

Self-Immolation in Tibet: Some Reflections on an Unfolding History

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Self-immolations by fire among Tibetans in contemporary times started in the exile community in 1998 and in Tibet¹ in 2009. Since then, these acts have continued, with rather long interruptions at some points but with a tremendous increase during the years 2011 and 2012. As all the contributions in this special issue show, this phenomenon has taken place in a number of other countries and has in each case a specific history and a possible array of explanations and interpretations.

This paper aims at putting the Tibetan self-immolations in context, giving their chronology and highlighting some of the reactions these events have set off. It will also briefly discuss the significance of speaking and writing on a subject such as this, while its history continues to unfold.

We have to go back 14 years back to understand the first modern Tibetan self-immolation by fire. In 1998, Thupten Ngodrup, a sixty-year old ex-Buddhist monk from Tashilhunpo monastery (Central Tibet) and ex-soldier (in exile), set himself on fire in Delhi (India). He was about to participate in a hunger strike unto death organised by the Tibetan Youth Congress² in order, as he said in an interview, “to give his life to bring about peace and fulfilment to his unhappy people.”³ But before his turn came, while the six hunger strikers were on the 49th day of their movement, the Indian police began their forced removal on April 27. Prevented from fasting unto death, Thupten Ngodrup self-immolated.

He was carried to the hospital where the Dalai Lama came to see visit him. The hierarch recognized that Thupten Ngodrup’s “act had

¹ In this article, the term Tibet covers the three main Tibetan regions: Central Tibet (U-Tsang), Kham and Amdo, i.e., the entire Tibetan Plateau.

² The Tibetan Youth Congress is an exile NGO that advocates independence for Tibet.

³ <http://www.jamyangnorbu.com/blog/2008/05/12/remembering-thupten-ngodup/>.

created an unprecedented awareness of the Tibetan cause."⁴ He was right, as can be seen from the message left by Lama Sobha⁵ who self-immolated in Darlak (Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai province) in January 2012. This lama explained, in his recorded testament, that he drew his inspiration from "Thupten Ngodrup and all other Tibetan heroes, who have sacrificed their lives for Tibet and for uniting the Tibetan people in action."⁶

On the same day in 1998, while the Dalai Lama was at Thupten Ngodrup's bedside, the hierarch advised him not to "harbour any feeling of hatred towards the Chinese,"⁷ thus stressing the importance of the state of mind of the individual at the time of dying in order for him or her to avoid a bad rebirth.

In a statement made the day after, the Dalai Lama expressed his disagreement with both actions, fasting unto death and self-immolation, on the grounds that "he was against any form of violence."⁸ However, Gandhi to whom the Dalai Lama often refers when speaking about non-violence, or Thích Quảng Đức, the Vietnamese monk who self-immolated in 1963 in Saigon, regarded these acts as part of a non-violent struggle. This was also clearly expressed by Thích Nhất Hạnh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, in the open letter he wrote to Martin Luther King in 1963: "To express one's will by burning oneself is not to commit an act of destruction but to perform an act of construction, that is to say, to suffer and to die for the sake of one's people." In his turn, Thích Quảng Độ, Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam who is presently under house arrest at a monastery in Hồ Chí Minh City, smuggled out a letter of solidarity he wrote to the Dalai Lama in which he expressed his feelings regarding self-immolation: "Self-immolation is indeed a tragic and extreme act, one that should be avoided at all costs. But there are moments when this ultimate gesture, that of offering one's body as a torch of compassion to dissipate darkness and ignorance, is the only possible recourse."⁹

At the time of Thupten Ngodrup's self-immolation, everyone was greatly shocked but, as far as I know, the scholarly community did

⁴ <http://www.jamyangnorbu.com/blog/2008/05/12/remembering-thupten-ngodup/>.

⁵ Sobha is a common pet name of Sonam in Amdo which explains why both spellings can be found.

⁶ <https://sites.google.com/site/tibetanpoliticalreview/articles/tibetanlamaurge-sunitynationhoodbeforeself-immolating>.

⁷ <http://www.jamyangnorbu.com/blog/2008/05/12/remembering-thupten-ngodup/>.

⁸ <http://www.tibet.to/tyc1998/tyce.htm#09>.

⁹ http://www.tncvonline.com/cms/index.php?op=news_details&id=5586.

not reflect upon nor react to the self-immolation itself in spite of the fact that, as far as we know, it was the first time a Tibetan had used this act as a form of protest.

