

Setting Fire to the Sacred: Esoteric Suicide and its Relation to Tibetan Self-Immolation

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In protest to China's ongoing human rights violations in Tibet, a wave of self-immolations has rocked the Tibetan Plateau since 2009. Such acts, performed mostly by Buddhist monks and nuns, have, for the first time since the 1960's, raised questions on the spiritual validity of suicide in the Buddhist religion. The following article will explore sanctioned practices of suicide common to Tibetan Buddhism and examine their legitimacy as spiritual acts. The article consists of three major sections relevant to the problem of Tibetan self-immolation. The first addresses the importance of human life as an indispensable factor in comprehending the basis from which esoteric suicide operates. The second addresses the path of the bodhisattva and the appropriate conditions required to offer one's body in pursuit of the perfection of generosity. And the third addresses the esoteric practice of transference of consciousness as an act of suicide and its relationship with divine perception and tantric morality. Finally, the philosophical points discussed in each section will be linked with the problem of Tibetan self-immolation to offer the reader a unique understanding of the philosophical gravity and embedded meaning in the performance of such acts

Keywords: Self-immolation, Tibet, Tibetan, Buddhism, suicide, esoteric.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Tibet has seen the most significant wave of self-immolations as a form of political protest since the Vietnam War. With no historical precedent of self-immolation in their culture, Tibetans by the hundreds have used a variety of scriptural inspirations to make their

voices heard in the face of China's ongoing control over the Tibetan Plateau.¹ While self-immolation and suicide more broadly are deeply controversial within Buddhist circles, the overwhelming response from Tibetans has been one of respect and even praise.² Following an incident of self-immolation, thousands of Tibetans have been known to gather, pay their respects, and engage in peaceful protest to show their support for the victims and to highlight the human rights abuses they have suffered.³ This response by Tibetans across the Himalayan region is an indication of both the significance of these actions as political statements and the unification of Tibetan solidarity throughout the region and its communities in exile.⁴

Despite the positive response by Tibetans, the mystical brand of Buddhism found in Tibet is known for its emphasis on the importance of human life as the ideal condition to travel to the highest points along the Buddhist path to enlightenment. While there is significant textual evidence to support acts of virtuous suicide to inspire those willing to take their life for the Tibetan cause, few are fully aware of its esoteric character, philosophical depth, or proper use. However, if done correctly and performed within the philosophical context of Tibet's esoteric *yogas*,⁵ the term *esoteric suicide*⁶ becomes an accurate reflection on the hidden realities at play when such acts are undertaken. Thus, the task of this article is to examine sanctioned practices of esoteric suicide by unmasking the supportive conditions required to turn an otherwise harmful act into something of great spiritual value. Through this process, and by linking it to the problem of Tibetan self-immolation, esoteric suicide will unveil itself as an extension of the life-preserving fundamentals of Buddhist doctrine that remain inappropriate for those who lack the necessary esoteric training, meditative experience, and spiritual attainments.

¹A Report by the International Campaign for Tibet. *Storm in the Grasslands: Self-Immolations in Tibet and Chinese Policy*. (Washington DC, 2012), 65.

²Ibid, 7.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵(Tib: *rnal 'byor*). In Buddhist tradition, the term *yoga* refers to meditative practices connected to Buddhism's esoteric traditions.

⁶Esoteric suicide is a term that can be applied to a variety of esoteric *yogas* designed to separate the mind from the physical body. These include self-immolation (*rang lus mer bsregs*), transference of consciousness (*'pho ba*), forceful projection (*grong 'jug*), illusory body (*sgyu lus*), and the rainbow body (*'ja' lus*).

PRECIOUS HUMAN LIFE

To understand esoteric suicide and its relation to Tibetan self-immolation, it is essential to get a sense of the extraordinary value placed on the attainment of a *precious human life*⁷ in the Buddhist tradition. Under a religious system based on the concept of *enlightenment*⁸ as a means to end the cycle of rebirth in *saṃsāra*,⁹ a human life, with its capacity for reason, provides the greatest potential to traverse the grounds and paths of Buddhist practice. This potential, however, is exceptionally rare and must be seized by the practitioner before the opportunity presented by such an existence is lost to the inescapable reality of death. As the Tibetan scholar Tsongkhapa Lobzang Drakpa¹⁰ (ca. 1357-1419) affirms in his *Condensed Points on the Stages of the Path*:¹¹

This life of *leisure*¹² is greater than a wish-fulfilling jewel.
It is only found like this now and just once.
Difficult to find and easily destroyed, it is like lightning in the sky.
Having contemplated in this way and realizing all worldly activities
Are like husks of winnowed grain,
You must always take life's essence night and day.

⁷(Tib: *mi lus rin po che*). A literal translation of this term would be rendered *precious human body*. In this context, however, the Tibetan word *lus* more accurately reflects a sense of *life* as opposed to the mere physical form of the *body*.

⁸(Tib: *byang chub*). In its most basic sense, the Buddhist concept of enlightenment is a spiritual state in which the suffering nature of unenlightened existence is brought to an end.

⁹(Tib: *'khor ba*). Characterized by suffering, *saṃsāra* is the continuous cycle of birth and death kept in motion until one reaches a state of enlightenment.

