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Self-Immolation In Tibet: Beyond The Lens Of The Western Media

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Self-Immolation in Tibet: Beyond the Lens of the Western Media

by

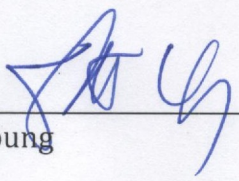
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A Proposal Submitted to the Honors Council

For Honors in the Religion Department

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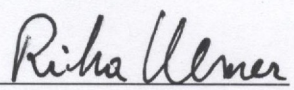
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Abstract

This thesis provides a critique of Western media articles concerning self-immolation in Tibet. I begin by illustrating how the Western media provides reductionist accounts of Tibetan self-immolation by depicting the act solely as a form of political protest in response to Chinese occupation. I argue that these limited portrayals of self-immolation can be attributed to the *Shangri-La* imagery that characterizes much of the Western conceptions of Tibet. Through *Shangri-La* imagery, both Tibetans and their Buddhist religion are portrayed as utopic, peaceful, and able to provide the antidote to solving Western problems relating to modernization and consumerism. After illustrating the ways in which *Shangri-La* imagery influences Western media portrayals of Tibetan self-immolation, this thesis explores the commonly disregarded Buddhist dimensions of the act. Looking to Buddhist doctrine, scripture, and history, this thesis establishes a clear relationship between self-immolation and Buddhism, which situates the act as being more complicated than mere political protest. I argue that these limited portrayals given by the Western media are problematic because they overlook a fundamental aspect of self-immolation, thus potentially misrepresenting Tibetans. This thesis explores the Buddhist dimensions of self-immolation as a possible way to further understand what has led more than one hundred Tibetans to perform this act during the time of political crisis.

I. Chapter One: Introduction

Over the past six decades, the question of Tibetan autonomy from China has become an extremely pressing issue. In more recent times, this issue has been brought to the global forefront by the increasing number of Tibetan protestors who have burned themselves to death. From March 2011 to the time of this writing, over one hundred people are estimated to have self-immolated in Tibet.¹ This phenomenon, both troubling and puzzling (albeit fascinating as a source of news), has largely been described in the Western media as a political protest in response to Chinese occupation of Tibet. Although some suggest that Tibetan self-immolation has been grossly underreported,² this thesis will argue that Western media accounts of self-immolation have also been overtly skewed by depicting the act solely as a political protest and a manifestation of helplessness. I will argue that this skewed media representation is a result of a Western *Shangri-La* imagery of Tibet, which will be described in detail below. By illustrating aspects of Tibetan self-immolation that have been potentially overlooked—ranging from Buddhist doctrinal, scriptural, and historical perspectives-- I will show how this act is far more complex than simply a “political protest” by a helpless, idealized people.

What is this so-called *Shangri-La* imagery? Somewhere deeply imbedded in the Western historical imagination exists the idea of a utopic, pacifist land located in the Far East. This land, deemed the paradisiacal *Shangri-La* in the Western mind is

¹ <http://www.freetibet.org/news-media/na/full-list-self-immolations-tibet>.

² Rawlings 2011, 1.

more properly known today as the contested state of Tibet.³ Through fiction, film, and explorations throughout recent decades, Tibet has been captured in Western culture as exotic, unique, and diametrically opposed to the perils of modern capitalist societies. As Donald Lopez has observed in his *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, “Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism have long been the object of Western fantasy,”⁴ *fantasy* being the word of crucial importance because such imagery has little factual basis. This thesis will look at the discrepancy between Western media accounts of Tibetan self-immolation as it has been skewed by this *Shangri-La* imagery, and a more complex understanding of the act as viewed from Buddhist doctrinal, scriptural, and historical perspectives.

Regardless of how accurately this *Shangri-La* imagery represents Tibetans, it has persisted for decades in the West, even as our world has become highly globalized, interconnected, and opened, both at formal and informal levels. Although many myths about nations located far away from the Western world have been dispelled, such myths about the Tibetan people and their Buddhist religion have nevertheless persisted. Why is this? As numerous scholars have suggested, including Lopez, Martin Brauen, and Orville Schell, it is because this *Shangri-La* imagery satiates a need in the Western imagination to believe that, no matter how depraved things have become through over-consumption, environmental degradation, religious fanaticism, and social injustices, there exists a land seemingly impenetrable to such atrocities. In the most dramatic forms of this fantasy, Schell writes that, “Tibet has now become the last place on earth still abounding in true mysteries, including

³ Schell 2000, 8.

⁴ Lopez 1998, 3.

lamas who could fly...If Buddhists saw the world as illusory...Westerners blurred the distinctions between what Tibet actually was and how they wanted it to be.”⁵ Such a mythologized and exaggerated view of Tibet not only comes to represent how it is understood in the West, but in turn “creates” a Tibet that exists only in the mind.⁶ In this respect, Tibetans have become what Lopez has deemed “prisoners of Shangri-La,” who must act in accordance with this widely accepted myth, assuming an identity not of their making. This identity includes acting as members of a benevolent society, free from internal strife, and an ability to navigate the perils of Western society. By presenting self-immolation as incongruous with their benevolent nature, the perception of Tibetans has been distorted by the Western media. Instead, self-immolation is depicted as resulting from erratic desperation, rather than having direct ties to Buddhism. It is thus evident that the Western media has created a false dichotomy for understanding self-immolation.

Historical relations of China, the West, and Tibet

The *Shangri-La* imagery of Tibet is at work not only through the image of Tibetans themselves, but also importantly by contrast with their most famous neighbor, China. Whereas little was historically known about Tibet due to its general lack of global participation, China, by contrast, has a long history of trade and engagement with the West.⁷ Moreover, this relationship between China and the

⁵ Schell 2000, 9.

⁶ Lopez 1998, 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

West has not always been fruitful, and is marred by deceit, distrust, competition, and general misunderstanding. As Sterling Seagrave captures in *The Soong Dynasty*, amicable relations between the two nations began to crumble as the military dictator of the 1930s-1940s, Chiang Kai-Shek, backed by the both Westernized and wealthy Soong family, began to lose power and legitimacy. In place of his oppressive rule came the rise of Communism, originally advocated throughout the Chinese state by the Soviet Union, and eventually undertaken by China's soon-to-be leader, Mao Zedong. Although Chiang and the Soong family were riddled with corruption and subjected Chinese citizens to great human rights abuses, the United States accepted this façade of a government, provided they remained on amicable terms. This is because Chiang's regime stood in opposition to Communism, the socio-political model so feared in the West. As the Chinese Communist Party was formed and eventually came into power in China, relations with the United States crumbled. If Tibet is the world's last utopian relic in the Western mind, China, by contrast, is imagined as the demonic, untrustworthy state out to undermine Western legitimacy through Communist propaganda. In more recent times, China has been demonized in the Western imagination not for its contrast to Western capitalist values, but rather for its gross magnification of such ideals; over-production, over-consumption, over-population, and so on. Essentially, China represents the parts of the West so commonly despised; Tibet, by contrast, depicts the lost values yearned for.

In this thesis I will offer evidence of the demonization of China by looking to recent occurrences of Chinese self-immolation, stemming from unlawful land

seizures, which have been largely ignored by the Western media. Furthermore, I will display the differing depictions of Chinese and Tibetan self-immolation; not only have Chinese immolations been overlooked in the Western media, but they have not been reported with the same sense of urgency and grievance as have Tibetan instances of self-immolations.

Contemporary relations between Tibet and China

The contrasting conceptions of China and Tibet have been further nuanced over the past six decades, since the Peoples Liberation Army invaded Tibet in 1949. Since this time, Tibet has been occupied by the Chinese state. By 1951, Tibet had been annexed in its entirety. During that year, representatives of Tibet, including the Dalai Lama, began a dialogue with the Chinese government to negotiate their autonomy, which ultimately proved futile. Under the Communist ideals of Mao, religion was viewed as an ideological tool to subjugate the disenfranchised working classes. While religion was never completely outlawed in China, it was severely restricted under Mao, and any religious teachings or doctrines that conflicted with the state were seen as threatening.⁸ Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism were essentially eliminated and Communist propaganda claimed that Tibetan Buddhism was “primitive and untruthful.”⁹ Along with a gross suppression of their religion, Tibetan cultural identity began to falter as well, largely because Tibetan identity (from education to government) was grounded in Buddhist foundations. On March

⁸ Goldstein 1998, 2.

⁹ Ibid., 9.

17. 1959, the Tibetan Leader, the 14th Dalai Lama, fled into exile, eventually establishing a government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India.

Following the death of Mao, Tibetans and Chinese began to see a loosening of religious restrictions and, to a certain extent, Tibetans attempted to revive Buddhism. The Chinese government recognized that because many people were still not ready to embrace Communism, religion could stand in as “a crutch” for social betterment until citizens realized that they no longer needed religion. In 1978, following the death of Mao, the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Chinese Communist Party Congress met in Beijing to discuss several reforms, which included greater religious freedom.¹⁰ While 1978 ushered in a new era of hope for Tibetans, Chinese oppression once again became more intense as Tibetans tested the limits of the Communist government. From this time onward, Tibetan-Chinese relations have become complex, fruitless, a source of global angst, and as this thesis will illustrate, a source of slanted news coverage in the Western media.

The issue of Chinese occupation and repression has become the basis for media accounts of Tibetan self-immolation. This phenomenon is frequently depicted as a political statement stemming from growing enmity and helplessness on the part of Tibetans towards Chinese policy. While there is no question that Tibetan self-immolations have been incited by this conflict with China, the act itself is not, contrary to media depictions, entirely political in its foundations. As this thesis will show, there is rather a rich historical tradition of self-immolation found within Buddhism. As Katia Buffetrille has noted, “One detail that is never given...is the

¹⁰ Goldstein 1998, 1.

Buddhist sect to which the self-immolator belongs, leading one to think that there is no relationship (at least in the minds of Tibetans) between religious school and immolation.”¹¹ Buffetrille also notes the impossibility of conclusively determining the motives underlying Tibetan self-immolations, especially considering the limited access to Tibet for foreigners, especially journalists.¹² But with her first point in mind, this thesis will situate self-immolation in its Buddhist doctrinal and historical contexts- a perspective that has been completely overlooked by the Western media

Defining Media

In addition to the politics of the Tibet-China conflict, Tibetans have become a fixation of the Western media due to their rising numbers of self-immolations. Mass media has been defined as “a means of public communication reaching a large audience through radio, television, newspapers, periodicals,” in addition to Internet news sources.¹³ Since the advent of modern technological breakthroughs that continue to advance every day, mass media has been described as the primary means through which people ingest information and knowledge.¹⁴ Thus, one can conclude that an overwhelming majority of information concerning Tibet and self-immolation is relayed through mass media. Lazarsfeld and Merton note that mass media is responsible for “[conferring] status on public issues, persons,

¹¹ Buffetrille 2012, 6.

¹² Ibid., 7.

¹³ Danesi 2000, 140, 142.

¹⁴ Emery, Ault, Agee 1973, 3.

organizations, and social movements.”¹⁵ When a more favorable depiction is given by the media of a group or an issue, public support in turn becomes more favorable; thus, how the media qualifies and presents groups and issues is of great importance.¹⁶ This suggests that the media has a crucial influence over public opinion. It is also the claimed job of the media to expose “deviations” of normative behavior to the public, consequently challenging instances of intolerance and suppression.¹⁷ Lazarsfeld and Merton also write, “To the extent that the media of mass communication have had an influence upon their audiences, it has stemmed not only from what is said, but more significantly from what is not said.”¹⁸ When considering the question of Tibetan self-immolation, this idea becomes of central importance; not only will this thesis analyze media depictions of Tibetan self-immolation, but it will go further to explore what is not depicted: namely the Buddhist dimensions of the act.

With a basic understanding of what constitutes the Western media, in addition to its function and role, the importance of this thesis becomes clear. Because the media is the primary means for conveying information about Tibet and because such presentations become the basis from which Tibetans and self-immolation are perceived in the West, the limitations of this portrayal of Tibetan self-immolation must be considered. This thesis will focus on Western media depictions of self-immolation from newspapers, magazines, and Internet news media. In turn, I will analyze how such content is influenced by and continues to perpetuate *Shangri-La*

¹⁵ Lazarsfeld & Merton 1996, 16.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 19.

imagery. In the following chapter I survey a dozen articles from several media sources and analyze the patterns that these articles exemplify in their depictions of Tibetan self-immolation.

Overview of thesis argument

When viewed through the lens of the Western media, instances of self-immolation are depicted as isolated events of political protest, a 'last resort' for Tibetans who have no other options left but to turn to this gruesome act. While self-immolation in Tibet may be a means through which Tibetans seek to regain a voice on a global scale and turn attention to the conflicts embroiling their nation, the act of self-immolation is vastly more complicated than an act of political protest or suicide, as depicted by the Western media. This thesis will show that self-immolation has intricate ties with the Buddhist religion and has been used throughout Buddhist history for a variety of reasons. Furthermore, in Buddhist thought, suicide is not necessarily regarded as a personal act.

The *Shangri-La* ideal as explained above is further displayed through Western media depictions of self-immolation. This ideal of Tibet as a peaceful, utopic nation requires that the Western media reconcile the brutal act of self-immolation as an isolated and recent phenomenon in Tibetan history, occurring only as a result of helplessness in the face of Chinese persecution. To examine the social, religious, and cultural forces underlying these instances of self-immolation would directly challenge the innate nature of a society whose utopian relics we idealize in the West.

Along this same line of thought, China is further depicted as the direct cause for these Tibetan self-immolations, further playing into the Western need to demonize the Chinese state.

This thesis will argue that while the essential meaning and reasoning behind Tibetan self-immolation may never be fully understood, the Western media's tendency to reduce and oversimplify the act is greatly problematic. By creating a one-dimensional image of the phenomenon, Tibetans further become "prisoners of *Shangri-La*." This not only denies the Tibetan people their own voice, but further robs them of a part of their autonomy; not only are religious and cultural practices repressed, but they are required to play a role demanded of them by the West. Just as China can be seen to have literally imprisoned Tibetans through invasion and occupation, the West has imprisoned Tibet on an ideological level to embody a certain set of characteristics. Through Western media depictions, self-immolation no longer is seen as a time-honored, doctrinally complex Buddhist act; instead it is seen only as a cry of desperation and helplessness. And so long as Tibetans and the Dalai Lama remain dependent on the West for aid in the struggle against China, they must become the people of *Shangri-La*. Western media depictions of self-immolation are problematic because they lack a more detailed understanding of the issues at hand and the people that they seek to describe.

