

**Breaking Rules to Be Compassionate: The ‘Skillful Means’ of Buddhist Relief  
after the Wenchuan Earthquake Disaster**

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*In the aftermath of the 2008 Great Wenchuan Earthquake, China, the ancient Buddhist Luohan Monastery became an important locus for disaster relief services. This included becoming a temporary maternity ward as the nearby hospital was badly damaged. This paper examines the monastery’s relief efforts as a case of socially engaged Buddhism. It pays particular attention to the ways in which the head monk of the monastery, Shi Suquan, negotiated tensions between responding to the desperate needs of nearby residents and long-standing religious rules and taboos which, on the surface at least, stood in opposition to certain forms of relief practices. The paper argues that he used Buddhist doctrines, particularly the Mahāyāna concept of ‘skillful means,’ to renegotiate the taboos by privileging the ethical imperative of compassionate action.*

**Key Words:** Wenchuan/Sichuan Earthquake, Disaster relief, Skillful means, Compassion, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Luohan Monastery.

### **Introduction**

On May 28, 2012, one hundred and eight babies celebrated their fourth birthday at the Luohan Monastery (罗汉寺) in Sichuan province, China.<sup>1</sup> The choice of this venue for the celebration was because the monastery was, quite literally, their place of birth. The babies had been delivered on the Buddhist monastery’s grounds during the aftermath of the 2008 Great Wenchuan Earthquake (also known as the Sichuan Earthquake), when the monastery was, as part of its wider engagement in disaster relief, temporarily transformed into a maternity ward because the local hospital had been badly damaged by the earthquake. The most devastating earthquake in China in more than three decades, the Great Wenchuan (汶川) Earthquake struck in the middle of the afternoon on May 12, 2008. The catastrophe resulted in 69,227 casualties,

374,643 injured, and 17,923 missing. Damage to buildings, including hospitals and schools, and infrastructure was extensive.<sup>2</sup> This paper explores the relief work of the Luohan Monastery as a case study of religious actors involved in disaster relief.

The Luohan Monastery (Figure 1) is a large and ancient Buddhist temple compound located in the north of Shifang (什邡) City, not far from the earthquake's epicenter, Wenchuan. The monastery is over 1,400 years old, and is particularly famous for its association with two of the greatest Chinese Buddhist masters: the great meditation master Daoyi (道一, also known as Patriarch Ma, 709–788 CE) of the Tang dynasty (Wang 2005), and a leading revolutionary monk of early 20<sup>th</sup> century China, Taixu (太虛, 1890–1947 CE). Master Daoyi was ordained in the Luohan monastery. After being appointed its abbot he initiated a number of long-lasting Chinese monastic traditions that continue through to this day. He also founded an important meditation school, the School of Chan (禪宗), which later spread to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam where it became known as Son, Zen, and Thiền schools, respectively. Similarly, Master Taixu was also an abbot of Luohan monastery. An advocate of modernizing, engaged Buddhism, he was also known to have revolutionary sympathies. In 1943 Taixu sent fifty-two monks to join the army to fight the Japanese in India (Birnbaum 2003; Sangye 2011, p. 40; Shi 2008d).<sup>3</sup> Both famous abbots, as well as the legacy of over a millennium of continuous monastic practice, have established Luohan as a site of particular importance for Buddhism in China.

The current abbot of the monastery is a middle-aged monk by the name of Shi Suquan (释素全). He took over the responsibility of managing the monastery before the earthquake struck the region, but was not conferred the abbotship of the temple until September 2009. Born in the late 1960s in Chengdu (the capital of Sichuan), Suquan earned a degree in technology from a prestigious national university. After graduation he worked in Chengdu as a district official in the provincial government of Sichuan for three years. When the Wenchuan Earthquake struck in 2008, Suquan had only been in charge of the monastery for one and a half years. This first period of his leadership had been focused on refurbishing and rebuilding the temple from the lasting damage that it had suffered during the Cultural Revolution (Shi 2009b). Unlike many of his peers, Suquan had no formal training in a Buddhist college. His knowledge of Buddhism seems to have been gained largely through association with his master, as well as through independent reading.



**Figure 1. The Main Prayer Hall of the Luohan Monastery. Courtesy of ifeng.com**

Shi Suquan is a central actor in how Luohan monastery came to be actively involved in disaster relief following the Wenchuan Earthquake. What makes this involvement remarkable is that it took place in the face of long-standing traditions that inhibited certain kinds of disaster response, including particularly taboos which prohibited women from visiting sacred places when they are in labor. In order for the monastery to come to play its eventual role as a temporary emergency maternity ward this monastic rule had to be renegotiated and come to be understood as non-binding, or at least as subservient to other ethical imperatives.