¹⁰(Tib: *Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*). Tsongkhapa was the founder of the Geluk (*dGe lugs*) school of Tibetan Buddhism. Often called Je Rinpoche (*rJe rin po che*) by Tibetans, he is credited by his followers as a reformer whose school restored the philosophical union between *sūtra* (*mdo*) and *tantra* (*rgyud*). His writings are known for their considerable scholastic prowess with his work on the illusory body (*sgyu lus*) yogas in the context of the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* (*gSang 'dus rtsa rgyud*) as his most praiseworthy.

¹¹(Tib: *Lam rim bdus don ma*). This text belongs to the stages of the path (*lam rim*) tradition founded by the Indian scholar Atīśa Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna (ca. 980-1054) and later expanded by Tsongkhapa.

¹²(Tib: *dal ba*). This refers to the eight leisures of a precious human life to be explained below.

I, the yogi, have practiced like this,
 You who wish for liberation should also do the same.¹³ (60)

Thus, by emphasizing the potential, rarity, and definite *impermanence*¹⁴ of a human life, Tsongkhapa is able to articulate the necessary attitude of *renunciation*¹⁵ for those who wish to derive the most benefit from their human form. Once this attitude has been cultivated through the traditional mediums of study, contemplation, and meditation, the ‘wish-fulfilling jewel’ of a human life is used with a sense of urgency to attain one of the goals common to Buddhist ambition: higher rebirth, liberation from the suffering of *samsāra*, or the state of a complete *buddha*.¹⁶

To help provide a catalyst to comprehend the rarity of human life, a variety of analogies are used in Buddhist tradition to spark a deeper appreciation of one’s present condition. Suppose, for example, there was a turtle in a vast ocean “who were to rise and poke his head right through the hole of a wooden ring as it drifted on the surface of a great salt sea.”¹⁷ Clearly, the likelihood of the turtle’s head ever meeting with the golden ring exists as a next-to-nothing possibility that is analogous to the unlikely event of one’s birth as a human. While there are many other examples, such as seeing a star at noon or balancing a mustard seed on the tip of a needle, they

¹³*dal ba’i rten ’di yid bzhin nor las / ’di ’dra rnyed pa da res tsam zhid yin / rnyed dka’ ’jig sla nam mkha’i glog dang ’dra / tshul ’di bsams nas ’jig rten bya ba kun / spun pa ’phyar ba bzhin du rtogs gyur nas / nyin tshan kun tu snying po len pa dgos / rnal ’byor nas kyang nyams len de ltar bgyis / thar ’dod khyed kyang de bzhin bskyang ’tshal lo.* Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa. *Byang chub lam gyi rim pa’i nyams len gyi rnam gzhag mdor bsdus te brjed byang du bya ba.* (My translation. Tibetan in Vol. 2. *Collected Works*. Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1982), 60.

¹⁴(Tib: *mi rtag pa*). This topic of meditation is usually referred to as death-impermanence (*’chi ba mi rtag pa*) in Tibetan tradition. Thus, by recalling the impermanence of life, a practitioner can develop a lifestyle conducive to Buddhist practice without wasting the moment of spiritual opportunity granted by possessing a human form.

¹⁵(Tib: *nges ’byung*). The determination to be free from *samsāra*. Traditionally, this involves an attitude that rejects a life of worldly pursuits to focus exclusively on furthering one’s enlightenment.

¹⁶(Tib: *sangs rgyas*). While there are many ways to define this term, in the esoteric sense, a buddha is a being who has attained the bodies of a buddha (*sangs rgyas sku*) and appears in the world to guide living beings out of the suffering nature of *samsāra*.

¹⁷Nāgārjuna. “Letter to a Friend.” Quoted in Tsongkhapa, *Preparing for Tantra: The Mountain of Blessings with a Commentary by Pabongka Rinpoche*. (Trans. Khen Rinpoche Geshe Lobsang Tharchin with Micheal Roach. Howell, New Jersey: Mahayana Sutra and Tantra Press, 1995), 40.

are all designed to convey the gravity of one's human condition as a rare and almost impossible event in a *beginningless*¹⁸ series of existences.

While a human form can be used as a vehicle to progress along the Buddhist path, it means little if the complete set of *eight leisures*¹⁹ are not present in one's life. The eight leisures, therefore, refer to a specific kind of human existence in which the *eight inopportune conditions*²⁰ are absent and cease to dictate one's ability to practice the teachings.²¹ As the Indian pandit Nāgārjuna²² (ca. 2nd century)²³ clarifies in his *Letter to a Friend*:²⁴

¹⁸(Tib: *thog med*). Buddhist tradition adheres to the belief that all sentient life has been wandering through *samsāra* in an endless series of rebirths stretching back to a beginningless time (*thog med dus*).

¹⁹(Tib: *dal ba brgyad*).

²⁰(Tib: *mi khom pa brgyad*). The eight inopportune conditions are the opposite states of existence to the eight leisures.

²¹Pabongka Rinpoche. *Liberation in Our Hands: Part Two, The Fundamentals*. (Trans. Sermey Khensur Rinpoche Lobsang Tharchin with Artemus B. Engle. Howell, New Jersey: Mahayana Sutra and Tantra Press, 1994), 73.

²²(Tib: *kLu sgrub*). As one of the most influential scholars in Buddhism's 2,500-year history, Nāgārjuna is known as the revealer of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* (*Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa*) that provided the foundation for the Mahāyāna, or Great Vehicle (*Theg pa chen po*) of Buddhism. He is also the author of many highly influential treatises and traditionally considered to be a master of the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*.

