

Online Articles on Self-immolation by Tibetans in Exile — A Brief Survey

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When a teenage monk, Tapey, self-immolated on 17 February 2009, only a few articles by Tibetans in exile on self-immolation appeared on internet. However, with the sudden rise in the number of self-immolations in Tibet since March 2011, there has been a great increase in the number of Tibetan-language articles on the internet regarding this issue.

Among those I have read, there are about sixty articles published in the opinion sections of the *Tibet Times*¹ and articles I have read on *Khabdha*,² *Tibet Express*³ and on blogs, together add up to more than one hundred.

The authors of these articles include both famous and unknown writers. Some have used their real names and others have used pseudonyms. Most of the authors who have signed their articles with real names are from Tibet and judging by their style of writing one can assume they mostly left Tibet fairly recently. In terms of age, almost all the authors using real names are over fifty.

Regarding the manner in which the articles are written, they can be classified under three categories: analytical, emotional and a mixture of the two. Analytical articles are very few. Moreover, the number of articles reflecting an in-depth study of the background and the evolution of self-immolation is very small.

From the outset, writers of online articles in Tibetan have used a variety of particular expressions to describe the act of self-immolation, such as “lighting one’s body as a lamp-offering” (*rang lus mchod mer bsgron pa*), “burning one’s body” (*rang lus mer bsregs*), “making a fire-offering with one’s body” (*rang lus me mchod*), “uniting one’s life with fire” (*rang srog bsregs sbyor*), “burning oneself” (*rang bsregs*) and “cremating one’s body” (*rang lus zhugs ’bul*). Nowadays, the terms “burning one’s body” and its abbreviation, “burning oneself,” have become the most common.

¹ <http://www.tibettimes.net>.

² www.khabdha.org.

³ www.tibetexpress.net.

Also, from an early stage in the online discourse on this issue, authors of online Tibetan articles have taken a variety of views and understandings regarding the self-immolation movement, and on some occasions have entered heated discussions on major issues regarding the movement. Over time one can observe in these discussions the development and elaboration of a more or less unanimous view and assessment concerning the self-immolations taking shape.

In the following section, I will discuss 1) areas where views converge, 2) issues of contention, and 3) other issues related to self-immolation also discussed in online articles by Tibetans in exile.

Converging views

The causes that have led to self-immolations

The online articles unanimously recognise the following as the causes that have led to the self-immolations in Tibet:

- The emotional wound inflicted on all Tibetans, by the unscrupulous blasphemy towards His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and the severe restrictions on the freedom of religious practice carried out in the monasteries under the campaign known as 'patriotic education.'
- The severe restrictions and threats imposed on Tibetans by the Chinese government's appeal to maintain 'harmony and stability.'
- The forcible imposition of policies which effectively ban the study and teaching of Tibetan language.
- The annihilation of Tibetan culture through economic enticement and the relocation of nomads.
- The colonisation and environmental destruction of Tibet going on under the guise of 'aid and development of Tibet.'⁴

⁴ See "Those lamps endowed with life belong to Tibetan culture" (Tib. *Tshe srog can gyi sgron me de dag bod kyi rig gnas shig red*), by Bongya Tenrap, *Khabdha*, October 2 2011, <http://www.khabdha.org/?p=23074>. See also Iron-Hare 2011. *Flames of resistance* (Tib. *Lcags yos btsan rgol me lce*). Translated and edited by Matthew Akes-ter. Published by the Mdo smad Editorial Committee of the Sworn Alliance in Support of Truth to Combat Repression. Downloadable from http://www.tchrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=288:iron-hare-2011-flames-of-resistance&catid=70:2012-news&Itemid=162.

The courage to self-immolate

Most of the online articles are unanimous in acknowledging the courage required to carry out self-immolation. Debates on this matter are almost nil. Most articles concur in saying that:

Heroes and heroines, both inside and outside Tibet, have immolated themselves non-violently and for the benefit of others, at the expense of their own life. Doing this is the greatest of courage.