This one-dimensional depiction not only metaphorically imprisons Tibetans, but it literally harms them in lived experience as they struggle to gain autonomy. How can an issue be resolved when the sum of its parts are not fully understood? How can we help the Tibetan people when we want them to embody something born not

of their own desires? Lastly, what happens when the myth of *Shangri-La* is unveiled; do we lose interest in the Tibet-China conflict when we understand that Tibet is not a magical land? In this thesis, I will critique Western media accounts of self-immolation and show how the act is more than just political protest. By investigating past and recent scholarly work, I will seek to answer questions such as, how and why has the act been used throughout Buddhist history, and what are its outcomes? By contrasting this Western *Shangri-La* imagery with a more comprehensive understanding of Tibetan Buddhism and self-immolation, I will explicate the limitations of Western media depictions of the act. I will also show how media accounts not only further exemplify Lopez's conception of the "Prisoner of *Shangri-La*," but how in turn these accounts herald grave outcomes for Tibetans themselves.

Such acts of self-immolation have become a focal point for the Western media in relation to the question of Tibetan autonomy from China. Similarly, the Western media depicts acts of self-immolation in isolation from traditional and contemporary Buddhist ideals and teachings, and instead depicts them solely as a result of Chinese hostility. However, this depiction of Tibetan self-immolation as a result of political struggle with Chinese oppression is overly reductionist. Furthermore, Western journalists have inappropriately depicted these acts as arising out of defiance and desperation, instead of presenting them in relation to their historical, religious, and social aspects as well. While the Western media is not incorrect in asserting that the nature of these self-immolations is at least in part a response to Chinese occupation, and a call for the return of the Dalai Lama, this

presents a limited picture in the scope of understanding why a growing number of Tibetans have turned to self-immolation.

Below I will examine Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist texts, in addition to premodern and recent historical events in other Asian Buddhist countries, all of which show Tibetan self-immolation to be a multifaceted practice. These perspectives have been completely overlooked by the Western media, which has obscured the act of self-immolation. This phenomenon of media bias can be seen as a result of the mythicized Tibet in the West, an extension of the idea of *Shangri-La*, in which Tibet is seen as a lost relic of peace and happiness in the world. The act of self-immolation has been obscured in such a way that makes it congruent with the 'Tibetan dream,' which firmly stands in contrast to the oppressive nature of China. In the following chapters, we will see how this limited portrayal of self-immolation as a political protest against China ultimately undermines and obscures the Tibetan plight for autonomy. By encapsulating Tibetans as something that they are not, they are forced to embody this perception so valued in the West, in hopes of receiving support for their cause. I will now turn to specific examples within the Western media regarding Tibetan self-immolation, which display the processes that I have outlined above.

II. Chapter Two: An in Depth Look at Media Accounts

This chapter will turn to a direct analysis of Western media accounts, which present a narrow depiction of Tibetans and Buddhism and thus a fraction of the possible meanings and attributes of self-immolation. These media accounts include sources from various Western news sites, including the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, *AFP*, *Voice of America*, and *Time* from 2011 to 2013. To begin, I will focus on prevalent patterns found throughout such articles concerning tone, structure, and topical focus as they categorize self-immolation in a political light. Next, this chapter will compare a recording made by a monk, Lama Sobha, who self-immolated in 2012 to a *Wall Street Journal* depiction of the event. The recording and the *Wall Street Journal* article are significantly different. Finally, I will compare the above accounts with Western media articles about self-immolation in China concerning land seizures, while examining the variations in coverage that the two issues have received.

As historian and Tibetan expert Tsering Shakya notes, “The Tibetans have framed the recent wave of self-immolations not only as acts of sacrifice but as acts with religious meaning, as in the tradition of offering one’s body for the benefit of others.”¹⁹ Contrary to this argument, however, the general patterns that arise within Western media depictions of Tibetan self-immolation present the act as occurring solely from grievance, defiance of policy, and political protest against China. Many media accounts, found in the abovementioned prominent news

¹⁹ Shakya 2012, 36.

sources, use similar structures to describe and understand instances of self-immolation. A structural theme begins to emerge with the title of such articles, which generally includes a line about China, or the growing 'resentment' or 'helplessness' of Tibetans: *Self-immolations reflect rising Tibetan anger* (the Washington Post), *China Offering Reward for Self-Immolation Intel* (Voice of America), *Tibetan Self-Immolates in China over Religious Freedom* (Standard Digital News). Simply through their headlines, such articles set a precedent for the nature of the reception of self-immolation through a Western lens. From the outset, such titles depict self-immolation as a direct result of political protest against Chinese occupation, or a growing sense of Tibetan hostility and helplessness. As such, they completely overlook the various Buddhist dimensions of the act.

Recurring Patterns in Media Content

Moving beyond the titles, the narrative of these articles generally begins with a brief description of the actual self-immolation. Following this, the articles generally juxtapose such events with the oppressive nature of China, harsh policies placed on Tibetans, and claims made by the Chinese government about the Dalai Lama's terrorist activities. The body of these articles depicts China as extremely "paranoid" when it comes to dealings with Tibet and the Dalai Lama, which further displays the subjugation of the Tibetan peoples. Finally, the articles generally conclude by shifting the focus back to the individual self-immolator. By concluding on this personal level, the articles evoke images of helpless Tibetans, who have become so

disenfranchised by China that they have no other option but to take their own lives. While brief mention is often made of an immolator's Buddhist identity, or that a certain incident occurred near a monastery, little to no discussion of the relationship between self-immolation and Buddhism is given. Furthermore, attention to religion is only paid in regards to oppressive Chinese policy restricting religious practices in general.

Chinese Oppressors

For example, a recent *Global Post* article titled "Tibet Calls for Talks Amid Fiery Protests" alludes to claims made within the Chinese government that the Dalai Lama is a modern-day Hitler, and that self-immolators are terrorists.²⁰ The article also goes on to denote the Dalai Lama's 1989 Nobel Peace Prize and the peaceful nature of the Tibetan people.²¹ All of the media accounts that I analyze in this thesis are marked by such stark contrasts drawn between "oppressive China and "peaceful Tibet." The sense of irony in likening the recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize to a Fascist leader and Holocaust perpetrator serves to further demonize the Chinese state in relation to Tibet.

This structure similarly emerges in an *AFP* article titled "China Blames Dalai Lama for Self-Immolation." The article begins by citing the fact that many of the self-immolators have been Buddhist monks or nuns. Just as the *Global Post* article uses the body of the text to depict China in a foolish light for condemning the Dalai Lama,

²⁰ Nunns 2012, 1.

²¹ Ibid.

so too does the *AFP* article insert claims made by the Chinese government that are made to appear absurd through juxtaposition with the Dalai Lama's spiritual and peaceful nature. The article quotes China's foreign ministry spokesman, Hong Lei, who states that, "in order to realize their separatist goals, the Dalai clique has incited some people to self-immolate. This is despicable and should be condemned."²² The article then goes on to note that Lei's comments have no evidentiary support, that Han Chinese have immigrated in mass numbers to ethnically Tibetan areas, and that the Dalai Lama was the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize recipient. Once again, the Dalai Lama's Nobel Peace Prize is mentioned in conjunction with China's assertion of his "terrorist" aspirations. The Dalai Lama is then noted to have remained "neutral" toward such self-immolations; while he has admired the immolators' courage, he is careful not to condone their actions or suggest that they be repeated.²³ Such instances serve as prime examples of the Western tendency to demonize China while simultaneously presenting Tibet in accordance with *Shangri-La* ideals. Focusing on the Dalai Lama's commitments toward non-violence embodies the perception of a pure, pacifist Tibetan nation; conversely, all Chinese officials are demonized as undermining such efforts.

Topics in Media Accounts: Political Protest & Helplessness

Looking beyond the structure of these articles, the actual topic of focus is of crucial importance in understanding Western conceptions of Tibet, as it has been

²² AFP 2012, 1.

²³ AFP 2012, 1.

influenced by *Shangri-La* imagery. This focal lens both presents a narrow range of explanations for understanding the nature of self-immolation and further imprisons Tibetans within this idealized Western dream. Media depictions tend to characterize the problem from a multitude of political standpoints, including China-Tibet relations, China-US relations, and intra-Tibetan concerns. In a *Standard Digital* piece, a recent self-immolation is noted to have occurred next to a Buddhist monastery; interestingly, while the article notes that the monastery is Buddhist, it describes the monastery's significance only in relation to the fact that it was the site of political protests in 2008 concerning Chinese occupation.²⁴ Depicting the monastery solely as a site of protest is a clear example of the ways in which the Western media has reduced acts of self-immolation to political statements and has neglected their religious, historical, and social dimensions.

A *Voice of America* article titled "China Offering Rewards for Self-Immolation Intel" similarly depicts self-immolation in relation to the threat it poses to the Chinese government, but neglects to account for specifically religious factors underlying the act. The article mentions that the U.S. State Department is "concern[ed] about escalating tensions [between China and Tibet]."²⁵ The article then quotes a U.S. State Department spokeswoman, Victoria Nuland, who expresses U.S. concern for the "pattern" of self-immolations in Tibet and the threat that China poses to Tibetan cultural heritage.²⁶ Interestingly, this quote denotes the State Department's worry regarding the loss of Tibetan culture; however, nowhere in this

²⁴ BBC 2012, 1-2.

²⁵ VOA news 2012, 1.

²⁶ VOA News 2012, 1.

“concern” for their culture is there any mention of Buddhism, neither as a basis for Tibetan cultural practices nor as a possible factor underlying self-immolation. Tsering Shakya writes that, “The roots of Tibetan grievances are based on ethno-nationalistic claims of a homeland and on opposition to...current authority. But...authority is not confined solely to the domain of politics, but encompasses the larger field of religion and cultural practices.”²⁷ While this *Voice of America* article focuses on the importance of preserving Tibetan culture, no attempt is made to actually portray any aspects of Tibetan culture. Instead it focuses on Tibet solely as it relates politically to China and the United States. There is no connection drawn between the parallels of political protest as rooted in Buddhist thought. The article also quotes Robert Barnett, director of the Modern Tibetan Studies Program at Columbia University, concerning Chinese responses to self-immolation. Barnett sees the immolations as “worrisome,” and suggests a mounting fear among Chinese officials in response to the growing number of self-immolations that have occurred.²⁸ However, the article does not have Barnett offer any explanations of self-immolation as it relates to Buddhism. The article also states, “at least 58 Tibetans have set themselves on fire to protest Chinese policy in Tibet.”²⁹ Just as it stops short of a quote from Barnett concerning Buddhism, the article offers no further reasoning for the occurrence of self-immolation apart from protesting Chinese policy and occupation.

²⁷ Shakya 2012, 24.

²⁸ VOA News 2012, 2.

²⁹ Ibid.

We can further see this limited topical scope concerning self-immolation in a *Washington Post* article titled “Self-Immolation Reflects Rising Tibetan Anger.” This article centers on Lobsang Jamyang, a Tibetan monk who self-immolated in 2012, and the effects that Chinese policy has had on Tibetan monasteries. The article is striking in that it centers on the role of Tibetan Buddhism in regards to Chinese occupation without actually discussing or describing any aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. This is a prime example of the ways in which the Western media uses references to Buddhism as a tool for propagating images of the peaceful nature of Tibetans, which has been tainted by the harsh policies of Chinese occupation. This is not to suggest that Tibetans are not actually peaceful, but rather to draw attention to the Buddhist imagery that surrounds this ‘peaceful nature.’ These references to Buddhism, however, are rarely explained in any meaningful way, thus leaving the reader to conclude that the act of self-immolation has no relationship to Buddhist history or doctrine. The article mentions that Jamyang was a monk, but offers no insight into the influence his Buddhist studies and practices might have played in his decision to self-immolate.³⁰ Furthermore, the article details the demise of Tibetan monasteries as they have become subject to harsh rules under Chinese policy.³¹

The article also notes that while the older monks have been hesitant to defy Chinese occupation, many younger monks have sought active resistance. The inclusion of the growing restlessness among younger monks in addition to the changing atmosphere within the monasteries denotes a recent change in the attitude and climate in Tibet. While Tibetans were once peaceful and virtuous, as

³⁰ Denyer 2012, 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

seen in older living generations, younger monks show how traditional Tibetan values are now crumbling at the hands of the Chinese. The contrast between the older and younger generations of Tibetans is also a prevalent aspect of a *New York Times* article titled “Tibet’s Desperate Toll Keeps on Climbing.” The article, published in December of 2012, was written when dozens of Tibetans had self-immolated over several days, adding a new sense of urgency to the issue.³² The article proposes that younger Tibetans are more inclined to seek violent means against the Chinese and have become wary of the Dalai Lama’s non-violent Middle Way.³³ The article concludes by quoting the president of the Tibetan Youth Congress as saying, “The older generation is 90 percent religious and 10 percent nationalistic...but the younger generation is not a bunch of Buddhas. We are Buddhist, but not Buddhas.”³⁴ The generation gap mentioned in these articles is an important point to consider in the context of *Shangri-La* imagery, versus the actuality of Tibet today. The Western media depicts older monks as in accordance with *Shangri-La* imagery, having lived in Tibet during a time when it was an untarnished haven; as such, their values are shown to be on par with those in the Western imagination of peace and virtue. However, the Western sense that the *Shangri-La* paradise is perishing is captured through the younger generation of Tibetans. Victims of harsh Chinese policy, their peaceful ways have been threatened to the extent that many no longer see non-violence as feasible. The distinction

³² McDonald 2012, 1.

³³ Ibid., 3.

³⁴ Ibid.

between the two generations reinforces the threat of *Shangri-La* values perishing at the hands of the Chinese.