Eight years later, on November 23 2006, another Tibetan, Lhakpa Tsering, an activist in the Tibetan Youth Congress, set himself on fire, also in India, this time in Mumbai as a protest against Hu Jintao's visit to India.¹⁰

The next immolation took place in 2009 in Tibet and was to be followed by many more.

We should recall here that an important series of events occurred in Tibet in 2008: that year demonstrations spread all over the Tibetan plateau, both in monasteries and among the lay community. As is well known, the resulting repression was very severe, leading to arrests, heavy sentences (including the death penalty), and an even stricter control of the monasteries. Nevertheless, from 2008 onwards, Tibetans in Tibet did not stop expressing their rejection of some Chinese policies and they resorted to various peaceful tactics: non-cooperation movements;¹¹ boycotts;¹² White Wednesdays (*lhakar*)¹³ during which people eat Tibetan food but no meat, speak Tibetan and wear Tibetan clothes; vegetarianism; abandon of monasteries by nuns and monks to escape from the new rules;¹⁴ demonstrations in support of the Tibetan language; coded radical poetry; and self-immolations.

¹⁰ <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=14875&t=1>.

¹¹ For example, Tibetans in February 2012 refused to celebrate New Year (*losar*) in spite of all attempts by Chinese authorities, by way of money or threat. Instead of the festival, they observed a period of mourning in memory of the self-immolators.

¹² http://www.tchrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=221:arming-boycott-continues-in-ngaba-village-against-detention-of-fellow-villagers&catid=70:2012-news&Itemid=162 and http://www.tchrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=209:tibetans-beaten-arrested-for-protesting-official-corruption&catid=70:2012-news&Itemid=162.

¹³ In many blogs such as <http://lhakardiaries.com/about/>, it is written that *lhakar*, literally meaning "White Wednesday," that is the "soul's day of the Dalai Lama." According to Charles Bell, *Portrait of the Dalai Lama*. London: Collins, 1946, p. 338, "Everybody has two lucky days and one unlucky day every week. These all depend on what year out of the cycle of twelve animals he was born in. The [13th] Dalai Lama having been born in the Mouse year, his lucky days are Tuesday and Wednesday; his unlucky one is Saturday... The two lucky days in each week are termed the life day (*sok-sa*; [Tib. *srog gza*']) and the soul day (*la-za* [Tib. *bla gza*'])." According to Bell, then, the "soul's day" is called *laza* (*bla gza*') and not *lhakar* (*lha dkar*). A Golok informant explained *lhakar* as "the soul's day of the Dalai Lama during which Tibetans do not eat meat": the soul day of the 14th Dalai Lama is Wednesday and the adjective *kar*, refers to *karkyong* or vegetarianism.

¹⁴ <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/abandon-01312012130228.html>.

On February 27 2009, this time in North-Eastern Tibet, in the traditional province of Amdo, Tapey, a young monk from Kīrti monastery, self-immolated in the market area of Ngawa (Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan) holding a Tibetan flag with a picture of the Dalai Lama. His gesture took place as a protest after the Chinese authorities forbade a prayer ceremony in his monastery. Kīrti monastery, a monastery belonging to the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism,¹⁵ and the larger county to which it belongs (Ngawa county), were soon to become the places where the highest number of self-immolations would occur, possibly, as Kīrti Rinpoche told one day because Ngawa was the first place reached by the Long March in 1935. Many people were killed, many monasteries were destroyed and “these events have caused a wound in the heart of Ngawa people, which is hard to heal.” The consequences of the “Democratic reforms” in 1958 and of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 led to “the wound of the second generation” that created a deep animosity against the Chinese Communist rule. The “wound of the third generation” developed from the various repressive dispositions taken against the monasteries since 1998.¹⁶

This radical form of taking one's own life, almost unheard of in Tibet, was not repeated until two years later, on March 16 2011, when Phuntsok, a monk from the same monastery, set himself on fire on the 3rd anniversary of the 2008 uprising in Ngawa. Since then, thirty-five other Tibetans have self-immolated in Tibet.¹⁷

According to the present Chinese administrative division, these self-immolations appear to take place in 3 provinces and 1 autonomous region (Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and the Tibet Autonomous Region). But if we look now at the traditional provinces of Tibet, which have disappeared from Chinese maps, only two of them, Kham and Amdo, which still exist as cultural entities, have been the

¹⁵ See Daniel Berounský's article on Kīrti monastery in this special issue.

