, for example, contains an unambiguous sanctioning of suicide as achievement, and the *Lotus Sūtra* champions the religious value of self-mutilation and suicide. Jākata and Avadāna literature commonly contains incidents of altruistic suicide, such as the story of the “Hungry Tigress Jākata,” popular in early Japan, in which a young bodhisattva offers herself as sustenance to a starving tigress.

With Kūkai’s radical re-envisioning of fundamental Buddhist concepts, particularly the doctrine of embodied enlightenment, traditional ambiguities are further amplified. Kūkai’s Mikkyō doctrines are characterized by their all-pervasive holistic view towards nature and the cosmos, which creates a unique standpoint in regard to the issue of self-destruction. According to his 817 treatise *Sokushinjōbutsu gi* (即身成佛義; *Attaining Enlightenment in This Very Existence*), the realization of enlightenment dispels the illusory phenomenal world, revealing the cosmic truth of Dharmakāya. The concepts of self or ego are similarly dispelled by the realization of the cosmic *samādhi* expressed by our bodies and minds (Krummel 2006). Though the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* (no-self) in general can be said to promote a reductionist view of the self, the lack of intermediary stages on the path to enlightenment and emphasis on metaphysical holism make this aspect far more pronounced in Mikkyō doctrine. In this context, the application of the term suicide (or even death) is problematic, for the self-mummifying monk is merely liberated from a delusory form of existence. Kūkai and the *Sokushinbutsu* are considered not to have died but to have escaped the cycle of rebirth and entered perpetual *samādhi* (Hori 1962, 227; Shiba 1978, 287). Death is a concern only for the unenlightened.

These doctrinal features are further influenced by wider Japanese religious and socio-cultural attitudes

toward suicide. Japanese Buddhist sects are often self-contained orthodoxies that can be regarded as independent religious traditions. Kūkai's Shingon school is, like all foreign cultural and religious appropriations in Japan, a uniquely Japanized form of its original sources (in this case Mahāyāna/Mantrayāna Buddhist thought), one whose doctrines create the possibility of permitting actions that may be questionable or even inadmissible in traditional Buddhist thought.<sup>5</sup> Like most Japanese religious practices, it is highly syncretic, with Shintō *kami* regarded as manifestations of Buddhas and bodhisattvas; more prominently, the cosmic Buddha Mahāvairocana is directly equated with the Japanese Goddess Amaterasu (天照). With Shugendō (mountain asceticism) practitioners the situation is further complicated, as Shingon doctrines are blended to an even greater degree with Shintō, Ying Yang, Taoism, and other non-Buddhist native shamanistic and animistic beliefs. Any evaluation of the practice of ritual self-mummification must therefore take these traditions into account as well as Japanese cultural and religious norms regarding suicide, which has a lengthy history of being regarded as justified and honorable in many circumstances. Pure Land Buddhism, for instance, contains a number of historical cases of suicide aimed at hastening rebirth in the Pure Land (Blum 2008). Given these factors, the philosophical doctrines of Buddhism, and the endorsement of altruistic suicide in numerous Buddhist texts, the practice of ritual self-mummification can be viewed as acceptable within a wider Buddhist tradition that habitually makes room for the acceptance and non-condemnation of suicide.

### **2.3 The Compassionate Ethics of Mikkyō**

Within this matrix of their religious and socio-cultural practices, assessing the actions of the self-mummifying monks is now straightforward. The ethical focus of Shingon and Shugendō's Mikkyō principles centers on the performance of compassionate acts performed for the benefit of sentient beings; Buddhahood can be defined as a capacity for compassionate acts. Kūkai describes it in *Sokushin-jōbutsu gi* by pointedly employing the central "sun-Buddha" metaphor of the *Mahāvairocana*

*Sūtra*, writing of “The compassion of the Buddha pouring forth on the heart of sentient beings, like rays of the sun on water” (Hakeda 1972, 232). Accordingly, the temples that host extant *Sokushinbutsu* place considerable emphasis on the fact that the monks underwent ascetic practices with the goal of achieving magico-religious powers to be used for the benefit of their communities.<sup>6</sup> To this end, many of the extant *Sokushinbutsu* in Yamagata prefecture (where the strongly Shingon-affiliated Yudono sect of the Shugendō school is based) lack one eye. The monks removed their eyes, an act separate and prior to that of mummification, as part of a ritualistic attempt to counteract an eye disease that was widespread in the area during the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries (Hori 1962).<sup>7</sup>

