

Lotus Sutra and Self-immolation in Tibet

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Abstract

As of February 2019, there have been a total of 155 reported self-immolations in Tibet since February 2009, of which 129 are men and 26 women. Given the poor human rights situation and deplorable political condition in Tibet, these heroic acts of self-immolations may be viewed as a protest to free Tibet from China. In fact, the issue of independence from China has been the dominant theme in the international media coverage of Tibet. In relative parlance, scholars who are familiar with Buddhism assumed that because Tibet is a Buddhist nation, the instances of self-immolations were directly influenced by the Lotus Sutra, particularly its 23rd chapter which venerates self-immolation and viewed it as the highest form of devotion to the Buddha. However, following Robert Barnett, this paper argues that these self-immolations are neither a form of protest to free Tibet from China nor are they directly influenced by the Lotus Sutra. This paper then looks at the relation between the concept of 'self-immolation' in the Lotus Sutra and Tibetan struggle for independence from China. It takes the position that, on the one hand, the protests in Tibet expressed most visibly through self-immolation were intended primarily to preserve Tibetan religion, culture, and language; and, on the other hand, they were shaped by the country's long history of colonial domination. Thus, as will be shown later, the Lotus Sutra has nothing to do with the instances of self-immolations in Tibet and that any attempt to read it as the principle of self-immolation is to utterly misinterpret its powerful teachings on truth and life from the perspective of the Buddha.

Keywords: *Lotus Sutra, Self-Immolation, Buddhism, Bodhisattva, Tibetan Struggle for Liberation, Tibet-China Conflict*

Introduction

One of the recent debates and controversies in world politics is the Tibet-China conflict which started with the occupation of the former by the latter in 1951. According to the 14th Dalai Lama (1997), the occupation was "a calculated and systematic strategy aimed at the destruction" of the Tibetan national and cultural identities. In fact, according to Tsering Topgyal (2013; see also Shakya, 2015 and Makley, 2015), identity insecurity is at the heart of the Tibetan struggle for liberation against Chinese occupation. As we can see, the peace-loving Tibetans haven been

resisting the Chinese occupation; and, as is well known, one of the dominant forms of resistance that the Tibetans seem to have employed is self-immolation.

Self-immolation is an important concept in Lotus Sutra, one of the most influential and venerated Mahayana sutras (Scherer, 2019; O'Neal, 2015). As a matter of fact, as of February 2019, there have been a total of 155 reported self-immolations in Tibet since February 2009, of which 129 are men and 26 women (International Campaign for Tibet, 2017; see also Beauregard, 2016 and Wood, 2016). Given the poor human rights situation and deplorable political condition in Tibet, these heroic acts of self-immolations can be viewed as a protest to free Tibet from China. In fact, the issue of independence from China has been the dominant theme in the international media coverage of Tibet. In relative parlance, scholars who are familiar with Buddhism assumed that because Tibet is a Buddhist nation, the instances of self-immolations were directly influenced by the Lotus Sutra, particularly its 23rd chapter which venerates self-immolation and viewed it as the highest form of devotion to the Buddha.

However, following Robert Barnett (2012), this paper argues that these self-immolations are neither a form of protest to free Tibet from China nor are they directly influenced by the Lotus Sutra. This paper then looks at the relation between the concept of 'self-immolation' in the Lotus Sutra and Tibetan struggle for independence from China. It takes the position that, on the one hand, the protests in Tibet expressed most visibly through self-immolation were intended primarily to preserve Tibetan religion, culture, and language; and, on the other hand, they were shaped by the country's long history of colonial domination. Thus, as will be shown later, the Lotus Sutra has nothing to do with the instances of self-immolations in Tibet and that any attempt to read it as the principle of self-immolation is to utterly misinterpret its powerful teachings on truth and life from the perspective of the Buddha.

This paper begins with a brief sketch on the key concepts of the 23rd chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Here, we will show that the mention of self-immolation by the bodhisattva does not necessarily suggest the 'literal' burning of the body as the greatest offering to the Buddha. In our understanding, the bodhisattva's act of burning his body or part of it is symbolic of how blissful life would be if one offers everything to God, to the Buddha. The paper then proceeds with a brief critical appraisal of the practices of self-immolation in Tibet in recent years. The emphasis here is on explaining the specificity of the self-immolators' goal and the reason behind their sacrifice.

Self-immolation and the Lotus Sutra

The Lotus Sutra, written in India sometime between 150 BCE and 100 BCE, is considered to be a canonical text in Buddhist literature. It was written in the form of sutras, a Sanskrit term for discourse, which is 'said to be the words of the historical Buddha transmitted after his death by the Buddhist community' (Kaufman, 2013, p. 34; see also Sanburn, 2011 and Twohig, 2016).

