

# Multiple Meanings of Buddhist Self-Immolation in China — A Historical Perspective

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**I** offer this contribution to the study of the recent wave of self-immolations in Tibet not because I believe that the historical perspective on Buddhist self-immolation is the only useful one, but in the hope that the issues raised below may still be helpful to interpret current events. As a historian of medieval Chinese religions, my own immediate frame of reference is to things that happened well over a thousand years ago. Here, I am only able to condense a few essential points from my recent publications on self-immolation and related issues in Chinese Buddhism.<sup>1</sup>

I will begin with an account of what is probably the earliest recorded case of self-immolation by a Buddhist monk in China. This happened in the year 396:

Fayu 法羽 was from Jizhou 冀州.<sup>2</sup> At the age of fifteen he left home, and became a disciple of Huishi 慧始 (d. u.). [Hui]shi established a practice of austerities and the cultivation of *dhūta*. [F]ayu, being energetic and courageous, deeply comprehended this method. He constantly aspired to follow the traces of the

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<sup>1</sup> The *Lotus Sūtra* and Self-immolation," in Jacqueline I. Stone and Stephen F. Teiser (eds.), *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, pp. 107-131; *Burning for the Buddha: Self-immolation in Chinese Buddhism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007; "Spontaneous Human Combustion: Some Remarks on a Phenomenon in Chinese Buddhism," in Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara (eds.), *Heroes and Saints: The Moment of Death in Cross-cultural Perspectives*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007, pp.101-133; "Fire and the Sword: Some Connections between Self-immolation and Religious Persecution in the History of Chinese Buddhism," in Bryan Cuevas and Jacqueline Stone (eds.), *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses and Representations*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007, pp. 234-65; "Self-immolation in the Context of War and Other Natural Disasters," in James Benn and Jinhua Chen (eds.) *Buddhism and Peace, Issues of Violence, Wars and Self-sacrifice*. Hualien: Tzu Chi University Press, 2007, pp. 51-83; "Written in Flames: Self-immolation in Sixth-century Sichuan," *T'oung Pao*, 92 no. 4-5 (2006), pp. 410-465; "Where Text Meets Flesh: Burning the Body as an 'Apocryphal Practice.' in Chinese Buddhism," *History of Religions*, 37 no. 4 (May 1998), pp. 295-322.

<sup>2</sup> Jizhou was north-east of present-day Lucheng 潞城 county in Shanxi 山西.

Medicine King and to burn his body in homage [to the Buddha]. At that time the illegitimate 'Prince of Jin 晉' Yao Xu 姚緒 (fl. late fourth century) was occupying Puban 蒲坂. [Fa]yu informed Xu of his intention. Xu said: "There are many ways of entering the path, why do you choose only to burn your body? While I dare not firmly oppose it, I would be happier if you would think twice [lit. think thrice]." But [Fa]yu's intention was resolute. Next, he consumed incense and oil; he wrapped his body in cloth, and recited the "Chapter on Abandoning the Body" (*sheshen pin* 捨身品). At its conclusion he set fire to himself. The religious and laity who witnessed this were all full of grief and admiration. At the time he was forty-five years old.

In many ways this account, taken from a medieval hagiographical collection called *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, is rather typical of its kind, but perhaps somewhat different from what we are seeing in Tibet today. Note, for example, the collusion of the monk Fayu with local authorities (the Prince of Jin) rather than any kind of conflict with them.

### A history of self-immolation

Acts of self-immolation by Chinese Buddhists are but part of a longer history of the ideals and practices of "abandoning the body" that may be found throughout the Chinese Buddhist tradition from the late fourth century to the present. In my research, I have encountered several hundred accounts of monks, nuns and laypeople who offered up or gave away their own bodies for a variety of reasons, and in multiple different ways. It is impossible to typify self-immolators since they are drawn from across the spectrum of the saṃgha in China: Chan/Zen masters, distinguished scholars, exegetes, proselytisers, wonder-workers, and ascetics as well as otherwise undistinguished and unknown monastics and laypeople. The deeds of self-immolators were usually enacted before large audiences. Government officials and sometimes even rulers themselves often attended their final moments, interred the sacred remains and composed eulogies, verses, and inscriptions that extolled their actions. One form of self-immolation, burning the body, frequently took the form of a dramatically staged spectacle. Overall, the performance and remembrance of self-immolation took a strong hold on the Chinese Buddhist imagination from early medieval times onwards.