The removal of eyes further confirms that the monks activities were compassionate, community-focused, and non-self-regarding. The practice of ritual self-mummification is clearly an altruistic act performed for the good of the wider community. The self-mummifying monks intention was to emulate the feat they believed Kūkai had performed, and likewise achieve a magico-religious enlightened state from which to perform benevolent acts, in accordance with the ethical principles of Mikkyō (and Buddhism in general). Though the act of ritual self-mummification is in no way *prescribed* by Mikkyō doctrines, it is nonetheless a compatible, if somewhat elastic, interpretation of those doctrines. Furthermore, Mikkyō’s uniquely Japanese character and doctrines mean the practice circumvents many of the issues that make it problematic within a more traditional Buddhist ethical framework.

### **3. Non-Buddhist Perspectives on Altruistic Suicide**

#### **3.1 The Problem of Suicide and Altruistic Self-Sacrifice**

In appraising the ethical aspects of Japanese aesthetic monks I have placed considerable importance on the status of their actions as a compassionate, fundamentally altruistic act. This point is particularly salient when we regard the topic from a non-Buddhist perspective. In Western philosophical discourse, suicide has proven to be a difficult topic, owing to two considerations: firstly, the topic is often colored

by strong negative stigma; secondly, it is characterized by considerable conceptual slipperiness that results in difficulty providing a simple definition. The first issue, that of the strong negative stigma in Western culture, can be largely attributed to the strict Christian injunction against self-murder. It remains a key influence on discussions of the topic, and is frequently cited as a major consideration in discussing suicide (Margolis 1975; Stern-Gillet 1990; Cholbi 2008). Literature on the topic frequently notes that pre-Christian societies—examples include Roman, Greek, Stoic, and Epicurean traditions—often regarded suicide entirely differently, as do many non-Christian societies, such as the Inuits and Japanese (Alvarez 1973). As one philosopher has noted, “[Western society] is still in some sense a Christian society and [...] the concept of suicide has, therefore, retained a derogatory connotation.” (Stern-Gillet 1990, 97)

For these reasons, *suicide* is often regarded as synonymous with *wrongful self-killing*, containing an implicit negative moral judgment of the agent. To label a death suicide is, generally speaking, to instantly and irrevocably condemn the agent. This situation has contributed substantially to the second issue, that of the topic’s conceptual and definitional problems (see Tolhurst 1980; Cholbi 2008). The desire to avoid negative judgments has resulted in numerous acts of self-killing or self-sacrifice being classified as acts other than suicide. For example, the death of Jesus is traditionally not thought of as suicide, though he clearly intends to sacrifice his life and goes willingly to a death entirely within his powers to avoid.<sup>8</sup> The death of Socrates is similarly seldom regarded as suicide, even though he voluntarily drank the hemlock which killed him and the option of exile was present, argued for, and, in all likelihood, expected. Numerous other paradigm secular and religious cases are similarly assessed: religious and political martyrs who choose death for their cause, the soldier who throws himself on a grenade to save his companions, and the individual who gives up a space on an overcrowded lifeboat and in doing so knowingly dooms himself.

One particularly famous case that highlights the difficulties of such definitions is that of Captain Oates, a member of Robert Scott's 1911-12 South Pole expedition. On the return journey the group faced extremely adverse weather conditions. Oates, injured and gravely ill, was slowing progress down considerably, thus seriously endangering his companions. In order to give his companions a greater chance of survival, Oates departed camp one morning and walked into a blizzard, to his death. The philosophically problematic issue with Oates' death has been the question of how to define his actions in a way that acknowledges the bravery and altruistic nature of his sacrifice, whilst avoiding the negative connotations of suicide. The inclination to avoid condemning Oates is such that one philosopher, R.F. Holland, completely denied the causal link between Oates' actions and his death, claiming that Oates didn't kill himself, "the blizzard killed him." (Holland 1980, 151)