I argue that Suquan was able to do so by interpreting and deploying the Buddhist concept of ‘skillful means’ (*upāyakauśalya*) as justification for flexibility with traditional taboos so as to prioritize the ethical praxis of compassion. The discussion here will explore the ways in which the Shi Suquan negotiated tensions between competing demands and priorities of those within the Buddhist religious tradition in responding to the disaster. The response of Luohan monastery to the Wenchuan earthquake is, therefore, presented as a case study in Buddhist social engagement and charitable activity in times of disaster.<sup>4</sup>

The material used for this case study is drawn primarily from published interviews between Shi Suquan and other parties, including journalists and the editors of *Fayin* (法音), the Journal of the Buddhist Association of China.<sup>5</sup> I have also made extensive use of Shi Suquan’s own blog entries, which he later published as a book entitled *Life of Tranquillity: Venerable Suquan’s Thoughts on Life* (从容的人生: 素全法师生命感悟) (Shi 2009a).<sup>6</sup> Further information about the events has been drawn from a series of reports and documentaries made by the Phoenix New Media Limited, a large Hong Kong-based company which has a department especially devoted to covering all aspects of Buddhism. Three days after the earthquake, the company sent four of its journalists to stay in Luohan monastery in order to report on the wider disaster relief processes. These journalists stayed in the monastery for more than two months and

were therefore well placed to report on the activities of the monastery itself (Shi 2008b).<sup>7</sup> In interpreting these first-hand reports I draw on my training, both monastic and academic, in Buddhist Studies.

### **Buddhist Responses to Disaster**

In order to understand Luohan monastery's involvement in disaster relief following the Wenchuan Earthquake it is necessary to attend to two broader contexts: first, the long history of charitable activity by Chinese Buddhist monasteries and, second, the more recent history of the relationship between Buddhism and the state.

Buddhist monasteries in China are the traditional seats of professional Buddhist practitioners, monks, and saints. One of the primary tasks of the occupants of monasteries is to provide answers to the spiritual needs of lay Buddhist devotees. Yet, as early as the fifth century Buddhist monasteries have served as key nodes of charitable activity in China, with numerous monasteries creating mechanisms for the provision of services for the poor, including health care and old age care.

As part of this charitable involvement monasteries have also been actively engaged in disaster relief.<sup>8</sup> Charitable activity among Buddhist monks has long included a broad range of activities, including various activities that move beyond narrowly defined social services and are consequently not always thought of as charitable by non-Buddhists. Of particular note here are emphases on fund-raising for rebuilding temples and monasteries and charity for animals – including housing ponds for 'liberated' fishes and tortoises, maintaining parks for old and sick animals (Fu 2007; Huang 2012; Pu 2005; Zeng 2006; Zhang 2003). Nevertheless, such charitable practices are "consistent with Buddhist religious practice and ethos" (Laliberté 2012, p. 112) which includes within its ethical purview attentiveness to all sentient beings.

The charitable "impulse" (cf. Bornstein 2012, p. 16) in Buddhism is grounded in two key virtues which are widely regarded as foundational to Buddhist social ethics: compassion (*karuṇā*) and generosity (*dāna*) (Harvey 2000, pp. 61–66, 103–109). In Buddhist scriptures and commentaries alike, compassion is almost always mentioned together with loving-kindness (*mettā*); they mean respectively 'releasing beings from suffering' and 'offering beings happiness.'<sup>9</sup> Generosity, which is obtained through the practice of giving, is the first of the six perfections that a bodhisattva (one who aspires to become a Buddha) should embody.

The ideal of generosity is illustrated in the story of the Vessantara Jātaka in which the hero, in order to perfect this charitable virtue, readily gives away all his princely wealth, including giving away his wife and two sons.<sup>10</sup> While he is eventually reunited with his family and wealth, his acts of self-sacrificial generosity are held up as the epitome of virtue. Such texts have been interpreted as providing compelling justification for a wide range of charitable and relief activities for those facing hardship.

While charity is legitimated by Buddhist virtues and scriptures, the practice of charity, including disaster relief, is also informed by political context. Over the past sixty years the dominant political actor in the Chinese context has been the Chinese

Communist Party (CCP) which came to power in 1949. Shaped by Marxist-Leninist ideologies which were deeply wary of religion, Mao Zedong and other early CCP leaders placed significant restrictions on Buddhism, including curtailment of financial resources and expropriation of land (Welch 1961; Yu 1971). The Cultural Revolution was a particularly difficult time for religious institutions, with concerted energies directed at closing down, looting and destroying religious buildings (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006). Despite its long history of charitable activity discussed above, Buddhist involvement in charity was also severely restricted, at least in its institutionalized forms.

However, in the 1980s Buddhism in China began to experience rapid growth, with a steady expansion of adherents matching a greatly increased public profile. This remarkable thirty-year Chinese Buddhist “revival” (Ji and Goossaert 2011, p. 491) is part of a widespread “religious renaissance” in China (Madsen 2011, p. 17; see also Overmyer 2003). This dramatic change directly parallels the economic ‘opening up’ of China initiated under Deng Xiaoping. Though the exact figures remain debated, it is clear that “Buddhism has become the largest of the five officially recognized religions in the PRC (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism), with at least a hundred million people engaged in various modes of practice” (Ji and Goossaert 2011, p. 491). According to Laliberté (2011, p. 108-110), the expansion of Buddhism was in part facilitated by CCP leadership, including open support from the highest echelons, who saw Buddhism as both a valuable aspect of Chinese tradition and a useful tool in its developmental ambitions. A key factor in these calculations is the potential role that Buddhist institutions are seen as being able to play in charitable and philanthropic activities.