When we examine en masse the representations of self-immolators, their motivations, and the literary crafting of their sto-

ries we discover that self-immolation, rather than being an aberrant or deviant practice that was rejected by the Buddhist tradition, may actually be understood to offer a bodily path to attain awakening and ultimately buddhahood. While this path took rather a different form than those soteriologies that stress the mind, such as meditation and learning, it was a path to deliverance that was nonetheless considered valid by many Chinese Buddhists.

### The terminology of self-immolation

“Self-immolation” is the term most often used for the range of practices in which we are interested, but we should first pay some attention to our understanding of the word. In its strictest sense self-immolation means “self-sacrifice,” derived from the Latin *molare* “to make a sacrifice of grain.” It does not mean suicide by fire, although of course the term is commonly used in that sense. While bearing the everyday usages in mind, I employ the term ‘auto-cremation’ to refer to the practice of burning one’s own body, and ‘self-immolation’ for the broader range of actions which in Chinese Buddhist discourse constituted ‘abandoning the body’—such as drowning, death by starvation, feeding the body to animals or insects, etc. Three terms are commonly encountered in the Chinese sources, and they are used more or less interchangeably: *wangshen* 亡身, meaning “to lose, or abandon the body,” or perhaps “to be oblivious (*wang* 忘) to the body;” *yishen* 遺身, meaning “to let go of, abandon, or be oblivious to the body;” and *sheshen* 捨身 “to relinquish, or abandon the body.” The glyph *shen* (body) that is common to these terms also carries implications of ‘self,’ or the person as a whole. These three binomes are also used to translate terms found in Indian Buddhist writings such as *ātmabhāva-parityāga*, *ātma-parityāga* (abandoning the self) and *svadeha-parityāga* (abandoning one’s own body). So we can say that, at least at the terminological level, self-immolation may be considered (and it was by some Chinese exegetes) as a particular expression of the more generalised ideal of being detached from the deluded notion of a self. Auto-cremation is usually marked with expressions such as *shaoshen* 燒身 (burning the body) and *zifen* 自焚 (self-burning), but these terms are deployed mostly descriptively rather than conceptually. That is to say, in the Chinese sources auto-cremation is understood to be a way of abandoning the self, but auto-cremation is not usually discussed as a separate mode of practice or ideal in its own right.

The concept of abandoning the body, or letting go of the self, manifested in a variety of ways in the history of Chinese religions and not all of them involved death or self-mutilation. For example, in Buddhist and Taoist texts and inscriptions, *sheshen* was paired with the term *shoushen* 受身 (“to receive a body”) so as to indicate what happened at the end of one lifetime in the endless round of rebirth—as one relinquishes one body one obtains another one. *Sheshen* could also be employed as an equivalent for the common Buddhist term *chujia* 出家, literally “to leave the household,” or to take up the monastic way of life. In a more extreme case of this, the pious emperor Liang Wudi 梁武帝 (464–549) literally offered himself as a slave to the saṃgha on a number of occasions and his ministers were obliged to buy him back with a substantial ransom. But ‘abandoning the body’ also covers a broad range of more extreme devotions: feeding one’s body to insects, slicing off one’s flesh, burning one’s fingers or arms, burning incense on the skin—not all of which necessarily result in death—and starving, slicing, or drowning oneself, leaping from cliffs or trees, feeding one’s body to wild animals, self-mummification (which involves preparing for death so that the resulting corpse is impervious to decay), and of course auto-cremation.