In a recent *New York Times* article, titled “As Self-Immolations near 100, Tibetans Question the Effect” a similar (though not necessarily deliberate) means of narrowing our perspective on self-immolation is evident. The article begins by describing self-immolations as the “desperate acts of a people left with no way to draw global attention to Chinese policies in Tibet.”³⁵ As such, all one hundred self-immolations that have thus far occurred are understood as “desperate acts” and “political protests,” which thereby reduce the individual meanings and motives behind each self-immolation. The article also centers on ethical issues surrounding self-immolation stating, “Yet even as the self-immolations have become central to the Tibetan protest movement, a quiet debate has been under way among Tibetans...who question how the acts reconcile with Buddhist teachings. Again and again, speakers emphasized that the Tibetan movement remains non-violent.”³⁶ The article is careful to reinforce the idea that Tibetans are still peaceful people using non-violent means. Noteworthy also is the fact that the article questions self-immolation in conjunction with Buddhist teaching, but it questions how self-immolation can be “reconciled” with Buddhism rather than understood as a time-honored application of Buddhist teachings.

Another important aspect of the article is that it presents Tibetan self-immolations in conjunction with the 2010 Tunisian self-immolation and the subsequent events of the “Arab Spring.” The article states, “If the Arab Spring has

³⁵ Yardley 2013, 1.

³⁶ Ibid.

inspired hope among some Tibetans that political change is always possible, it has also offered a sobering reminder that no two situations are the same, nor will the international community respond in the same fashion.”³⁷ Tibetan self-immolation is presented in relation to the events of the Arab Spring and as a source of inspiration for Tibetans, however, no mention is made of the famous Vietnamese self-immolation by the Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức (which will be discussed in detail in a later chapter). Rather than presenting the Tibetan acts as on par with other Buddhist self-immolations, it is instead seen as similar to the Tunisian self-immolation as a cry of desperation and helplessness. Lastly, the article quotes the Tibetan prime minister in exile as saying that while Tibetans are committed to nonviolence, the Arab world has received more support from the West in their recent struggles than Tibetans. This article therefore seems to indicate that while Tibetan self-immolations have drawn inspiration from the self-immolations in the Arab Spring, Tibetans are somehow different from the Arab world in their commitment to nonviolence.

Media Depictions of Self-Immolators

A noteworthy trend is also evident in media descriptions of the actual self-immolators. Just as Western media depictions neglect to account for Buddhist understandings of self-immolation, little information concerning an immolator’s role within a Buddhist monastery or the larger Buddhist community (*sangha*) is

³⁷ Ibid.

given. A *New York Times* article titled “From the Tibetan Monastery at the Heart of Self-Immolations, an Explanation,” begins by noting that three recent self-immolators “all had worn the crimson robes of Kirti Monastery”³⁸ and were devoted to their religion. The article then goes on to note that many recent immolators had also belonged to the Kirti Monastery as well. However, no further information is given about Kirti Monastery, nor is there any discussion of the relationship between this particular monastery and self-immolation. Similarly, the *Washington Post* article, “Self-Immolations Reflect Rising Tibetan Anger,” also mentions the Kirti Monastery and the fact that many self-immolators once belonged to it. While the article goes into great detail describing life at the monastery under Chinese occupation, no information is given about the studies and practices a monk or nun might have undertaken at Kirti before Chinese occupation.³⁹ Western media accounts provide little insight into the actual lives of monks or nuns, and instead provide basic facts about immolators’ lives, such as their hobbies or occupation. This serves to humanize the immolator, thereby evoking sympathy, yet neglects to account for a large aspect of their identity. The greater implications of this will be discussed below, as I examine the importance of considering a self-immolator’s Buddhist and Tibetan identity in relation to his or her act.

Sonam Wangyal: Media Depictions vs. Personal Recording

³⁸ Wong 2012, 1.

³⁹ Denyer 2012, 3.

The self-immolation of Sonam Wangyal, or Lama Sobha, who died on January 8th, 2012, is an important example of the themes analyzed in this thesis. He is perhaps the only self-immolator to have left behind a tape recording describing the reasons for his act. While Lama Sobha aligns his act with Buddhist principles and makes no mention of Chinese suppression, the *Wall Street Journal* article refers to his self-immolation in the context of a political protest. The specific contents of the tape will be analyzed in greater detail in a later chapter; however, a brief outline of his recording will suffice for our present purposes.

The *Wall Street Journal* depiction of this instance of self-immolation is significantly different than Lama Sobha's own account of the motives underlying his actions. The article, entitled "Tibet Strife Spreads as Top Monk Kills Self," makes little connection between the nature of his self-immolation and Buddhism, aside from noting that he was seen as a living Buddha and a spiritual leader in Tibetan Buddhism.⁴⁰ The article goes into greater detail concerning the location of recent self-immolations, noting that Lama Sobha's self-immolation took place in Qinghai, while most self-immolations have occurred in so-called Tibetan autonomous regions of the Sichuan province, which constitutes part of Tibet.⁴¹ The reporter is primarily concerned to use Lama Sobha's self-immolation as evidence that the act is spreading in its popularity among different regions in Tibet. The article asserts that, "[Lama Sobha] is the first ranking clergy to have self-immolated...the areas [where the recent immolations have occurred] have drawn increasing pressure from armed

⁴⁰ Spegele 1, 2013.

⁴¹ Ibid.

police in recent months.”⁴² This quote would suggest that Lama Sobha’s self-immolation occurred because of mounting pressure from Chinese police. This *Wall Street Journal* depiction of self-immolation exhibits patterns similar to those I discussed above. Lama Sobha’s self-immolation is related largely to Chinese occupation; his act is significant because it occurred in an area facing increasing pressure from Chinese police. The article is also concerned with the problems that the new waves of self-immolations pose to Beijing and how the Chinese have responded to such actions.⁴³

Not only providing a limited portrayal of self-immolation, this article completely neglects Lama Sobha’s Buddhist identity, except to note that he was a high-ranking monk. A blatant discrepancy can be seen between Lama Sobha’s own account of his self-immolation and its significance in the Western media. Interestingly, no reference to his recording is mentioned in the article. As the next chapter of this thesis will illustrate, Lama Sobha’s recording describes his self-immolation in terms of solidarity and strength for the Tibetan peoples, rather than stemming from weakness and opposition to China. However, the Buddhist thought behind his actions contradicts the values attributed to Tibetans by *Shangri-La* imagery, and as such, a more Buddhist understanding of Lama Sobha’s self-immolation is neglected.

Western Media Depictions of Chinese Self-Immolations

⁴² Spegele 2, 2013.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.

Self-immolation has been a tactic used not only by Tibetans, but by Chinese citizens as well, most recently in response to illegal land seizures by the government. Chinese farmers appear to have been victimized by the Chinese government, which has allegedly evicted an estimated 70 million farmers between 1994 and 2004 alone.⁴⁴ Chinese citizens have used a variety of means to protest these illegal land seizures, including the act of self-immolation. In March 2010, a 92 year-old man and his 68 year-old son set themselves on fire to protest the demolition of their family's pig farm; in 2009, a woman self-immolated on a roof to protest land seizures as well. As pictures and videos of her death circulated around the Internet, another man in Beijing soon self-immolated.⁴⁵ While such self-immolations helped bring attention in China to these illegal land seizures, their actions in the Western media have been of lesser importance. Furthermore, self-immolations in Tibet have received greater amounts of coverage and cries of grievance in the Western media. This fact further reinforces the demonized view of China. To begin with, Chinese self-immolations have received much less attention in Western Internet news sources than Tibetan self-immolation. In a *Telegraph* article titled, "Chinese Farmer Dies after Self-Immolation over Land Seizures," the tone of urgency and sympathy present in articles on Tibetan self-immolation is missing. The article matter-of-factly describes the self-immolation of Tao Huixi, the same man who immolated with his father in protest of their pig farm being demolished.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Hays 2012, 1.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁶ No author 2010, 1.

The article then reports that a Chinese woman set herself on fire shortly after in the province of Sichuan and died 16 days later.⁴⁷

A *National* article titled, "Self-Immolations by Tibetans Don't Bother the Chinese" asserts, "Issues such as land seizures, corruption, and labor concerns can draw tens of thousands of Chinese into the streets, and have even led to Chinese self-immolations, but Tibetan demonstrations have been small and isolated, and have drawn little sympathy from the majority."⁴⁸ Ironically, the opposite effect seems to be occurring in the Western media. The *Miami Herald* published an article on the issue of Chinese land seizures, citing an Amnesty International statistic that at least 41 people in China had self-immolated from 2009-2011 over illegal evictions.⁴⁹ Amnesty International reports have also concluded that illegal land seizures are the most significant source of public angst in China.⁵⁰ One must consider, given the prevalence of self-immolation in China over land seizures, why this has not been an issue of greater importance in the Western media. Just as China has come to occupy the land of Tibet, so too has the Chinese government illegally seized the land of Chinese citizens. Given the similar nature of such events, why has the Western media neglected to account for the dozens of Chinese citizens who have also self-immolated? This discrepancy is further evidence that *Shangri-La* imagery still influences the way Tibetans and Chinese are viewed in the West; while self-immolation in Tibet is depicted as a cry for urgency, it is rarely reported at all when performed by Chinese citizens.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁸ Bruno 2013, 1.

⁴⁹ Lasseter 2013, 1.

⁵⁰ Lasseter 2013, 1.

Through examining a variety of Western articles concerning self-immolation, it is thus evident that similar patterns arise that cannot be attributed to mere coincidence. As *Shangri-La* imagery has influenced the way we view Tibet in the West, so too has this understanding effected depictions of self-immolation. These articles paint a picture in which the once benevolent Tibetans have been forced to turn to violent means in order to enact change. Furthermore, this narrow understanding of self-immolation conveys it as an act of “helplessness” on the part of the Tibetans. The tendency for the Western media to depict self-immolation only in relation to China and politics conveys a growing sense of anger and nihilism on the part of Tibetans; but this is an incomplete portrayal, with larger overarching consequences for how Tibetans are understood in the West.

Media portrayals of Tibetan self-immolation not only present a narrow perspective from which to understand such acts, but they also hinder Tibetans themselves as they seek to regain some sense of autonomy. By encapsulating them within an exotic Western ideal, according to which Tibet is a once utopian society driven to violent acts as a result of helplessness, a false and potentially dangerous precedent is set for Tibetans. Such media accounts are a prime example of this *double bind* that the Tibetan people face: the visible suppression at the hand of the Chinese state, and a false sense of cultural identity projected upon them by the West.

As Tibetans and their Buddhist religion are seen to be peaceful, self-immolation is presented as an act outside of their character. Furthermore, the Buddhist foundations for the act of self-immolation are ignored, as this would challenge the *Shangri-La* notions of Buddhism as a purely peaceful religion. While the Western

media tends to depict self-immolation simply as political protest, the following chapters will look to Buddhist doctrine, scripture, and historical events, which will present an alternate lens through which self-immolation can be understood.

III. Chapter Three: Buddhist Foundations of Self-Immolation

In the previous chapter I illustrated examples of Western media accounts of self-immolation and the limitedness of their portrayals of both Tibetans and self-immolation. Having considered the reoccurring patterns in Western media accounts of self-immolation as a political protest and act of desperate defiance, this chapter will analyze self-immolation in conjunction with Buddhist doctrine and scripture. While the self-immolations occurring outside of the monasteries have become a focal point for the Western media, we might also look *inside* the monasteries, where we can see the Buddhist contexts of self-immolation and thus gain a fuller understanding of its growing use among Tibetans. In the first part of this chapter, I will illustrate how self-immolation is a vastly complex act that has been mischaracterized in Western media accounts, which portray it as contradictory to Buddhist principles. Furthermore, through Buddhist conceptions of devotion, karma, and skillful means (which will be discussed in detail below), I will also display the complexity of the physical body in Buddhist thought and its relation to self-immolation. I will argue that although self-immolation in Tibet may be used as

a political statement against Chinese oppression, it is reductionist to view it *only* through this lens. Furthermore, if one wishes to view Tibetan self-immolation as a political protest, one must also consider how it is shaped by its roots in Buddhist doctrine and history. The Western media is attempting to understand what has driven more than one hundred Tibetans to self-immolate in such a short period of time. However, rarely is the question asked: *why self-immolation* as opposed to other acts? When the Western media *do* consider the nature of self-immolation, they generally portray it as a radical mechanism used to attain global attention and as a sign of insurmountable desperation. However, these accounts almost never consider the fact that self-immolation is not only accordant with Buddhist thought, but is in fact directly rooted in it. Below I will look to the *Lotus sutra*, an ancient Mahayana text supposedly preached by the Buddha, and *jataka* tales, which are stories concerning the past lives of the Buddha, as these influential texts frequently reference self-immolation. In this light, self-immolation can be seen as both political protest as well as a time-honored Buddhist practice that draws upon several traditional religious ideas.

Buddhist Doctrinal Background

In order to analyze Buddhist texts and situate self-immolation in the context of Buddhist doctrine, it is important that a basic understanding of these doctrinal principles is given. Both Tibetan Buddhism and the *Lotus Sutra* operate within the Mahayana Buddhist tradition; the implications of this in regards to self-immolation

will be considered below. The Mahayana tradition is known as the “Greater Vehicle” because it affirms that all beings are capable of reaching enlightenment and must be helped along the way. This “Greater Vehicle” is the path of the bodhisattva, one on the path to enlightenment who seeks to end the suffering of all sentient beings.⁵¹ Bodhisattvas pursue “six perfections,” consisting of generosity, moral virtue, patience, vigor, meditation, and intuitive wisdom.⁵² The bodhisattva seeks to attain these perfections through the Noble Bodhisattva Path, consisting of ten stages. During the first six stages, bodhisattvas work to develop these six perfections. At the sixth stage, they attain the perfection of wisdom. From the seventh to tenth stages, bodhisattvas are seen as “great beings” because of their ability to help others with their vast amounts of merit. Past the tenth stage, bodhisattvas finally attain Buddhahood.⁵³

While on this path, bodhisattvas also work to teach others, helping them to end their suffering as well. The means of teaching these doctrinal concepts to unawakened beings is known as *upaya*. Essentially, *upaya* involves the bodhisattva using a variety of teaching methods, which are devised to suit the dispositions of a given audience, in order to help that audience reach a proper understanding of the Buddha’s teachings.⁵⁴ *Upaya* is also about the goal or the intentions of the bodhisattva, rather than the actual means used to convey the teachings.⁵⁵ This concept is known as *upaka-kaushalya* (“skill in means”), which means that different

⁵¹ Tesier and Stone 2009, 1.