¹⁶ <http://www.savetibet.org/policy-center/us-government-and-legislative-advocacy/testimony-kirti-rinpoche-chief-abbot-kirti-monastery-tom-lantos>. See also <http://historicaldocs.blogspot.in/2012/05/red-army-in-ngaba-1935-1936.html> and *Mi thog gsum gyi rma kha 1935-2009*, Dharamsala: bzhugs sgar Kīrti'i byes pa grwa tshang gi dza drag 'brel mthud tshogs chung, n.d. See also Daniel Berounský and Tsering Shakya's contributions in this issue for other interpretations.

¹⁷ This paper was presented on May 14 2012. At the time of writing (October 14 2012), the toll had risen to 55. This number does not include Thupten Nyendak Rinpoche and his niece Ani Atse who died on April 6 2012 in a house fire, because we do not know exactly if their death was the result of an accident or an immolation. In this paper, though, I will only analyse and provide details about the first 35 self-immolators. See <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/fire-05042012163355.html?searchterm=Nyendak%20Rinpoche>.

scene of self-immolations, with a majority having taken place in Amdo alone.



Courtesy ICT (MAP 2009-MAY 2012)

In Amdo — 30 immolations

- 14 self-immolators were monks or former monks from Kirti monastery in Ngawa (Ch. Aba) county in the Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture (Sichuan),
- 8 more came from the same county, among them 2 were nuns
- 3 were from Dzamthang (Ch. Rangtang), also in the Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture (Sichuan),
- 1 from Themchen in the Tsonup (Ch. Haixi) Mongolian and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Qinghai),
- 1 from Darlak in the Golok (Ch. Guolo) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Qinghai),
- 2 from Rebkong in the Malho (Ch. Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Qinghai), and
- 1 from Machu in the Kanlho (Ch. Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Gansu).

In Kham — 5 immolations

- 1 Tibetan set himself on fire in Kardze and two in Tawu in the Kardze (Ch. Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Sichuan),

- 1 was from Jyekundo in the Jyekundo (Ch. Yushu) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Qinghai),
- 1 immolation took place in Chamdo (Ch. Changdu), the traditional administrative centre of Kham (currently in the Tibet Autonomous Region).

Among these 35 Tibetans, 25 were monks or ex-monks (among them one reincarnated lama), 3 were nuns and 7 were lay people (5 men and 2 women).

As for age, more than two-thirds (26) were in their twenties or younger; the others were a little older; the oldest being in his forties. All were born and educated in the People's Republic of China. As far as we know, as of May 2012, 25 of them had died from their burns.

In exile, 3 Tibetans have self-immolated since 2011: 1 in Nepal and 2 in India. The most recent one, Jamphel Yeshe, died on March 29 2012. Many pictures of him in flames found their way into newspapers all around the world, drawing the interest of the international media to the situation in Tibet for a few days. This is in sharp contrast to the lack of coverage by the international media of the 35 Tibetan self-immolators in Tibet.¹⁸

In exile, foreign media in Tibetan (Voice of America, Radio Free Asia) or Tibetan media in English (such as *Phayul* or the *Tibetan Political Review*) or in Tibetan (such as *Khabdha*), all give the same information about the self-immolators: name, father and mother's names; status (monastic or lay); if lay, the information includes: occupation, family circumstances for lay people (siblings, marital status, children) and age. But one detail that is never given, as far as I know, is the Buddhist sect to which the self-immolator belongs, leading one to think that there is no relationship (at least in the mind of Tibetans) between religious school and immolation. Nevertheless, it should be noted that regarding those whose religious affiliation is known with certainty, 25 were Gelukpa, i.e. the majority, reflecting the fact that most self-immolations concerned monks from one single big Gelukpa monastery.

To this tragic list we have to add the case of a young Tibetan who, instead of self-immolation, chose another form of self-inflicted death to protest against the Chinese occupation: he jumped to his death from Howrah bridge in Kalkotta (India) in April 2012 wearing a Free Tibet T-shirt.

¹⁸ See on the subject: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/13/china-attempts-seal-tibet-outside-information>. A *TIME* magazine survey has listed the "Self-Immolation of Tibetan Monks" as the number one "underreported story" for the year 2011. See <http://www.examiner.com/article/self-immolations-most-underreported-story-of-2011>.