So we cannot understand self-immolation in historical context by looking only at auto-cremation, rather we must consider a broader mode of religious praxis that involved doing things to or with the body. In Chinese Buddhist history this mode was by no means static but was constantly shaped and reformulated by practitioners and those who told their stories. At times, auto-cremation was cast as the dominant form of self-immolation, while at other moments it receded into the background.

### Self-immolation in China

The fluid nature of the concept of self-immolation was partly a historical accident—it was not consistently defined or explained in canonical sources available to medieval Chinese Buddhists—but it was also a consequence of the ways in which Chinese Buddhist authors composed their works. Most of what we know, and what Chinese Buddhist practitioners themselves know, about self-immolation in China is presented in the form of biographies or hagiographies of self-immolators. Compilers of exemplary biographies of monks were the most important agents in the invention of self-immolation as a practice of the Chinese saṃgha. By grouping together biographies of exemplary individuals under the rubric of ‘self-immolation’ they created the appearance of unity from a diversity of practices, but in

their reflections on the category they were often reluctant to draw precise boundaries around the tradition they had thus created. The difficulties of determining what actions constituted self-immolation, what mental attitude was required, and what goals self-immolation aimed at were not only challenges that scholars face now, they also plagued Buddhist authors who were themselves much more closely involved with self-immolators.

To give one pertinent example of the dilemma that faced Chinese Buddhist authors: how could they justify the transmission of biographies of self-immolators as records of eminent monks (that is to say, as models of monastic behaviour), if the monastic regulations found in the *vinaya* condemned suicide and self-harm? There was no simple or single answer to that question. Buddhist authors always struggled to define and endorse self-immolation and were often pre-occupied with other concerns that shaped their view of exemplary Buddhist practice. The attitude of the state towards the *saṃgha* as a whole, or towards certain types of monastic behaviour; orthodoxy as presented in scriptural and commentarial materials; orthopraxy as reported by Chinese pilgrims to India: all these and other factors in addition affected the opinions of those who wrote about self-immolators.

Of all the forms of self-immolation, auto-cremation in particular seems to have been primarily created by medieval Chinese Buddhists. Rather than being a continuation or adaptation of an Indian practice (although there were Indians who burned themselves),<sup>3</sup> as far as we can tell, auto-cremation was constructed on Chinese soil and drew on range of influences such as a particular interpretation of an Indian Buddhist scripture (the *Saddharmapundarika* or *Lotus Sūtra*) along with indigenous traditions, such as burning the body to bring rain, that long pre-dated the arrival of Buddhism in China. The practice of auto-cremation was reinforced, vindicated, and embellished by the production of indigenous Chinese scriptures, by the composition of biographies of auto-cremators, and by their inclusion within the Buddhist canon as exemplars of heroic practice. As time went on, more biographies were composed and collected. The increasing number and variety of precedents provided further legitimation for auto-cremation. In China, auto-cremation thus became a mode of practice that was accessible to Buddhists of all kinds.

My studies of auto-cremation have made it apparent to me that the somatic devotions of self-immolators are best understood not as aberrant, heterodox, or anomalous, but were in fact part of a serious attempt to make bodhisattvas on Chinese soil in imitation of models

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<sup>3</sup> See Marie Lecomte's article in this issue.

found in scriptures such as the *Lotus Sūtra*. As we have noted, self-immolation resists a single simple explanation or interpretation and accounts of self-immolation were not simply recorded and then consigned to oblivion but continued to inspire and inform readers and listeners through history and down to today. Thích Quảng Đức, the distinguished and scholarly Vietnamese monk who burned himself to death in 1963, was conversant not just with the scriptural sources for self-immolation—he chanted the *Lotus Sūtra* every day—but also with the history of Chinese self-immolators who had gone before him.

Monks and nuns, emperors and officials thought about self-immolation in different ways at different times. On the whole, Chinese Buddhists tended to support their co-religionists who used their bodies as instruments of devotion, whereas the literati (at least in public) often regarded such acts with disdain or disapproval. But conversely, many literati did participate in the cults of self-immolators, and some Buddhist monks were bitterly opposed to it. Self-immolation brought out tensions within the religion, and in society at large. Each case had to be negotiated separately, and there were clearly regional variations and patterns among self-immolators. The cults of self-immolators were both local—celebrated in particular places by the erection of shrines, *stūpas*, images and stelae—and also made universal through written accounts found in monastic biographies and in collections which celebrated acts of devotion to particular texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra* or which were intended for a more popular audience.

