Self-immolation

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Self-immolation refers to setting oneself on fire, often as a form of protest or for the purposes of martyrdom or suicide. It has centuries-long traditions in some cultures, while in modern times it has become a type of radical political protest. Michael Biggs compiled a list of 533 "self-immolations" reported by Western media from the 1960s to 2002, though in this work his definition is generalized to any intentional suicide "on behalf of a collective cause." [1]

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Etymology

The English word *immolation* originally meant (1534) "killing a sacrificial victim; sacrifice" and came to figuratively mean (1690) "destruction, especially by fire." Its etymology was from Latin *immolare* "to sprinkle with sacrificial meal (mola salsa); to sacrifice" in ancient Roman religion. *Self-immolation* "setting oneself on fire, especially as a form of protest" was first recorded in Lady Morgan's (1817) *France*.[2][3]

It was Western media coverage of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc immolating himself in protest of the Vietnamese Ngo Dinh Diem regime in 1963 that introduced the word "self-immolation" to a wide English-speaking audience and gave it a strong association with fire.[4] The alternative name *bonzo* comes from the same era, because the Buddhist monks who immolated themselves were often referred to by the term *bonze* in English literature before the mid-20th century, particularly when describing monks from East Asia and French Indochina. This term is derived via French from the Japanese word *bonsō* for a priest or monk, and has become less common in modern literature.[5]

History

Self-immolation is tolerated by some elements of Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism, and it has been practiced for many centuries, especially in India, for various reasons, including Sati, political protest, devotion, and renouncement. Certain warrior cultures, such as in the Charans and Rajputs, also practiced self-immolation.

Two well-known *Jataka tales*, Buddhist myths about previous incarnations of the Buddha, concern self-immolation. In the "Hungry Tigress" Jataka, Prince Sattva looked down from a cliff and saw a starving tigress that was going to eat her newborn cubs, and compassionately sacrificed his body in order to feed the tigers and spare their lives. In the "Sibi Jataka", King Śibi or Shibi was renowned for unselfishness, and the Hindu gods Śakra and Vishvakarman tested him by transforming into a hawk and a dove. The dove fell

on the king's lap while trying to escape the hawk, and sought refuge. Rather than surrender the dove, Śibi offered his own flesh equivalent in weight to the dove, and the hawk agreed. They had rigged the balance scale, and King Śibi continued cutting off his flesh until half his body was gone, when the gods revealed themselves, restored his body, and blessed him.

The Buddhist god of healing, the "Medicine King" or "Medicine Buddha" (Bhaisajyaguru) was associated with auto-cremation. The *Lotus Sutra* describes the Medicine King drinking scented oils, wrapping his body in an oil-soaked cloth, and burning himself as an offering to the Buddha. His body flamed for 1,200 years, he was reincarnated, burned off his forearms for 72,000 years, which enabled many to achieve enlightenment, and his arms were miraculously restored.

Self-immolation has a long history in Chinese Buddhism. The relevant Chinese terms are: *wangshen* 亡身 "lose the body" or 忘身 "forget the body", *yishen* 遺身 "abandon the body", and *sheshen* 捨身 "give up the body". James A. Benn explains the semantic range of Chinese Buddhist self-immolation.

> But "abandoning the body" also covers a broad range of more extreme acts (not all of which necessarily result in death): feeding one's body to insects; slicing off one's flesh; burning one's fingers or arms; burning incense on the skin; starving, slicing, or drowning oneself; leaping from cliffs or trees; feeding one's body to wild animals; self-mummification (preparing for death so that the resulting corpse is impervious to decay); and of course, auto-cremation.[6]

The monk Fayu 法羽 (d. 396) carried out the earliest recorded Chinese self-immolation.[7] He first informed the "illegitimate" prince Yao Xu 姚緒 – brother of Yao Chang who founded the non-Chinese Qiang state Later Qin (384-417) – that he intended to burn himself alive. Yao tried to dissuade Fayu, but he publically swallowed incense chips, wrapped his body in oiled cloth, and chanted while setting fire to himself. The religious and lay witnesses were described as being "full of grief and admiration."