Following this wave of self-immolations, the reactions among Tibetan leaders and the diaspora population were far from uniform. In 2011, the Dalai Lama was much less peremptory than after Thupten Ngodrup's immolation. He did not condemn the self-immolations anymore but questioned their effectiveness,¹⁹ as he considered them to be "a sign of deep desperation."²⁰ For his part, Lobsang Sangay, the Prime Minister in exile elected in 2011, agreed with the description of the self-immolators as desperate people and claimed that these acts were a waste of life,²¹ somehow depriving those Tibetans of their own agency. As for the Karmapa, one of the most important Tibetan hierarchs in exile, he called for a halt to them.²² This opposition on the part of charismatic leaders in exile clearly had a limited effect since, as we saw, immolations took place, not only in Tibet but also in India and Nepal.

The scholarly community was greatly affected and alerted by this wave of self-immolations. The international symposium of which results are presented in this issue was one of the responses to this phenomenon and aims at providing a means to understand it better. But to address a phenomenon pertaining to an unfolding history is a challenge: how to grasp the meaning of these acts without being able to stand back and look at them retrospectively? How to answer the many questions that these acts raise? Do they belong to the religious or the political sphere? Are they both protests and offerings? How to explain why it is mostly clerics who have immolated themselves, in spite of the fact that some Buddhists²³ consider self-immolations by nuns and monks more problematic than those committed by lay people, since these actions will prevent them from continuing their spiritual practices?

Moreover, given our lack of access to the Tibetan areas ever since the dramatic chain of suicides began, how to assess the situation on the ground? We should also make it clear that it is almost impossible for any of us here to contact friends and relatives in Tibet, given the amazingly tight and efficient control by the Chinese authorities over international communications (i.e., email and telephones) and the

¹⁹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-15799562>.

²⁰ <http://www.navhindtimes.in/india-news/go-vegetarian-kalachakra-ceremony>.

²¹ http://www.moneycontrol.com/news/special-videos/immolation-is-wastelife-support-is-vital_690429.html.

²² <http://kagyuoffice.org/#KarmapaBG5>.

²³ Yijing (635-713), a Chinese pilgrim who went to India, opposed immolation by fire if they were committed by monks and nuns, since their deaths "would deprive them of the opportunities to continue spiritual practices" (see Martin Delhey, "Views on Suicide in Buddhism: Some remarks," in M. Zimmermann (ed.) *Buddhism and Violence*. Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2006, p. 49). One may note that this remark concerns Chinese Buddhism only.

danger that our friends would face if we phoned them to ask their opinions.

In our particular field, Tibetologists and intellectuals began questioning the act of self-immolation in the Tibetan world on various blogs in 2009, that is after the self-immolation of Tabey, a gesture, as was noted, that was not repeated until 2011.

The first and main question raised in these discussions was whether self-immolation was or was not a Tibetan Buddhist practice and whether there were earlier cases of self-immolations in Tibetan history. As for the former, some claimed that such an act was absolutely against Tibetan Buddhist practice since the taking of one's own lives is considered a very negative act.²⁴ A few added that only a lack of proper Buddhist education in occupied Tibet could explain that monks and nuns took their own life in such a way. Others, on the contrary, made a parallel with the previous lives of the Buddha, pointing to the fact that the *jātaka* tales (stories of Buddha's lives) were full of stories recounting the Bodhisattva's self-sacrifice for altruistic reasons.²⁵ Several made a reference to the self-immolation of the Bodhisattva Medicine King told in the 23rd chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*.²⁶

Actually, it seems very difficult to answer this question, since self-immolation is viewed differently according to the period and the school of Buddhism to which one refers.²⁷ It seems that one can always find the answer one wants to find in one text or another.

Regarding the question of self-immolations in Tibetan history, we can turn to the *Bashe*,²⁸ a historical text believed to have been written in the 9th century. It focuses on the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet, the construction of Samye (the first Tibetan monastery) and the debate that took place between the adepts of Chinese and Indian Buddhism. It mentions a dispute that led to the immolation of one of the protagonists: "Rgya set fire to his own head and died."²⁹ It should

²⁴ <http://www.vipassana.fr/Textes/DalaiLamaEthique3Millenaire.htm>.

