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Inferno in the Land of Snows: A Holistic Investigation of Tibetan Self-Immolation Through a Tibetan Perspective

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Inferno in the Land of Snows:

A holistic investigation of Tibetan self-immolation
through a Tibetan perspective

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Fall 2012

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Vietnamese monk Tich Quang Duc commits self-immolation
in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), Vietnam, June 11, 1963

“To burn oneself by fire is to prove what he is saying is of the utmost importance. There is nothing more painful than burning oneself. To say something while experiencing this kind of pain is to say it with utmost courage, frankness, determination, and sincerity.”

- Tich Nhat Hanh, 1967

Abstract

According to the ICT (International Campaign for Tibet) at least 90 Tibetan monks, nuns, and non-monastic Tibetans have committed self immolation since 2009, 73 (81%) of which have been proclaimed as deceased due to inflictions experienced as a result of the demonstrations; this only exists as the current statistic at the time the proceeding investigation was conducted. Though this number may initially seem somewhat small, it in fact shows a significant build-on to this trend over recent years. To many this practice comes across as quite striking, if not completely incomprehensible; to most the first method of protesting religious oppression and political persecution chosen would not be in the form of self immolation. Some publications, mostly in the form of journalistic articles, have written off Tibetan self immolation as a sign of desperation considering the situation between Tibet and China. And so the question explored throughout this article: Is Tibetan self immolation in fact an indication of what perhaps Western psychology might describe as desperation and/or depression, or is there rather a more emic, nuanced explanation of this practice that can only be unveiled through qualitative, emic research of an insider's perspective? The unique melding of religion and politics makes these acts all the more complex, and therefore the platform in which the demonstrations occur upon is also investigated in a holistic manner. In this case, an insider's perspective is to be considered the viewpoint of the Tibetan people, both monastic and lay, rather than a viewpoint based upon the speculation of the international community.

This study takes the form of a psycho-social analysis, taking an in-depth glance at the meaning of self immolation to Tibetans. The research conducted in order to produce this study was heavily qualitatively based, primarily composed of semi-structured interviewing and/or focus groups in order to achieve maximum data representativeness. The study also utilized a great amount of archival research as well, incorporating indications of Buddhist philosophy within the practice of self immolation and Buddhist views on self-immolation, as well as an extensive literature review on self immolation in itself, especially considering self-immolation in contexts other than Tibet. This study conducted was primarily located in-and-around Dharamsala/McLeod Ganj, India; the high Tibetan population in this region, not to mention proximity to political figures and leaders of the Tibetan community-in-exile, made this location ideal for finding the demographics necessary to make this piece as representative as possible.

A Brief Introduction to Self-Immolation and the Rise of its Tibetan Context

On the first day of October in 1949, Mao Zedong and his followers had gained enough power to instate the first People's Republic of China (PRC), modern China's first communist regime following Zedong's nationalist military campaign through what is now most of eastern China. With influence firmly established, the PRC then turned its attention upon the land to the west; land that the China considered under Chinese sovereignty¹. This ideology has for decades been at the core of historical debate between the PRC and Tibetans, who claim that Tibet has always existed as an independent sovereignty, citing details such as independent currency and postal stamps predating Chinese occupation². As a result, in October of 1950, a year after the declaration of the People's Republic of China, approximately 30,000 troops of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) forcefully pushed into the two eastern regions of the Tibetan plateau, Kham and Amdo, under the discourse of "liberating" the Tibetan people from its unjust feudal society. Outmatched numerically and technologically, the regional Tibetan militaries united and fought the PLA resiliently, but eventually fell to the crushing force of the communists, and thus in 1951 the PLA marched its way into the city of Lhasa, the capital of Tibet and seat of the Dalai Lama³.

With the intention of not coming across as too radical, the PRC took caution in not completely implementing its policy, granting a certain yet insignificant amount of power to Lhasa, as well as preserving certain religious practices and monastic structures of the Tibetan people. This period of pseudo-autonomy and religious tolerance did not last an extensive period of time, however, and resistance to the PRC rule developed, leading to a complete military crackdown by the Chinese. This action is what ultimately led to what is known as the 1959 Lhasa Uprising and His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama's flee into exile⁴.

Since this date, the Chinese approach to management over the Tibetan society and its people has shifted dramatically. All citizens of the Tibet "Autonomous" Region (TAR), both monastic and lay, have been subjected to reeducation by their Chinese conquerors and many religious

¹ Craig, Mary (1999). "Tears of Blood." *Counterpoint Publications*, 2. 1-341.

² Bagdro (Ven.) (2012). "What About Justice?" *Ven. Bagdro*, 1. 1-106.

³ Avedon, John (1984). "In Exile from the Land of Snows." *HarperCollins Publishers*, 2. 1-366.

⁴ Barnett, Robert (1994). "Resistance and Reform in Tibet." *MotilalBanarsidass Publishers*. 1-313.

practices and ceremonies of Tibetan Buddhism have been severely restricted or banned⁵; even possessing a photograph of the Dalai Lama can potentially result in imprisonment. Some of the more “unruly” monasteries have been transformed into de facto prisons⁶, the PRC using methodologies as extreme as torture, both physical and psychological, as a means of controlling any form of resistance⁷. With increased security and surveillance of Chinese police forces, most forms of protest against Chinese rule, such as rallies, marches, or hunger strikes, are ousted almost instantly and any person involved is subject to arrest. As a result, dozens of Tibetans both monastic and lay have taken it upon themselves to commit self-immolation as a means of protest.