²³In academic circles, Nāgārjuna is commonly thought to have flourished in the 2nd century of the common era. However, Tibetan tradition recognizes his lifespan extending into the early period of the tantras several centuries later. This is because he is the author of several landmark works on the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* believed to have emerged much later than the 2nd century. In other words, the tradition holds that Nāgārjuna lived for several centuries.

²⁴(Tib: *bShes pa 'i spring yig*). This text is extraordinarily popular because it presents the fundamentals of the Buddhist path in a profoundly simple and straightforward manner.

To be born as a person with *false views*,²⁵
An *animal*,²⁶ a *ghost*,²⁷ or in the *hells*,²⁸
In a land *lacking the conqueror's word*,²⁹
As a *barbarian in some remote land*,³⁰
An *imbecile*³¹ or a *mute*,³² or a *long-lived god*,³³
These are the eight inopportune conditions.
Yet by their absence you have found *leisure*,³⁴
So strive now to bring an end to rebirth.³⁵ (73)

²⁵(Tib: *log par lta ba*). In general, false views are considered to be errant religious views other than Buddhism. More specifically, there are traditionally three false views: (1) not accepting the law of karma, (2) not believing in past and future lives, and (3) not believing in the concept of enlightenment.

²⁶(Tib: *dud 'gro*). A living being in the animal realm would not be able to recite a simple *mantra* (*sngags*) even if the Buddha himself taught the animal. Hence, an animal does not possess the mental capacity to practice the teachings.

²⁷(Tib: *yi dvags*). Ghosts in Buddhist tradition are constantly tormented by hunger and thirst, heat and cold, and weariness and fear. They are said to have enormous bellies that are always empty, skinny necks that are blocked by knots, and a mouth opening that is the size of a pinhole. Because they are so hungry, they are constantly searching for food and therefore have no leisure to practice.

²⁸(Tib: *dmyal ba*). While there are many types of hells, they are all characterized by intense pain and torture. Because of the incredible suffering experienced by those in the hells, it is impossible for them to learn or practice the teachings in such conditions.

²⁹(Tib: *rgyal ba 'i bka' med pa*). This refers to a time in human existence where it is impossible to practice the teachings because a buddha has not yet appeared or the teachings have died-out.

³⁰(Tib: *mtha' 'khob tu kla klo*). This refers to people in remote areas of the world where the Buddha's teachings have not spread.

³¹(Tib: *glen pa*). This refers to a person who is unable to understand the teachings because of a mental defect.

³²(Tib: *lkugs pa*). Someone who is unable to speak cannot recite mantras or other prayers. He or she is, therefore, unable to make meaningful progress on the path to enlightenment.

³³(Tib: *tshe ring lha*). In general, Tibetan Buddhism does not recommend taking rebirth in a god realm. As a realm of existence where good karma is spent to exhaustion, the beings there are often reborn into the lowest realms of existence because their negative karma could not come to fruition in the god realms. Furthermore, it is considered one of the eight inopportune conditions because there is not enough suffering in the god realms to develop the necessary renunciation to encourage one to practice the teachings.

³⁴(Tib: *dal ba*). In Tibetan tradition, the word *leisure* is an abbreviated reference to the eight pleasures of a precious human birth.

³⁵Nāgārjuna. "Letter to a Friend." Quoted in Pabongka Rinpoche. *Liberation in Our Hands: Part Two, The Fundamentals*. (Trans. Sermei Khensur Rinpoche Lobsang Tharchin with Artemus B. Engle. Howell, New Jersey: Mahayana Sutra and Tantra Press, 1994), 73.

According to Buddhist literature, the majority of sentient life is unable to practice the teachings because of their intense suffering in the *three lower realms*:³⁶ in the numerous hells, as ghosts, or in the animal realm.³⁷ Some live in celestial paradises where the pleasures are so intense they are never motivated by suffering to do any form of spiritual practice. Others are born in a time or place where the Buddha's teachings are unavailable. And there are still more who live with impaired faculties or errant religious views that block their acceptance of Buddhist doctrine. Thus, in every instance, the eight inopportune conditions represent a destination or circumstance of rebirth to be avoided because they fail to provide the necessary leisure of a life devoted to Buddhist goals.

In the traditional structure of Buddhist practice, the extraordinary potential of a human life endowed with the eight leisures would be contemplated through the medium of *analytical meditation*³⁸ until a fundamental shift in the perception of one's human life has been altered. This shift in perception is said to manifest in one's mind as a feeling of extraordinary joy similar to a pauper who suddenly realized his hearthstone was made of gold.³⁹ If this comparison is applied to the issue of Tibetan self-immolation, each act of suicide reveals itself as a lost opportunity for fortunate individuals to manifest the highest reaches of the Buddhist path and cause the emergence of a buddha in the world. For this reason, to abandon one's life, even in protest to Tibet's ongoing political plight, is tantamount to throwing away a priceless treasure that will otherwise be a scarce reality in an endless cycle of birth and death.

BODHICITTA AS THE MOTIVE FOR SELF-IMMOLATION

While all Buddhist practice is built upon an understanding of the value of human life, there is enormous precedent within Tibet's mystical traditions to support the concept of virtuous suicide. By far the most direct reference to self-immolation in the traditional literature of Tibet is

³⁶(Tib: *ngan song gsum*).

³⁷Khedrup and Hurley, *The Water and Wood Shastras*, 35.

³⁸(Tib: *dpyad sgom*). Analytical meditation involves the meditative focus on a single topic of contemplation to be established through repeated analysis by using scripture and profound reasoning. Analytical meditation is not to be confused with reflective meditation (*shar sgom*), which involves the systematic review of multiple topics of contemplation in one meditative sitting.