Amongst all Tibetan movements, self-immolation is the one that needs urgent attention and it represents the culmination of previous movements. "We certainly have the courage and we could take the opportunity to hurt those who deny us freedom by stabbing them, but ours is only a small knife. But instead we have entered the path of not hurting others for the sake of our own freedom, and this is an extraordinary act," wrote Kyamda.⁵

Making a comparison between one's courage and the courage of the self-immolators, the exile Bongya Tenrap wrote :

My monk students [in Tibet] demonstrated by making themselves lamps while living between the fangs of demons, and I went on a candle-light march in the alleys of McLeod Ganj. This is the difference of place. They demonstrated by truly engaging in the practice of exchanging oneself with others, the practice on which *bodhicitta* is based, while I paraded reciting prayers to generate *bodhicitta*. This is a real difference. My monk students demonstrated for the sake of the Buddha's teachings, the source of benefit for all sentient beings, and for the cause of Tibet. Will I be able to take to the West those who have not yet lost their lives, for them to be treated, thanks to international pressure? If their burns are so severe that there is no hope of survival, then I pray that they pass away soon. This is the difference of aims. My monk students demonstrated by burning their golden bodies of unfathomable value, on which others would even hesitate to prick a needle. While I, without feeling anything, lit a free candle and paraded. This is the difference of sacrifice. Or this is the distance. Thinking of this distance over and again gives me a real pain in the heart.

⁵ *The flame of freedom* (Tib. *Rang dbang gi me lce*), by Kyamda, *Tibet Times*, April 4 2012, <http://tibettimes.net/news.php?cat=5&id=5833>.

Issues of debate

Amongst the issues debated in the online articles in exile, the most prevalent ones concern the question of whether the movement is non-violent or violent; whether it is in accordance with Buddhist teachings or not; and whether the movement should be stopped or continued.

Whether or not the movement is non-violent

Most of the arguments assessing the violent or non-violent nature of self-immolation are based on the question whether they are in accordance with Buddhist teachings or not. Almost all of the arguments lack a discussion of non-violence as understood by the world at large. Gradually, the articles have begun to manifest an ability to distinguish between the general non-violent approach of resistance movements from that of the non-violent doctrines advocated by Buddhist teachings.

Whether or not the movement is in accordance with Buddhist teachings

Discussing whether the self-immolation movement is concordant or discordant with Buddhist teachings is the central online debate. Those who regard the movement as concordant with Buddhist teachings tend to cite the *jātakas*, in which the Buddha in one of his previous lives gave up his own body to feed a hungry tigress, and also the *Sūtra of White Lotus*. Having identified the gesture as *bodhisattva* conduct, they praise the act of complete self-sacrifice for the benefit of others.

Those that assess the movement as not in accordance with Buddhist teachings quote the *Vinaya* (Buddhist code of moral discipline) and assert that taking one's own life is violent because it brings harm upon numerous micro-living beings surviving on one's body, imposing on them an untimely death.

The majority of articles and most of the titles of the articles reflect strong inclinations toward spiritual belief on the part of their authors.

Whether or not the movement is effective

Along with praising the movement as courageous and worthy of admiration, online articles in exile also argue about its actual effec-

tiveness and timing. Underscoring the emotional grip that the self-immolations have on Tibetans inside and outside Tibet, they argue that the self-immolators are putting the Chinese government in an uncomfortable position and are revealing more clearly the cause of Tibet to the wider world. In these ways the self-immolations are regarded as effective and worthy of praise.

Others are of the opinion that the self-immolation movement is untimely, since China is presently undergoing a change in leadership. They also argue that the movement is not able to meet the hopes it was expected to fulfill.

Whether or not the movement should be stopped

On this question the articles are of two opinions: the movement of self-immolation is a great success, for which reason it should be continued and, the movement should be stopped, for it has caused the loss of life of many brave Tibetans and is not capable of producing actual results. Authors such as Sharkhen and Arjia Rinpoche have written online articles appealing for the containment of the movement and many articles have been written as counter-arguments to their appeals.

Other issues related to self-immolation

Following are other issues related to self-immolation, which are discussed in online articles by Tibetans in exile:

- The Middle-way approach policy advocated by the Central Tibetan Administration needs to be reviewed and changed.
- Protests and prayers carried out in exile in support for the self-immolations are insufficient. More productive and far-reaching activities should be undertaken.
- As the situation inside Tibet is critical, singing and dancing in exile is considered inappropriate.
- Worries and anger over the self-immolations are becoming more common.

GLOSSARY

Transcription	Transliteration	Tibetan
Arjia Rinpoche	A kyā rin po che	ཨ་རྒྱ་རིན་པོ་ཆེ།
Bongya Tenrap	Bon rgya bstan rab	བོན་རྒྱ་བསྟན་རབ།
<i>Sūtra of the White Lotus</i>	<i>Mdo padma dkar po</i>	མདོ་པདྨ་མ་དཀར་པོ།
Kyamda	Skya mda'	སྐྱ་མདའ།
Sharkhen	Shar mkhan	ཤར་མཁན།
Tapey	Bkra bhe	བཀྲ་བེ།