²⁵ Among them, Jamyang Norbu, an exile intellectual and activist. See <http://www.jamyangnorbu.com/blog/2012/01/03/self-immolation-and-buddhism/>

²⁶ On which topic, see J. A. Benn, *Burning for the Buddha: Self-Immolation in Chinese Buddhism*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007, chapter 2 and James Benn's article in this issue.

²⁷ As Delhey (*op. cit.*) has shown through the various sources he studied.

²⁸ Pasang Wangdu and Hildegard Diemberger, *Dbā' bzhed: The Royal Narrative Concerning the Bringing of the Buddha's Doctrine in Tibet*. Wien : Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften-Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences of the Tibet Autonomous Region, 2000, pp. 77, 80.

²⁹ *Rgyas ni rang gi mgo la me btang ste shi /*

be noted, though, that the name could refer to a Chinese master rather than a Tibetan one.³⁰

As for Tashi Tsering,³¹ he mentions, based on Pawo Tsuglak Trengwa's *Feast for the Learned*,³² the self-immolation in the 11th century of Dolchung Korpon, "the local functionary,"³³ in front of the Jowo, the most sacred statue in the main temple of Lhasa: "he wrapped his body in an oiled cloth, and immolated himself (*mar mer sbar*) ... as an offering in the presence of the Jowo..." When he passed away, "a great light emerged from the crown of his head, in the place where his skull had caved in, and vanished into the sky."³⁴ This last sentence leads us to think that by offering his body, he attained salvation.

Tashi Tsering gives also the example of Karma Chagme (1613-1678), a great master of the 17th century, who gave one of his left fingers as an offering lamp to the Jowo.³⁵

More recently, Robert Ekvall, an American missionary who spent many years among pastoralists in North-Eastern Tibet during the first half of the 20th century and was quite immersed in the milieu of Tibetan culture, mentioned "suicidal immolation" that, he thought, survived "from pre-Buddhist forms of propitiation in violation of basic Buddhist ideals."³⁶ This pre-Buddhist hypothesis needs further research and, as far as I know, has not been mentioned anywhere else.

Yet, even if we can assume, on the grounds of such attested incidents, that more cases of self-immolation might be found in Tibetan biographies and other sources than we initially thought, it is difficult to assert that self-immolation as an act of offering or protest constituted a widespread tradition in Tibet.

³⁰ "The *Nyang chos 'byung* (407) rejects the self-immolation of the Chinese Master and his followers as false." Pasang Wangdu and Hildegard Diemberger, *op. cit.* 2000, p. 88, n. 331.

³¹ Tashi Tsering, in Gyurme Dorje, Tashi Tsering, Heather Stoddard, André Alexander (eds.), *Jokhang, Tibet's most sacred Buddhist Temple*. London and Bangkok: Edition Hansjörg Mayer, 2010, pp. 136-37.

³² Tashi Tsering, *op. cit.*, and Dpa' bo Gtsug lag phreng ba, *Dam pa'i chos kyi 'khor lo bsgyur ba mams kyi byung ba gsal bar byed dpa mkhas pa'i dga' ston*. Stod cha. Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1986, p. 447.

³³ Ronald M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance. Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 2008, p. 254.

³⁴ Dpa' bo Gtsug lag phreng ba, *op. cit.*, p. 447.

³⁵ Tashi Tsering, in Gyurme Dorje et al., *op. cit.*, p. 137.

³⁶ Robert B. Ekvall, *Religious Observances in Tibet: Patterns and Functions*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1964, p. 165.

Terminology

Terminology is an aspect of self-immolation that might provide us with some information on how Tibetans perceive the act of self-immolation today.

Ekvall claimed in his book³⁷ that immolations are called “blood offerings” (*marcho*), a term used at the present time mainly, as far as I know, to describe animal sacrifices or the offering of human blood to local deities during some rituals like the *lurol* in Rebkong (Amdo).

Concerning the contemporary situation, I have never come across the expression *marcho* or blood offerings in articles or blogs speaking about self-immolations. Instead, I have found various other Tibetan expressions such as:

rang sreg: to burn oneself
rang lus mer sreg: to burn one's body
rang lus me sbar: to set one's body on fire
sku lus zhugs mer 'bul: to offer one's body to fire (humilific)
rang lus me sbyin: to give fire to the body
rang lus me mchod: offering fire to the body
rang lus me sgron: to light one's body on fire³⁸
[rang lus] mar mer sbar: to burn [one's body] as an offering lamp
rang srog blos btang: to give up one's life-force
lus sbyin: to give one's body
rang lus zhugs 'bul: to offer one's body to the fire (humilific)

We can see that Tibetan commentators are striving to create new terms for a new phenomenon that they interpret in diverse ways, showing the novelty and diversity of interpretations of the phenomenon. But the expression *rang lus la me gtong*, “set fire to his own body,” used in the *Bashe*, does not seem to be used anymore.