Accompanying the expansion of Buddhism in China since the 1980s, there has also been a rapid resurgence of Buddhist charitable activities, including involvement in education, health care, social welfare, and disaster relief (Laliberté 2012). The growth of charitable activities draws upon similar developments among Chinese Buddhist communities in Taiwan, Hong Kong and elsewhere (Laliberté 2011, p. 114). Of particular note are the charitable activities of the Taiwanese-based organization The Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation (Tzu Chi), which began working in China following the 1991 floods in Hunan Province and has been active ever since (Laliberté 2003; Laliberté 2013; Huang 2002). Tzu Chi formally registered with the Chinese government in 2008 and Laliberté (2013, p. 95) speculates that it is possible that the success of this state-sanctioned “controlled experiment” has encouraged other religious organizations in China to follow Tzu Chi’s example.<sup>11</sup>

The 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, therefore, struck during a time of expanding opportunities for Buddhist charitable activities in China. Encouraged by invitations from state, and responding to an appeal from the Buddhist Association of China, Buddhist organizations across the country poured into Sichuan to offer assistance. Almost all of the relatively rich monasteries in big cities participated in fundraising for relief. Only a few days after the disaster substantial donations had already been delivered to earthquake victims, including : 150 tons of rice and 10 tons of cooking oil from the Buddhist Association of Hebei province, 30 tons of rice and 20 tons of

cooking oil together with 20 tons of wheat flour and a few trucks of mattresses from the Longhua Monastery of Shanghai, 1,200 army beds and 1,000 blankets from the Guangxiao Monastery of Guangzhou province, and 100,000 yuan (ca. USD\$16,000) donated by the Venerable Minghai of the Bailin Monastery (Shi 2008g).

Once again Tzu Chi was one of the first organizations to be on the disaster-site after the earthquake and it was extensively involved in providing relief aid (O'Neill and Tzu Chi Foundation 2010, p. 79). During the reconstruction stage, Buddhist associations across China have been particularly active in school reconstruction, again in response to government requests (Laliberté 2012, p. 109). This Buddhist involvement was part of what Shieh and Deng (2011, p. 181) have described as a “tremendous surge” of voluntary and civil society groups after the earthquake (see also; Teets 2014, pp. 137-141). It was in this context of resurgent Buddhist charitable activity that the Luohan monastery carried out its own relief operations following the Wenchuan Earthquake.

### **Negotiating Tensions in the Provision of Relief**

The Luohan monastery is located very close to the epicenter of the Wenchuan Earthquake. It was the largest and most significant monastery located in the devastated area. Because of this proximity to the disaster zone and because the monastery sustained only slight damage during the earthquake, it was well positioned to play an active role helping coordinate incoming Buddhist aid supplies. But the monastery did more than just coordinate the relief efforts of others. Instead it became actively involved in the provision of a range of relief services.

Of these operations, the role the monastery played as a temporary maternity hospital is particularly remarkable because the delivery of newborn babies in a Buddhist religious institution is almost unheard of in the entire history of Buddhism in China. As is explained below, this was unusual not only because the children's hospital and the monastery are seen as two completely different kinds of institutions, but also and more importantly because both popular perceptions and the formal rules of monastic discipline (*vinaya*) regarding the highly charged and messy business of giving in temple grounds. This section examines the ways in which the tensions surrounding Luohan monastery's disaster relief work were negotiated.

In the few months immediately following the earthquake, Shi Suquan compassionately engaged his monastery in the disaster relief efforts. This work was only carried out in the midst of considerable difficulties, tensions, and strains. Beside the practical difficulties such as a shortage of food and lodging for the refugees and the greatly increased administration load placed on monastery personnel, the monk also faced other tensions surrounding religious rules and cultural taboos.<sup>12</sup>

The earthquake seriously damaged the state-owned Women's and Children's Hospital located across the street from the monastery in Shifang City. At that time, the hospital housed eighteen mothers with their newborn babies along with more than twenty pregnant women who were about to deliver. Following suggestions by others, the director of the hospital, though not without hesitation, went to ask the Luohan

monastery for help. While the monk did pause momentarily upon hearing the request for help, he soon agreed to it (Shi, 2008e). Later, the hospital director said in an interview with a reporter that Shi Suquan “seemed uncertain as to whether it was acceptable to help us as their religious precepts are against getting in close contact with women, but he agreed to help out of kindness” (Wangmu, 2012).

With the approval of the abbotship Suquan, the hospital found a new home in the monastery and stayed there for nearly two months (Shi 2008e). Immediately after accepting the request to relocate the hospital to the monastery, Shi Suquan was confronted by over thirty resident monks and an equal number of devotees who expressed their discomfort with the arrangement. The reason for their disapproval was rooted in the traditional taboo that prohibits women’s visits to sacred places during their menstruation period or when they are in labor.

To address their concerns, Shi Suquan summoned all the resident monks and leading devotees, specially emphasizing that “to Buddhist monks a genuine taboo is not offering help upon seeing people in desperate need!” He then announced three new regulations as follows: one, the monastery will welcome and accommodate all the incoming refugees, including pregnant women and new mothers without any exception; two, the monastery shall provide food to the refugees; and three, the hospital could use all the facilities of the monastery whenever necessary. Soon, the majority of the empty space on the premises was occupied by tents set up by military medical teams and charity organizations (Figures 2 and 3) (Sangye 2011, p. 41; Shi 2008d).