### How do we know about the history of self-immolation?

Much of our historical data for understanding self-immolation is preserved in collections of the genre known as *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (*Biographies of Eminent Monks*). Biographies of self-immolators in these sources were, for the most part, based on the funerary inscriptions composed for their subjects rather than on miracle tales or anecdotes. Some of these funerary inscriptions are still preserved in other collections or in the form of the actual stelae themselves. Biographies of eminent monks, especially in the first *Gaoseng zhuan* collection, were largely based on inscriptions written by prominent men of letters (usually aristocrats in the medieval period) and so, not unnaturally, they stress the contacts of monks with the court as in the account of Fayu with which I began.

Self-immolation remains a somewhat nebulous or elastic concept that is not usually very well-articulated in the individual biographies

of self-immolators. The compilers of biographical collections also took a somewhat circumspect approach to the topic in the critical evaluations (*lun* 論) appended to the sections on self-immolation. Our attempts as scholars at defining the meaning (or meanings) of self-immolation must therefore be contingent on a thorough investigation of what at first might appear to be a mass of incidental detail.

### Self-immolation in the literature of the Mahāyāna

Biographers often represented individual acts of self-immolation as if they were predicated on a literal reading of certain texts, particularly *jātaka* tales (accounts of the former lives and deeds of the Buddha Śākyamuni) and the *Lotus Sūtra* which contains a famous account of the Bodhisattva Medicine King who makes a fiery offering of his own body to the relics of a Buddha. As we saw in the biography of Fayu, he wished to emulate this particular advanced bodhisattva. But, one may legitimately enquire, how else should we expect Chinese of the medieval period to have taken these heroic tales, other than literally? In the Mahāyāna scriptures and commentaries in particular, the Chinese were presented with the blueprints for making bodhisattvas, and those blueprints said repeatedly and explicitly that acts of extreme generosity (or charity *dāna*) were a necessary part of that process. For example, one of the most influential Mahāyāna texts known to the medieval Chinese, *Dazhidu lun* 大智度論 (*Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise*) which was attributed to the great Indian thinker Nāgārjuna, says:

What is to be understood by the fulfilment of the perfection of generosity appertaining to the body which is born from the bonds and karma? Without gaining the *dharmakāya* (dharma body) and without destroying the fetters the bodhisattva is able to give away without reservation all his precious possessions, his head, his eyes, his marrow, his skin, his kingdom, his wealth, his wife, his children and his possessions both inner and outer; all this without experiencing any emotions.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, according to a normative text that was often referred to by medieval Chinese Buddhists, the bodhisattva must dispassionately surrender his own body and even his loved ones long before he reaches awakening ("gaining the *dharmakāya*"). The same text continues by recounting the stories of Prince Viśvantara who famously

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<sup>4</sup> *Dazhidu lun*, Taishō 1509.25.149b.

gave away his wife and children, King Sarvada who lost his kingdom to a usurper and then surrendered himself to a poor brahman so that he could collect a reward from the new king, and Prince Candrabhadra who gave his blood and marrow to cure a leper. The stories of these mythic Buddhist heroes of the past are presented in a matter-of-fact manner as the paradigms and exemplars of true generosity. Chinese Buddhists were acutely aware that tales of these bodhisattvas and similar teachings that were precious to them had emerged from the golden mouth of the Buddha himself. Indeed, they could point to many places in the scriptures where the Buddha had more or less explicitly instructed them to do extraordinary things with their bodies if they wished to advance on the path to buddhahood.