³⁹Pabongka, *Liberation in Our Hands*, 73.

found in the *Lotus Sutra*.⁴⁰ In its twenty-third chapter, the Bodhisattva Medicine King⁴¹ displays “his insight into the selfless nature of his body” by setting fire to himself to spread the “light of the dharma for twelve-hundred years.”⁴² It is, however, impossible to comprehend the richness of embedded meaning in this act without a conceptual understanding of the deep-seated philosophical structures at play in the form of *bodhicitta*.⁴³

At some point during the process of spiritual development, a stage of full maturity can be reached in which one is not only capable of caring for one’s own progress, but is also capable of caring for others.⁴⁴ Through the process of recognizing the suffering nature of *samsāra*, a level of awareness can be developed to identify the various types of suffering inherent in every living being.⁴⁵ This can eventually cause one to experience an incredible degree of compassion for others and elicit the determination to help them find freedom from the cycle of birth and death. Such an attitude, *bodhicitta*, is the defining practice of the *bodhisattva*⁴⁶ who vows to become a buddha to establish all sentient life in an enlightened state beyond the natural trappings of *samsāra*.⁴⁷ Tsongkhapa echoes this point in his liturgical poem *The Foundation of Good Qualities*:⁴⁸

⁴⁰(Tib: *Dam chos pad ma dkar po’i mdo*). The title *Lotus Sutra* is an abbreviation. The full name of this text is the *White Lotus of Sacred Dharma Sutra*.

⁴¹(*Byang chub sems pa sman rgyal ba*). This is a prominent figure in the *Lotus Sutra* who is known for his healing abilities.

⁴²Such acts are done to inspire others to achieve similar results by earnestly practicing the teachings. Furthermore, the motive of *bodhicitta* always guides these acts. International Campaign for Tibet, *Storm in the Grasslands*, 65.

⁴³(Tib: *byang chub kyi sems*). *Bodhicitta* is the intention to become enlightened to lead all other living beings out of the suffering of *samsāra*.

⁴⁴Khedrup and Hurley, *The Water and Wood Shastras*, 61.

⁴⁵While there are many ways to categorize suffering in Buddhism, the most common method is in accordance with the three sufferings (*sdug bsngal gsum*). They are: (1) the suffering of suffering (*sdug bsngal gyi sdug bsngal*), (2) the suffering of change (*’gyur ba’i sdug bsngal*), and (3) the suffering of conditionality (*khyab pa ’du byed kyi sdug bsngal*).

⁴⁶(Tib: *byang chub kyi sems pa*). This is someone who is guided by the concept of *bodhicitta* and seeks enlightenment to free other living beings from *samsāra*.

⁴⁷Khedrup and Hurley, *The Water and Wood Shastras*, 61.

⁴⁸(Tib: *Yon tan gzhir gyur ma*). This text is commonly recited in conjunction with the *Hundred Deities of the Land of Joy* (*dGa’ ldan lha brgya ma*) as a daily practice to review the entire path to enlightenment.

Just as I have fallen into the ocean of *samsāra*,
 So have all *mother beings*.⁴⁹
 I seek your blessing then to develop supreme *bodhicitta*,
 Which carries the burden of liberating beings.⁵⁰ (115)

With this intention known as *aspirational bodhicitta*,⁵¹ Tsongkhapa expresses the importance of cultivating a mind that aspires to liberate sentient life from the suffering of *samsāra*.⁵² Once cultivated, this mind is then nurtured through various methods until one experiences a level of compassion for living beings stronger than a mother's love for her only child. At a certain point, this intention to liberate all beings from their suffering can grow into an extraordinary urge to engage the outside world and transform one's mere aspiration into an actual reality.

In order to transition aspirational *bodhicitta* into a practical sphere of engagement, a bodhisattva must also develop *active bodhicitta*⁵³ through the practice of the *six perfections*.⁵⁴ While all six have their own importance on the bodhisattva path, the *perfection of generosity*⁵⁵ is the one most commonly associated with suicide. In his guru devotion text entitled *Inseparable*

⁴⁹(Tib: *mar gyur 'gro ba*). Tibetan tradition adheres to the belief that all sentient life once existed as one's mother at some point throughout a beginningless time.

⁵⁰*rang nyid srid mtshor lhung ba ji bzhin du / mar gyur 'gro ba kun kyang de 'dra bar / mthong nas 'gro ba sgrol ba'i khur khyer ba'i / byang chub sems mchog 'byongs par byin gyis rlobs*. Tsong kha pa, *Yon tan gzhir gyur ma*. (My translation. Tibetan in *Guru Yoga, Meditational Deity Sadhanas, and Essential Prayers*. New Delhi: Sherig Parkhang Trust, 2016), 115.

⁵¹(Tib: *smon pa sems bskyed*). A level of *bodhicitta* based on the thought of becoming enlightened for the benefit of all living beings without its practical engagement in the world.

⁵²Tsong kha pa, *Yon tan gzhir gyur ma*, 115.

⁵³(Tib: *'jug pa sems bskyed*). To bring one's aspirational *bodhicitta* to a level of practical engagement in the world.