Self-immolation is the act of setting fire to one’s self, and in most cases, the act ultimately results in suicide. The common methodology for such acts is through soaking one’s clothing and skin in kerosene or other flammable liquids, often ingesting a certain amount as well, proceeded by setting fire to the body. The first documented Tibetan immolation was that of Thupten Ngodup which took place on the 29th of April in 1998. Ngodup was attending, amongst several other Tibetan exiles, a TYC (Tibetan Youth Congress) organized hunger strike in New Delhi demanding UN talks regarding the situation in Tibet; demands that the UN expressed it would be unable to meet. Indian police forces then moved in to break up the strikers, and thus, on the second day of the break up, Ngodup, who was a former monk, committed self-immolation in protest, ultimately dying from overwhelming burns to his body. At a ceremony honoring Ngodup’s death, however, a sign was placed upon his coffin exclaiming that Tibetans will one by one follow in Ngodup’s footsteps⁸. And so they have, exponentially so. Starting in 2009, eleven years following the death of Ngodup, Tibetans by the dozens have followed in the martyr’s example, proclaiming to the PRC their ultimatum of political independence, religious tolerance, and return of their leader the Dalai Lama to Tibet. 2012 has been the deadliest year yet concerning the self-immolation of Tibetans, almost all cases occurring within Chinese occupied Tibet; 77 (86%) of the 90 instances of self-immolation have taken place in 2012 alone⁹. With the alarming rate in which these acts are taking place, it is important for the realm of academia to explore the on-going phenomenon of Tibetan self-immolation in a holistic manner. In order to

⁵ Craig, Mary (1999). “Tears of Blood.” *Counterpoint Publications*, 2. 1-341.

⁶ Wong, Edward (2012). “In Tibetan monastery, a reason for fiery death.” *New York Times*, June 2nd, 2012. 1-4.

⁷ Bagdro (Ven.) (2012). “What About Justice?” *Ven. Bagdro*, 1. 1-106.

⁸ Ardley, Jane (2012). “Violent compassion: Buddhism and resistance in Tibet.” *Political Studies Association*. 1-37.

⁹ *International Campaign for Tibet*

bring to light the mindset in which Tibetans lie within when committing self-immolation, however, it is important to juxtapose the Tibetan context of self-immolation to that of other contexts, both historical and contemporary.

Self-Immolation in Other Contexts

It is known that self-immolation indeed does not prove unique to that of the Tibetan cause. Made famous by the Vietnamese monk Tich Quang Duc self-immolating in the summer of 1963 in protest of an escalating war (see pg. 4), self-immolation has been seen multiple times throughout history. Self-immolation has in fact been utilized as a means of making a statement during multiple political and socio-cultural struggles throughout recent years, the most recent of which are still taking place to this date. With this said, it is important to examine these instances as a means of perhaps understanding self-immolation within the Tibetan context at a superior level.

Even as recent as the years 2005 and 2006, for example, have widespread self-immolation demonstrations taken place. Starting in 2005 a war-torn Afghanistan became witness to an incredible trend of self-immolations over the next two years. What makes the Afghani tendency significant is that all documented cases of self-immolation within 2005 and 2006 lie within such a specific demographic. Virtually all cases of self-immolation reported females of ages 12 and older; 55% of cases were of young women between 16 and 19 years of age¹⁰. Living within a highly militarized area brings a potentially heavy emotional burden with it, and just as Tibetans living within Chinese occupied Tibet, many Afghanis lived within a predominantly American occupied Afghanistan, and still do to date, and so drastic measures such as self-immolation do not prove shocking from the Afghani people; an ironic circumstance seeing the United States government stated on November 10th, 2011 that it was “alarmed by the recent incidents in Tibet of young people lighting themselves on fire in ‘desperate’ acts of protest... [and] we [the United States government] continue to call on China to embrace a different path¹¹.” Just as the Tibetan context, however, the Afghanistan situation was/is one of great complexity, and one cannot simply assume these immolations as a product of military occupation, especially considering the

¹⁰ Raj, Gomez & Silverman (2008). “Driven to a fiery death- the tragedy of self-immolation in Afghanistan.” *New England Journal of Medicine*, 335, 2201-2203.

¹¹ *Human Rights Update*, November 2011

detailed demographics of Afghani immolators. Studies have shown that other forms of trauma such as husband and in-law abuse, child marriage, and forced marriage have all proven as precedent factors to the Afghani immolations, despite legislative attempts to root out these social problems; 80% of all Afghani self-immolations in 2005 and 2006 were of married females¹². These precursors and statistics reveal an indication of the suffocation of the female voice in Afghanistan, and so these isolated women voice themselves through the only form of communication they see possible: a voice through a medium that of fire.

It is possible that the same can be said for Tibetan immolators in a similar respect. The voice of Tibetans under occupation has been taken away as well, through both legal action of the PRC and ethnic dilution by means of Han immigration into the plateau¹³. The Chinese state has forbidden ethnic Tibetans from partaking in any and all forms of protest against Chinese rule in Tibet on threat of imprisonment, and thus some Tibetans have communicated their voice in the only way they can, and that is through the act of self-immolation. Dowa Tsering, an ex-political prisoner who escaped from the TAR further explains the act of self immolation as a means of communication:

“People know that the Chinese put Tibetans in prison, but what people fail to realize is that the Chinese have made *Tibet itself* into a prison. The only thing we [Tibetans] have control over in this situation is our own body. People are committing self-immolation to get their voice to the outside, not necessarily to the international community, but to their fellow Tibetans in exile; they want all those in exile to take action, and they are voicing this to them without using words because it is impossible for them to use words.”¹⁴

Dwelling within an occupied territory that has had its borders sealed and closed by the Chinese state, and all forms of media and social media suppressed and shut down by the same force, Tibetans communicate their voices through the most powerful means that remains possible, and that exists as self-immolation. Tenzin Kedhup and Ngawang Norphel, both

¹² Raj, Gomez & Silverman (2008). “Driven to a fiery death- the tragedy of self-immolation in Afghanistan.” *New England Journal of Medicine*, 335, 2201-2203

¹³ Craig, Mary (1999). “Tears of Blood.” *Counterpoint Publications*, 2. 1-341.