The Lotus Sutra is an interesting text as it radically departs from the core teachings of the previous Buddhist texts. For instance, in the pre-Lotus teachings, it is believed that Buddhahood

or enlightenment can only be accessed by exceptional individuals, especially the monks and nuns. This means that ordinary persons, including women, do not have the possibility of becoming Buddhas themselves. The Lotus Sutra, on the other hand, preached that all people, without exception, are capable of attaining enlightenment. What is more interesting is that the Lotus Sutra teaches that enlightenment can be attained in this life as opposed to the previous teachings that enlightenment requires countless lifetimes (Watson, 2009; Rossabi, 2002; Christiansen; 2020). Indeed, of all the Buddhist sacred texts, it is the Lotus Sutra that sets forth the fundamental teaching of equality.

One of the most famous and influential figures of the Lotus Sutra is the ‘Bodhisattva Medicine King’ chapter which, according to Jacqueline Stone (2007, p. 51) ‘provides the *locus classicus* for the practice of self-immolation by recounting how a bodhisattva...burnt its body as an offering to the Buddha’. Let us briefly reconstruct the story of the Bodhisattva Medicine King and show that the act of discarding the body was originally ‘presented as a way to cultivate perfection of generosity, which is considered fundamental on the bodhisattva path’ (Benn, 2009, p. 119; see also Shinohara and Lisiecki, 2021). This explains why, as already mentioned, the act of burning the body as depicted in the Lotus Sutra has no connection with the famous self-immolations in Tibet in recent years which were done for cultural reasons.

In the first few paragraphs of the chapter on ‘The Former Deeds of the Bodhisattva Medicine King’, we found the Buddha preaching the Lotus Sutra to the bodhisattva and to the multitude of voice-hearers. After hearing the Lotus Sutra, the bodhisattva aspired to become a Buddha himself and began to practice austerities for twelve thousand years. What follows is that the bodhisattva gained Samadhi, a highly advanced form of meditation, which allowed him to manifest all physical forms. Having gained Samadhi, the bodhisattva decided to offer beautiful things to the Buddha, which included flowers, incense, and sandalwood. However, the bodhisattva realized that these material things were not enough and so he decided to offer his body by burning it. Thus, after ‘anointing his body with fragrant oil, he appeared before the Buddha Sun Moon Pure Bright Virtue, wrapped his body in heavenly jeweled robes, poured fragrant oil over his head and, calling on his transcendental powers, set fire to his body’ (*The Lotus Sutra*, 2002; see also Ives, 2017 and Salguero, 2018).

The Buddha was delighted upon seeing the bodhisattva self-immolated and said: ‘Excellent, excellent, good man! This is true diligence. This is what is called a true Dharma offering to the Thus Come One.... Good men, this is called the foremost donation of all. Among all donations, this is most highly prized, for one is offering the Dharma to the Thus Come One.’ (*The Lotus Sutra*, 2002). The Buddha then proclaimed the great merit and wisdom that can be accumulated from this form of self-sacrifice. For sure, no other form of offering can match what the bodhisattva did, that is, for offering his whole life to the Buddha.

Now, what the story of the bodhisattva clearly shows is that self-immolation as portrayed in the Lotus Sutra represents something completely different from the kind of self-immolation that can be witnessed in Tibet in recent years. In fact, Benn (2009, see also Lu, 2020) argues that the story of the bodhisattva is primarily a form of worship through which one can become a Buddha. But most importantly, he further argues that the bodhisattva’s act of discarding his body is meritorious, inasmuch as it represents non-attachment to selfish bodily desires while at the same time exalting the spirit. Thus, to self-immolate is precisely to annihilate our dependence and attachment to selfish worldly desires. For sure, we have our body and, as much as possible, we need to preserve it; however, the satisfaction that we gained through it does not lead to

enlightenment, to true satisfaction. The way to enlightenment, therefore, is to purify the mind so that it shall see the truth. In this way, the burning of the body or parts of it could mean the burning of ignorance, of worldly selfish desires. As Kaufman (2013, p. 37) puts it, ‘witnessing a self-immolation (or even reading the text of the Lotus Sutra) can serve to wake someone up to ultimate reality’.

Self-immolations in Tibet and the Lotus Sutra

The self-immolations in Tibet in recent years have truly captured the attention of the international community. And people have speculated about the intentions of the self-immolators and the reason behind this ultimate form of self-sacrifice. Studies show that there are several important factors that contributed to this phenomenon. In this section, we will critically appraise these factors vis-à-vis the Lotus Sutra and show whether or not this sacred Buddhist text has directly influenced the protests.