### **3.2 Instrumentality and Classification**

A more promising attempt to circumvent this problem is presented by Joseph Margolis, who argues that the suicide's main goal is to end his own life. By contrast, "if the agent is presumed rational, then if he takes his own life or allows it to be taken for some further purpose that he serves instrumentally, then we normally refuse to say he has suicided." (Margolis 1975, 28) In addition to discussing Oates, Margolis gives as examples numerous non-Western cases, including the 1963 self-immolation of the Vietnamese Mahāyāna Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức,<sup>9</sup> and elderly Intuits who depart their tribes with inadequate provisions of food when no longer able to contribute productively to their community. In all these cases, the existence of instrumental reason precludes them from being classified as suicide.

Margolis' highlighting of the role of instrumentality is important, for it appears establish to grounds for the distinction being made between suicide and non-suicidal acts in cases such as those of Socrates and Oates. However, as Robert Martin (1980) notes, reference to the mere presence of instrumental reason is insufficient, it is necessary to consider the specific *focus* and *content* of that instrumentality. For

example, the teen who commits suicide in order to make a statement to peers she feels have shunned or persecuted her does so for instrumental reasons. Yet this case, most people would agree, is clearly suicide, not acceptable self-sacrifice. Furthermore, it is difficult to identify a self-killing that doesn't serve an instrumental purpose. Individuals rarely, if ever, intend death as an end itself, but rather regard it as a means to achieve some other (instrumental) end—escape from physical, emotional or psychological suffering, avoidance of punishment or shame etc. Thus, noting the presence of instrumental reason alone is inadequate, it is necessary to make a moral evaluation of that instrumentality. In doing so, we can distinguish between self-killings that primarily selfish in nature, and thus *generally* judged immoral,<sup>10</sup> and those that serve some altruistic or noble end, and are normally judged morally good, or at least morally permissible.

Reference to instrumentality is clearly important to defining acts as suicide or non-suicide and the subsequent moral evaluation of different suicidal acts, but it is less certain whether this moral evaluation should inform the issue of classification. That is to say, we can question the frequently accepted conclusion that acts serving an altruistic or noble end are something other than suicide.

Michael Cholbi has referred to this type of project as an attempt “define away” the various examples of altruistic or “justified” self-killings as something other than suicide, and suggests identifying a defensible non-normative conception of suicide before discussing the moral merits of various acts of suicide (Cholbi 2008; see also Kupfer 1990). Attempts to “define away” self-killings often explicitly acknowledge that the primary reason for this action are the negative connotations of suicide in Western culture. Margolis, for example, notes that with cross-cultural cases such as the elderly Inuits we “refuse to label an act suicide” in order to avoid “condemning it in accord to our own values” (Margolis 1974, 25). R.G. Frey, interestingly, represents the other side of this argument. He labels Socrates a suicide because he wishes to morally condemn him (Frey 1978).

Unfortunately, these moves have only contributed to the conceptual confusion that surrounds the classification issue, drawing the definition of suicide further away from its most bare bones or folk formulation—the intentional taking of one’s own life. In doing so, they have allowed various seemingly clear acts of suicide to be defined as something else. Captain Oates, for example, deliberately and knowingly went to his death, no matter how commendable his ultimate motivation. Any attempt to circumvent the most pragmatic classification for his actions is little more than special pleading. Rather than formulate exceptions for cases we wish to excuse, the solution may lie in confronting and questioning the all-encompassing negative stigma of suicide.<sup>11</sup> Yet given the strength of the Western suicide taboo as a universalized and absolute moral norm, the thought of de-stigmatizing any form of suicide may seem difficult to achieve.

There is, nonetheless, an already existent and increasingly prominent example. Within the euthanasia debate, the terms “assisted suicide” or “physician-assisted suicide” are widely used within philosophical discussions and legislation (to refer to cases where the individual is provided with the means to end their life). In these, the negative moral stigma of the term suicide is largely overcome, in that it is becoming increasingly accepted that this form of suicide is morally permissible. The relevance of this development should not be understated: the contemporary euthanasia debate establishes the precedent of a suitably qualified, morally non-judgmental use of the term suicide, and opens the possibility that the traditional negative connotations may, in time, be overcome.