¹⁴ Interview: Dowa Tsering, November 9, 2012

immolating in now Qinghai province on June 20, 2012, add to this notion with their joint last-words recording:

“We do not have the ability to help Tibetan's religion and culture. We do not have the economic means to help other Tibetans. For the sake of our Tibetan race, in particular for the return of His Holiness Dalai Lama to Tibet, we choose self-immolation. We want to tell all the Tibetan youth, swear to yourself, never fight against each other, among Tibetans, we have to be united and protect our race¹⁵.”

In times before the era of modernity often a beacon system (a chronological lighting of signal fires across extensive areas) was utilized as a means of widely distributing “s.o.s” messages or warnings as quickly and efficiently as possible. With the outside world closed off to them, many Tibetans under occupation have taken it upon themselves to construct their own beacon system. As mentioned by Dowa Tsering, at this point each Tibetan under occupation only has control over his/her own body, and therefore have used each body in the construction of this beacon system, the body as the vessel of communication and fire as the form of communication. This particular system has stretched even as far as the reaches of Europe; a British monk set fire to himself in France on November 16, 2012, perhaps in solidarity with the imprisoned Tibetans¹⁶.

The history-making movement popularly known as “Arab Spring” took witness to several accounts of self-immolation as well; in fact, a single act of self-immolation in Tunisia is commonly accepted as the very act which “sparked” the movement in 2010. The man behind the demonstration, Mohamed Bouazizi, was a small businessman born and raised a native of Tunisia. However, living within a country administered by a government with an ever-increasing sense of authoritarianism and corruption, it usually proved very difficult for small businessmen such as Bouazizi, who owned a small produce cart, to acquire the documentation necessary to run their business legally¹⁷. Absent of the proper permit and technically working outside of the law, Bouazizi was frequently harassed by the authorities, repeatedly berated or fined by the officials; eventually administrative personnel confiscated much of Bouazizi’s equipment, including his weight scale, a quintessential instrument to the produce merchant. Mentally exhausted with the

¹⁵ Lam, Oiwan (2012). “Last voices of 19 Tibetans who committed self-immolation.” *Global Voices Online*. 1-3.

¹⁶ Interview: Tenzin Tsundue, November 18, 2012

¹⁷ De Soto, Hernando (2011). “The real Mohamed Bouazizi.” *saudiwave – web, December 18th, 2011*. 1-4.

day-to-day aggravation, Bouazizi, 26 years old, returned to commit self-immolation in front of the local administrative building on December 17, 2010¹⁸.

Bouazizi's protest against authoritarianism and corrupt rule ignited the inspiration of many throughout all of North Africa and the Middle East, and eventually internal struggle and the call for political, social, and economic reform rang out within the two regions; within a year the call for reform had spread to nations such as Egypt, Libya, and Syria. What is relevant, though, is that Bouazizi was not in fact the only being to utilize self-immolation as protest within the duration of greater Arab Spring. Following Bouazizi's demonstration in Tunisia, at least 35 other accounts of self-immolation occurred across North Africa and the Middle East in replication and inspiration of Bouazizi's public statement. Proving even more significant, moreover, is that these replications were mostly of younger businessmen in similar situations to that of Bouazizi¹⁹; yet another indication of solidarity within a group that has had its voice stripped, spreading its message through means of immolation.

When exploring self-immolation outside of the context that of Tibet one does not even need to travel outside the confines of China itself, even as far back as the sixth century. During a portion of the Sui dynasty in Eastern China (apprx. 581-618CE) practitioner limitations were instated during a time of quickly-popularizing Buddhism in China. In protest to this, the Chinese monk known as Dazhi was said to have removed his flesh and burned his bones as a personal sacrifice in honor of his faith²⁰. Self-immolation has occurred in contemporary China as well. Starting in 1992, a spiritual movement with Buddhist roots known as "Falun Gong" emerged and quickly spread throughout the country. The movement's teachings put an emphasis on truthfulness, compassion, and forbearance and rapidly became somewhat popular amongst many Chinese people. In 1999, however, labeling the movement and its members as a cult, the Chinese state held a nation-wide crackdown of Falun Gong. In response to this, five members of the movement were said to have committed self-immolation at Tiananmen Square in 2001²¹; a display of defiance to the behemoth PRC administration, though many consider the incident to have been staged by the Chinese police.

¹⁸ De Soto, Hernando (2011). "The real Mohamed Bouazizi." *saudiwave – web, December 18th, 2011*. 1-4.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Benn, James (2007). "Burning for the Buddha: self-immolation in Chinese Buddhism." *Kuroda Institute in East Asian Buddhism*, 9, 1-337.

²¹ Bhatia, Ashwini (2012). "Wave of Tibetan immolations among history's biggest." *USA Today, April 2nd, 2012*. 1-3.



Mohamed Bouazizi committed self-immolation on December 17, 2010 in Ben Arous, Tunisia, igniting much inspiration behind what is known as Arab Spring.



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An adolescent Afghani girl, Fariba, unveils the burn scars she was inflicted with after committing self-immolation in Herat, Afghanistan on April 6th, 2010. Fariba is eleven years old in this image.



The charred corpse of a supposed member of the Falun Gong movement in China, who committed self-immolation in Tiananmen Square in 2001. Many consider the incident to be a PRC hoax.

²² Saeedi, Majid (2010). "Afghan women use self-immolation as cry for help." *Zimbio- web*, April 5th, 2010. 3-36.

It is clear that there is much parallelism across context when considering some purposes that self-immolation can serve as a methodology of protest. However, though these different cases of self-immolation prove as acts with a means of communicating change and reform within their given struggles, it is important to note that in none of these other cases have each respected population necessarily been stripped of their identity, such as in the fashion of the Tibetan people. Therefore, it cannot in fact be certain that the emic meaning and the psychology involved in an act of self immolation is universal across both political borders and cultural milieu.