**Figure 2. Tents in Front of the Main Prayer Hall. Courtesy of ifeng.com**

Unhappiness with breaking the taboo over childbirth was not the only problem the monk faced. Before the earthquake struck, some halls of the monastery were undergoing extensive renovation. As a result, tarp and scaffolding were scattered all around the monastery. On the first night after the earthquake, a storm came and blew all the tarp and scaffolding including the tents that sheltered the pregnant women. With no other rooms available for use, the monks vacated their own rooms for the

women – something that under normal circumstances would have been unthinkable. The monks spent the night in some other dry places, while they worked together with the soldiers who were struggling to stabilize the affected tents (Sangye 2011, p. 41; Shi 2008f).



**Figure 3. Tents on the Premises of Luohan Monastery. Courtesy of the ifeng.com**

Early next morning, one of the pregnant women's water broke and the doctor urged her to have a cesarean to prevent injuring the baby. Thus, the director of the hospital again approached the monk with further worries that this would breach other taboos as there would be 'impure' blood in the monastery. To her surprise, the monk immediately approved of the procedure. He even suggested that they use the monastery's dining hall to perform the surgery. The operation was a success despite having no operation table and despite having flashlights as the only source of lighting.<sup>13</sup>

As more babies were being born, there were no more rooms to shelter them and their mothers, so abbotship Suquan himself started to dismantle the tent covering the statue of Master Daoyi so as to make space for more tents for them (Figure 4). Before the earthquake, the Patriarch Hall that originally housed the Master's statue was being refurbished, which was why the statue was shifted to a main courtyard and was covered with a tent. Observing the monk remove the cover for the statue, and thereby exposing the statue to the elements, a devotee criticized him for being highly disrespectful to their master's statue. In reply, the monk said that "now the most important thing is to help the living not the mud statue" (Xin 2009).

The actual birth process was not the only issue that attracted criticism. In Chinese society, there is a long-standing practice according to which a new mother is supposed to take certain tonic foods, such as freshly prepared chicken soup, which help her recover from the exhaustion of childbirth. In accordance with this practice, after their child was born many families in the monastery killed chickens and cooked them in order to feed them to the new mothers.

It was reported that many monks, who in keeping with the Buddhist prohibition against killing sentient life had been vegetarian for a couple of decades, could not stand the smell of cooking poultry and complained to the head monk. Similarly, many residents and devotees criticized him for allowing the killing of animals in the monastery. Accordingly, Shi Suquan issued a written warning saying that killing of chickens was only allowed for the new mothers and any other dweller on monastery grounds should not kill. (At the same time he also issued a warning against gambling as a number of visitors to the monastery, in keeping with broader Sichuanese culture, like to play mahjong for money as well as for leisure.) Shi Suquan warned that anyone disobeying this rule would be asked to leave the monastery. After the notice was issued, no monks complained further, and no other unlawful behaviors and inappropriate activities were reported (Xin 2009).



**Figure 4. Tents of the Women and Children's Hospital. Courtesy of *Shifang zhichuang***

By the third day after the earthquake more than two thousand people were taking their meals in the monastery daily. The monastery's food stocks quickly ran out. Fortunately, a number of wealthy devotees came to the rescue by providing substantial donations. Eventually, the monastery was able to house refugees for over a month. Shi Suquan himself notes the surprising fact that even though living conditions in the monastery at that time were far from ideal, nevertheless none of the newborn babies contracted infections (Shi 2008g).

### **Analysis of the Shi Suquan's Decisions**

It is evident from the preceding account that the head monk's decision in receiving and helping the pregnant refugees was in principle against at least one

prominent monastic rule and some other traditional taboos. The following analysis seeks to identify the factors that might have contributed to his decisions, despite inherent tensions and external pressures. The sources of these tensions will first be highlighted, followed by an analysis of the possible factors contributing to the monk's decisions.

Of the various factors contributing to difficulties in the decision-making process, two different types can be identified: one is that of traditional cultural taboos and beliefs, and another, important Buddhist rules. Taboos and religious rules both provide prohibitions against doing certain things, but the former are more of cultural superstitions whereas the latter are precepts for the practitioners of religions, which in the Buddhist case are ethical prescriptions laid down to aid the follower's spiritual practices. Buddhism has incorporated some indigenous religious elements in the process of its acceptance by the Chinese. This incorporation included some taboos found in folk religions.<sup>14</sup> For instance, the general population of Buddhists would accept the taboo that pregnant women or menstruating women, or those who are in labor, are not pure and are not supposed to visit sacred places that house gods, saints and sages,<sup>15</sup> even though better informed Buddhists including monks and nuns tend not to hold such a view. Lay persons who visit or reside in Buddhist monasteries are the main believers of such taboos, which is why Shi Suquan was forced to confront challenges to his decision to allow women to give birth within the precincts of his monastery.