⁵⁴(Tib: *pha rol tu phyin pa drug*). The six perfections are as follows: (1) the perfection of generosity (*sbyin pa'i phar phyin*), (2) the perfection of ethical discipline (*tshul khrims phar phyin*), (3) the perfection of patience (*bzod pa'i phar phyin*), (4) the perfection of effort (*brtson 'grus phar phyin*), (5) the perfection of concentration (*bsam gtan phar phyin*), and (6) the perfection of wisdom (*shes rab phar phyin*).

⁵⁵(Tib: *sbyin pa'i phar phyin*).

The path of seeing is preceded by both the *path of accumulation*⁶⁰ and the *path of preparation*.⁶¹ At the initial stage of the path of accumulation, a firm determination is made to become a buddha as the best method to lead living beings out of *samsāra*. This determination is then cultivated until it pervades a bodhisattva's every thought and becomes the single motivation for engaging in all aspects of life. The path of preparation is attained through conceptual realizations of *emptiness*⁶² by the combined method of meditative single-pointed concentration and special insight into the nature of reality. The path of seeing, which is also the first of ten *bodhisattva grounds*,⁶³ is attained during the first non-conceptual realization of emptiness which begins the process of cutting the various *mental afflictions*⁶⁴ from the root.⁶⁵

Once the path of seeing has been attained, a bodhisattva gains the ability to perceive both living beings and material objects as utterly empty of an inherent reality. This eliminates the perception of an existing self and results in the loss of attachment to the *five aggregates*.⁶⁶ With this sense of detachment, a bodhisattva is able to perfect the perfection of generosity by not only giving his or her “enjoyments and virtues accumulated,” but also the body without the slightest sense of attachment, pride, or thought of reward.⁶⁷

⁶⁰(Tib: *tshogs lam*).

⁶¹(Tib: *sbyor lam*).

⁶²(Tib: *stong pa nyid*). This is the term used to describe the lack of intrinsic reality of all phenomenon. On the Mahāyāna (*Theg pa chen po*) path of Buddhism, the realization of emptiness loosens the mental afflictions by causing a change in how one perceives reality.

⁶³(Tib: *byang chub sems dpa'i sa*). These are the grounds of attainment traversed by bodhisattvas on the path to buddhahood. The ten bodhisattva grounds are (1) perfect joy (*rab tu dga' ba*), (2) immaculate (*dri ma med pa*), (3) illuminating (*'od byed pa*), (4) radiant (*'od 'phro can*), (5) difficult training (*shin tu sbyang dka' ba*), (6) clearly manifested (*mngon du gyur ba*), (7) far progressed (*ring du song ba*), (8) immovable (*mi gyo ba*), (9) perfect intellect, (*legs pa 'i blo gros*), and (10) the cloud of dharma (*chos kyi sprin*).

⁶⁴(Tib: *nyon mongs*). The negative emotions that cause suffering and keep one in *samsāra*.

⁶⁵Daniel Cozort. *Highest Yoga Tantra: An Introduction to the Esoteric Buddhism of Tibet*. (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2005), 132.

⁶⁶(Tib: *phung po lnga*). The five aggregates are (1) form (*gzugs*), (2) feeling (*tshor ba*), (3) perception (*'du shes*), (4) mental formations (*'du byed*), and (5) conciseness (*rnam shes*).

⁶⁷Gyaltzen, *Inseparable Bliss and Emptiness*, 45.

In addition to the direct realization of emptiness on the path of seeing, the level of *ultimate bodhicitta*⁶⁸ is also achieved. As the highest level of *bodhicitta*, a bodhisattva's compassion finds its most mature expression through a direct realization into the empty nature of existence. In particular, by seeing the emptiness of persons, a bodhisattva's compassion is brought into a state of purity devoid of the various conceptual methods cultivated on the previous two paths. Without this combined purity of *bodhicitta* and wisdom, a bodhisattva remains unfit to offer the body in pursuit of the ultimate goal of buddhahood. As the Indian pandit and bodhisattva Śāntideva⁶⁹ (ca.685-763) warns in his *Engaging in Bodhisattva Activities*:⁷⁰

Do not give away this body
While your compassion is impure.⁷¹ (95)

In other words, a bodhisattva's compassion must be made pure by seeing the empty nature of existence before the act of giving away the body becomes a valid means to pursue the perfection of generosity. Thus, perceiving emptiness directly is what acts as the lone purifying agent to give rise to the highest level of compassion and its resultant *bodhicitta*.

In the case of the Bodhisattva Medicine King, because of his magical example and place of reverence in the *Lotus Sutra*, his act of self-sacrifice is considered a genuine occurrence of *bodhicitta* in lockstep with the necessary requirement of the path of seeing. For the bulk of self-immolators in Tibet, however, the situation is far less certain and even potentially damning to the spiritual prospects of otherwise well-meaning individuals. While it is impossible to determine the

⁶⁸(Tib: *don dam sems bskyed*). This is the level of *bodhicitta* attained after a direct perception of emptiness. Ultimate *bodhicitta* is attained at this point because a bodhisattva is able to see the empty nature of living beings which allows for a complete understanding of love, compassion, and what it means to have *bodhicitta*.

⁶⁹(Tib: *Zhi ba lha*). Best known as the author of *Engaging in Bodhisattva Activities*, Śāntideva was a scholar from the famed Nālandā Monastic University where he excelled as a writer and teacher.

⁷⁰(Tib: *Byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa*). Known for its poetical description of the bodhisattva path, this text presents the finer points of the Mahāyāna vehicle by skillfully highlighting a number its key elements.