Culture is the epitome of relativity, especially in the case of Tibet and its melding of politics and religion into its national identity. Thus, it stands as ever-the-more important to take a more detailed look at the aspects that form the Tibetan identity in light of self-immolation as protest, and further investigate the understanding of self-immolation to the Tibetan people.

Review of Relevant Literature

The topic of self-immolation of course is quite a complex and abstract subject, and therefore much care needs to be taken considering the approach to said topic as to evade becoming overly simplified and vague. Many different aspects regarding Tibetan self immolation must be addressed in order to completely and thoroughly envelop what self immolation means to a Tibetan. Ashwini Bhatia, for example, in one of her multiple journalistic pieces on Tibetan self immolation (this piece written for USA Today), quotes Pennsylvania State University professor John Horgan, stating that self immolation can be considered an act performed out of “frustration and helplessness”²³. Though it is probably common sense to assume those who commit suicide by self immolation find themselves frustrated, it seems ill-informed to label self immolation, at least that of the Tibetan context, as an act of helplessness without proper representation.

Tsering Shakya adds to this overall notion of pessimistic interpretation of Tibetan self-immolation. Though Shakya interestingly notes Tibetan self-immolation as symbolic of Tibetan nationalism, stating that the acts show a “conflating [of] body and nation,” Shakya goes on to conclude that Tibetan self-immolation can be seen as the result of the “impossibility of making a

²³ Bhatia, Ashwini (2012). “Wave of Tibetan immolations among history’s biggest.” *USA Today*, April 2nd, 2012. 1-3.

meaningful life²⁴.” This article will exhibit an argument that this notion and all similar to it tend to exist more as speculation and interpretation than representation, utilizing evidence collected from Tibetans that have recently come into exile and/or those born in exile, and that in fact Tibetan self-immolation is acted more out of hope than hopelessness.

A recent *Economist* article adds to this conflicting sentiment as well. The article, simply titled “No Impact,” draws upon the relationship between China and India, China and the United States, as well as the health of the global economy as a window for examining the Tibetan cause, and more specifically, self-immolation as protest. The article speaks of how economic talks between China, the US, and India make it so that the Tibetan issue is somewhat overshadowed and that the Chinese state does not seem to be overly concerned that Tibetan unrest will “derail its diplomacy²⁵.” However, the article seems to leave the reader somewhat confused, as it also notes the Chinese do feel a burden under the immense wave of Tibetan self-immolations and that this makes the state anxious. This piece will highlight the burden that these self-immolations have imposed on the Chinese state, as well as touch on some of the rhetoric the PRC has used to combat this burden. This study will also aim to refute any and all claim of Tibetan self-immolation as an indication of desperation, but instead rather more out of a nuanced nationalistic and Buddhist philosophical notion; these facets find extensive coverage within.

For instance, Damien Keown elaborates on the views of one taking one’s own life from a Buddhist philosophical perspective. Keown notes the role of karma considering one committing suicide, as killing one’s self is seen by Buddhists as an accumulation of negative karma, meaning negative implications for one’s next life. However, also discussed is the matter of intention of a suicide in terms of intention’s role karmically, in that if one is to commit suicide with the intention of somehow benefiting others (especially at the final moment preceding death), then this implies less of a consequence for reincarnation²⁶. This stands as an important detail in the role that Buddhism plays behind the mindset that self immolators are located within, supporting the argument that self immolation indeed does not prove as an indication of desperation or helplessness. This notion is supported by Dr. Kenpo Chowang, an expert on Buddhist philosophy

²⁴ Shakya, Tsering (2012). “Transforming the language of protest.” *Hot Spot Forum, Cultural Anthropology Online*. 1-3.

²⁵ “No Impact.” *Economist, March 31st, 2012*. 1.

²⁶ Keown, Damien (1996). “Buddhism and suicide: the case of Channa.” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 3. 8-31.

and practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, who states that according to the Buddha, committing suicide is a negative act that does indeed mean negative implications, but perhaps that one committing suicide on behalf of the benefit of many others indicates multiple positive acts²⁷. Both of these notions are necessary to note for forming a supplementary theme regarding the act of self immolation and will be addressed and added to.

A recent notion that nationalism plays a strong role regarding Tibetan self immolation has been put forward as well. It is said that these acts of self immolation can be seen as acts provoked out of rage as a show of strength and defiance against Chinese oppression²⁸; for one to commit an act so bold such as self immolation without fear or hesitation requires great strength and discipline, and such a display can be interpreted as a show of this strength, and the strength of the Dharma, to the Chinese conquerors²⁹; an interesting approach to look at Tibetan self immolation seeing that the Dalai Lama and his followers in Dharamsala are said to have openly opposed such acts³⁰. This is a generalization, however, and exists as an ill-informed understanding brought upon by Western speculation and journalism, which oftentimes seems to cover the Tibet issue out of necessity to fulfill requirements for synopses of various conflicts around the world³¹. This piece utilizes gathered evidence that will contest previously conceived perceptions, and argue that in fact many Tibetans-in-exile do not necessarily speak against the immolations occurring in occupied Tibet. With this said, it is also important to look at Tibetan self immolation from this angle, as well as the relationship between Tibetans under occupation and in exile regarding the debate of encouragement vs. discouragement of self immolation; despite the Dalai Lama's condemning of self immolation, many still within the TAR (Tibetan "Autonomous" Region) promote the continuation of the phenomena³². Many of the above explanations for Tibetan self immolation exist only as outsider interpretations, and at times prove vague (if not ill-informed) and only scratch the surface of the psychosocial meaning behind Tibetan self immolation. These approaches can serve as a starting point, however, and this study

²⁷ Interview: Dr. Kenop Chowang, October 26, 2012

²⁸ Shakya, Tsering (2012). "Transforming the language of protest." *Hot Spot Forum, Cultural Anthropology Online*. 1-3.

²⁹ Gyatso, Janet (2012). "Discipline and resistance on the Tibetan Plateau." *Hot Spot Forum- Cultural Anthropology*. 1-3.