Following Fayu's example, many Buddhist monks and nuns have used self-immolation for political purposes. Based upon analysis of Chinese historical records from the 4th to the 20th centuries, Benn discovered, "Although some monks did offer their bodies in periods of relative prosperity and peace, we have seen a marked coincidence between acts of self-immolation and times of crisis, especially when secular powers were hostile towards Buddhism."[8] For example, Daoxuan's (c. 667) *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 "Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks" records five monastics who self-immolated on the Zhongnan Mountains in response to the 574-577 persecution of Buddhism by Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou (known as the "Second Disaster of Wu").[9]

While self-immolation practices in China were based upon Indian Buddhist traditions, they acquired some distinctively Chinese aspects. An "unburned tongue" (cf. Anthony of Padua), which supposedly remained pink and moist owing to self-immolation while chanting the *Lotus Sutra*, was based on the belief in Śarīra "Buddhist relics; purportedly from a master's remains after cremation".[10] "Burning off fingers" was a kind of gradual self-immolation, often in commemoration of relics or textual recitations. The Tang Dynasty monk Wuran 無染 (d. c. 840) had a spiritual vision in which Manjusri told him to support the Buddhist community on Mount Wutai. After organizing meals for one million monks, Wuran burned off a finger in sacrifice, and eventually after ten million meals, had burned off all his fingers.[11] Xichen 息塵 (d. c. 937; with two fingers left) became a favorite of Emperor Gaozu of Later Jin for practicing finger burning to memorialize sutra recitions.[12] "Buddhist mummies" refers to monks and nuns who practiced self-mummification through extreme self-mortification, for instance, Daoxiu 道休 (d. 629).[13] "Spontaneous human combustion" was a rare form of self-immolation that Buddhists associated with samādhi

"consciously leaving one's body at the time of enlightenment". The monk Ningyi 寧義 (d. 1583) stacked up firewood to burn himself, but, "As soon the torch was raised, his body started to burn 'like a rotten root' and was soon completely consumed. A wise person declared, 'He has entered the fiery *samādhi*." [14]

James A. Benn concludes that, "for many monks and laypeople in Chinese history, self-immolation was a form of Buddhist practice that modeled and expressed a particular bodily or somatic path that led towards Buddhahood."[8]

Jan Yun-Hua explains the medieval Chinese Buddhist precedents for self-immolation.[15]

> Relying exclusively on authoritative Chinese Buddhist texts and, through the use of these texts, interpreting such acts exclusively in terms of doctrines and beliefs (e.g., self-immolation, much like an extreme renunciant might abstain from food until dying, could be an example of disdain for the body in favor of the life of the mind and wisdom) rather than in terms of their socio-political and historical context, the article allows its readers to interpret these deaths as acts that refer only to a distinct set of beliefs that happen to be foreign to the non-Buddhist.[15]

Jimmy Yu has shown that self-immolation cannot be interpreted based on Buddhist doctrine and beliefs alone but the practice must be understood in the larger context of the Chinese religious landscape. He examines many primary sources from the 16th and 17th century and demonstrates that bodily practices of self-inflicted violence, including self-immolation, was ritually performed not only by Buddhists but also by Daoists and literati officials who either exposed their naked body to the sun in a prolonged period of time as a form of self-sacrifice or burned themselves as a method of procuring rain [16] In other words, self-immolation was a sanctioned part of Chinese culture that was public, scripted, and intelligible both to the person doing the act and to those who viewed and interpreted it, regardless of their various religion affiliations.

During the Great Schism of the Russian Church, entire villages of Old Believers burned themselves to death in an act known as "fire baptism".[17] Scattered instances of self-immolation have also been recorded by the Jesuit priests of France in the early 17th century.[*citation needed*] However, their practice of this was not intended to be fatal: they would burn certain parts of their bodies (limbs such as the forearm or the thigh) to symbolise the pain Jesus endured while upon the cross.[*citation needed*] A 1973 study by a prison doctor suggested that people who choose self-immolation as a form of suicide are more likely to be in a "disturbed state of consciousness", such as epilepsy.[18]

In her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?", philosopher Gayatri Spivak discusses how self-immolation is a way Hindu law regulated women in pre-colonial India. According to Spivak, the necessity to commit self-immolation imprisons women in a double bind in colonial and postcolonial India.[19] In Spivak's postcolonial framework, the woman who commits self-immolation takes the form of the subaltern.