I therefore conclude that, contra Margolis, Martin and others, to label an act suicide is not to automatically condemn it. On the contrary, that we can acknowledge that the term suicide encapsulates a variety of morally variegated types of self-killing, and that there are cases of suicide that are justified, moral, and noble. The preceding discussion highlights the problem of letting the moral appraisal of self-killings influence their classification, further obscuring an already complicated issue. While we

may at times employ the more euphemistic terms *self-sacrifice* or *self killing* these nonetheless refer to a *form* of suicide, not a separate class of act. With this point in mind, I wish to uphold a more straightforward definition of suicide:

An act is suicide if the agent believes that their actions (or related consequence) will result in death (or is at least highly likely), and intends to die by engaging in said action(s).

This definition in no way precludes the acknowledgement of altruistically motivated suicides and other forms of morally non-condemned suicides.

#### **4. Final Notes on Ritual Self-Mummification**

The preceding discussion allows us to look at the issue of ritual self-mummification clearer. The practice, which may strike some as exotic, macabre and abstruse, is clearly parallel to cases such as those of Socrates and Captain Oates, which also served altruistic goals. The phenomenon also draws attention to how traditional Western/Christian ethical norms have skewed this issue. In regard to the *Sokushinbutsu*, it is indeed strange to feel obliged to define Japanese self-mummifying monks as something other than suicide in order to satisfy external cultural norms and uphold the inherent altruism of their actions. It is doubly unusual when we note the existence in Japan of traditionally honorable yet undoubtedly suicidal acts such as *seppuku*, and the extensive instances of favorably presented acts of suicide (of the self-sacrifice/altruistic variety) in its literary and popular cultures.

The unique nature of this topic however leaves a final, and possibly overriding, consideration with the issue of *Sokushinbutsu* and suicide. All definitions of suicide (including the one given here) stress the agent's *intention* to take his life as a necessary condition (primarily to differentiate examples of suicide from those of accidental death). Generally speaking, the stronger the intention to die, the greater the

moral condemnation. In the case of altruistic suicides, death is only moderately or weakly intended—the primary (strong) intention is the altruistic good.<sup>12</sup> *Sokushinbutsu* deaths are weakly intended, at best. Given their beliefs, we can question the attribution of even weak intentionality. The intention of self-mummifying monks is not to end their life—which is viewed as illusory—but to gain release from the cycle of rebirth and achieve unity with the Dharmakāya. In contrast to the eschatologies of Christianity and Islam, for example, which do not completely negate the importance or status of terrestrial existence, Buddhist metaphysics positively denies any concept of the self as a substantial entity. Classifying the self-mummifying monks as suicides may well be unsupportable; it is logically akin to prosecuting an individual for attempting to steal the emperor's new clothes. It may, however, be another way to display the conceptual slipperiness of the term suicide and difficulty forming a universally applicable definition.<sup>13</sup> It is certainly a case where the usually efficacious focus on intentionality raises unique problems.

Clearly, the practice of ritual self-mummification escapes all negative connotations of the term suicide. We can see it as either a clear case of altruistic suicide (euphemistically referred to as altruistic self-sacrifice) or we can argue that Buddhist metaphysics preclude it from even qualifying as suicide (or, for that matter, death). Whatever the case, it is clearly possible to question some of the base assumptions about the uses of the term suicide. Rather than restricting the use of the term to those acts we wish to condemn, it can be used for a number of acts, ranging from fundamentally selfish to undeniably altruistic.