⁵² Harvey 2001, 110.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Pye 2003, 2.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 1.

methods or techniques may be used by a bodhisattva based on the situation or the audience; the “skill” comes from understanding which methods to use.⁵⁶

Because the Mahayana tradition and bodhisattva path are about not just reaching personal enlightenment, but ending the suffering of all beings, a fundamental virtue of Mahayana Buddhism is compassion. A basic Buddhist teaching contends that one’s destiny in future lives is contingent on one’s actions and morality in one’s current life (karmic retribution).⁵⁷ Because bodhisattvas are concerned for the wellbeing of humanity, they seek good karma not just for themselves, but for all. Positive karma, resulting from “good” actions can also be known as merit.⁵⁸ Stemming from this desire to help, karmic retribution can be displaced on other beings as well, thereby helping others to amass positive merit. It is possible that one can offer a gift or perform a meritorious action and displace his or her good karma on other beings, ultimately relieving these beings of their suffering.⁵⁹ James Holt writes that “The act of giving is ethically productive because it is rooted in a selfless disposition of compassion directed toward the assuaging of another’s suffering.”⁶⁰ Merit transfer may be performed on someone’s behalf and the possibility remains that being in the actor’s sheer presence can generate merit for the witness.⁶¹ Merit transfer can work based on two principles. Firstly, the actor must be inspired by selflessness and compassion. Secondly, merit-transfer may be possible if the receiver has an intellectual appreciation of the act. This means that merit transfer is

⁵⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁷ Holt 1981, 8.

⁵⁸ Harvey 2001, 68.

⁵⁹ Holt 1981, 12.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁶¹ Ibid., 2.

also directly related to one's mental disposition; the beneficiary must approve of the act in the first place.⁶² Buddhist thinker Malalasekera says "the recipient of the transfer becomes a participant of the original deed by associating himself with it. Thus the identification of himself with both the deed and the doer can sometimes result in the beneficiary getting even greater merit...because his elation is greater or his appreciation is more intellectual."⁶³ *Parivatta* ("merit-transfer"), then, is about compassion for others that occurs as a result of selflessness.

Before turning to the examples of self-immolation in the *Lotus Sutra* and *Jataka* tales, we must also consider what exactly a bodhisattva comes to properly realize on the path to enlightenment. In this respect, one must understand the Buddhist worldview. Countless philosophical treatises have been written on the Buddhist understanding of the world, but a brief description here will suffice. According to Buddhist thought, we hold a false perception of having an eternal, independent "self" or "soul." In ultimate reality, however, all phenomena are impermanent, and cannot exist independently.⁶⁴ This does not mean that "things" do not exist, but rather do not exist in and of themselves, eternally as isolated entities. This leads to the concept of *dependent origination*, which means that "everything arises according to appropriate conditions and is part of a changing process."⁶⁵ When you boil things down to their raw essence, they consist of *dharmas* (mental/physical processes). However, these *dharmas* too lack their own essence and can only be understood as acting in relation to one another. All *dharmas* are contingent on other *dharmas*. So,

⁶² Holt 1981, 16.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Harvey 2001, 78.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 106.

to view oneself as an isolated, independent entity is a false view; a bodhisattva understands that there is no self (*anatman*). Because things are therefore constantly changing, it is futile to become attached to them. Suffering is caused by this sense of attachment we feel towards things that can never exist as we want them to. While a bodhisattva understands the true nature of things, the concept of *upaya* is employed to help others understand these ideas as well. The instances of self-immolation within the *Lotus Sutra* depict these ideals in practice; self-immolation in this context can therefore be understood in a different manner than that given by the Western media.

Self-Immolation in Buddhist Scripture: The Lotus Sutra

The *Lotus sutra* is believed to have been written in India sometime between 150 BCE and 100 CE.⁶⁶ Although its author is unknown, it is seen by scholars as the most influential Buddhist scripture in East Asia.⁶⁷ The text is written in the form of a *sutra*, which is a discourse said to be the words of the historical Buddha transmitted after his death by the Buddhist community.⁶⁸ The text itself is an expedient means (*upaya*) in that people sought to emulate the qualities of the holy beings that it depicts.⁶⁹ The text is also used as a liturgy and has become a fundamental feature of Buddhist devotionalism. We will shortly see the implications of this through the story of the Medicine King bodhisattva found with this *sutra*.

⁶⁶ Teiser and Stone 2009, 1.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

The Medicine King is one the most famous and influential figures of the *Lotus sutra*. The story of this bodhisattva takes place in the distant past in a Buddhist realm very different from our own world. In this realm, the Buddha “Pure and Bright Excellence of Sun and Moon” preaches the *Lotus sutra* to the bodhisattva “Gladly Seen with Joy by All Living Beings.” After hearing the *Lotus sutra*, the bodhisattva becomes so inspired that he to aspires toward Buddhahood. Gladly Seen with Joy by All Living Beings then begins practicing austerities; for twelve thousand years he becomes an ascetic and ultimately achieves *Samadhi* (“absorption”), which is a highly advanced level of mediation.

Having reached *Samadhi*, Gladly Seen With Joy by All Living Beings decides to make an offering to the Buddha Pure and Bright Excellence of Sun and Moon in thanks for preaching the *Lotus sutra* to him. He begins by entering the state of *Samadhi* whence he produces a shower of flowers and incense, but then he realizes that the gift of his body would be far superior. After anointing his body in perfumes and oils for over one thousand years, he sets fire to himself and burns to death. At the end of the story, Seen with Joy by All Living Beings is revealed as the present day bodhisattva Medicine King.⁷⁰ After he self-immolates, the Buddha then proclaims, “This is true diligence. This is what is called a true Dharma offering to the Thus Come One...this is called the foremost donation.”⁷¹ The Buddha praises Seen with Joy by All Living Beings, claiming that gifts of the body surpass any other form of offering. The Buddha then proclaims the great merit and wisdom that can accumulate from self-sacrifice, in addition to the utmost devotion that self-sacrifice

⁷⁰ Benn 2009, 109.

⁷¹ Hurvitz 1976, 295.

displays towards the Buddha. In this way, we can see self-immolation as representing something completely separate from political protest through its use as a devotional offering to the Buddha.

As James Benn illustrates in his book, *Burning for the Buddha*, the *Lotus sutra* provides many explanations for self-immolation as accordant with ancient Buddhist ideals. The story of the Medicine King bodhisattva shows that the benefits of self-immolation are multifold. On a basic level, the story illustrates how self-immolation can be used as a means to worship the Buddha by exalting one's devotion to him as above attachment to one's own body. But beyond worshipping the Buddha, self-immolation also offers a means through which one can *become* a Buddha, or initially a bodhisattva by cultivating one's understanding of non-attachment and skillful means. In this respect, Benn writes, "Self-immolation offered a way of becoming a Buddha...rather than being an aberrant practice that must be explained away, it...offers a bodily path- a way to attain awakening and, ultimately, Buddhahood."⁷² A bodhisattva is therefore able to give his body away because he holds no sense of attachment to it, nor to an idea of "the self." The body creates a false sense of independence and attachment, and self-immolation offers a means to annihilate these false conceptions.

The Medicine King's act of devotion has implications that further extend toward the other Mahayana concepts discussed above. The Medicine King hopes that his self-immolation will result in his personal attainment of Buddhahood and this can be seen as directly beneficial to others as well. Benn writes, "By becoming a Buddha

⁷² Benn 2007, 7-8.

rapidly the self-immolator would soon find himself in a position to rescue sentient beings from suffering by means of a Buddha's salvific powers."⁷³ Self-immolation is grounded in compassion and its benefits transcend the actor himself. Benn also writes, "In texts, self-immolation is generally presented as a way to cultivate perfection of generosity, which is considered fundamental on the bodhisattva path."⁷⁴

Thus, self-immolation becomes a means of enacting fundamental Buddhist ideals. Let us review the concepts discussed above as they relate to self-immolation. Firstly, by understanding the concept of no-self (*anatman*) and *co-dependent origination*, giving away the body takes on new dimensions. Lacking attachment to something transient and contingent upon change, one stops seeing the body as the ultimate manifestation of "the self." Therefore self-immolators might be seen not as actually killing themselves, since "selves" do not exist per se, but rather manifesting Buddhist ideals. Secondly, if all things exist in relation to one another, self-immolation is not selfish, in the way that suicide is regarded in Western culture. The merit amassed from self-immolation creates merit for other beings as well. Aside from merit-transfer, self-immolation becomes a tool of skillful means (*upaya*) in and of itself. Witnessing a self-immolation (or even reading the text of the *Lotus Sutra*) can serve to wake someone up to ultimate reality.

In fact, self-immolation can be understood as a manifestation of the six bodhisattva perfections: generosity to give the body away; virtue to undertake such a gruesome act; vigor in dedicating oneself to this deed; patience in knowing when

⁷³ Benn 2009, 111.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

self-immolation is a proper act; meditation as being employed while one self-immolates; and wisdom as one understands all these concepts in relation to self-immolation. In the next chapter we will return to the *Lotus sutra*, as its influence can be seen in the daily lives as well as momentous devotional acts of premodern Chinese monks.

Self-Immolation in Jataka Tales

Turning now to *jataka* tales, or past-life stories of the Buddha, we can see the notion of *Parivatta* (merit transfer) used in the practice of self-sacrifice. Although there are many instances of self-sacrifice found within *jataka* stories, for the purpose of this thesis I will look to three, which clearly depict the different benefits and means of self-sacrifice to be found within traditional Buddhism. *Jataka* tales exemplify the virtues of the Buddha and the means to obtain enlightenment. To begin, we can look to the story “Why the Buddha had Good Digestion.” In this tale, the Buddha is seen in a past life as King Padmaka. The king ultimately commits suicide and becomes a rare fish in order to cure the people of his kingdom who are suffering from a mysterious illness. After reincarnating as a fish, he donates his flesh to the citizens while he is still alive and conscious. The king willingly suffers for them out of compassion. This *jataka* firmly situates the act of self-immolation in the context of Buddhist doctrine, illustrating how in some cases it has nothing to do with political protest. Firstly, there is the understanding of no-self (*anatman*). One can interpret this tale as illustrating the king’s proper understanding of Buddhist

virtues, which allows him to self-sacrifice for the greater good. By sacrificing himself, the king shows the necessity of relinquishing attachment to the body in order to become a bodhisattva. The king's proper understanding displayed in this story also drives his compassion through his willingness to literally take the suffering of others upon himself by feeding them with his flesh. Such acts also allow one to amass merit, not only for himself or herself, but also potentially for society as a whole, as a result of good karma accrued through compassion and selflessness. The king chooses to die not in order to be reborn in a better life, but rather to use that karma to directly help those around him who are suffering.

In another *jataka* tale titled "A King Gives Away His Head," we can see these same Buddhist concepts of compassion and *upaya* manifested in self-sacrifice. In the story, the bodhisattva King Candraprabha is described as, "a giver of everything, a renouncer of everything, one who gave away without attachment and engaged in generosity."⁷⁵ However, the king soon realizes that because his gifts are all based in the material world (such as money, animals, and jewels), they are ultimately unreal. He then wonders, "It is wonderful that I have given food to those who want food, drink to those who want drink, and clothing...to those who want them. But what if I were to give away even my own body to supplicants?"⁷⁶ The king eventually declares, "I will give up my own head not for the sake of kingship, not...heaven...not wealth...not for the victory of a universal emperor. But having attained complete and perfect awakening, I will tame beings who are wild, pacify beings who are not liberated, comfort beings who are troubled, and bring to nirvana beings who have

⁷⁵ Lopez 2004, 146.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

not attained nirvana.”⁷⁷ The nature of King Candraprabha’s self-sacrifice is similar to that of King Padmakas; both characters have reached a certain level of understanding that allows them to denounce attachment to their bodies. Stemming from this level of understanding, they also feel compassion towards others who are suffering (because kings are really bodhisattvas). As such, they understand that self-sacrifice can be used as a skillful means to help attend to the suffering of others.

Finally, we can look to the so-called “tiger *jataka*.” In this story, a prince is on a walk with his family when he finds a starving tigress that has recently given birth to cubs. Suffering and hungry, the dying tigress is about to eat her young when the prince decides that he will sacrifice himself to the tigress to save her cubs. The prince thinks, “For a long time I have been wandering in samsara wasting innumerable bodies and lives...what is the use of this body which for the sake of Dharma has not even once engaged in merit?”⁷⁸ The prince is driven by such extreme compassion that when the tigress is too weak to kill him, he stabs himself with a sharp branch to entice her with his blood, whereupon the tigress finally eats him. Once again, self-sacrifice is seen here to be multi-dimensional. Because the prince has a proper understanding of Buddhist doctrine, he realizes that he can use his transient body positively by giving it to the hungry tigress. Just as King Padmaka gives away his flesh to cure his sick subjects, the prince gives up his flesh for the nourishment of others. Self-sacrifice in this story is driven by compassion and is seen as an awesome deed. In fact, the prince is then reborn in the realm of gods.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 156.

⁷⁸ <http://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/English-Texts/Garland-of-Birth-Stories/01-The-Story-of-the-Tigress.htm>

Self-sacrifice is once again depicted as being a beneficial act because it can end the suffering of others.