³⁰ Bhatia, Ashwini (2012). "Tibet exiles oppose self-immolations." *Lansing State Journal, September 30th, 2012*. 1.

³¹ Norbu, Jamyang (2012). "Make it a burning issue." *Phayul, November 6th, 2012*. 1-3.

³² Wong, Edward (2012). "In Tibetan monastery, a reason for fiery death." *New York Times, June 2nd, 2012*. 1-4.

will attempt to take what has already been said and take it even further, approaching the subject of Tibetan self immolation holistically and speaking from the paradigm of Tibetans themselves.

Self-Immolation from a Tibetan Buddhist Perspective

It would prove impossible, of course, to examine Tibetan self-immolation through a paradigm that of a Tibetan without approaching self-immolation through the perspective of Tibetan Buddhism. With Buddhism having such a strong incorporation into the Tibetan identity, it therefore establishes the importance of observing Tibetan self-immolation through a Buddhist worldview, especially concerning the fragile ethics of Buddhist theory regarding violence and harm involved in the concept of self-immolation.

Tibetan Buddhism and Violence

One of the most crucial facets regarding the practice of Buddhism, seen as essential in developing one's sense of compassion, is that of non-violent action. As the first of what is known as the Five Precepts, non-violence is included as part of the Noble Eightfold Path to what is considered right action, stating that non-violence is absolutely necessary in cultivating freedom from the urge of violence and killing, and to avoid and abstain from the killing of all living beings³³. Thus, fundamentally speaking, if one is to take his/her own life through an act such as self-immolation, and an overwhelming amount of Tibetan immolators have, this means one is to cut-off one's self from spiritual growth, seeing as it is considered that no being of high spirituality will kill his/herself³⁴. This is the case especially so within the realm of Tibetan Buddhism, as compassion is seen as the key facet to living one's life, seeing the Tibetan people view themselves as the direct descendent of Chenrezig, Buddha of Compassion, the Dalai Lama lineage seen as the human emulations of Chenrezig³⁵. Self-immolation, though, is of course considered self-harm and taking one's own life, and so this detail must be specifically examined more closely.

As previously stated, Buddhist fundamentals include the self when considering the definition of all sentient beings, and therefore to harm or take the life of one's self remains seen as an act

³³ Ardley, Jane (2012). "Violent compassion: Buddhism and resistance in Tibet." *Political Studies Association*. 1-37.

³⁴ Keown, Damien (1996). "Buddhism and suicide: the case of Channa." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 3. 8-31.

³⁵ Interview: Dr. Kenpo Chowang, October 26, 2012

without virtue. Important to note when considering self-harm from a Buddhist perspective is the concept of desire, which is considered one of the Three Poisons within Buddhist theory. In taking one's own life, it is implied that a great attachment exists for death, and this means negative implications in the goal of attaining Buddhahood³⁶. Tsepak Rigzin, a personal translator of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, explains this notion through the context of Tibetan self-immolation:

“It is known that the teachings of the Buddha state that all acts violent in nature are unacceptable. This includes all acts of violence towards ourselves. Concerning Buddhist philosophy, what these people who have committed self-immolation have done is still wrong. By burning yourself to death, it still means taking the life from a sentient being and this is not virtuous. This is especially so if the person who has immolated feels attachment to his/her life and a sense of loss when ending that life. Self-immolation in this context is protest, yes, but can be considered as ‘technically violent’ in the Buddhist sense³⁷.”

With this said, it is important that the term “technically violent” is carefully analyzed, as the concept of intent in fact has much influence on the positive or negative karma that one accumulates as the result of one's actions.

The Relationship between Intent and the Violence of Self-harm

Just as crucial as the concept of non-violence in itself, the idea that intent plays a major role karmically within acts of violence is just as important. To say that an act has proven technically violent is to say that the act that was committed has proven violent in itself, not considering the intent of the person who committed the act at the time. Tsepak Rigzin elaborates further on the influence that intent has on an act of negative repercussion:

“However, the Buddha says his teachings are adaptable to account for circumstance, and so there may be exceptions fundamentally for negative acts in the Mahayana tradition. Take, for example, a simple negative act such as lying. Say there is a practitioner meditating in the forest. A deer frantically runs by the

³⁶ Keown, Damien (1996). “Buddhism and suicide: the case of Channa.” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 3. 8-31.

³⁷ Interview: Tsepak Rigzin, November 13, 2012

practitioner, followed shortly by a hunter. The hunter asks the practitioner if he had seen which direction the deer ran. Aware of the fact that the hunter desires to take the life of the deer, the practitioner lies to the hunter and points him in the wrong direction with the intent of preserving the deer's life. In this sense, on behalf of others, may it be possible for one to commit an act that would usually be seen as wrong and adapt it to account for circumstance³⁸."

With this notion in mind, it can be applied to the situation of self-immolation in Tibet. Regarding the consequences one should karmically face as the result of self-harm, Damien Keown cites that to take one's own life "does not omit one from fruition and will have to partake in the fruit of his action³⁹." When looking at the act of self-immolation as simply one committing suicide, it of course seems appropriate to label such acts as desperate attempts to escape a situation of suffering and marginalization. When considering the intent of immolators, however, the meaning of the situation seems to change. The ideology of subjectivism states that a person's acts are functions of that person's state of mind, and so if the motivation behind self-immolation is that on behalf of others and not on behalf of the self in any fashion then this means such an act is free of attachment and/or desire, and therefore means less of a negative implication for the immolator⁴⁰. Dr. Kenpo Chowang further applies this sense of motivation to that of Tibetan self-immolation.

"All beings have a seed that can be cultivated so that we may all eventually attain Buddhahood [Enlightenment]. Some unfortunately have ignorance towards this, which is poisonous, and kill themselves. Killing one's self is of course a negative act, but when intent of killing one's self is on behalf of the benefit of others, however, then this may imply many positive acts. In the case of Tibet, self-immolation can be seen as a display of mental strength, defiance, and perseverance towards the Chinese on the behalf of all Tibetans⁴¹."