One traditional belief that is still held by many is that freshly prepared chicken soup is vital for new mothers to help them recover after childbirth. Unlike the aforementioned taboo, this belief, as well as living practice, involves killing a living creature, which is a breach of the Buddhist rule of 'abstinence from taking life.' This rule is one of the five cardinal precepts for any Buddhist, the other four for the lay Buddhist being 'no stealing', 'no sexual misconduct', 'no lies' and 'no intoxicants,' (Buddhayaśas 410, 1019c03; cf. Takakusu and Kaikyoku 1991).

Finally, Shi Suquan took away the tent that was used to cover the mud statue of Master Daoyi, the great important Chan master. Veneration of statues of saints such as the founder Buddha Śākyamuni, celestial bodhisattvas (e.g. Avalokiteśvara), and Arhat figures plays an important part in daily Buddhist practice of the Mahāyāna. When it spread to China, Buddhism was further influenced by the ancient Chinese practice of ancestor worship, thus the patriarchs of Buddhist schools also became objects of veneration for their followers. As a local ancestral hero and great religious master, Master Daoyi, is amongst the array of statues in the monastery venerated by the local Buddhist community. Therefore, his statue is akin to that of the status of the Confucius statue housed in the Cultural Shrine (文庙) for many Chinese Confucians. Both statues are venerated out of deep respect and tremendous gratitude. For this reason, the head monk's actions drew criticism from members of the community, both lay and monastic.

Although two of the three of these prohibitions can be considered as social and traditional, rather than strictly related to Buddhist precepts, all three are frequently

seen by the general public as against Buddhist prohibitions. By permitting the violating of each of these prohibitions, therefore, the monk attracted public admonition and condemnation of his actions. Shi Suquan had been a monk for over 15 years and was therefore certainly aware of the ways in which his actions would attract critique. Nevertheless, it is clear that he decided to break these rules in order to do as he deemed necessary to help others. What, we may ask now, made the head monk ignore these taboos and popular opinion?

It would be easy to say that Shi Suquan simply did what he had to do in that context - ‘desperate times call for desperate measures.’ However, his response was by no means typical with regard to the actions of other Buddhist clerics faced with similar situations. If we look at his decision and actions from a Buddhist doctrinal point of view, a deeper explanation emerges. Namely, the principle that justified his apparently unconventional or even ethically wrong actions can be attributed to one extremely important Mahāyāna concept, *upāyakauśalya*, or ‘skillful means’ or ‘skill in means.’ This is a concept that most ordinary Chinese monks are familiar with. Though this justification did not directly come from the head monk, it can be inferred from his replies and reactions to the tensions that emerged that he was acting on the principle of ‘skillful means.’

The meaning of ‘skillful means’ in early Buddhism is understood by scholars as “the Buddha skillfully adapt[ing] his teaching to the level of his audience” (Federman 2009, pp. 125-126) or “the Buddha skillfully apply[ing] various means to deliver his understanding of truth and to help other beings to progress on the path to awakening” (Hick 1991, p. 141).<sup>16</sup> Later on it was conceptualized and legitimized in Mahāyāna scriptures among which the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* (The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law) and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* (The Sutra Spoken by *Vimalakīrti*) are the crucial ones.<sup>17</sup> The former tells a story of a rich man who lures his children from a burning house by promising them imaginary gifts. The house represents the realm of rebirth, the imaginary gifts are the Buddha’s teaching styles, and being outside of the house is the realm of enlightenment (Kern 1884, pp. 36–37). The Buddha relates this story to tell his disciples that what he had previously preached was via skillful means and thus should be understood as only temporary or transitional, rather than as the final word on the matter.

The teachings of the Mahāyāna are the ultimate truth that leads to the genuine final enlightenment. Here, therefore the Buddha breaches the cardinal precept of not lying, yet it is not a truly negative breach as it is just a skillful means done out of compassion to guide beings to the genuine final enlightenment. Thus, unlike in earlier scriptures, the term ‘skillful means’ in the Mahāyāna scriptures stands for not only skillful pedagogical means, but also for an important ethical principle that justifies flexibility in observing, or even breaching, religious vows and training rules when the doer’s intentions are driven by compassion or when his act is morally and spiritually more meaningful than the rigid observance of the rules.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the value of kindness and compassion can be used as a justification for the breach of other precepts, and the rationale for taking such action can be found in interpretations of the doctrine of ‘skillful means.’

This clearly indicates the importance and priority of compassion over the observation of ritual precepts in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Within this tradition, compassion and wisdom are the two pillars of Mahāyāna philosophy and the two most distinctive qualities of Buddhahood: for a bodhisattva, wisdom enables the clearing of all defilement and the attainment of enlightenment, whereas compassion is the ‘basis and motivating force’—the pursuit of enlightenment begins out of compassion towards all sentient beings (Williams 2009, pp. 194–200).

Therefore, as far as Mahāyāna Buddhism is concerned, cultivating and perfecting these two virtues is the very purpose of practicing Buddhism. Accordingly, if there is a direct way to cultivate these virtues, other rules should not restrict one from doing so. After all, although rules that are laid down are not supposed to be overridden or broken, they are there primarily to help the practitioners to practice Buddhism, i.e. to perfect the virtues of wisdom and compassion. This latter point is supported by the fact that the Buddha did not prescribe precepts (training rules) until twelve years after his enlightenment (Holt 1981, p. 33).<sup>19</sup> In short, it was the doctrine of ‘skillful means’ that helps practitioners to make the right decision of upholding the core values of Buddhism.