On a literal level, certain instances of self-sacrifice are used to cure illnesses with flesh. On a metaphorical level, self-sacrifice cures people of their suffering as a result of ignorance. It is important to note that in no instances of self-sacrifice in the *Lotus sutra* or the *jatakas* does the act function only for the benefit of the performer. As a rule, when self-sacrifice is performed in accordance with *upaya*, its effects always attend to the suffering of others. These *jatakas* also display a further discrepancy between Buddhist conceptions of self-immolation and Western media accounts of the act. While the Western media seems concerned to highlight the “suffering” experienced by the self-immolator (which allegedly drives their actions), self-immolation in Buddhist doctrine is not about the suffering experienced by the self-immolator, but rather is used to end the suffering of *others*. This would situate self-immolation in a Buddhist context not as an act of desperation or helplessness, but rather as a powerful honor that benefits both the self-immolator and those surrounding the performer.

Reexamining the Self-Immolation of Lama Sobha

With these ideas in mind, we can now return to the recording left by Lama Sobha. The nature of Lama Sobha’s act according to his own account can be seen in direct contrast to the account published in the *Wall Street Journal*. In a translated recording obtained from the *Save Tibet Organization*, Lama Sobha dedicates his self-

immolation to Tibetans and calls for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet, while further proclaiming the courage of other self-immolators. He states,

“This is the year in which so many Tibetan heroes have died. I am sacrificing my body to stand in solidarity with them in flesh and blood, and to seek repentance through this highest tantric honor of offering one’s body...I am giving away my body as an offering of light to chase away the darkness, to free all beings from suffering, and to lead them...to the Buddha of infinite light...I offer this sacrifice as a token of long-life offering to...the Dalai Lama...”⁷⁹

Lama Sobha begins by directly relating his act to traditional Buddhist principles. He notes that self-immolation is both a “tantric honor” and can be used to help all beings end their suffering, both ideas that are grounded in from Buddhist doctrinal beliefs. On this point, Teniz Mingyur Paldrom suggests that self-immolation can be understood to challenge how pain is experienced and by whom; self-immolation, in this context, is about a willingness to displace the suffering of others unto oneself. Paldrom’s suggestion can be seen in direct relation to the doctrinal understandings of merit-transfer as discussed above. In this regard, self-immolation is seen not as a sign of desperation or weakness, but rather as a further display of empowerment that results from the cultivation of Buddhist virtue, which can directly help to end the suffering of others.⁸⁰ Self-immolation in practice can be seen to directly mirror the principles and actions of characters found within Buddhist texts and teachings. By “tantric honor,” Lama Sobha is alluding to a popular form of Buddhism found within Tibet known as *Vajrayana*. Tantra, or *Vajrayana*, is generally understood as a “ritual identification,” meaning “a ritual act in which the practitioner becomes one

⁷⁹ www.savetibet.org 2013, 1-2.

⁸⁰ Paldrom 2012, 2.

with the deity evoked.”⁸¹ In this regards, Lama Sobha’s self-immolation can be seen as a sacred ritual in which he seeks to emulate the Buddha.

In this recording, Lama Sobha also alludes to leading other beings to “the Buddha of infinite light.” By this, he is referring to beliefs rooted in the Pure Land Buddhist thought. Pure Land Buddhism, thought often overlooked in the West, has been a fundamental aspect of Tibetan Buddhism for centuries.⁸² Pure Land Buddhism teaches that one can be reborn in a pure, perfect, happy realm after death; there are many of these pure lands scattered throughout the universe, though the Western Pure Land *Sukhavati* has been of central importance for Tibetans.⁸³ Followers of Pure Land believe *Sukhavati* to be an actual place that mirrors a paradise. Practice in Pure Land Buddhism involves contemplation, yoga, and prayer; *Sukhavati* became linked to tantric yoga in which one’s consciousness at the moment of death could be centered on a pure land. This consciousness could leave one’s body through the top of the head and travel directly to a pure land at the moment of death.⁸⁴ The parallels between Pure Land Buddhism and Lama Sobha’s self-immolation are thus interesting to consider; by alluding to the Buddha of infinite light before his death, it might logically follow that Lama Sobha was thinking about a pure land as he immolated. He also states that he hopes other beings will be reborn there as well. This would greatly complicate the meaning of ‘political protest’ by suggesting that he hopes to bring change to Tibetans through Buddhist belief and practice.

Lama Sobha goes on to state,

⁸¹ Payne 2006, 9.

⁸² Kapstein 2004, 19.

⁸³ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 26.

“To all my spiritual brothers and sisters...you must unite and work together to build a strong and prosperous Tibetan nation...you must maintain unity and strength. Give love and education to the children...it is extremely important to genuinely practice Buddhist principles in order to benefit the Tibetan cause...”⁸⁵

He uses the rest of his recording as a message to Tibetans to continue to preserve Tibetan identity and culture, and states that by practicing Buddhist principles they will directly benefit their nation’s cause. While Lama Sobha does not directly reference the Buddhist doctrinal terms I have previously depicted, the parallels between these ideas and his recording are important to consider. To begin, he states that his goal is to free all beings from suffering, which is the ultimate goal of self-immolation in the *Lotus sutra* and *jataka* tales. Lama Sobha also states that his self-immolation is “an offering of light to chase away the darkness.” In a story found within the *avadanas* (stories of disciples’ past lifetimes), a disciple soaks his turban in oil and sets it on fire to be used as a lamp for the Buddha.⁸⁶ In both instances, self-immolation is used as a metaphor for bringing beings out of darkness and into the light. Lama Sobha’s recording is also characterized by the strength to undertake such a powerful action, which he calls “an honor.” Similarly, as we saw in the story “A King Gives Away His Head,” the king characterizes self-sacrifice as “wonderful” for its benefits to others.

It is significant that nowhere in Sobha’s recording does he use the words “China,” “protest,” or “politics,” nor does he attribute his act to defiance and helplessness. As Tsering Shakya writes, “A Number of testimonies left...show that they were motivated by the wish to preserve Tibetan religion and culture and to

⁸⁵ www.savetibet.org 2013, 1-2.

⁸⁶ Benn 2009, 122.

ensure the return of the Dalai Lama. In these testimonies, the protestors do not articulate their grievances in terms of particular policy but in terms of *civilization preservation*.⁸⁷ By this, Shakya is referring to the immediacy Tibetans feel in regards to protecting their disappearing culture. This desire is what Lama Sobha directly alludes to in his recording when he deplores the necessity of preserving their identity through Buddhist means. Just as the *jataka* tales depict self-immolation as a courageous and awesome act, so too can Sobha's self-immolation be seen in this respect

Scholar Giovanni da Col suggests that, in accordance with the doctrine of merit-transfer, a single self-immolation can be seen to benefit the entire Tibetan nation.⁸⁸ Let us reconsider a statement made in Lama Sobha's final recording: "I am taking this action neither for myself nor to fulfill a personal desire...I am sacrificing my body both to stand in solidarity with [Tibetans]...and to seek repentance through this highest tantric honor."⁸⁹ There are many points of interest within this quote to unpack. The notion of 'self' is challenged in that Sobha intends for his actions to be viewed in conjunction with the entire Tibetan state, rather than an individual form of protest or devotion. This complex understanding of the self and the body (as discussed above as being "empty") is completely overlooked in Western media accounts of self-immolation. The merit accrued from his action may be seen to benefit the Tibetan state, thereby helping their plight for autonomy, at least from a Buddhist perspective.

⁸⁷ Shakya 2012, 36.

⁸⁸ da Col 2012, 2.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 2.

We must also consider the blatant discrepancy between Sobhas's words and the way in which the Western media contextualizes his actions. In the Western media accounts previously analyzed, self-immolation is depicted as an act of defiance and protest in response to Chinese occupation; yet Sobha's recording centers on the *Tibetan people*, and how he wants others to see his action to be of direct benefit and attribution to the Tibetan nation as a whole. Sobha does not attribute his self-immolation to a feeling of nihilism or hostility towards his situation. Sobha self-immolates with the intent to honor past Tibetans who have died throughout the ongoing struggle of life, amid delusion, attachment, and suffering. Furthermore, he seeks to undertake what he sees as a beneficial action for his people and his nation.

This leads to a further point discussed by da Col that the Western media neglects to account for: the relationship between the self-immolator, his or her countrymen, and the Tibetan nation. The Western media depicts acts of self-immolation in relation to Chinese occupation, and depicts the self-immolators themselves generally in relation to their immediate life, such as their family, their hobbies, or their occupation. In this regard, immolators are humanized and a sense of sympathy is produced. A reader will feel sorry for a self-immolator who has abandoned his or her family, home, and hobbies as a result of complete helplessness and defiance. While it is certainly important that self-immolators continue to be humanized, we must also consider the relationships and implications that their actions have on a larger scale. As da Col discusses, and Sobha's recording suggests, self-immolation may be seen as a practice to empathize with fellow Tibetans by

allowing the self-immolator to use his or her body to literally manifest the suffering of others, or in accordance with the Buddhist belief that positive merit may accrue for all beings.

Of course, no aspect of self-immolation exists in a vacuum. As we will see in the next chapter concerning socially engaged Buddhism, it is also within the nature of Buddhist principles and practices to perform self-immolation as a means to convey political or social messages. As discussed above, in terms of Buddhist doctrine, self-immolation can be used to display proper understanding of reality because the performer knows that the body is transient and that there is no true self, so s/he seeks to relinquish attachment to these through self-immolation. Following this line of thought, scholar Janet Gyatso has suggested that self-immolation has historically targeted an “inner enemy,” but today’s target is an “outer enemy” - an oppressive state.⁹⁰ In this respect, traditional Buddhist ideals not accounted for by the Western media have been contextualized in a modern situation. Gyatso suggests that the power of self-immolation in a modern context forces witnesses to realize the self-immolator’s courage and potential reasoning for immolating in the first place.⁹¹ Gyatso goes on to further suggest that self-immolation serves to undermine the oppressive government, but must also be considered as it relates to Buddhism. She further asserts that self-immolation allows the oppressed to regain control of their fate.⁹² Self-immolation in this regard is both a skill obtained through Buddhist training and a courageous and empowering act. This interpretation stands in stark

⁹⁰ Gyatso 2012, 2.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

contrast to Western media accounts. Gyatso's work suggests that Tibetan self-immolation, though used as a tool in political crisis, cannot be separated from its religious-ethical nature.

In this chapter I have illustrated the meanings of self-immolation through Buddhist doctrine and scripture. Contrary to the preceding chapter, which analyzed the reductionist accounts of self-immolation given by the Western media, self-immolation in a traditional Buddhist context takes on an entirely different and more complex meaning than mere political protest. As I have shown, self-immolation is a means for understanding and effecting the goals of the Mahayana tradition. In this light, self-immolation can be undertaken as a practice of devotion, skillful means, merit-making, and merit-transfer. Thus, from a Buddhist standpoint, self-immolation is grounded in compassion and a drive to end the suffering of others. Further, I have also shown how these doctrinal beliefs are effected through self-immolation in classical Buddhist texts. The act of self-sacrifice is commonly found in Mahayana literature and in ancient Indian *jatakas*. These aspects of self-immolation are almost never contemplated on any meaningful level in Western media depictions, and Buddhism is neglected as a possible inspiration for self-immolation. In fact, the Western media generally presents the act as in direct contradiction to the 'happy,' 'peaceful' nature of Buddhists! In the following chapter, I will return to the importance of the *Lotus sutra* as it influenced Chinese Buddhists in medieval times. We will then come to see that self-immolation is not only present in Buddhist doctrine and text, but has been practiced throughout Buddhist history (both medieval and contemporary) as well.

IV. Chapter Four: Self-Immolation in Buddhist History

In this chapter, I will look to instances of self-immolation that have occurred throughout Asian Buddhist societies. In this way, self-immolation can be seen not only as an act with significant background in Buddhist doctrine and scripture, but also one that has been practiced by living monks and nuns throughout history. To begin, I will look to self-immolation in medieval China as inspired by the *Lotus sutra*. Following this, I will examine other forms of self-sacrifice occurring in Late Imperial China, including self-immolation as a tool to bring rain in times of drought. Turning to more recent times I will look to Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk who coined the term “socially engaged Buddhism” (which will be discussed later) and the self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức during the Vietnam War. While the Western media rarely considers Thích Quảng Đức’s self-immolation as a possible source for contextualizing and understanding Tibetan self-immolation (instead comparing it to self-immolation in the Middle East), the events that unfolded during the Vietnam War are of considerable importance when considering Tibetan self-immolation.

Our analysis of Thich Nhat Hanh and Thích Quảng Đức will finally culminate in a more theoretical discussion concerning the nature of suicide (or, perhaps more fittingly ‘self-sacrifice’) as presented by French sociologist Émile Durkheim. In conjunction with Durkheim’s work, I will show how the complexities behind Tibetan self-immolation relate back to the larger needs and values of society. In this chapter, I will illustrate how, contrary to Western media depictions, self-immolation

in Tibet is neither an isolated occurrence nor completely removed from Buddhist practice. Rather, self-immolation and other forms of self-sacrifice have played a complex and significant role throughout Asian and Buddhist history, which must be considered when surveying Tibetan Self-Immolation.

Self-Immolation in Medieval China

While self-immolation is fundamentally based in Buddhist doctrinal literature, its importance transcends the textual realm alone. The *Lotus sutra* and *jatakas* not only used stories to exemplify Buddhist concepts, but the practices found within these stories were actually meant to be effected in real life. As Reiko Ohnuma writes, “In many Mahayana sutras, the bodhisattva’s gifts are treated as examples to be imitated, and all bodhisattvas are encouraged to give their bodies away, either literally or figuratively.”⁹³ Thus self-immolation is not only used in texts to convey Buddhist concepts such as merit, karma, devotion, or skillful means, but the act itself is to be seen as imitable in real life.⁹⁴ Ohnuma argues that this is possible through the method of storytelling used in Mahayana literature. Generally, stories involve simple first-person narration, and many times the giver-of-flesh is not the Buddha or a bodhisattva, but a seemingly random human or even animal. She writes, “[bodily donation] is an awesome deed, to be sure, but perhaps it becomes something we can actually imagine when it is related to us in a simple, first-person

⁹³ Ohnuma 2007, 6.