⁷¹*snying rje'i bsam pa ma dag par / lus 'di gtang bar mi bshad*. Śāntideva. *Byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa*. (My translation. Tibetan in New Delhi: Sherig Parkhang Trust, 2003), 95.

spiritual accomplishments of each self-immolator, the path of seeing and its subsequent bodhisattva grounds are deemed a rare but precious achievement in the Buddhist tradition. Consequently, even though the possibility of such attainments exists in the tradition as a viable and very real occurrence, the majority of self-immolators, in-all-likelihood, committed an act of suicide on misguided philosophical ground out-of-step with the norms usually required to turn such a practice into the path of enlightenment.

VOWS, DIVINE PRIDE, AND TRANSFERENCE OF CONSCIOUSNESS AS AN ACT OF SUICIDE

After becoming well-practiced in the bodhisattva-oriented path, a *yogi*⁷² is then urged to enter on the path of *tantra*⁷³ as an expedient method to accomplish a buddha's complete enlightenment. At this stage of spiritual growth, a yogi is confronted with a series of new concepts that seem, at least at first, to challenge the ethical boundaries cultivated on the bodhisattva path. Under a philosophical structure that uses desire, anger, and transgressive practices to realize the *single-taste*⁷⁴ of all existence, a yogi requires the indispensable guidance of a *guru*⁷⁵ to ensure a proper understanding of tantra and its non-contradictory relationship with *ethical discipline*⁷⁶ and the law karma. Otherwise, the path of tantra becomes subject to misuse and its profound *yogas* turned into a cause for rebirth in the lower realms. As a result, the history of tantra is littered with cautionary tales of yogis who disregarded the Buddha's teachings on

⁷²(Tib: *rnal 'byor pa*). Under its original meaning in Sanskrit, the word *yogi* is a masculine word with *yogini* as its feminine counterpart. However, the term *yogi* being used here will be in accordance with its western usage which denotes both male and female yogis.

⁷³(Tib: *rgyud*). The tantras are a genre of teachings and yogic practices in the Vajrayāna vehicle of Buddhism. Their philosophical principle is based on the transformation of impure vision into pure vision through the medium of skillful yogic methods. These yogic methods usually involve the visualization of oneself in the form of a tantric deity surrounded by a divine environment. Tantra is also considered a swifter path to enlightenment compared to other systems of Buddhist practice.

⁷⁴(Tib: *ro gcig*). This is a defining feature of Buddhist tantra which views all phenomena in both *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* (*mya ngan las 'das pa*) as completely pure. In other words, all the elements of one's life are considered ultimately pure with concepts such as good and evil coexisting as a single-taste of purity. This concept, however, has historically been subject to considerable abuse by yogis who perform actions with negative karmic results in the name of the single-taste doctrine of tantra.

⁷⁵(Tib: *bla ma*). While the Sanskrit word *guru* has the meaning of a heavy relationship with one's teacher, the Tibetan word *lama*, however, literally means *unexcelled* or *nothing higher*. Thus, one's teacher in Tibetan tradition is considered to be *unexcelled* in his realizations.

⁷⁶(Tib: *tshul khrims*). This is one of the six perfections on the bodhisattva path.

karma to perform tantric practices outside the spiritual conditions in which they are appropriately performed.

Given the central importance of tantra in Tibetan Buddhism and the frequency in which tantric *initiations*⁷⁷ are given in the tradition, it is almost implicitly assumed that the self-immolators were given a tantric initiation at some point in their lives. When this is considered with the fact that nearly all of the self-immolators were ordained monks and nuns, it would seem unlikely that they did not experience such a commonplace occurrence.

In the process of tantric initiation, a yogi is meditatively guided by a guru into the divine *mandala*⁷⁸ of a *meditational deity*.⁷⁹ Once inside, the yogi makes requests to receive a variety of *pledges*⁸⁰ and *vows*⁸¹ until he or she is granted permission to perform the deity's rituals and *self-generation*⁸² practices. After the mind has been ripened through the process of initiation, a yogi must learn and maintain the pledges and vows made in the presence of the deity in order to provide a foundation on which to build spiritual accomplishments. Once again, Panchen Lobzang Chokyi Gyeltsen explains:

Therefore, I seek your blessings so that I may cherish more than
my life
The pledges and vows, the root of attainments,
And from the kindness of the captain, the *vajra holder*,⁸³

⁷⁷(Tib: *bang*). Also translated as *empowerment*, a tantric initiation is a series of rituals performed in the presence of a disciple. It is designed to empower a disciple to practice the tantras in the context of a particular deity.

⁷⁸(Tib: *dkyil 'khor*). In this context, a mandala is a sacred environment in which a deity abides.

⁷⁹(Tib: *yi dam*). This refers to one's personal deity chosen as the central medium of meditative accomplishment in the tantras.

⁸⁰(Tib: *dam tshig*).

⁸¹(Tib: *sdom pa*).

⁸²(Tib: *bdag bskyed*). This is a practice manual that provides a series of visualizations designed to dissolve one's ordinary appearance (*tha mal gyi snang ba*) and ordinary concepts (*tha mal zhen pa*) into that of the meditational deity's divine nature.

⁸³(Tib: *rdor rje 'dzin pa*). This is generally a respectful term used to refer to one's guru. More specifically, it refers to a guru who holds an authentic line of tantric transmission passed down from guru to disciple over the centuries.