Many other questions are to be raised: Are the immolators martyrs? Tibetans in exile tend to describe them as “heroes” (*paowo*), but they also used the term “martyr” in their translations from Tibetan to English.³⁹ Yet, a martyr is “a person bearing witness to his or her religious beliefs by refusing to renounce them in death”⁴⁰ and it is a term that is heavily inscribed in the Christian and Muslim world. The translation of *paowo* as “martyr” can thus be considered as an over-

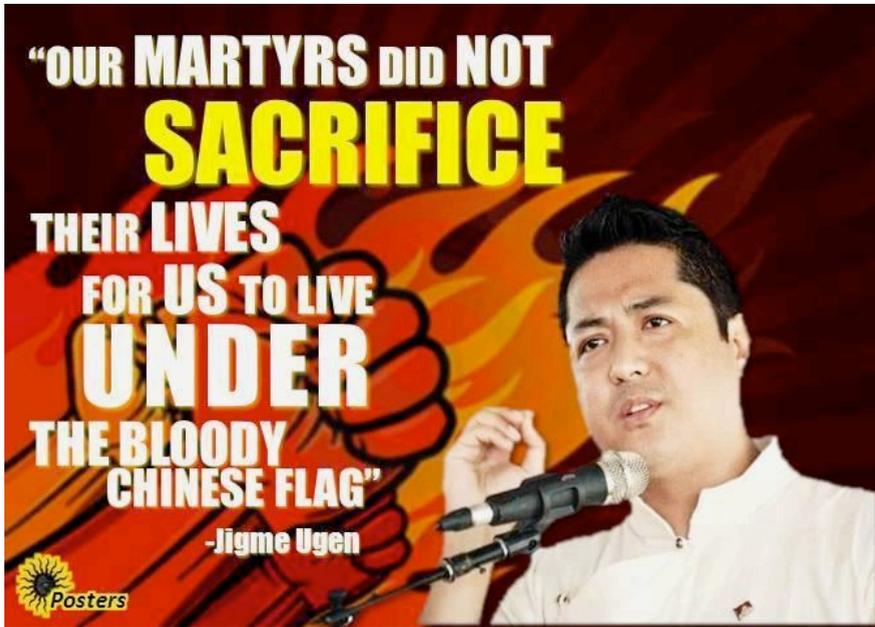
³⁷ Robert B. Ekvall, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

³⁸ This expression has been used only recently according to the Board of *Tibetan Political review* (April 14 2012).

³⁹ <http://tibetanyouthcongress.org/tyc-archives/press-releases/2012/03/28/pawo-jamphel-yeshi-passes-away/>.

⁴⁰ *English Dictionary Harraps Chambers*, 2006, p. 917.

interpretation and leads to many questions, which will be discussed in a longer paper.



Courtesy Jigme Ugen

How can we describe these actions? Are they suicides or sacrifices? Are they suicide and sacrifice at one and the same time? According to Émile Durkheim, one of the pioneering social scientists who examined suicide as a social phenomenon, "the term suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or a negative act performed by the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result."⁴¹ But this definition does not take into account the motivation leading to such an act, which in Buddhism is fundamental. Those self-immolators who left letters have all expressed their motivation as being an altruistic one.

In his letter to Martin Luther King, Thích Nhất Hạnh expressed his total disagreement with the qualification of self-immolation as suicidal since "suicide is an act of self-destruction." In an audio recording he left before immolating himself in January 2012, Lama Sobha, a

⁴¹ Émile Durkheim, *Le suicide. Étude de sociologie*. "Les classiques des sciences sociales," Livre I : pp. 14-15. http://www.uqac.quebec.ca/zone30/Classiques_des_sciences_sociales/index.

reincarnated lama said: "I am giving my body as an offering of light to chase away the darkness, to free all beings from suffering."⁴²

So, when a Tibetan chose to jump from an Indian bridge in protest against the Chinese occupation, was it a suicide as protest or was it a sacrifice? What are the necessary conditions for an act to be labelled suicide or sacrifice? Without a common definition of the words, how can we move forward?