⁹⁴ Benn 2009, 107.

voice and involves one's life as [for example] a lowly rabbit."⁹⁵ This can, at least hypothetically, provide some clues as to why Tibetans have resorted to self-immolation, as opposed to other forms of action in their ostensive protest against Chinese occupation. If Buddhist texts not only depict the merit that can accrue from self-immolation-- both for the performer and those surrounding him-- but further promote the act as a real practice, we can begin to see self-immolation in Tibet as far more than nihilistic protest.

To understand this phenomenon more clearly, we can return to the *Lotus sutra*. In fact, the story of the Medicine King is so influential that the Buddhist ordination tradition of burning small marks on the crown of the heads of monks and nuns is derived from this text.⁹⁶ In medieval China, the Medicine King bodhisattva inspired many to perform self-immolation and surviving records on stones epitaphs have been inscribed with accounts of men and women who chanted verses from the *Lotus sutra* as they self-immolated. The death of the Medicine King was regarded by these medieval Chinese Buddhists as "selfless and heroic," and as such, many sought to imitate the bodhisattva's actions.⁹⁷ Throughout Chinese history, Buddhist thinkers have undertaken exegetical means to validate the practice of self-immolation in real life. James Benn cites Jizang (549-623), a highly influential Buddhist thinker who praises self-immolation as a means "to repay the kindness of the Buddha and pay homage to him, thus propagating the sutra for humans, teaching and converting

⁹⁵ Ohnuma 2007, 14.

⁹⁶ Benn 2009, 108.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

myriad beings.”⁹⁸ Therefore, according to Jizang, self-sacrifice is based upon altruistic principles and is thus to be condoned.⁹⁹

It was thus in the context of devotion and veneration for the Medicine King bodhisattva that several hundred Chinese monks and nuns undertook self-immolation. In fact, some were so inspired by the text that surviving documents suggest that they imitated all the actions of the Medicine King found within the *Lotus sutra*. These monks and nuns therefore self-immolated in front of *stupas* (which enshrine relics of the Buddha), or in front of large groups, hoping to inspire the audience through “skillful means” and “merit transfer,” just as the Medicine King bodhisattva was inspired to self-immolate after hearing the Buddha “Pure and Bright Excellence of Sun and Moon” preach the *Lotus sutra*.¹⁰⁰

Given the prevalence of self-immolation in medieval China, it is important that we look to surviving records that detail the accounts of actual self-immolators. In an account from 7th century China, for example, two nuns who were also sisters were awestruck by the *Lotus sutra*, and recited the text constantly. They began to detest their physical bodies and began practicing severe austerities by restricting their food and renouncing all material possessions including their clothing. Gradually, they began to consume oil (as did the Medicine King) and stopped eating grain altogether. Surviving documents describe them as follows: “they were filled with strength of essence; their spiritual determination was bright and vigorous.”¹⁰¹

When the sisters felt that they were ready, they wrapped themselves in waxed cloth,

⁹⁸ Ibid., 114.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 115.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

began reciting the *Lotus sutra*, and eventually lit flames atop each others' heads. Records describe the sisters as reciting the *Lotus sutra* with increasing volume as they eventually burned to death.¹⁰²

In another surviving account, a monk named Sengming (502-519) sought to self-immolate. Inspired by the *Lotus sutra*, Sengming built a temple to the Buddha and constantly recited the religious text, claiming that he could hear the sound of fingers snapping in approval and the word "excellent" being repeated to him. Throughout his practices, he wrote the Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty (502-549) asking for permission to self-immolate. When Emperor Wu finally granted his approval, Sengming self-immolated on a rock. Surviving texts depict miracles that subsequently occurred at the site of his self-immolation. Supposedly, the sick were cured, flowers began to spontaneously bloom, and a pond was formed with curative water.¹⁰³ The miracles associated with his self-immolation would once again suggest the presumed positive nature of the act.

While these are just two of several hundred surviving accounts of self-immolation in medieval China, the practice of self-immolation clearly penetrated far beyond the text of the *Lotus sutra*. In the medieval Buddhist *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* it is stated,

"What is to be understood by the fulfillment of the perfection of generosity appertaining to the body which is born from the bonds and karma? Without gaining the dharma body...the bodhisattva is able to give away without reservation all his precious possessions, his head, his eyes, his marrow his skin..."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 117.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 119.

This 'dharma body' is understood in relation to the Buddha; the dharma is the truth of his teachings expressed through his physical body. Because the Buddha was seen as the "embodiment of ultimate truth in enlightened knowledge," the dharma was metaphorically seen as the Buddha's essential being.¹⁰⁵ After the Buddha's death, this 'body of dharma' came to represent his teachings.¹⁰⁶ Thus, in medieval China, monks and nuns were concerned to understand religious doctrine (the Buddha's teachings, or 'dharma body') as it was enacted in everyday life. As this text would suggest, the fulfillment of bodhisattva ideals translated into an ability to give generously without reservation. It would therefore make sense that a devout monk or nun might be inspired to self-immolation as a means to instantiate these bodhisattva ideals.

Just as self-immolation in Tibet has become a widely contested practice and hotly debated in terms of its meaning, effectiveness, and accordance with Buddhist principles, so too was self-immolation a lively source of debate in medieval China. The difference, however, is that Chinese Buddhists always understood the act in relation to Buddhism; the question was often whether or not it was a breach of monastic codes. When the Western media considers the question of how self-immolation relates to Buddhism, it is generally concluded that self-immolation is contradictory to Buddhist principles. However, when debated by prominent medieval monks, the ethical questions concerning self-immolation and Buddhism are much more complex. The first rule of the *vinaya* (rules of conduct for monastics) is the prohibition against killing living beings; some Buddhist thinkers therefore

¹⁰⁵ Buswell 2006, 77.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

believed that self-immolation was a violation of the *vinaya* because it involves killing oneself. However, other thinkers sought a more complex understanding of self-immolation. Daoshi (596-683), a leading medieval Chinese authority on the *vinaya*, wrote that, “Since the bodhisattva is intent on leaving samsara...and has developed compassion toward all beings, he has no intention of harming others, and so his giving up of the body only generates merit. Thus there is no offense against the precepts.”¹⁰⁷ Again, self-immolation is here understood and legitimized by foundational Buddhist principles. The underlying intention, rather than the act itself, is what fundamentally matters. As Benn writes, “An appreciation of the complex interplay between text and practice in Chinese Buddhism shows that auto-cremation was far from the extreme or deviant practice that it might first appear to be, and that it possessed a logic and aesthetic that could be appreciated by the larger Buddhist community.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, contrary to Western media depictions, self-immolation has a rich tradition (including ethical debate) throughout Buddhist history, though it is important to note that this debate is not necessarily consistent throughout history. While the context in which self-immolation has been performed has doubtlessly changed, to understand Tibetan self-immolation without looking to Buddhist history results in a limited depiction of the act.

Self-Immolation in Late Imperial China

¹⁰⁷ Benn 2009, 127.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

Continuing this tradition of self-immolation, 16th and 17th century Chinese religious adepts also offer useful parallels for understanding Tibetan self-immolation. In late Imperial China, self-immolation was additionally believed to have the power to produce rain during times of drought. While the use of self-immolation during environmental crises may appear to be significantly different from self-immolation during political/social crises, the underlying drives behind these 16th and 17th century self-immolations offer potential insight into the acts of politically motivated self-immolations.

Jimmy Yu, in his book *Sanctity and Self-Inflicted Violence in Chinese Religions 1500-1700*, seeks to understand the driving forces behind Buddhist, civilian, and royal instances of self-immolation during times of drought. Yu writes that, “Performers of exposure and self-immolation presented themselves as altruistic heroes who were acting out of sincerity and great compassion in their desire to alleviate people’s suffering.”¹⁰⁹ These motives of self-immolators during times of drought resemble the motives that drive the bodhisattvas to self-immolate in Buddhist scripture. However, there is more to consider in these instances of self-immolation than their altruistic motives. Yu describes those who self-immolated as being seen to have cosmological powers, meaning they could mediate between the visible (worldly) and invisible (transcendent) realms.¹¹⁰

Surviving myths concerning drought-related self-immolations begin in the 16th century with a cleric named Zhoufu. According to the story, at the end of Zhoufu’s life, he told his followers his time had come “to follow the example of the Buddha

¹⁰⁹ Yu 2012, 117.

¹¹⁰ Yu 2012, 118.

and join the path of fire.” After stacking up a pile of firewood, his body burst into flames and he proclaimed, “If there is ever a drought in the future call my name and rain will fall heavily.”¹¹¹ Self-immolation came to be seen as a tool to end drought due to the belief that the body had propitious powers. Self-immolation was seen in light of the notion of *tapas*, a Sanskrit term meaning “magical heat.” This magical heat was believed to have the power to burn away greed, hatred, and ignorance.¹¹² *Tapas* was also seen as a form of inner heat directly related to the life force and was understood to be cultivated through breath control.¹¹³ This inner heat was used to directly engage the body with the goal of realizing the reality of non-dualism. Thus, this inner heat (the internal fire) became synonymous with wisdom (non-dual nature of the world), and therefore self-immolation was seen as a manifestation of this wisdom.¹¹⁴

However, in premodern China it was believed that one’s physical body could produce cosmological (other-worldly) changes as well. The powers of the body to effect social and cosmic change were understood to be as real and as systematized as the laws of natural science are understood today.¹¹⁵ In 16th and 17th century China, the belief that the body could bring about cosmological change was upheld by Buddhists, shamans, and emperors alike. By perpetuating the idea that the body held auspicious powers, those who performed self-sacrifice (such as self-

¹¹¹ Yu 2012, 133.

¹¹² Ibid., 134.

¹¹³ Bendor 2000, 597.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Yu 2012, 118.

immolation) were also able to display their altruistic devotion to the community.¹¹⁶

This belief provides us with another powerful lens through which we might understand the nature of self-immolation. Historically speaking, self-immolation was seen to have real, transcendent value, powerful enough to alter the course of nature. Its repercussions extended beyond the actor not just to those surrounding him or her (as we saw in the case of merit-transfer), but to the course of nature as well.

In this regard, it is useful to consider the myth of the sage king, King Tang (1600-1046 B.C.E), which exemplifies this belief system. According to legend, a seven-year drought occurred in the era of Tang. King Tang declared, "I will offer myself as a sacrifice on behalf of my people." He had a fire prepared, purified himself with water, and burned himself to death. As he burned, rain began to fall.¹¹⁷ Here, there are two important points to consider. Firstly, the myth depicts the body as being powerful enough to alter the course of nature and end drought. Secondly, the king is moved to self-immolate out of a sense of duty and compassion to his suffering subjects. The similarities between this story and the selflessness displayed in *jataka* tales is significant; in both instances, altruistic desires are seen in conjunction with the power of the body to end suffering.

Self-mutilation in Late Imperial China

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 116.

¹¹⁷ Yu 2012, 119.

Looking to a more general context of self-sacrifice and self-inflicted violence occurring in China from the 1500s to 1700s, we can see just how prominent self-immolation was in Buddhist culture. Before we look to some examples, however, it will be useful to differentiate between various terms used to describe such acts. By 'self-sacrifice,' I refer to instances in which the performers willingly intend to kill themselves. Thus, self-immolation (when used as a means to death, as opposed to burning during ordination ceremonies) is a form of self-sacrifice. By 'self-inflicted violence,' I refer to instances in which the performers willingly harm themselves, but, do not have the intention to die. As Jimmy Yu notes, both self-sacrifice and self-inflicted violence were a common and highly visible part of life, used to affect people, events, and the environment.¹¹⁸ Rather than sporadically occurring in isolation, the acts were "often systematic, ritualized, and replete with meaning both for the performers and their audience."¹¹⁹ Beyond self-immolation, other forms of self-harm included blood writing, filial body slicing, chastity mutilation, and more. Filial body slicing was the practice of slicing off one's own flesh to feed to a sick parent out of devotion and loyalty. The importance of this practice in the context of medieval China was not about the cannibalistic act of eating human flesh, but rather was used as a way to "reaffirm family ties and social order."¹²⁰ Chastity mutilation and suicide were used by women to resist rape and remarriages if their husband died.¹²¹ Widows and young women would cut off their noses or other parts of their

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

bodies as an attempt to “de-eroticize” themselves.¹²² Blood writing, of more direct relevance to the purposes of this thesis, will be discussed below. Practitioners believed that self-harm and self-sacrifice could be used for social, spiritual, and physiological means.¹²³ Self-harm and self-sacrifice were performed in conjunction with ‘higher aims,’ allowing one to “become a sanctified and revered participant in society.”¹²⁴ As we will see below, self-sacrifice as it relates to the larger needs of society is a significant consideration commonly overlooked in Western media depictions of Tibetan self-immolation.

To help contextualize the meaning and benefits of self-immolation, we can look in more detail to the practice of blood writing. Practitioners would draw blood from various parts of the body, including the tongue, finger, or skin near the heart, and use it to copy Buddhist scriptures. What was the point of such a gruesome act? Blood writing was commonly used as a way for children to display their devotion and loyalty to their parents. The point of harming oneself by drawing one’s own blood was that it expressed the *genuineness* of one’s devotion.¹²⁵ This is significant to consider because in Western thought self-inflicted violence or self-sacrifice (deemed ‘suicide’) is generally seen to stem from psychosis. While the magnitude of self-inflicted violence and self-sacrifice are certainly very different given that one culminates in death, willingly inflicting pain unto one’s body is generally viewed negatively in the West. However, in this context, self-harm was seen as positive and beneficial for both the practitioner and society at large.

¹²² Ibid., 5.

¹²³ Ibid., 8.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 16.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 40.

In a more specific context, blood writing was also used to display the difference between those who truly lived wisdom and those who simply “spoke” of wisdom.¹²⁶ Just as we saw in the *Lotus sutra* and *jatakas*, the act of self-sacrifice or self-harm was used to display one’s devotion and understanding of doctrinal ideals. Furthermore, blood writing was seen as a manifestation of one’s virtue, honor, and morality.¹²⁷ Another interesting drive behind blood-writing and other forms of self-sacrifice was the belief that it could protect the ‘true’ dharma, thus preventing Buddhism from becoming corrupt; for if one has true and pure devotion to something, what better way to display this devotion than literally placing it above the self by harming or completely annihilating the body?¹²⁸ This can be seen to directly contrast the commonly held notion in Western media accounts that self-immolation stands in opposition to all Buddhist foundations and values; historically speaking, it was rather used to *preserve* these very values in question.