The application of the teaching of ‘skillful means’ in Buddhism has a precedent in the *Upāyakauśalya Sūtra*, which includes a story about the Buddha in a past life as both a bodhisattva and a ship captain named ‘Great Compassion’:

[He] was transporting 500 merchants. One night deities inform him in a dream that one of the passengers is a robber intent on killing all the rest and stealing their goods. He realizes that the robber will suffer in hell for aeons for such a deed, as the merchants are all *bodhisattvas*. He ponders deep and long on how to prevent this, but realizes that if he informs the merchants of the plot, they will kill the robber – and themselves go to hell. If he does nothing, many will die. He is thus left with one option, the least of three evils: himself killing the robber. Even though he would himself be reborn in hell for ‘a hundred thousand aeons’ because of this, he is willing to endure this to prevent others suffering (Harvey 2000, p. 135; Nandi, 2009).

Likewise, there is also a Jātaka story (No. 267) entitled *The Crab and the Elephant* about the act of doing something morally wrong in the service of the greater good (Francis and Thomas 1916, pp. 211–212).<sup>20</sup> The story tells of a crab which lives in pound and pinches all those coming for a drink. Eventually, an elephant who was a bodhisattva (one of the Buddha’s past lives who is pursuing Buddhahood) stomps on the crab and kills him.

The moral of this story is that despite the fact that killing the crab was morally wrong, nevertheless this was a compassionate act for the sake of others and therefore was the correct thing for the bodhisattva to do. This story can be read as an instance in the practice of ‘skillful means’ where compassionate action took priority over other ethical norms.

I argue that the decision of the head monk of Luohan monastery to break long-standing rules for the sake of the victims of the Wenchuan Earthquake directly parallels both of these canonical moral narratives. Shi Suquan faced tensions between cultivating the value of compassion and observing the rules of his training in line with traditional taboos and beliefs. The moral dilemma was therefore having to choose between adhering to monastic rules and protecting the safety and health of human beings.

Because the concept of ‘skillful means’ is so deeply ingrained in daily Chinese monastic life, the head monk understandably chose to put the teaching of compassion and kindness into practice and took a series of expedient measures to solve the problems that came out of his decision to extend assistance in the aftermath of the earthquake. While we do not know whether - as with the bodhisattvas in the two stories just narrated - the head monk decided to accept the karmic consequences of allowing sentient beings (chickens) to be killed in the monastery, nevertheless it is clear from reports that he valued helping others more than observing official rules and popular taboos (Sangye 2011, p. 40).

In this particular case, the head monk permitted the killing of chickens and even allowed these to take place in his monastery, out of compassionate intentions. Typically, the killing of chickens would be considered wrong in the eyes of monks and lay Buddhists. After all, even if considered important, the killing of chickens and animals was not, strictly speaking, absolutely necessary for the mothers and the newborn babies their lives did not hang in the balance over whether or not the mother would be able to consume tonic soup. Nevertheless, Shi Suquan’s actions are not unprecedented in the history of Chinese Buddhism.

There are multiple examples of drastic actions undertaken by pious and well-versed Mahāyāna followers, given certain circumstances (Yang 2009). The fact that Shi Suquan allowed people to kill chickens in monastery may mean that the head monk valued the welfare of human beings more than that of animals. This hierarchical treatment of sentient beings is justified in Buddhist understandings of the cycle of rebirth, in which human beings occupy a pivotal place. The actions of the head monk here thus present a further striking example of the Mahāyāna approach to cultivating the virtue of compassion with reference to the principle of skillful means.

In his handling of this situation, the head monk interpreted and deployed Buddhist conceptions of compassion to justify his actions in the face of criticism from various parties. The prioritization of compassion was possible because of the emphasis in Mahāyāna Buddhism on the value and necessity of using ‘skillful means’. One may even argue that it was also compassion that led others to accept his decision, albeit reluctantly for at least some of them. After all, they all understood the value of compassion and the desperate nature of the situation at that time.

### **Changes after the Events**

While the crisis situation of the Wenchuan Earthquake disaster led to the monastery breaching usual taboos, these rules were only temporarily suspended. After

a few months of operating as an emergency maternity ward, the hospital was able to relocate to other facilities to continue its work and the monastery reverted back to prior routines and assumed again its central function as a place of Buddhist learning and spiritual practices. Yet, the practice of engaging with disaster relief did result in some enduring changes. For the monk, Shi Suquan, the changes were both external and internal. Later in the year he was given an award by the local government (based on a public opinion poll) with the title of “Shifang County Hero Outstanding in Ten Respects” (Jinri 2008). This brought both the monk and the monastery an unprecedented prominent and positive public profile. Such public affirmation is indicative of wider changes currently taking place in regard to the status accorded to Buddhism by the Chinese state. Perhaps an even more definitive sign of the government’s appreciation of the work that Shi Suquan had carried out after the earthquake disaster was that in September 2009 he was appointed abbot of Luohan monastery (Figure 5) (Wang, 2009). Given the fact that in China the appointment of an abbot of any significant monastery has to be approved by the local government’s Religious Affairs Bureau, it is fair to surmise that Shi Suquan’s promotion to abbot was in large part an indication of the government’s appreciation for his contribution to the relief efforts.