The question can also be raised of the right to dispose of one's own life: when all freedom is prohibited, could the sacrifice of one's own life be the only and last freedom an individual has, since even an authoritarian government like China's does not seem able to prevent its exercise?

This paper raises more questions than it gives answers to an unfolding history.

Whatever might be the case, the very fact that Tibetans now commit self-immolation on an increasingly massive scale might be a sad confirmation, for those who still doubted it, that globalisation has reached Tibet, which is still complacently seen by some people as a realm of a pristine, untouched, and radically otherworldly civilisation.

As a postscript

Since our symposium was held, 20 more immolations have taken place in Tibet: on May 28 2012, in a highly symbolic gesture, two young Tibetans set themselves on fire in Lhasa. One of these men was a former monk from Kirti monastery and the other was from Labrang (Gansu), so they both came from the province of Amdo. The novelty of their action lay in the choice of a location for their radical act: in front of the heart of hearts of Tibetan Buddhism, the Jokhang temple. As if to echo this act, two days later a mother of three children torched herself near a monastery in Dzamthang. This was followed by the immolation of a herder in Chensa (Ch. Jianza), Malho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai, on June 15, and 5 days after, that of 2 more young Tibetans in Jyekundo. Both of them were carrying Tibetan national flags in their hands at the time of their self-immolation and called for Tibetan independence. Then, on June 27, a woman set herself ablaze in Jyekundo⁴³ in protest against the confiscation of her residence, a policy decided on by the Chinese authori-

⁴² <https://groups.google.com/forum/?forumgroups#!topic/soc.culture.indian/kT4WWV3CuyE>.

⁴³ <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/selfimmolation-07022012183039.html>.

ties to fit in with their reconstruction plan for the city of Jyekundo following the 2010 earthquake. On July 8, a young herder self-immolated in Damzhung, a city north of Lhasa. This was the first time a Tibetan from Central Tibet set himself on fire. Then, on July 17, a monk from a branch of Kirti monastery self-immolated in Barkham. Again, on August 6, another monk from Kirti set himself on fire and on August 7, it was the turn of a young mother of 2 to die after having set herself ablaze in the city of Tsö in the Kanlho (Ch. Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Gansu). On August 10, Ngawa county was again the scene of a new immolation by a young nomad followed by that of a monk from Kirti monastery and of a young nomad on August 13, and that of one monk and one ex-monk from Kirti monastery on August 27.

In spite of the plea to stop self-immolations expressed by 400 the representatives of the exiled community who gathered in Dharamsala (India) for a special four days meeting in September, the week between September 29 and October 6 saw the self-immolation of three Tibetans: a lay man set ablaze himself in Dzato (Ch. Zaduo) county in the Jyekundo (Ch. Yushu) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture on September 29, followed by the self-immolation of the first lay Tibetan writer, Gudrup, in Driru (Nakchu Prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region) on October 4 and by another layman, father of two who torched himself on October 6, on the grounds of Tso (Ch. Hezuo) monastery, Kanlho (Ch. Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, in Gansu Province. On October 13, a man of 52, the grandfather of the 7th Gungthang Rinpoche of Labrang Monastery, one of the most revered and important reincarnation lineages in this famous monastery, self-immolated, also on the grounds of Tso monastery.



Courtesy ICT (Map 2009-October 1 2012)

As for the Dalai Lama, he expressed in July 2012 his desire “to remain neutral” since self-immolations are “a very, very delicate political issue.” He added: “now, the reality is that if I say something positive, then the Chinese immediately blame me,” he said. “If I say something negative, then the family members of those people feel very sad. They sacrificed their life. It is not easy. So I do not want to create some kind of impression that this is wrong.”⁴⁴ Nevertheless, he said in August 2012 that he would “not give encouragement to these acts, these drastic actions, but it is understandable and indeed very, very sad.”⁴⁵

It might be interesting to note that (as far as we know) all women (lay and nuns) except one (Tsering Kyi in Machu who died in the market place) sacrificed their lives near a monastery. In contrast, until recently, men, lay and monks alike, have so far self-immolated mainly close to official buildings, as is the case in Ngawa where 27 self-immolations already took place, most of them on the main street. This street is now called “Heroes’ street” or “Martyrs’ street” in the Tibetan medias in English.