Self-Immolation in the Vietnam War & Socially Engaged Buddhism

Instances of self-immolation are not only commonly found in premodern China; it is estimated that since 1963, up to 3,000 self-immolations have occurred throughout the world.¹²⁹ The year 1963 is important, as this was the year Thích Quảng Đức (1897-1963) burned himself to death during the Vietnam War. This event is of crucial importance for understanding Tibetan Self-Immolation. However,

¹²⁶ Ibid., 53.

¹²⁷ Yu 2012, 46.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 47.

¹²⁹ Biggs 2008, 23.

before we take an in depth look at Thích Quảng Đức and his actions, we must first introduce the Vietnamese monk and social activist, Thich Nhat Hanh. This is because Nhat Hanh's writing has set the modern precedent for Buddhist social activism.

Thich Nhat Hanh was born in 1926 in South Vietnam and founded the Tiep Hien Order (Order of Interbeing) in 1965. The Tiep Hien Order was founded to manifest Buddhist views in practice, such as non-attachment, *upaya*, compassion, and a commitment towards social betterment. This idea of employing Buddhist virtues to achieve social betterment and change became known as socially engaged Buddhism.¹³⁰ Nhat Hanh became a central Buddhist figure during the Vietnam War for his opposition to violence and his belief that Buddhism provided the proper foundations to enact social and political change in the wake of crisis. For the purposes of this thesis, we do not need to go into great depth concerning the details of the Vietnam War; however, a brief background considering Buddhist involvement will be helpful.

Under the Southern Vietnamese Roman Catholic government of Ngô Đình Diệm, Buddhism was heavily censured. As clashes between Buddhists and the regime became more violent, many Buddhists began demanding greater equality. On June 11, 1963, a ceremony at Phau Buu Pagoda in Saigon was held to rally support for Vietnamese Buddhists. 700 priests and thousands of bystanders were present when the 73-year-old Thích Quảng Đức was willingly doused in gasoline and burned to

¹³⁰ King 1996, 323.

death, becoming the first known monk to self-immolate in modern times.¹³¹ Quảng Đức had written one last letter in which he pleaded for President Ngô Đình Diệm “to take a mind of compassion towards the people of the nation and implement religious equality... I call the venerables, reverends, members of the *sangha* and the lay Buddhists to organize in solidarity to make sacrifices to protect Buddhism.”¹³² The message and subject of Quảng Đức’s letter are of interest; he calls for Ngô Đình Diệm to implement *religious* equality, and calls for *Buddhists* to organize to protect *Buddhism*. The point of significance found within this letter is the relationship between self-immolation and Buddhism. Thích Quảng Đức is also quoted as stating, “I pray to the Buddha to give light to President Ngô Đình Diệm, so that he will accept the five minimum requests of the Vietnamese Buddhists. Before closing my eyes to go to Buddha, I have the honor to present my words to President Diệm, asking him to be kind and tolerant toward his people and enforce a policy of religious equality.”¹³³

These five minimum requests, or the five-point manifesto, were five demands that Vietnamese monks had of the government. They included withdrawing the prohibition against flying the Buddhist flag, granting Buddhism equal status to the Catholic Church, punishing officers involved in the Hue incident (the shooting of Buddhist demonstrators), and allowing free worship for the Buddhists. Quảng Đức also considers his actions an “honor,” rather than being a declaration of helplessness. What is so fundamentally important about this language is that Quảng Đức’s political protest can be seen as directly grounded in Buddhist doctrine and

¹³¹ King 2000, 143.

¹³² Tường 2005,

¹³³ Joiner 1964, 918.

principles. This “religious language” is nearly invisible in Western media depictions of Tibetan self-immolation.

Following Quảng Đức’s actions, Thích Nhất Hạnh worked to ground Quảng Đức’s self-immolation in accordance with principles of socially engaged Buddhism. In response to the brutality of the governmental regime, Nhat Hanh proclaimed,

“These events have shown us that social events can deeply influence the religious life because Buddhists are at the same time citizens...this organization aims to...aid disciples to fulfill their social duties. What are those? They are the practice of Buddhist doctrine in daily life, the propagation of this doctrine to the people around them...the Buddhists have to participate in social and cultural activities.”¹³⁴

Self-immolation can here be understood as a political statement inspired by and grounded in Buddhist thought. Nhat Hanh has also been careful not to proclaim a universal meaning driving self-immolation and is hesitant to draw any definitive conclusions concerning the nature of self-immolation, stressing that it cannot be reduced to “good/bad,” or “violent/non-violent.” Rather, according to Nhat Hanh, self-immolation can serve to wake people up to the horrors associated with warfare, in addition to the desire of the performer to literally feel the pain of those suffering.¹³⁵ Nhat Hanh grounds these ideas in the concept of the “Middle Way,” which he describes as follows: “The Middle Way avoids extreme views and dualistic thinking. Because we have wrong views we have wrong perceptions...afflictions are born from wrong perceptions.”¹³⁶ Thus, reducing self-immolation to good or bad, violent or non-violent is a result of dualistic thinking and should therefore to be

¹³⁴ King 1996, 329.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 336.

¹³⁶ Nhat Hanh 2010, 8

avoided. Dualism is seen as being negative because it categorizes and separates things, rather than accounting for the interconnectivity of all entities.

A major distinction can be seen here between Western media accounts of self-immolation and Nhat Hanh's interpretations of the act. As I have previously illustrated, a main feature of Western media accounts concerns the question of whether or not self-immolation is violent or non-violent, contradictory to or accordant with Buddhist values. However, in light of Buddhist doctrine and Nhat Hanh's belief that self-immolation cannot be reduced to categories of good/bad or violent/nonviolent, it would seem that this debate shows a limitedness in the Western media understanding of self-immolation as it relates to Buddhism.

The parallels between the positions of Vietnamese Buddhists during the Vietnam War and of Tibetan Buddhists today are unmistakable, and therefore the presence of Buddhist thought within political activism cannot be ignored. Sociologist Michael Biggs stresses that the importance of Quảng Đức's self-immolation when surveying other contemporary instances of self-immolation cannot be underestimated. In fact, Biggs argues that the only significant association with self-immolation is religion. He writes, "The proportion of Hindus and Buddhists in a country are positively correlated with the rate of self-suicide."¹³⁷ Thus, self-immolation in Tibet cannot be disentangled from its religious meaning. This is not to suggest that self-immolation in Tibet is simply a religious act; as I have previously stated, it is evidently being used in conjunction with political grievances. In light of Quảng Đức's self-

¹³⁷ Biggs 2008, 25.

immolation and Nhat Hanh's understanding of socially engaged Buddhism, the understanding of Tibetan self-immolation may be similarly viewed.

Suicide in Social Context: Émile Durkheim

In a further study of self-immolation in Vietnam (concerning both Thích Quảng Đức and subsequent Buddhist self-immolators), B.C. Ben Park offers an important insight into Tibetan self-immolations: "Rigid and highly repressive dictatorships have existed in other countries without resulting in a single self-immolation."¹³⁸ With this thought in mind, Park turns to the work of the famed 19th century sociologist, Émile Durkheim. In Durkheim's influential book, *Suicide*, he sets out to explore the underlying meanings that drive one to suicide. His underlying belief is that suicide, rather than being an isolated, individualized act, is inseparable from the structures of a given society.¹³⁹ Thus, what drives an individual to suicide stems from a collective drive, which is directly affected by society.¹⁴⁰ Durkheim differentiates between three main types of suicide, one of which, *altruistic suicide*, is useful to consider in the present context. Durkheim writes, "Altruism expresses the state where the ego is not its own property, where it is blended with something not itself, where the goal of conduct is exterior to itself, that is, in one of the groups in which it participates."¹⁴¹ Altruistic suicide, therefore, stems from extreme

¹³⁸ Park 2010, 83.

¹³⁹ Simpson 1951, 13.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹⁴¹ Durkheim 1897, 222.

integration/identification with a group.¹⁴² When altruistic suicide occurs, the act is less about the individual and more about the society to which one belongs and the needs of this society at a given time.

It is in this context of altruistic suicide that Park argues one can understand Vietnamese self-immolation. In fact, Park notes that Nhat Hanh did not even seek to classify Thích Quảng Đức and the other Vietnamese Buddhists' self-immolation as a form of protest. Nhat Hanh states that the self-immolators acted "to move the hearts of the oppressors and all the world's attention to the suffering of their people." Thus, the impact of their self-immolations would be both meaningful and beneficial.¹⁴³ These cases of self-immolation can therefore be seen in the context of altruistic suicide because the performers acted with the larger goal of helping society. However, according to Durkheim, this desire to aid society through self-immolation stems from the very values of society in the first place.

How might societal values that sanction self-immolation be classified? In Park's analysis of letters and statements from self-immolators, he finds that many were driven to self-immolate from a sense of virtue, dignity, honor, or a desire to effect positive change.¹⁴⁴ In such cases, he writes, "The self-immolators saw themselves as martyrs who died for their faith...with dignity and moral integrity intact..."¹⁴⁵ Therefore, might self-immolation be seen as stemming from *Buddhist* societal structures given the parallels between these expressed values and the Buddhist doctrinal/textual attributes of the act?

¹⁴² Park 2010, 84.

¹⁴³ Park 2010, 88.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 90-91.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 91.

In this Durkheimian context, self-immolation in Tibet becomes a much more complex phenomenon than 'political protest' or 'nihilistic desperation' when viewed in conjunction with societal values and altruistic motives. In fact, it is significant to note that many of the attributes of altruistic suicide are similar to Buddhist doctrinal views. Durkheim asserts that all individual motives are driven by societal values; the individual cannot be disentangled as an isolated entity removed from the whole. Similarly, the Buddhist doctrine of co-dependence states that all things are interrelated through their inherent lack of selfhood. When viewed in conjunction with doctrinal, textual, and historical cases of Buddhist self-immolation, can Tibetan self-immolation be seen as a mere coincidence, or might larger societal factors (both historically and religiously speaking) play a role in the Tibetan drive to self-immolate?

With these ideas in mind concerning the numerous historical instances of self-immolation and a more theoretical understanding of suicide as it is performed within a given society, we can now offer some conclusions concerning the limitations of Western media accounts of Tibetan self-immolation. In light of the historical events and religious teachings examined in this and the previous chapter, we are now ready to re-analyze Western media depictions of Tibetan self-immolation. Now that we have a strong basis for the issues associated with reducing self-immolation to black-and-white political protest, we will finally return to the question of *why* this reduction is occurring in the first place and the potential hazards associated with this.

V. Chapter Five: Conclusion

This thesis has examined Buddhist doctrine, scripture, and history in order to contextualize Western media depictions of contemporary Tibetan self-immolation. Given the wide scope of topics explored throughout this thesis, it will be useful to reconsider the original question I considered in conjunction with a brief summary of the subsequent ideas laid forth. The central observation of this thesis has been that Western media articles concerning Tibetan self-immolation have been reductionist in their portrayal of self-immolation solely as a form of political protest. Such Western media depictions have also in turn given a limited description of both the Tibetan people and their Buddhist religion. Following this observation, the hypothesis of this thesis has been that these reductionist accounts of Tibetan self-immolation can be attributed to a wider historical phenomenon concerning the reception of Buddhist cultures in the West. The myth of *Shangri-La*, as we recall, represents a desire in the West to conceive of a utopian land that could provide the remedy to our 'Western troubles.' In relation to the myth of *Shangri-La*, I have also depicted the Western demonization of China. Historically speaking, this is seen through China's communist values and capitalist threat. In a modern context, this is seen through the notion that China has 'crushed' the last utopian society of Tibet. Building off of these ideas, the subsequent chapters concerning Buddhist doctrine, scripture, and history have served to critique Western media articles by placing self-immolation in a Buddhist context, rather than being removed from or in opposition

to Buddhist ideals. This thesis has not sought to paint a more 'true' or comprehensive picture of Tibet itself, but rather to illustrate potential perspectives of self-immolation overlooked by the Western media. Later in this chapter, we will consider a new media article as it can now be seen in the context of the many ideas presented throughout this thesis. It is my intention that the reader will view this article through a more Buddhist orientation, while considering the ways in which Buddhist thought may shape self-immolation in the context of political protest.

Chapter Synopsis

Having giving a general introduction to the overarching observations and arguments of this thesis, Chapter Two provided an analysis of a sampling of Western media articles, focusing on the emerging patterns of content, tone, and structure. These patterns included juxtaposition of 'Oppressive China' with 'Peaceful Tibet,' the depiction of self-immolation as a cry of helplessness and desperation, and claims that self-immolation is not in the nature of Tibetans. Following this survey of Western media accounts, the goal of each subsequent chapter has been to present a more complex understanding of self-immolation, in order to show that these accounts have been overly reductionist. As this thesis has shown, there is a considerable amount of evidence to suggest that Tibetan self-immolation cannot be viewed in the context of political protest alone. Firstly, I have sought to challenge the reoccurring notion that self-immolation directly contradicts traditional Buddhist values by illustrating the complex relationships between Buddhism and self-

immolation. These various chapters have explored the deep dimensions of this relationship. I have also sought to present self-immolation within the context of the Buddhist tradition, thus depicting it in a different light than that presented in Western media articles.

Chapter Three displayed the rich tradition throughout Buddhist texts concerning self-immolation as a devotional practice and form of bodily gift. To better understand self-immolation as used in Buddhist texts, considerable focus was given to Buddhist doctrine, especially concerning the interdependence of beings and the inherent lack of individual essence. It is important to understand these foundational teachings when reading Buddhist scripture because without them it is easy to overlook the underlying motives and goals of self-immolation in Buddhist contexts. Next, I examined the highly influential *Lotus sutra* and *jataka* tales concerning self-immolation and the value that the act has as it relates to wisdom, selflessness, compassion, and non-attachment. While the relationships between self-immolation and Buddhist doctrine and scripture are extremely important for understanding Tibetan self-immolation, these contexts alone are not enough.