Over time, the miraculous world described in Buddhist *sūtras* and represented in Buddhist artworks also took root in Chinese soil. This fact may be seen, for example, in the development from early accounts of monks who emulated or imitated *jātaka* stories and the *Lotus Sūtra*, to later stories of practitioners who had direct and unmediated encounters with the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī in China or, for example, the increasing prevalence of the spontaneous combustion of eminent monks. We may also trace this process by paying attention to the mention of relics in the biographies. Broadly speaking, while in early accounts relics of any kind are rarely found, later, the relics of the Buddha start to play significant roles, but by the tenth century self-immolators themselves were commonly depicted as being able to produce relics in vast quantities, sometimes spontaneously while still alive. I would see this evolution of relics as part of an on-going process in which Chinese monks grew more confident of their abilities to create bodhisattvas in China and this development was no doubt related to continuing patterns of self-immolation.

Over the years that I have studied and written about self-immolation, the question I have most often been asked is, "why did people do such things to themselves?" There can never be a single answer to that simple question. What I have been able to do, I hope, is to show that in Chinese Buddhist history self-immolation was not a marginal or deviant practice indulged in by a handful of depressives with suicidal tendencies. The evidence I have amassed shows, I believe, that self-immolation was not only relatively common but also enduring and largely respected within the tradition. The sources reveal that self-immolation was not a single phenomenon, but a category that allowed Chinese Buddhists to think about a diverse range of practices, ideals, and aspirations that were open to constant negotiation and interpretation.



Self-immolation was not confined to the Buddhist monastery. It had repercussions for the state and its relations with the *saṃgha* and it had ramifications for China's intellectual and political history. Modes of 'Confucian' filial piety, for example, were indebted to Buddhist practices such as slicing the thigh to feed one's parents. Auto-cremation was sometimes co-opted by officials in late imperial China: some local magistrates, and even a Song dynasty emperor, threatened to burn themselves to bring rain.

Thus, I stress the need to avoid imposing uniformity on what was always a diverse set of practices and ideals. We should endeavour to seek the deeper meaning in the details, by carefully unravelling the scriptural and historical precedents for apparently bizarre and inexplicable behaviour such as feeding the body to insects or slicing flesh from the thighs. By concentrating on the biographies of self-immolators, their scriptural models and learned defenders, I have aimed to show that the category 'self-immolation' is a virtual one. It was the compilers of biographies who determined what practices should constitute that model.

I have been hesitant to present self-immolation as a subset of some larger interpretive category. For example, I remain to be convinced that in China self-immolation was primarily an ascetic tradition. Despite references to terms such as *dhūta* or *kuxing* (苦行 "austerities") in the biographies, I have not found strong evidence of self-immolation as part of a larger and fully-articulated program of asceticism. On the contrary, often the preparation of the body seems to emphasise its positive aspects—it was not something to be subdued but rather cultivated and transformed. The physical practices of Chinese Buddhists may be said to represent the performative aspect of the religion. These practices manifested distinctive material results; they changed the shape of the body by burning or cutting off fingers or arms; they etched the teachings into the skin by branding the torso, arm or head. They produced relics, mummies, and indestructible tongues. Self-immolators affected the lives of the witnesses, as they saved the lives of humans and animals, cured diseases, or converted people to the vegetarian diet. Self-immolators were said to have preserved the *saṃgha* in times of persecution, or to have averted the disasters at the end of a *kalpa*, ended warfare, brought rain in times of drought, and turned back floods. Thus, their acts were not simply a departure from the world, but an active involvement in it. While these may have been the acts of extraordinary individuals, they were not considered completely misguided or deluded by the larger community. In fact, I would suggest that they were as solidly grounded in scripture and doctrine as any other Buddhist practice in China, and for the most part were understood as part of a wider pro-

ject designed to make ordinary humans into the heroic and benevolent bodhisattvas celebrated in the literature of the Mahāyāna.

In China, while often controversial, self-immolation was always considered a valid Buddhist practice. It was not pushed to the margins by Chinese Buddhist authors, but was considered seriously as part of the path to buddhahood itself. If we refuse to take self-immolation equally seriously, wherever and whenever it appears, I believe that we can only fail to understand it.