This is in fact true in the case of the Tibetan martyrs that have committed self-immolation both inside and outside of occupation. Almost all of those who have committed self-immolation

³⁸ Interview: Tsepak Rigzin, November 13, 2012

³⁹ Keown, Damien (1996). "Buddhism and suicide: the case of Channa." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 3. 8-31.

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Interview: Dr. Kenpo Chowang, October 26, 2012

since 2009 have sent the same message preceding immolation, stating that they have died for the cause of Tibet and demanding the liberation of the Tibetan people from Chinese rule and the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet as the rightful ruler of the plateau⁴². It seems that in fact those who have committed self-immolation have proven free of attachment towards their own lives, and instead have sacrificed their lives on the behalf of promoting the wellbeing of the lives of all other Tibetans. Free of poisonous intention, perhaps self-immolation of Tibetans can be seen as acts of compassion rather than desperation.

Self-Immolation as Compassion

Dying on behalf of the wellbeing of others is not unheard of even of the Buddha. There in fact exists a story that tells of a time when an incarnation of the Buddha took his own life as a sacrifice so that others may live. This story finds setting at the location of Name Buddha, situated in what is now central Nepal. It is said that the Buddha was walking amongst the hills and stumbled upon a cave in which he entered. Within the cave lay a starving tigress and her cubs. Aware of the fact that the tigress was too feeble to feed her cubs, the Buddha decided that he was the only help that the family of tigers had. To bring food to the tigress would mean killing another creature, and this the Buddha could not rightly do, and so the Buddha let run his blood for the starving tigress to drink. The tigress eventually gained enough strength to eat, and so the Buddha sacrificed his own body so that the tigress could eat and feed her cubs; a selfless act that takes one life in order to preserve multiple⁴³.

The actions said to have taken place at Namu Buddha were actions made out of compassion for the lives of other sentient beings, and the same can be said for those Tibetans who have chosen to self-immolate on behalf of all other Tibetans that have and still are currently suffering under occupation. Tenzin Jigdal, the current president of the group Students for a Free Tibet (SFT), supports this notion of self-immolation as compassion, stating that the Tibetans who have committed self-immolation are not only exhibiting compassion towards their fellow Tibetans, but

⁴² Tibetan Parliament in Exile, *Messages from Martyrs*

⁴³ Interview: Patrick Dowd, November 15, 2012

even towards the Chinese as well, both the state and the ethnic Han who have immigrated into Tibet under encouragement of the state⁴⁴:

“Is Tibetan self-immolation violent? No I do not think so. These people who have committed these acts have taken all of the years of pain and suffering they have experienced, all of the pain that they could have redirected to inflict upon others around them, and instead have inflicted it upon themselves. This, I believe, is one of the highest forms of non-violence and compassion⁴⁵.”

Through their acts of self-immolation, the people who have committed these acts have made it clear that they value the life of their leader the Dalai Lama and the freedom of their country and people above all else, even their own lives. The immolators have shown that their mindset at the time of immolation was one of empathy and not out of anger or malice⁴⁶. Free of these blinding and inhibiting states of mind, it is clear that the intent of these acts is out of compassion, and this exists as one of the ultimate altruisms, especially to the Tibetan people who value compassion above all else. Nevertheless, it seems that misunderstanding stands perpetuated amongst the greater community, and for multiple reasons. With this said, it is imperative that the complexity of the politics surrounding the subject of Tibetan self-immolation is dissected.

The Politics of Tibetan Self-Immolation: Domestic and International

“One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” This seems to be the situation that varied rhetoric has currently placed Tibetan self-immolation in. Rhetoric, after all, proves as one of the most powerful forces regarding influence over one’s perception of a certain reality. Palestinian jihadists are considered evil by most Israelis, but many Palestinians understand these militants as the people fighting to regain their homeland. This is the type of opposing discourse that has seemed to cause so much perplexity concerning various understandings of Tibetan self-immolation, even within the Tibetan exile community itself.

⁴⁴Craig, Mary (1999). “Tears of Blood.” *Counterpoint Publications*, 2. 1-341.

⁴⁵ Interview: Tenzin Jigdal, November 22, 2012

⁴⁶ Interview: Tenzin Choekyi, November 15, 2012

An Internal Divide?

It is known that the Dalai Lama has openly opposed and called for an end to the self-immolations occurring inside and outside of occupation⁴⁷. As the emulation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, His Holiness approaches these acts of self-immolation with Buddhist discourse and the perspective of self-immolation as violence towards the self. Tsepak Rigzin provides another example as a representation of this view:

“Take, for instance, those who have undergone tantric initiation. An important aspect of tantric practice is that one is not to neglect his/her health, and harming or killing the self in this fashion is to go against this belief. In tantric meditation one is to see the self as a deity. Committing self-immolation and killing yourself in this situation can be seen in a way as killing this deity. By supporting these acts we are no less guilty, as we would be rejoicing in the act of killing⁴⁸.”

This notion, however, is born purely out of a religious point of view and somewhat ignores the intent behind those who have committed self-immolation for the Tibetan cause; as previously stated, Tsepak Rigzin himself mentions the importance of circumstance in these situations⁴⁹. To look at Tibetan self-immolation in this manner and this manner only is to label these acts as a form of protest out of solely religious motivation, and this is not necessarily the case; from a Buddhist perspective self-immolation and/or suicide can be seen as the ultimate violence, but as an act of political means these acts can be considered as the ultimate sacrifice, free from judgment of religious ethics⁵⁰. Tenzin Choekyi, a member of the Tibetan advocacy group known as the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), explains this alternate view:

“There is nothing more honorable than giving up your life for your country and your people. If these people are willing to selflessly sacrifice their lives for the cause of their country then who are we to say that’s morally wrong? We have absolutely no right to pass judgment. None of these peoples’ neighbors try to stop them from carrying out these acts; who would I be as an activist to reject them? It

⁴⁷ Bhatia, Ashwini (2012). “Wave of Tibetan immolations among history’s biggest.” *USA Today*, April 2nd, 2012. 1-3.