To further support the above ideas, I then showed in Chapter Four that there is in fact a rich historical tradition of self-immolation in Buddhist Asia. I discussed premodern Chinese instances of self-immolation effected both in response to the *Lotus sutra* and other scriptures, in addition to the practice of self-immolation during times of drought. In a more modern context, I then examined the self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức and the socially engaged Buddhist movement as crucial background for understanding Tibetan self-immolation. Finally, this chapter

culminated in a larger discussion concerning the nature of suicide in theoretical terms. This discussion then led back to the idea that Tibetan self-immolation may very well be used as a form of political protest; however, to depict it solely in these terms is fundamentally problematic because it overlooks several other important meanings behind the act. Having reviewed the relationships between self-immolation and Buddhism, the remainder of this conclusion will reconsider the question of why a reductionist illustration of Tibetan self-immolation is repeatedly found within Western media articles.

Reconsidering Western Media Accounts

It should now be evident that a more Buddhist orientation for the practice of self-immolation shows the great complexity behind the act, and presents it in a much different light than in Western media depictions. For example, a *Time* article titled “Burning Desire for Freedom” suggests that self-immolation is evidence of a “nihilistic desperation [that] has descended on the Tibetan plateau.”¹⁴⁶ Such an understanding may be a logical conclusion for a Westerner with no foundation of Buddhist scriptures or teachings. However, there is clear evidence to suggest that the act can be seen in ways radically opposed to the idea of nihilism. As the *Lotus sutra* and *jataka* tales display, self-immolation is not only an unsurpassable devotional practice, but it is a way to display proper understanding of Buddhist ideas (such as no-self and co-dependent arising), accrue good karma, and help to

¹⁴⁶ Beech 2011, 1.

end the suffering of others. For example, the *Time* article notes that one self-immolator, Tsewang Norbu, screamed his love for the Dalai Lama as he burned.¹⁴⁷ The article's author discusses this instance in relation to her recent visit in Tibet, centering on the new security measures in Tibet implemented by China.¹⁴⁸ While the motives underlying Norbu's declaration are unclear, recitation of the Dalai Lama's name during self-immolation can be understood in more than political ways. For example, the author offers no insight into the ways in which professing love for the Dalai Lama might be seen as a Buddhist devotional practice. Self-immolation as a devotional practice can be used to emulate the qualities of a bodhisattva and display an appreciation for their teachings. The article instead focuses on self-immolation solely as it relates to harsh policies instituted by The Chinese government.

The potential dimensions of self-immolation that are overlooked by the Western media in addition to the framing of self-immolation in the context of *Shangri-La* imagery should now be apparent. With this foundation of the religious and historical precedent for self-immolation, we can consider a recent *Time* article titled "How Many Self-Immolating Tibetans Does It Take to Make a Difference?" This article was written to mark the (estimated) 100th Tibetan self-immolation since 2009.¹⁴⁹ According to this article, it seems that all one hundred self-immolations are somehow the same; the underlying similarity, of course, is resistance to Chinese occupation. The article states, "The act has become the signature tactic in recent

¹⁴⁷ Beech 2011, 1.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Tharoor 2013, 1.

years of Tibetans voicing their frustrations with Chinese rule.”¹⁵⁰ This “new” tactic is seen as a manifestation of anger and frustration. The article also notes that, “Many of those choosing to set themselves on fire are young teenagers...They are farmers and aspiring clerics, nomads, and students.”¹⁵¹ One should be quick to notice that while ‘cleric’ is used to describe some self-immolators, the word *Buddhist* is nowhere to be found. Are these self-immolators not to be seen as Buddhists, or is the act somehow understood as completely unrelated to Buddhism? Of course, it is important to consider that younger Buddhists might not be as well versed in bodhisattva ideals as older monks; nonetheless, one can likely conclude these young Buddhists have been inspired by the self-immolations of these well-versed elders. The article ends by discussing the Dalai Lama’s stance towards self-immolation, noting that he advocates the path of “the middle way,” in addition to non-violence and a plea for the end of self-immolation.¹⁵² Firstly, a definition of “the middle way” is not given here, though it is seemingly contrasted with the propriety of self-immolation. The article therefore implies that “the middle way” is significantly different than the definition given by Thich Nhat Hanh as discussed in the previous chapter. According to Nhat Hanh, “the middle way” is an anti-reductionist view; thus self-immolation is not seen as either “good/bad” or “violent/nonviolent.” However, this *Time* depiction would suggest that self-immolation is “bad” and because Tibetans are fully committed to nonviolence, self-immolation is out of the realm of their general character.

¹⁵⁰ Tharoor 2013, 1.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

Given the inconsistencies of Western media articles and the relationship between self-immolation and Asian Buddhism, it is important to consider the question of whether or not religion plays any role in Western media representations of the act. As we have seen thus far in Western media accounts, Buddhism *does* play a role to the extent that self-immolators may be described as monks or nuns, immolation sites are indicated as nearby monasteries, or a self-immolator's last words may be a tribute of sorts to the *dharma* or concerning the Dalai Lama. However, past such surface facts surrounding self-immolation, it appears that Western media sources only care that such acts are "Buddhist" insofar as this characterization allows one to see the self-immolation as contrary to the Western image of Tibetan Buddhists as 'peaceful' and 'happy.'

An extension of this point will bring us to an understanding of why such a one-sided representation in the Western media is occurring. By depicting Tibetan self-immolations as influenced by *Shangri-La* imagery, the Western media makes it appear that the "pacifist" identity of Tibetans is being threatened; the threat to Tibet here, of course, is China. In this respect, depicting Tibetan self-immolation in regard to Buddhism only occurs when it serves the purposes of showing that the 'happy Tibetan demeanor' has diminished. However, Western media depictions also suggest that any truly Buddhist stance would oppose self-immolation.

The Dangers of Shangri-La Imagery

This brings us back to the notion of *Shangri-La*, which centers on the belief that Tibet can save the West from the perils of consumerism and unhappiness if only we become more attuned to their lifestyle. As this thesis has already demonstrated, this so-called Tibetan lifestyle has been a product of the Western imagination, evolving through many generations. What is generally ignored in the context of the *Shangri-La* imagery is the problem this causes for the Tibetan people as they are forced to navigate living in times of turmoil (whatever this life may actually entail) with the images projected upon them.

As Lopez has argued, Tibet has historically been considered an isolated nation, closed off from the West, which in part has contributed to its mystification. Conversely, China is seen as an “open country,” which has had a much stronger historical precedent for engagement with the West.¹⁵³ While Chinese occupation has “opened” Tibet to the rest of the world in its struggle to gain support, China has been blamed for “tainting” the mysterious, peaceful Tibet. Lopez suggests that to the Western mind, the Chinese are “Godless people” tarnishing this utopian society.¹⁵⁴ Absent from much of this dialogue is the fact that Tibet is a country which has historically suffered from social inequalities, such as poverty and gender inequality. These social realities within Tibet are overlooked in Western media accounts because such facts threaten the imagery of *Shangri-La*.

Nonetheless, the dream of this ideal Tibet still persists. As Lopez shows, this dream becomes a tangible reality to the extent that it exists in the Western mind as a

¹⁵³ Lopez 1998, 5.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

socially constructed ideal.¹⁵⁵ Because few facts have historically been known about Tibet, this image has gradually become the nation's "true" identity, at least in Western conception. As Tibetans struggle for their autonomy and seek to gain attention to their cause, there is perhaps no better image for the Tibetans to embody than that of a peaceful nation, which has been cruelly crippled by an imperialist enemy. By embodying this image they become its prisoners; they become bound by *Shangri-La*.

This brings us back to the Western representation of the act of self-immolation. As prisoners of this socially constructed identity, Tibetans must meet certain expectations as an ideal nation. Self-immolation, however, would appear to be the exact opposite of this; it is a form of "suicide," which is both very public and very gruesome, without any clearly justifiable motives or effects. For this reason, self-immolation as depicted by the Western media has been presented as a mere political struggle in defiance of the Chinese; as I have previously shown, it is depicted as an act of helplessness, a culmination of fruitless struggle, and a last hope to gain attention on a public stage. By depicting Tibetan self-immolations as such, both Tibetans as a whole and the act itself can still be seen to embody this *Shangri-La* imagery. Tibetans are still seen as a last relic of peace in the world, but self-immolation also serves to send another message to Western readers: this relic is quickly fading under the oppression of the Chinese and will soon disappear. Losing the idealized image of Tibet conjures fear that Shangri-La ideals will perish.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 10.

While the media depictions of self-immolation portray it as a recent phenomenon, I have shown throughout this thesis that Asian Buddhist societies have had a long and deep tradition of self-immolation. Thus, for Tibetans to have adopted the act might not be a coincidental expression of nihilism and anger. Furthermore, certain examples presented in this thesis have also shown the *positive* value that can be associated with self-immolation. At least hypothetically, this may lead one to believe that self-immolation can actually benefit society. This idea relates directly back to Durkheim, who through the notion of altruistic suicide contended that suicide is largely about societal needs and relations. If Buddhist thought indicates that self-immolation can have positive value for the performer and those surrounding the performer, then from a Durkheimian perspective, self-immolation can therefore be used to answer the needs of society at large.

Self-immolation can be understood as a sacred act, a declaration of devotion and selflessness, and an act that allows one to regain sovereignty and control over their current situation. Yet by overlooking these aspects of self-immolation, Western media representations imprison Tibetans as puppets of the Western imagination. If media depictions of both self-immolation and Tibetans as a whole are not valid portrayals (or at least all-encompassing of their socio-religious dimensions) then only partial justice is being done to the Tibetan peoples as they seek negotiations with China.

Many Western media accounts of Tibetan self-immolation also highlight the fact that due to the lack of transparency in Tibet, many self-immolations are either not being reported or Tibetans are using self-immolation as a way to gain global

attention because they cannot freely access reporters. For example, a *Time* article titled “How Many Self-Immolating Tibetans It Take to Make a Difference?” notes that, “Part of the problem is where these protests occur. The overwhelming majority takes place within the border of China...[where] media access is heavily controlled...”¹⁵⁶ However, in light of the information presented in this thesis, I argue that a problem also arises when self-immolations that *do* get reported are lacking in fundamental information.

Looking back to the Western media’s usage of Buddhist terminology in articles concerning self-immolation, we can also understand the importance of such Buddhist language as it plays a fundamental role in the perpetuation of *Shangri-La* imagery. As Martin Brauen illustrates, Tibetan religion is seen as being so powerful in the Western imagination that it is understood not as religious, but as magical.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, the land itself has been imagined to be “divine,” similar to a Christian conception of Eden.¹⁵⁸ This magical imagery is important because it provides a basis for the belief that Tibet can ‘cure’ the West of its troubles. This brings us back to the fundamental reason why many Westerners care about the Tibetan cause in the first place: because without Tibet, no truly pacifist nation will exist, and thus the perils of the West will never be cured.

Concluding Implications of Western Media Articles

¹⁵⁶ Tharoor 2013, 1.

¹⁵⁷ Brauen 2000, 158.

¹⁵⁸ Brauen 2004, 170.

We have thus seen that Western media articles concerning self-immolation in Tibet exhibit a pattern of depicting the act as a calculated political protest against Chinese occupation. As I have illustrated, self-immolation in Tibet can certainly be understood as a form of political protest; however, this is not a complete understanding and therefore overlooks the complexity of self-immolation and the Tibetan people. We have seen that Buddhist meanings behind self-immolation are largely absent in these articles. When details about Buddhism are given, it is simply to perpetuate *Shangri-La* ideology by foregrounding the (formerly) peaceful and happy demeanor of Buddhists.

I have argued that these media patterns concerning self-immolation are not arbitrary coincidences; they in fact have arisen (albeit somewhat subconsciously) through our skewed understanding of both Tibetans and Buddhism through *Shangri-La* imagery, which has been embedded in the western psyche for generations. This imagery depicts Tibetans as citizens of a mysterious land that live in egalitarian and utopian splendor. Under such façades, Tibetan religion is seen as both mystical and magical, but in this way it is broadly misconceived. This *Shangri-La* imagery has become a crutch for the Western psyche, assuring us that while our own society is fraught with overconsumption, waste, imperialistic history, and discrimination, there is a far off land that can serve as a model to solve our problems.

In the face of Chinese occupation, this *Shangri-La* imagery has been threatened; the innocent, helpless Tibetans are being subjugated and their utopia is disappearing. In this respect, China is the enemy; it represents the side of Western

culture that we dislike, while additionally threatening our own global power. While this may be accurate to some extent of what is actually happening, Western media representations are nonetheless overtly skewed. As such, self-immolation in Tibet has been presented in the Western media solely in the context of political protest for two reasons: firstly, self-immolation must not threaten our *Shangri-La* expectations of Tibetans; we cannot account for self-immolation as having Buddhist precedent because this would mean Tibetans are in fact *not* the pacifist people we have imagined them to be. Secondly, we are able to further demonize China; helpless Tibetans have been given no other option by the evil Chinese but to light themselves on fire. The West is able to displace the blame onto China while contrasting Chinese authoritarian values with Western values of egalitarianism. Little discussion is presented in media articles concerning the ways in which self-immolation may actually be an *empowering* practice.

Ultimately, I have claimed that the skewed Western media depictions of self-immolation as a result of *Shangri-La* beliefs is a great hindrance to Tibetans and will not help them to solve any long-term problems concerning questions of autonomy. We cannot engage in dialogue about a nation under threat if the very nation we wish to discuss is misrepresented. A real solution can only be found if one earnestly seeks to understand the nature of the parties in question. Furthermore, negligible depictions of self-immolation threaten the complexity of the act itself; self-immolation cannot convey its meaning in its entirety if it is only understood through a skewed perspective. While some bias will always be present when understanding another culture's practices, the Western media must strive to depict Tibetan self-

immolation empirically and objectively, with full weight given to its Buddhist doctrinal and historical contexts, rather than continuing to imprison Tibetans within a Western *Shangri-La* understanding.

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