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- <sup>1</sup> Throughout this article the term Shugendō is used specifically to refer to the Yudono sect of Shugendō, which in the seventeenth century placed itself under the authority of the Shingon school (Hori 1962, 232-33). All reference to the philosophical doctrines of Shingon in this paper can therefore also be assumed to be held by Shugendō practitioners.
- <sup>2</sup> All quotes from Kūkai’s work are taken from Hakeda’s translations in *Kūkai: Major Works*.
- <sup>3</sup> Kūkai describes the relationship of mind and matter in the work *Sokushin-jōbutsu gi*: “The four great elements are not independent of the mind. Differences exist between matter and mind, but in their essential nature they remain the same. Matter is no other than mind; mind, no other than matter. Without any obstruction, they are interrelated. The subject is the object; the object, the subject.” (Hakeda 1972, 229). For a more detailed overview of Kūkai’s thought, see Hakeda and Krummel (2006).
- <sup>4</sup> In his case against the Jains, Śākyamuni argued that austerities that enfeeble the mind or body are to be condemned. Hardships should not be seen as an end in themselves, but merely contingencies to be withstood, not actively pursued. Suicide is similarly eschewed on numerous grounds: it is deemed a false escape from the trials of life, and thus a failure to understand and acknowledge the law of karma (it in fact generates negative karma). It further contravenes Buddhist doctrines as it indicates a craving for non-existence/annihilation and an impatience to achieve nirvana, and in its desire to annihilate the self paradoxically displays a strong concern for the self.
- <sup>5</sup> Grapard (2000) notes a number of Shingon practices that are difficult to reconcile with traditional Buddhist ethics, including justifications of the killing of sentient beings (fishing and hunting). At Kongōbuji (the temple on Mt. Kōya where Kūkai’s remains rest) the names of tax defaulters and temple opponents were recorded and targeted with “divine punishment”. This practice was justified ethically by claiming the destruction of the enemies’ afflictions helped lead them to enlightenment.
- <sup>6</sup> The compassionate nature and altruistic motivation of the monks’ sacrifice is stressed in literature available at Kaikōji Temple in Sakata, Yamagata, where the remains of the monks Chūkai (忠海; d.1780) and Enmyōkai (円明海; d.1829) are enshrined. It was further stressed in private discussions the author held in March 2007 with staff at both Dainichibō and Chūrenji Temples in Asahi, Yamagata, where the respective remains of Shinnyōkai (真如海; d.1783) and Tetsumonkai (鉄門海; d.1829) are enshrined. The suffix *-kai* (海) in the majority of the monks’ post-mummification names reflects their reverence for Kūkai (空海).
- <sup>7</sup> At Honmyōji temple in Asahi, Yamagata, the remains of the monk Honmyōkai still receive submissions from people suffering from eye ailments.
- <sup>8</sup> As the story is related in Christian scripture, Jesus willingly and knowingly accepts his death. When the Roman soldiers come to arrest him, Jesus orders his disciples to put away their swords, asking them: “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?” (Matthew 26:53-54) For a discussion of the issue of Jesus and suicide, see Stern-Gillet (1990).
- <sup>9</sup> Margolis argues that the classification of Thích Quảng Đức’s self-immolation centers on what we accept as the primary motivation of the monk; whether it was primarily an act of protest-suicide and therefore suicide, or if it was primarily an attempt to influence his country’s political situation (which it ultimately did) and is therefore not suicide (Margolis 1974, 27).
- <sup>10</sup> I say *generally* judged immoral as there are exceptions. In the case of “physician-assisted suicide,” for example, the motivation of the agent may well be “selfish” and in no way altruistic—a desire to avoid great suffering—but is far less

likely to be morally condemned.

- <sup>11</sup> Jerome Motto has suggested that the topic must be subjected to a thoroughgoing reappraisal, arguing that “just as with past taboos—TB, cancer, sex (especially homosexual), drug addiction, abortion—it will gradually lose the emotional charge of the forbidden.” (Motto, 217-18) Motto, it must be acknowledged, is arguing for the right to rational suicide, which most philosophers acknowledge is a rare circumstance.
- <sup>12</sup> The distinction between strongly and weakly intended self-killings has also been used by William Tolhurst to define acts as suicide or non-suicide (Tolhurst 1983). This position is parallel to the Margolis/Martin strategy and represents another form of the attempt to “define away” self-killings we don’t wish to morally condemn, and is therefore subject to the same critique. Whatever the motivation, the agent knowingly and intentionally commits acts which result in her physical death.
- <sup>13</sup> In response to problems of this sort, it has been suggested that suicide may need to be viewed as a form of Wittgensteinian family resemblance (Windt 1981).