⁴⁸ Interview: Tsepak Rigzin, November 13, 2012

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Interview: Lhasang Tsering, November 23, 2012

is insulting to interpret these acts as violent or not; they are political acts with means towards a greater end, not acts of religious means⁵¹.”

Perhaps the Dalai Lama would not agree with this notion, but how could he? He is the figure-head of the Buddhist faith; to not oppose self-immolation would go against the very doctrine that he embodies. The Dalai Lama lineage has always held a position of strong religious and political authority, and the fact that the current Dalai Lama has been faced with this dilemma has put him in a complicated position; having a position of religious symbolism and political weight over a tense exile community is in part why His Holiness has given away much of his political power in order to focus more on his spiritual leadership. The vast majority of immolators in Tibet have demanded the return of their leader the Dalai Lama to Tibet as a preceding message to immolation. As a result, many have interpreted this as a reason to go about the Tibet cause through the Dalai Lama’s so called “Middle Path,” a methodology for compromise in Tibet that solicits a certain amount of autonomy for Tibetans to co-exist with Chinese people in a transition of peaceful and non-violent means. Self-immolation, of course, violates this method, but this makes it important to analyze the demands of immolators for His Holiness’s return. When taken literally, one could easily interpret these demands as of religious means, but this is not necessarily the case. Rather, asking for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet can be seen, as in the words of Jamyang Norbu, a Tibetan author and activist, as a means “to personalize a broad political ideal and make it more immediate and meaningful to the common Tibetan⁵².” In this sense asking for the return of His Holiness is interpreted as a demand for eventual autonomy for the Tibetan people. Tenzin Choekyi further clarifies:

“Do you think that these people who are immolating are asking for the Dalai Lama to return to give teachings right now? No, they are asking for their political leader back. To have the Dalai Lama return to Tibet would mean autonomy for Tibet and freedom for the Tibetan people⁵³.”

The reestablishment of the Dalai Lama in Tibet would of course mean the restoration of complete religious practice for Tibetan Buddhist, but it is first necessary to understand what the

⁵¹ Interview: Tenzin Choekyi, November 15, 2012

⁵² Norbu, Jamyang (2012). “Make it a burning issue.” *Phayul*, November 6th, 2012. 1-3.

⁵³ Interview: Tenzin Choekyi, November 15, 2012

Dalai Lama means to the Tibetan people. He is the emulation of the patron-saint Chenrezig, embodiment of all that Tibetans hold dear and true. The Dalai Lama serves as the icon of this embodiment; he is the physical representation of the Tibetan identity. Many of the immolators under occupation have never seen His Holiness or even an image of him due to Chinese censorship, and hence feel stripped of this identity⁵⁴. Through crying out for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet these immolators are not necessarily demanding the return of an individual, but rather are crying out for the restoration of freedom of their people *through* the return of that individual⁵⁵. This notion, however, can easily prove lost in translation, as understandings for phenomena such as this often become confused when crossing cultural borders as such.

Is the International Community Even Capable of Understanding?

After witnessing the history-making acts of self-immolation throughout the period of the war in Vietnam during the 1960's an American doctor attempted to wrap her mind around what she had seen, having the incidents explained to her by the Buddhist philosopher Tich Nhat Hanh. These were Tich Nhat Hanh's words after-the-fact:

“I said no more, realizing that she could never understand. She could not understand because she was unable, though not unwilling, to look at self-immolation from any angle other than her own⁵⁶.”

The question regarding the ability to perceive out-of-context phenomena such as self-immolation is an important one indeed. The act of taking one's own life is perceived quite differently across cultural borders, especially that of East to West. Oftentimes the Western perception of suicide is labeled as “giving up” in a certain respect, whereas in the context of Tibetans, these acts of suicide are perceived as quite the opposite: as acts of patriotism⁵⁷. Tenzin Tsundue, a free Tibet advocate and well-known Tibetan poet, adds to this:

“Considering the matter of context, it is important how we explain it [self-immolation] to the community. If we are to know how to articulate immolation we must first know how to articulate struggle. When western Buddhists who are

⁵⁴ Interview: Lhasang Tsering, November 23, 2012

⁵⁵ Interview: Tenzin Choekyi, November 15, 2012

⁵⁶ Ardley, Jane (2012). “Violent compassion: Buddhism and resistance in Tibet.” *Political Studies Association*. 1-37.

⁵⁷ Interview: Lhasang Tsering, November 23, 2012

closest to us [Tibetan Buddhists] do not understand us then how will say the Christian or Muslim world? From a puritanical Buddhist perspective any harm to others or self is morally wrong because it is violent, but we must evaluate these incidents of violence by the actor's intent and in *their* context⁵⁸.”

Some have taken the rhetoric of Tibetan self-immolation as pure violence and run, including the Chinese state. As part of the Chinese campaign to come across as just concerning its occupation of Tibet the PRC has labeled the Tibetan immolators as extremists and terrorists, claiming that these so called terrorists commit these acts as a means to return Tibet to the fascist state it once was and to ethnically expel all non-Tibetans⁵⁹. This rhetoric, however, does not seem to travel outside of China, and the terms “extreme” and “radical” have not made a significant impact upon the international community⁶⁰.