Shi Suquan has also written that his experience of the Wenchuan Earthquake disaster and his involvement in disaster relief activities have instigated some internal spiritual changes. In one of his blogs he wrote, “...these three busy months have been a challenging process that has tempered my soul. Faced with the impermanence of the world, fragility of life, and the forces of nature, I have learned a lot about forgiveness, understanding and strength... [D]isasters are painful, but if our being becomes purer after every disaster, then we have not been defeated by those disasters, because the purity of our being is the very essence of the human civilization.”<sup>21</sup>

In an interview with a journalist from the *China Daily*, Shi Suquan even said that the disaster helped him to understand the nature of the universe better than the Buddhist scriptures he had read (Li 2013). In another blog post, he also wrote that the disaster had given his soul a complete cleansing (Shi 2011b). In another piece of writing, he expressed his sympathy and concern for victims of a tsunami in Japan in early 2011 and led a day of prayers for the victims (Shi 2011a). It is clear from these reflections that the experience of the disaster and his responses to it have profoundly effected his understandings of the tradition and his views on the human impact of such tragedies.



**Figure 5. Second Standing From The Left. Courtesy of the Fenghuang Media Co.**

Apart from the abbot himself, the monastery, of course, also became the center of attention because of the media coverage during and after the earthquake and the aftershocks. This attention was heightened by the birthday celebration of ‘108 babies’ in May 2012 mentioned at the start of this paper. This celebration which took place at the Luohan monastery itself was extensively covered by Chinese media and was facilitated by the local government (Li 2013). Naturally, the monastery and Buddhism also benefited from close contact with celebrities who joined the relief volunteers in the monastery, who in turn had a better chance to understand Buddhism in general and the life of Buddhist monks in particular. There are also indications that the people of Shifang City have become friendlier to monks than they were before, resulting from positive perceptions of the monastery’s relief efforts and engagement with society in the aftermath of the earthquake (Sangye 2011, p. 4).

### **Conclusion**

In the extreme and demanding context of post-disaster Sichuan local religious leaders found themselves re-interpreting particular elements of their tradition to help them understand and respond to the crisis they, and their surrounding communities, faced. This paper has presented a case study of the head monk of the Luohan Monastery who utilized the Buddhist notion of ‘skillful means’ (*upāyakauśalya*) in pursuit of the virtue of compassion. This was done so in a way that allowed not only for the immediate response to life-threatening danger, but that also served to re-frame broader discourses within the community about religious leadership, ritual propriety, and social engagement in the years following the disaster relief efforts. This particular case involved a re-negotiation of tensions between competing normative frameworks within Buddhist traditions and thus carried with it a possibility for considerable internal contestation as to what should be the proper response to the earthquake and the human suffering it caused. The particular way in which the head monk of Luohan

Monastery handled the issues involved presents not only a remarkable instance of how Mahāyāna Buddhists respond to disaster but is also a perfect example of the actual application of ‘skillful means’ for the purpose of cultivating the paramount value of compassion.

In the relief services offered by the Luohan Monastery, allowing women to give birth and permitting people to kill chickens on the monastery’s premises in principle breaches both popular perception and certain monastic rules. Yet, they were nonetheless carried out with the head monk’s permission. By taking this stance, the head monk seems to have made history by breaking long-standing taboos—beliefs preventing or discouraging people from doing certain things—and religious rules. The rationale that the forbidden actions were justified by the ideal of compassion while still taboo under normal circumstances opened up space for the negotiation of imperatives from within the tradition in light of specific circumstances. Specifically, the imaginative deployment of the Buddhist concept of ‘skillful means’ ideology justifies the violation of the rules and taboos in pursuit of the virtue of compassion.

By examining a Buddhist monastery as a disaster relief actor, and by focusing particularly on questions of Buddhist doctrine and the ethical tensions surrounding the provision of disaster relief services, this paper seeks to open new conversations in the disaster literature. Specifically, I have drawn attention to the important role that local religious institutions can play in the provision of relief services.

The Luohan monastery was not part of the formal humanitarian industry and nor had its monks received professional training in emergency medicine. When the Wenchuan Earthquake struck, the monastery happened to be located in the middle of the disaster zone and, as a consequence of agreeing to provide assistance to a nearby hospital, the monastery was transformed into a temporary emergency maternity hospital. This sudden transformation in both the function and the kinds of activities that were carried out within the monastery’s precinct led directly into a series of fraught ethical concerns.

While the head monk adeptly navigated through these challenges, the challenges themselves are nevertheless important objects of analysis. The concerns about whether the Luohan monastery should house women in labor, and apprehensions over the killing of poultry for tonics for the mothers of newborn babies - both of which broke traditional taboos - indicate that the decision to provide assistance was not a straight forward one.

