



# SELF-IMMOLATIONS



*“To burn oneself by fire is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance.”*

– Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh,  
in a letter to Dr Martin Luther King, 1965



*20-year old Kirti monk Lobsang Palden sets himself on fire on March 16, 2014 in Ngaba, Eastern Tibet*

**In an act driven by the anguish of oppression and separation from the exiled Dalai Lama, 143 Tibetans<sup>1</sup> have set fire to themselves in Tibet and China in one of the biggest waves of self-immolation as political protest globally in the past 60 years<sup>2</sup>.**

In February, 2009, Kirti monk Tapey became the first in Tibet when he walked out of his monastery and set himself alight after a prayer ceremony was cancelled by the authorities. Since his self-immolation, a 19-year old female student, widowed mother of four, the

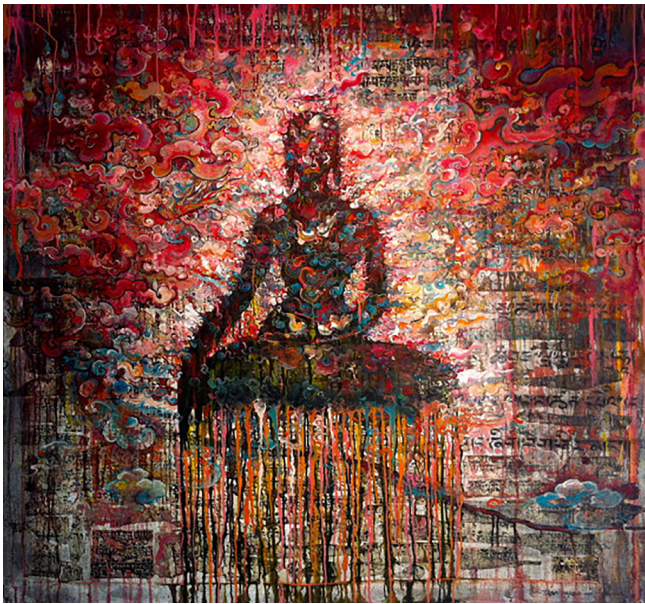
<sup>1</sup> As of September 4, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> ICT documentation of self-immolations is at: <http://www.savetibet.org/resources/fact-sheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/>. Also see ICT report ‘Storm in the Grasslands: Self-immolations in Tibet and Chinese policy’ available at <http://www.savetibet.org/storm-in-the-grasslands-self-immolations-in-tibet-and-chinese-policy/>

# SELF-IMMOLATIONS

PAGE 2/4

grandfather of an important reincarnate lama, monks in their early twenties, nomads, and laypeople from every sector of society, have also set fire to themselves.



*'Self-immolation' – a painting by Tashi Norbu, Tibetan artist based in Amsterdam, by kind permission of the artist*

There was an escalation in self-immolations in Tibet during and after the Chinese Communist Party Congress in November 2012 – a once-in-a-decade leadership transition – marking an increase in frequency of self-immolations. There has also been a broader geographical spread, with clusters of self-immolations in particular areas such as Rebkong in Qinghai, Labrang in Gansu and Ngaba in Sichuan.

While the self-immolations are deeply controversial, the overwhelming response from Tibetans to the individuals who self-immolate is one of respect and compassion and the authorities' attempts to turn

people against them has been a resounding failure. Thousands of Tibetans have gathered to pray and pay their respects for those who have self-immolated, and peaceful protests involving Tibetans from all sectors of society have often followed the self-immolations.

The responses by Tibetans across Tibet to the self-immolations indicate both the significance of the actions as statements, and the developing and resolute sense of Tibetan solidarity and unity across Tibetan areas. A Tibetan described the impact of the self-immolations among Tibetans in Tibet as being “beyond measure”.

While the Chinese government has sought to underplay the self-immolations, they expose a crisis in the Beijing leadership's Tibet policy. The self-immolations are a dramatic and visible counter to the claims of the Chinese Communist Party to be improving Tibetans' lives and they are a direct challenge to the Party's legitimacy in Tibet. Although the Chinese government has sought to blame the Dalai Lama and 'outside forces' for the self-immolations, it is acknowledged by the international community as well as a number of scholars and netizens in China that these dramatic developments in Tibet reflect significant failures in policy that must be addressed.

China has responded to the self-immolations by intensifying the military buildup in Tibet and strengthening the very policies and approaches that are the root cause of the acts, such as aggressive campaigns against loyalty to the Dalai Lama.