It must be noted that people who are not familiar with the internal dynamics of the Tibetan society and its long history of colonial domination would assume that the self-immolations are concrete proof that the Tibetans want independence from China. It must be remembered that China annexed Tibet in the 1950s (Woesser, 2016; Agence France Presse, 2013). For this reason, it is but logical to conclude that the root cause of these protests is directly linked to the issue of independence. Moreover, because Tibet is predominantly a Buddhist nation, people readily believed that the Buddhist teaching of self-sacrifice provides the blueprint for those acts of self-immolations. However, a closer investigation of the issue would show that these self-immolations are neither a form of protest to free Tibet from China nor are they directly influenced by the Lotus Sutra. Let us briefly explain this point.

The best way to determine the root cause and the objectives of these acts of self-immolations are to peruse the statements of the immolators themselves. According to Barnett (2012, p. 54), only nine of those 155 who self-immolated ‘have left statements in which they explain their decision to give up their lives’. The most famous is that of Sobha Trulku who self-immolated in January 2012. Tulku's statement called for the rebuilding of a strong and prosperous Tibet in the future (Barnett, 2012). More specifically, Tulku's statement urged the Tibetans themselves to address three issues within their community, namely: 1) to end disputes among Tibetans over land and water resources; 2) to provide education to children, especially in the traditional field of study; and 3) to maintain and protect Tibetan language and culture (Barnett, 2012; see also Kłodkowski, 2017 and Villanueva, 2013). According to Barnett (2012), all other statements expressed the same concerns, except one, that of Nangdrol, who explicitly called for independence from China. With these statements, we can, therefore, say that the protests are more concerned with spiritual and cultural issues than with independence. As a matter of fact, there was little mention of Chinese harsh policies in these statements; instead, the statements emphasized the importance of the Tibetans acting for the preservation of their cultural identity. This clearly shows that the protests expressed most visibly through self-immolations are cultural in nature rather than a political act of freeing Tibet from Chinese rule. As Barnett (2012, p. 54) writes, the self-immolations ‘focus on broad, long-term concerns about the erosion of Tibetan culture, religion and education in general and the suffering of living under Chinese rule.’

Barnett (2012, p. 55; see also King, 2000) further writes, ‘Although all statements refer to Tibetans as having been occupied or invaded by China, most do not specify whether they seek independence or only what the Dalai Lama has called, meaning autonomy.’ It is important to note that the Dalai Lama remains neutral on issues relating to self-immolations and their presumed call for independence from China (Branigan, 2012; Ong, 2013).

Now, on theories that may have influenced the self-immolations. For sure, the protests depicted images reminiscent of the bodhisattva’s act of offering his whole life to the Buddha by burning his body. However, the cultural practices of the Tibetans strongly suggest that the self-immolations were not directly influenced by the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. Barnett’s (2012; see also Twohig, 2016) study showed that the immolations are directly linked to the Tibetans’ practice of honorable suicide. It is worthwhile to mention here that the Tibetans have a long history of practicing suicide as a noble, meritorious and virtuous act of self-sacrificing for the nation. Thus, it can be argued that the practice of honorable suicide as a form of protest has been reframed by the self-immolators as embodying high motives and collective purpose for the benefit of the Tibetan society. Again, this clearly shows that the 23rd chapter of the Lotus Sutra has nothing to do with the self-immolations in Tibet in recent years.

Conclusion

As we can see, the discussion on the key concepts of the 23rd chapter of the Lotus Sutra suggests that indeed the mention of self-immolation by the bodhisattva does not necessarily suggest the ‘literal’ burning of the body as the greatest offering to the Buddha. It can be inferred that the bodhisattva’s act of burning his body or part of it is symbolic of how blissful life would be if one offers everything to the Buddha. Thus, to view the protests in Tibet in recent years as being influenced by the teaching of the Lotus Sutra is to misinterpret the powerful Buddhist teachings on truth and life. It can also be argued that the parallelism between the images of self-immolation in the 23rd chapter of the Lotus Sutra and the protests in Tibet may have been just a matter of coincidence given the fact that the Tibetans are mostly Buddhists.

The brief discussion above also shows that the primary motive behind the protests in Tibet is cultural and religious in nature rather than political. In fact, the only political dimension of these protests is their call for the return of the Dalai Lama as their leader.

Finally, it should be noted that the practice of self-immolation as a religious act is as old as Buddhism itself. Hence, those who are not very familiar with self-immolation as famously articulated in the Lotus Sutra and the Tibet-China conflict need to avoid running the risk of falling into the pit of reductionism. One should not associate self-immolations in Tibet with the Tibet-China conflict (see Liu, 2011). In other words, one should not view the self-immolations in Tibet as a form of a struggle for independence from China for the facts don’t say so.

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