Political protest

See also: List of political self-immolations

A number of Buddhist monks (including the most famous case of Thích Quảng Đức) immolated themselves in protest of the discriminatory treatment endured by Buddhists under the Roman Catholic administration of President Ngô Đình Diệm in South Vietnam — even though violence against oneself is prohibited by

most interpretations of Buddhist doctrine. The twenty-third chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* recounts the life story of the Bodhisattva Medicine King, which served as the main inspiration for the monks and nuns who self-immolated. In the Sutra, the Medicine King demonstrates his insight into the selfless nature of his body by ritualistically setting his body aflame, spreading the "light of the Dharma" for twelve hundred years. Thich Nhat Hanh adds: "The bodhisattva shined his light about him so that everyone could see as he could see, giving them the opportunity to see the deathless nature of the ultimate."[20]

The widespread coverage of the self-immolations of the Buddhist monks in western media established the practice as a type of a political protest. Self-immolations are often public, dramatic, political, and thus newsworthy. They can be seen as a type of altruistic suicides for the collective cause. Unlike suicide attacks, self-immolations are not intended to inflict physical harm or material damage.[1] They attract attention and become glorified as martyrdom, because of the perception of great pain, but they do not guarantee death for the burned. While the burning of vital tissue can be very painful during self-immolation, shock or asphyxiation quickly make the event painless,[18] as do the onset of third-degree burns which destroy the nerve endings. Suicides by self-immolation have led to numerous copycat suicides: researchers have counted almost 100 self-immolations covered by the *New York Times* and *The Times* between 1963 and 1971.[21] Most of these suicides occurred in the United States protesting the Vietnam War and Asia. In 1968 the practice spread to the Soviet bloc with self-immolation of Polish accountant and Armia Krajowa veteran Ryszard Siwiec, as well as that of Czech student Jan Palach. As a protest of Soviet rule in Lithuania, 19-year-old Romas Kalanta set himself on fire in Kaunas. Non-political suicides by fire also became more prevalent.

The practice continues with India leading – as many as 1,451 and 1,584 self-immolations have been reported in 2000 and 2001, respectively.[22] A particularly high wave of self-immolations in India has been recorded in 1990 protesting the Reservation in India.[1]Tamil Nadu has the highest number of self-immolations in India till date.It is considered to be the capital of Self-immolation in India

At least 54 [23] Tibetans have self-immolated to protest Chinese rule, 40 have died [24][25][26] since protests began in 2011.[27] [28] [29][30][31][32][33][34][35][36][37][38] The Dalai Lama has said he does not encourage the protests, but he has praised the courage of those who engage in self-immolation. However, the Chinese government claims that he and the Tibetan exiled government are inciting these acts.[39]

A wave of self-immolation protests occurred in conjunction with the Arab Spring protests in the Middle East and North Africa, with at least 14 recorded incidents. These actions helped inspire the Arab Spring, including the 2010–2011 Tunisian revolution, the main catalyst of which was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, the 2011 Algerian protests (including many self-immolations in Algeria), and the 2011 Egyptian revolution. There have also been self-immolation protests in Saudi Arabia, Mauritania, and Syria.[40][41]

Notable political self-immolations

In the six months immediately after Mohamed Bouazizi's death, at least 107 Tunisians self-immolated.[42]

On July 14, 2012, during a rally in Tel-Aviv, Israeli citizen Moshe Silman set himself on fire in protest against the Israeli government's welfare policy which was, in his words, "constantly humiliating the citizens of Israel who have to endure humiliation on a day-to-day basis."[43][44] On July 20, disabled IDF veteran Akiva Mafi set himself on fire in Yehud, Israel, in protest of social injustice[45][46][47]

On July 30, 2012, Vietnamese citizen Dang Thi Kim Lieng self-immolated before a government building in Bac Lieu province in protest of the detention of her daughter Ta Phong Tan, a dissident blogger.[48][49]

On Jan 29 2009 Tamil journalist Named Muthukumar set fire on himself.== References ==

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