On the other hand, an understanding that has seemed to have proven pervasive among the greater community is that of Tibetan self-immolation out of desperation or helplessness⁶¹. This impression is perhaps influenced by the common perception that an act of suicide is in essence eternal surrender, a way of giving up or escaping despair. This is a misconception in this context, however, and requires attention. There perhaps exists an aspect of desperation regarding self-immolation, but concerning the context of Tibetan self-immolation any desperation displayed has nothing to do with the immolator's mindset and everything to do with the immolator's circumstance; in the words of Lhasang Tsering, a Tibetan autonomy activist and former president of the TYC, these acts of self-immolation are “not out of lost hope and prove desperate only under a desperate *situation*⁶².” As mentioned, Tibetans under occupation have had their voice taken from them; all form of protest has been strictly forbidden by the Chinese state. Tibetan self-immolation is therefore an act of desperation only in the fact that these people have been left with no other option. To the Tibetan people self-immolation is not in a sense “giving up,” but rather just the opposite; they continue to resist occupation and assimilation and fight to restore what was once their country, and even more important, they fight to reclaim the identity that has

⁵⁸ Interview: Tenzin Tsundue, November 18, 2012

⁵⁹ “No Impact,” *Economist*, March 31st, 2012

⁶⁰ Interview: Tenzin Choekyi, November 15, 2012

⁶¹ Shakya, Tsering (2012). “Transforming the language of protest.” *Hot Spot Forum, Cultural Anthropology Online*. 1-3

⁶² Interview: Lhasang Tsering, November 23, 2012

been stripped from them. Although sorrowful, self-immolation has made it clear that Chinese policy is not welcome in the plateau⁶³. In the age of instant gratification the effect that self-immolation has towards the Tibetan cause may not seem visible to the naked eye, but this is because the effect that Tibetan self-immolation creates is neither instant nor visible. In the context of the 1960's Vietnamese self-immolations, Tich Naht Hanh explained the intention behind the acts in that the "self-immolator hopes the 'supporters of war' cannot bare the pain of such a sight and stops his actions⁶⁴." In the context of Tibetan immolation, the situation is similar; the surmounting accumulation of a humanitarian burden speaks to the consciousness of the PRC⁶⁵. Tenzin Choekyi elaborates:

"The loss of these peoples' lives is saddening, yes, but we must look at the larger picture; we must concentrate on the long-term goal in the scheme of this all. The immediate result is the loss of Tibetan lives and the immediate burden is on the Tibetan people, but the larger burden will prove to be on the Chinese. Tibet is a pressure cooker; with the number of immolators rising the situation is only going to escalate and the message of the Tibetan people will only ring louder⁶⁶."

A pressure cooker Tibet is indeed, and for this to function heat is required. The Tibetans under occupation have provided this necessary ingredient, with each immolator adding another flame, each increasing the pressure within; at the rate of self-immolation that Tibet is currently witnessing the question of its maximum capacity for this pressure is only a matter of time. The might and strength of the PRC is immense, but even the PRC can only prove so strong in this situation, each immolator in Tibet adding another brick lain upon the back of the Chinese; it is only a matter of how many of these bricks the back of the Chinese state can hold. This, in the minds of so many Tibetan people, exists as the underlying meaning for these acts of martyrdom.

Conclusion

In recent years the amount of Tibetans under occupation committing self-immolation as protest has been increasing at an astounding rate. Bearing witness to self-harm and suicide as a

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Ardley, Jane (2012). "Violent compassion: Buddhism and resistance in Tibet." *Political Studies Association*. 1-37.

⁶⁵ Interview: Tenzin Tsundue, November 18, 2012

⁶⁶ Interview: Tenzin Choekyi, November 15, 2012

means of protesting this occupation, much of the world has been left in a state of awe and confusion, and in many cases has constructed meaning for these acts as to understand them within one's own paradigm. However, to fully understand these acts for what they are and what they mean to the people committing them, it is necessary to examine these incidents through the context of which they lie within. Self-immolation may prove violent in a certain respect, perhaps, but these acts of self-immolation are not in fact necessarily committed in the name of Buddhism. These protests are absolutely political in nature and should be judged as such; the effects of such acts may not appear as an immediate repercussion for the cause of the Tibetan people, but rather exist as a means to a greater end. These people do not immolate out of cowardice or purposeful escape, but instead out of selfless devotion to one's people, country, and cause; after all, this is what has granted these men and women the title of "martyr."



Jampa Yeshe self-immolates in New Delhi on March 26, 2012

“We can only give our lives to our cause and our beliefs, and if that is not Buddhist enough of us, then we have nothing left to offer.”

- Tenzin Tsundue, 2012

Methodologies

It is important to note that this study was conducted as a means to reflect the views of Tibetan people in exile, employing information gathered in the field. Much time was spent utilizing archival research pertaining to the subject-matter of this article in order to build a base upon which this study found its starting point. This included literature pertaining to theory relevant to the research conducted for this study, and relevant literature provided by Tibetans in exile as well. The majority of the research conducted was heavily qualitative in nature. Several semi-structured interviews were recorded with members of the exile community in order to produce an article that was as representative of the Tibetan population as possible. All persons interviewed and included in this article provided informed consent and were informed of their ethical rights. Let it be noted that this article was meant to be expressive of the Tibetan people and the informants which are included; the tone and attitude presented by the researcher were intended to act as a vessel for which this could take place.

Limitations

In terms of reflecting the views and mindset of the Tibetan people concerning the recent acts of self-immolation, this investigation would have ideally taken place within occupied Tibet. Practicalities made this impossible, however, and thus the research conducted was done so in exile communities. This remains representative, though having conducted the study inside Tibet would have assured the representativeness of the population in which this analysis pertains to. Also, although adequate time was given to conduct this research and produce its responding article, having been given more time would have even further strengthened its representativeness. Minor emotional distress experienced by both informants and researcher could have potentially affected this as well.

Suggestions for Further Research

Though the relationship between those for complete autonomy of Tibet and those for the “Middle Path” was covered to a minor extent within this piece, it is imperative that the dynamic of this relationship and its effect on the exile community be further

investigated. Said dynamic is likely to have much influence over the exile community; an investigation of both the political and social aspects of this relationship is suggested.



The Tibetan Martyrs Memorial in McLeod Ganj, India

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