May I cross the intricate ocean of the tantras.⁸⁴ (115)

Thus, Lobzang Chokyi Gyeltsen describes the pledges and vows as the *root of attainments* because they are the source from which all the accomplishments on the tantric path arise. To go a step further, Lobzang Chokyi Gyeltsen is able to convey the karmic weight of the pledges and vows by emphasizing their value above that of his own life. For this reason, depending on how well a yogi's pledges and vows have been kept, it is often said that the path of tantra can only end in one of two results: (1) complete enlightenment, or (2) birth in the lowest hell.⁸⁵

Among the fourteen tantric vows critical to the issue of Tibetan self-immolation, the eighth is particularly problematic because of its intimate relationship with divine perception. The eighth tantric vow is as follows: “treating the five aggregates, which are the essence of the five buddhas, with contempt.”⁸⁶ In the context of the daily liturgy performed by yogis of the Geluk⁸⁷ school of Tibetan Buddhism, they recite the phrase *rang gi phung por brnyes*, which means “to harm my aggregates.”⁸⁸

⁸⁴*de nas rdor rje 'dzin pa'i ded dpon gyi / drin las rgyud sde rgya mtsho'i mjings brgal te / dngos grub rtsa ba dam tshig sdom pa rnams / srog las gces par 'dzin par byin gyis rlobs. bLo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtsan. Zab lam bla ma mchod pa'i cho ga bde stong dbyer med ma. (My translation. Tibetan in Guru Yoga, Meditational Deity Sadhanas, and Essential Prayers. New Delhi: Sherig Parkhang Trust, 2016), 115.*

⁸⁵Sermey Khensur Lobsang Tharchin. *Six Session Guru Yoga: An Oral Commentary with a Detailed Explanation of the Bodhisattva and Tantric Vows*. (Howell, New Jersey: Mahayana Sutra and Tantra Press, 1999), xxii.

⁸⁶Tsongkhapa Lobsang Drakpa. *Tantric Ethics: An Explanation of the Precepts for Buddhist Vajrayana Practice*. (Trans. Gareth Sparham. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 98.

⁸⁷(Tib: *dGe lugs*). The Geluk school is the most recent school to emerge in Tibet. It has grown over the centuries into the largest and most dominant school of Tibetan Buddhism. The school is known for its emphasis on monasticism, scholarship, and dialectical debate, with the Stages of the Path (*Lam rim*) instructions as its most famed teaching. As for the school's tantric practices, it holds a system that combines the generation stage (*bskyed rim*) and completion stage (*rdzogs rim*) yogas of Guhyasamāja, Cakrasaṃvara, and Yamāntaka (*gSang bde 'jigs gsum*). During the generation stage of tantra, this involves the daily recitation of the self-generation practices of all three deities. During the completion stage of tantra, the illusory body (*sgyu lus*) yogas of Guhyasamāja (*gSang 'dus*) and the inner-heat (*gtu mo*) yogas of Cakrasaṃvara (*m'Khor lo sdom pa* or more commonly: *bDe mchog*) are practiced in the visualized form of Yamāntaka (*Shin rje shed* or more often: *rDor rje 'jigs byed*). The Geluk school is also the school of the Dalai Lamas.

⁸⁸bLo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtsan. *Thun drug bla ma'i rnal byor*. (My translation. Tibetan in *Guru Yoga, Meditational Deity Sadhanas, and Essential Prayers*. New Delhi: Sherig Parkhang Trust, 2016), 18.

In tantric practice, self-generation texts are recited as a means to guide a yogi through a series of visualizations that culminate in a meditative transformation of the physical and mental aggregates into that of a tantric deity. When these texts are recited using tantric techniques such as *mudras*,⁸⁹ *mantras*,⁹⁰ and liturgical recitation, the body is blessed and the aggregates of form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness are perceived by the yogi as inseparable from the *five buddhas*:⁹¹ Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, Amoghasiddhi, and Akṣobhya respectively. A yogi then consciously develops *divine pride*⁹² and *clear appearance*⁹³ through the medium of his or her chosen deity to aid a realization into the innate purity of the aggregates. Thus, once the aggregates have been ripened through the process of initiation and then blessed through the use of self-generation rituals, to set fire to oneself as a form of political protest is equivalent to killing the five buddhas.

Despite all these warnings, there are several occasions in which a tantric yogi can leave the body through various yogic methods. The most well-known and practiced of these, however, is *transference of consciousness*.⁹⁴ A practice that is technically suicide, transference of consciousness is a meditative yoga designed to intentionally separate the mind from the aggregates at the time of death as a means of taking rebirth in a *pure land*⁹⁵ of a buddha.⁹⁶ As one of its many benefits, the practice is also used as a way to exit the physical body before the pain of death begins to set in. Even though transference of consciousness is a spiritually sanctioned act of suicide, its practice manuals warn against leaving the body too soon. As the

⁸⁹(Tib: *phyag rgya*). These are the hand movements used during tantric rituals.

⁹⁰(Tib: *sngags*). These are the sacred syllables recited as a way to invoke one's tantric deity.

⁹¹(Tib: *rgyal ba rigs lnga*). These are the five buddhas of the five buddha families. They are also known as the five peaceful buddhas of the sambhogakāya (*longs sku*).

⁹²(Tib: *nga rgyal*). The divine pride of being one's meditational deity that serves as the antidote to ordinary concepts.

⁹³(Tib: *gsal snang*). The visualized clear appearance of being one's meditational deity that serves as the antidote to ordinary appearances.

⁹⁴(Tib: *'pho ba*).