But the recent immolations show the involvement of older laymen and also a change in the place of sacrifice, since the two last self-immolators, who were lay people, set themselves ablaze on the grounds of a monastery.

GLOSSARY

Transcription	Transliteration	Tibetan
Amdo	A mdo	ཨ་མདོ།
Barkham	'Bar khams	འབར་ཁམས།
<i>Bazhe</i>	<i>Dbā' bzhed</i>	དབང་བཞེད།
	<i>Sba bzhed</i>	སྐ་བཞེད།
Chamdo	Chab mdo	ཆབ་མདོ།
Chentsa	Gcan tsha	གཅན་ཚ།
Darlak	Dar lag	དར་ལག།

⁴⁴ <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article3617428.ece>

⁴⁵ <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/08/29/tibet-dalai-lama-india-idINDE87S0B820120829>

Damzhung	'Dam gzhung	འདམ་གཞུང་།
Dolchung Korpon	Mdol chung bskor dpon	མདོལ་ཆུང་བསྐོར་དཔོན།
Driru	'Bri ru	འབྲི་རུ།
Dzamthang	'Dzam thang	འཇམ་ཐང་།
Dzato	Rdza stod	རྩ་སྟོད།
Gelukpa	Dge lugs pa	དགེ་ལུགས་པ།
Golok	Mgo log	མགོ་ལོག།
Gudrup	Dgu 'grub	དགུ་འགུབ།
Gungthang rinpoche	Gung thang rin po che	གུང་ཐང་རིན་པོ་ཆེ།
Jamphel Yeshe	'Jam dpal ye shes	འཇམ་དཔལ་ཡེ་ཤེས།
Jokhang	Jo khang	ཇོ་ཁང་།
Jowo	Jo bo	ཇོ་བོ།
Jyekundo	Skye rgu mdo	སྐྱེ་རུ་མདོ།
<i>Khabdha</i>	<i>Kha brda</i>	ཁ་བད།
Kanlho	Kan lho	ཀན་ལྷོ།
<i>karkyong</i>	dkar skyong	དཀར་སྐྱོང་།
Karma Chagme	Karma chags med	ཀམ་ཆགས་མེད།
Karmapa	Karma pa	ཀམ་པ།
Kardze	Dkar mdzes	དཀར་མཛེས།
Kham	Khams	ཁམས།
Kīrti	Kīrti	རྒྱ་རྟེན།
Labrang	Bla brang	བླ་བྱང་།
Lama Sonam	Bla ma Bsod nams	བླ་མ་བསོད་ནམས།

Lama Sobha	Bla ma Bsod bha	ལ་མ་བསོད་ནམས།
<i>la za</i>	bla gza'	ལ་གཟམ།
Lhakpa Tsering	Lhag pa tshe ring	ལྷག་པ་ཚེ་རིང་།
<i>lhakar</i>	<i>lhag dkar</i> <i>bla dkar</i>	ལྷག་དཀར། ལ་དཀར།
Lobsang Sangay	Blo bzang seng ge	ལྷོ་བཟང་སེང་གེ།
<i>Lurol</i>	<i>glu rol</i>	ལྷུ་རོལ།
Machu	Rma chu	མ་ཚུ།
<i>marcho</i>	<i>dmar mchod</i>	དམར་མཚོད།
Ngawa	Rnga ba	ར་བ།
Nakchu	Nag chu	ནག་ཚུ།
<i>pawo</i>	<i>dpa' bo</i>	དཔའ་བོ།
Pawo Tsuglak Trengwa	Dpa' bo gtsug lag phreng ba	དཔའ་བོ་གཙུག་ལག་ཕྱིང་བ།
Phuntsok	Phun tshogs	ཕུན་ཚོགས།
Rebkong	Reb gong	རེབ་གོང་།
Samye	Bsam yas	བསམ་ཡས།
<i>sok za</i>	<i>srog gza'</i>	སྲོག་གཟམ།
Tapey	Bkra bhe	བརྟམ་ལྷེ།
Tashilhunpo	Bkra shis lhun po	བརྟམ་ཤིས་ལྷུན་པོ།

Tawu	Rta'u	རྟཱུ
Thupten Ngodrup	Thub bstan dngos grub	ཐུབ་བསྐྱེད་དངོས་གྲུབ།
Tso	Gtsod	གཙོད།