Recently, the Chinese government reacted to dissent expressed by Tibetans with a politicization of criminal law by punishing those allegedly 'associated' with self-immolators, including friends, families and even entire communities. In a set of guidelines announced in the Chinese state media by the end of

<sup>3</sup> The report 'Acts of Significant Evil: The Criminalization of Self-Immolation' is available at: <http://www.savetibet.org/acts-of-significant-evil/>



# SELF-IMMOLATIONS



2012, Tibetans can be sentenced on homicide charges based on their alleged ‘intent’ and presumed ability to influence a Tibetan who has self-immolated.

Moreover, in April 2013, a county-level government in Dzoega, Ngaba, Sichuan Province, announced new forms of punishment and persecution for Tibetan individuals and communities if a Tibetan self-immolator is a relative or from the local area. The provisions represent a form of collective punishment, which is prohibited by international law. Sanctions include the inability of individuals to hold government positions or receive official aid, deprivation of government assistance to villages where the self-immolation protests occur, and farmland or pasture registered in the name of the self-immolator will be taken by the authorities.

In July 2014, the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) published a report, ‘*Acts of Significant Evil – The Criminalisation of Tibetan Self-immolations*’<sup>3</sup>, which found that:

- Since 2010, at least 98 Tibetans have been sentenced, detained or disappeared due to an alleged association with a self-immolation;
- According to the 2012 guidelines, Tibetans can be sentenced on homicide charges based on their alleged ‘intent’ and presumed ability to influence a Tibetan who has self-immolated;
- As a consequence, since 2012, at least 11 Tibetans have been sentenced to prison terms or even to death on “intentional homicide” charges, because they allegedly have “aided” or “incited” others to self-immolate. There is no indication about a formal legislative process having been observed by the Chinese authorities justifying the application of such a provision. However, such process is

mandatory according to the Chinese constitution when introducing new criminal offenses;

- In a number of cases documented, there is no evidence that those convicted either spoke to the self-immolator beforehand or even knew the self-immolator. Often, there is no further detail available on the underlying legal background.

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*“We are not terrorists, we are Buddhists, so we are not going to harm any other people”*

– Unidentified monk in Ngaba, speaking in a clandestine interview<sup>4</sup>

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There appears to be a direct correlation between the self-immolations and an intensified campaign against the Dalai Lama in Tibet together with the aggressive expansion of legal measures tightening state control over Tibetan religion and culture. This has been particularly evident following the imposition of increasingly restrictive measures in the eastern Tibetan areas of Amdo and Kham, where most of the self-immolations have occurred.

From 1994 onwards, the Chinese authorities launched a particularly aggressive campaign against the Dalai Lama, including prohibitions on the display of Dalai Lama photographs and requirements for monks and nuns to denounce the Dalai Lama. While the policies were first implemented in the Tibet Autonomous Region, they have gradually been imposed in the eastern areas of the Tibetan plateau, where previously

<sup>4</sup> Sky Television News, UK, March 6, 2012



# SELF-IMMOLATIONS



there was more space and scope for Tibetans to express themselves and practice their religion in comparison with the TAR.

Many Tibetans who have self-immolated have sought to underline the religious context of their acts. Some have died with their hands clasped in prayer, while many of those who have self-immolated have done so beside a stupa (reliquary building), monastery or nunnery.

While individual reasons for the self-immolations are ultimately unknowable, virtually all of the Tibetans who have set fire to themselves in Tibet have communicated a wish for the Dalai Lama to return to Tibet and for Tibetan freedom.

The unprecedented wave of self-immolations in Tibet signals the need for a fundamentally new approach in Tibet. The Chinese government needs to take immediate steps to address the current emergency

in Tibetan areas. Governments in the international community should coordinate their efforts with other like-minded countries and explicitly call upon the Chinese government to address the policies in Tibet threatening Tibetan culture, religion and identity that are at the root cause of the current crisis. The international community should also prevail upon the Chinese leadership to end the military buildup and limit the dominance of the security apparatus, factors that have intensified the dangers in Tibet, increasing the risk of more self-immolations.

The Chinese government must acknowledge the importance of the Dalai Lama to the Tibetan people and his critical role in Tibet's future, and engage in a broader and more substantive dialogue with Tibetan representatives as a matter of urgency. The international community should re-evaluate its approach on Tibet as an issue tied to Asian and global security, of increasing geopolitical significance.