These examples also reveal considerable differences between the approach of the Luohan monastery and mainstream humanitarianism which tends to emphasize the provision of assistance irrespective of gender and which rarely shares the Buddhist concern for the sanctity of sentient life. Although these differences should not be overemphasized—after all, for a period of some months Shi Suquan was indeed able to transform his monastery into a maternity ward—they are revealing for the kinds of issues that disaster researchers should pay attention to when studying the relief practices of religious actors. Traditions, doctrines, and formal rules are important factors in the provision of disaster relief services, but these should not be imagined as

immutable. Instead, close attention should be given to how religious actors navigate the doctrinal and practical tensions they face in responding to disasters.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> ‘One hundred and eight’ is likely to be an estimate, rather than an exact figure. The number is often considered an important one in Buddhist traditions, stemming from the priority ascribed to it by the Sarvāstivāda School, one of the major four early Indian Buddhist schools (Hirakawa 1993, p. 202).

<sup>2</sup> These statistics were provided by the Department of Civil Administration and were published on the September 25, 2008. Retrieved April 14, 2012. ([http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2008-09/25/content\\_10110384.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2008-09/25/content_10110384.htm)).

<sup>3</sup> For biographical studies of Taixu, and assessments of the importance of his ‘Humanistic Buddhism’ for contemporary Chinese Buddhism, see also Pittman (2001) and Xue (2005).

<sup>4</sup> The modern origins of socially engaged Buddhism can be traced to the Thiền Vietnamese meditation master Thich Nhat Hanh who is said to have been inspired by the Humanistic Buddhism reform movement initiated in the early twentieth century by abbot Taixu of Luohan monastery, discussed above. While socially engaged Buddhism has various forms and operates on different scales, charitable activity is frequently one of its aspects. For excellent studies on socially engaged Buddhism, see: Huang (2009), King (2009), Queen (2000), and Queen and King (1996).

<sup>5</sup> The interview with *Fayin* is published in *Sangye* (2011). The Buddhist Association of China is a semi-governmental organization responsible for announcing government policy on Buddhist religion, representing Buddhist adherents in China, and managing some of the affairs of the Chinese Buddhist community.

<sup>6</sup> His blog is posted on the website of the Phoenix New Media Limited at <http://blog.ifeng.com/1031017.html>. All original sources are in Chinese, with the translations into English undertaken by the author.

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the author’s request for an interview with the abbot was turned down.

<sup>8</sup> For studies on Buddhist charitable organizations and activities see, for example, Deng (2002), Huang (2009), Huang (2012), Su (2009), and Zhang and Kai (2007, pp. 41–45). The recent collection edited by Kawanami and Samuel (2013) addresses Buddhist relief activity in a wider frame.

<sup>9</sup> For discussions of these terms in Buddhist scriptures see, for example, Zhi (2009, pp. 23-24) and Amoghavajra (2009, pp. 1-2).

<sup>10</sup> For a study and English translation of this story, see Gombrich and Cone (1977). There is also a third-century Chinese translation of the story (Kang 2009).

<sup>11</sup> For a valuable and informative study on Tzu Chi, focused particularly on its work in Taiwan, see Huang (2009).

<sup>12</sup> A further concern at the time of the disaster would have been legal restrictions imposed by the Chinese government on the uses of monastery property. Governmental regulations prohibit non-religious activities within officially designated religious spaces. However, given the extremity of the situation immediately after the earthquake, this rule appears to have been over-ridden, or at least temporarily sidelined, for the sake of facilitating relief efforts.

<sup>13</sup> As discussed above approximately 108 babies in total were delivered in the monastery. The last child was born in the second month after the earthquake (Shi 2008e).

<sup>14</sup> For studies supporting this view, see Sharf (2002), and Pu (2014, chapter 1).

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, a stronger version of this belief can also be found in ancient Indian Brahmanism (Gombrich 2006, 144).

<sup>16</sup> For a similar interpretation, see Sharma (1990, p. 23).

<sup>17</sup> Michael Pye (2004) has done a brilliant study of this concept.

<sup>18</sup> Different Buddhist traditions have their own instruction and principle for applying the concept. For a discussion, see Harvey (2000, p. 136).

<sup>19</sup> Twelve years is the view of the most schools: *Sifenseng jieven* 四分僧戒本 (T22n1430\_p1030b07-b10); *Shizhu piposha lun* 十住毘婆沙論 (T26n1521\_p0077b05); *Zengyi ahan jing* 增一阿含经 (T02n0125\_p0787b04-b10); *Genben Sapoduo bu lushe* 根本薩婆多部律攝 (T23n1442\_p0628a03-a05). *Mohe sengqi lu* 摩訶僧祇律 also maintains the view of five years (T22n1425\_p0412b24), while the *Shanjian lu piposha* 善見律毗婆沙 20 years (T24n1462\_p0713a22-a26).

<sup>20</sup> Jātaka stories are narratives of previous lives of the Buddha during which he performs virtuous deeds. There is a collection containing 557 such stories in Theravada Buddhism. Thanks to Michael Feener for drawing my attention to this Jātaka narrative.

<sup>21</sup> “三个月的奔忙，对于我的心灵是一个艰难的历练过程。面对无常的世界，面对脆弱的生命，面对自然的力量，我学会了更多的宽容、理解、坚强……灾难是痛苦的，但是每次灾难过后如果我们的人格会因此变得更加纯净，那灾难就没有难到我们，因为人格的纯净才是人类文明的本质” (Shi 2008a).

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