⁹⁵(Tib: *dag zhing*). This is a heaven-like paradise created by a buddha where everything is conducive to spiritual development.

⁹⁶Ngulchu Dharmabhadra. *Blazing Inner Fire of Bliss and Emptiness: An Experiential Commentary on the Practice of the Six Yogas of Naropa*. (Trans. David Gonzalez. Seattle: Dechen Ling Press, 2014), 163.

revered lineage holder Ngulchu Dharmabhadra⁹⁷ (ca. 1772-1851) explains by quoting the *Vajradāka Tantra*⁹⁸ in his commentary on the *Six Yogas of Naropa*:⁹⁹

Perform transference when the time comes.

The wrong time becomes killing the deities.

By simply killing the deities

You will burn in hell.¹⁰⁰ (163)

Because the Buddhist tantras employ the constant use of divine pride and clear appearance, to commit suicide prematurely through the practice of transference of consciousness carries the karmic weight of killing a buddha. If, however, the practice is carried out at the appropriate moment when a yogi's death is on the verge of making itself felt, transference of consciousness can serve as a skillful method to further a yogi's enlightenment by ejecting the mind into a pure land of a buddha.

Thus, by understanding the conditions required to perform the yoga of transference of consciousness, it is clear that a yogi's body is only abandoned when it has completely outlived its usefulness to continue practicing the teachings. Because of the vows and pledges taken during initiation, the body of a tantric yogi is protected and maintained in the manner of a divine manifestation entirely in sync with the fundamental value placed on the attainment of a precious human life. In this regard, both the bodhisattva-oriented path of the Mahāyāna¹⁰¹ and the tantric

⁹⁷(Tib: *dNgul chu d+harma b+ha dra*). Ngulchu Dharmabhadra is one of the more prevalent lineage holders in the Geluk tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. His writings are also highly praised, and they are still read by Gelukpa scholars and yogis.

⁹⁸(Tib: *rDor rje mkh' 'gro rgyud*). This is a tantra that dedicates a section of it for detailing the practice of transference of consciousness.

⁹⁹(Tib: *Na ro chos drug*). This is a highly esoteric practice originating from the Indian mahāsiddha Tilopa (*Ti lo pa*) (ca. 988-1069) and then passed to his spiritual son Nāropā (*NA ro pa*) (ca. 1016-1100) who the practice is named after.

¹⁰⁰“Vajradāka Tantra.” Quoted in Ngulchu Dharmabhadra, *Blazing Inner Fire of Bliss and Emptiness: An Experiential Commentary on the Practice of the Six Yogas of Naropa*. (Trans. David Gonzalez. Seattle: Dechen Ling Press, 2014), 163.

¹⁰¹(Tib: *Theg pa chen po*). Translated as the *Great Vehicle*, the Mahāyāna is the vehicle of Buddhism that emphasizes the path of the bodhisattva guided by the concept of *bodhicitta*. It is also the form of Buddhism found in most parts of East Asia.

path of the Vajrayāna¹⁰² are in perfect harmony and remain absent of the all-too-frequent assumption that the two vehicles are incompatible. For this reason, both vehicles remain dedicated to the preservation of life at every step and only sanction acts of suicide for unique individuals with high meditative attainments.

CONCLUSION

While no one doubts the sincerity of the hundreds of Tibetans who have self-immolated, the philosophical ground on which they acted rests on too many variables to be able to confirm the religious validity of their actions. Without a deep understanding of the proper use of esoteric suicide, the potential for abuse is undeniable, and it should be countered by providing monks and nuns with an experiential review of the fundamental value of human life in their tradition. It is simply not enough for one to memorize a contemplative outline or perform a daily review of the topic through liturgical recitation. Instead, the value of human life needs to be repeatedly engaged by using meditative analysis to combine one's understanding with experience. Otherwise, the risk of becoming insensitive to the profound points of the topic can ruin one's potential for spiritual transformation. If, however, the profound meaning of human life can be penetrated through meditative practice, the thought of suicide becomes an unthinkable act that is contrary to the spiritual goals of Buddhism.

On the bodhisattva path, a new dynamic comes into play when the concept of *bodhicitta* is considered. Although many of the self-immolators cited religious freedom and the preservation of Buddhism as their motive, if this is compared to the benefits of continuing one's life to pursue the teachings, the act of self-immolation reveals itself as a shortsighted maneuver of *bodhicitta*. Under the very definition of a bodhisattva, which is to become a buddha for the benefit of all sentient life, it is a requirement of a bodhisattva to consider his or her long-term spiritual goals in the performance of every major action. Thus, while the spiritual levels of each self-immolator are unknown, the prospect of becoming a buddha should have taken precedent over suicide.

¹⁰²(Tib: *rDor rje theg pa*). Translated as the *Diamond Vehicle*, it is the vehicle of Buddhism that emphasizes the tantric teachings of the Buddha. It is also the form of Buddhism commonly found in places like Tibet, Nepal, and the greater Himalayan region.

On the level of tantra, a clear path to a beneficial future needs to be ascertained before an act of suicide can become a virtuous endeavor. While the tantras are filled with stories of great yogis engaging in unusual acts, such as suicide, sex, and even killing, the context in which they are properly performed always looks forward to a long-term goal with a lasting benefit. Because of this, no act of suicide is ever implemented, in its proper context, without first considering the value of human life and how to derive its full potential. Without this consideration, a potential self-immolator would miss-out on an incredible opportunity and deny the emergence of a buddha in the world.

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