

A Question of Violence: Buddhism and Acts of Self-Immolation during the Vietnam War

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On June 11, 1963, Thich Quang Duc, a seventy-three-year-old Buddhist monk, sat serenely in the lotus position on the corner of Phan-Dinh-Phung Street in Saigon. His fellow monks proceeded to saturate his body with gasoline. Quang Duc then allowed himself to burn to death as thousands of onlookers watched the monk's perfectly still body be consumed by flames.¹ Over the course of the Vietnam War thirty-six monks, one laywoman, and two American Quakers would follow Quang Duc's example.² In the twentieth-century Vietnam endured decades of war, foreign occupation, and chaotic instability. A people divided by both domestic and international disputes, the Vietnamese experienced unspeakable violence and hardship. As the United States escalated the military conflict with the Communist forces in the North, the relatively passive Buddhist community of South Vietnam began to mobilize their resistance efforts following Quang Duc's powerful act of self-immolation (also referred to as auto-cremation).

A leader of the "engaged Buddhism" movement and influential peace activist in Vietnam, the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh stated in response to Quang Duc's self-immolation, "The Vietnamese monk, by burning himself, says with all his strength and determination that he can endure the greatest of sufferings to protect his people."³ However, intuitively the unequivocally violent act of burning one's self to death seems opposed to the fundamental Buddhist precept of non-violence. In this paper I examine the moral tension caused by Buddhist self-immolations during the Vietnam War. My analysis gives particular attention to the precedence for and results of the first modern case of Vietnamese self-immolation: Thich Quang Duc. Furthermore, I outline the opposing viewpoints concerning self-immolation within the Buddhist community and draw conclusions on whether this type of violence is justified by the Buddhist tradition.

Buddhist Precedence for Self-Immolation

In Mahayana Buddhism the ancient *Lotus Sutra* remains one of the holiest texts. In chapter twenty-three, the bodhisattva Medicine King makes the offering of his own body to the Buddha by performing various acts of self-mutilation, including burning his body: "Anointing his body with fragrant oil...and calling on his transcendental powers, [he] set fire to his body...The Buddhas in these worlds simultaneously spoke out in praise, saying: 'Excellent, excellent, good man! This is true diligence.'"⁴ While many scholars have argued that this sacrifice was meant to be taken metaphorically, ardent believers have often interpreted the sutra literally and with dire consequences.⁵ Despite the interpretative debate, the *actions* of the bodhisattva in the *Lotus Sutra* are indisputable and therefore provide the doctrinal basis for Buddhist self-immolation.

Evidence for self-immolation can be found in Buddhist practice as well. In a letter addressed to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on June 1st 1965, Thich Nhat Hanh describes one manifestation of self-immolation in modern Mahayana practice:

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1. C.A. Joiner, "South Vietnam's Buddhist Crisis: Organization for Charity, Dissidence, and Unity." *Asian Survey* v.4, no.7 (1964): 918.
 2. C. Queen, "Introduction: the Shapes and Sources of Engaged Buddhism." In C. Queen & S.B. King (Eds.) *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996): 1.
 3. T.N. Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*. (Clinton, MA: Hill and Wang, Inc., 1967), 106.
 4. B. Watson, *The Lotus Sutra* (B. Watson, trans.). (NY: Columbia University Press, 1993), 282.
 5. Ibid.

During the ceremony of ordination, as practiced in the Mahayana tradition, the monk-candidate is required to burn one or more small spots on his body in taking the vow to observe the 250 rules of a *bhikshu*, to live the life of a monk, to attain enlightenment, and to devote his life to the salvation of all beings...when the words are uttered while kneeling before the community of *sangha* and experiencing this kind of pain, they express all the seriousness of one's heart and mind, and carry much greater weight.⁶

These comparatively minor burns are by no means directly equivalent to the fatal burning experienced by Quang Duc and others. However, they do suggest the praise and elevated status accorded to acts of physical sacrifice in Mahayana Buddhism. Perhaps these small acts of self-mutilation, under no duress, can be extrapolated to legitimize self-immolation under the extreme threats and pressures of war. Additionally, "voluntary termination of life, or sacrifice of the body" by numerous methods, including fire, frequently took place in medieval Chinese Buddhism.⁷ Jan Yiin-Hua closely examined the moral conflict that stemmed from the medieval Chinese monks' religious suicides. He concluded that the monks' actions were indeed justified within the Buddhist tradition, stating that religious suicides were "practical actions needed to actualize spiritual aims" and demonstrated great acts of selflessness.⁸

Thich Quang Duc's Self-Immolation

Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation was vividly recorded by photographers and writers alike. *New York Times* reporter and eyewitness to the event, David Halberstam, gave the following account:

I was to see that sight again, but once was enough. Flames were coming from a human being; his body was slowly withering and shriveling up, his head blackening and charring. In the air was the smell of burning human flesh; human beings burn surprisingly quickly. Behind me I could hear the sobbing of the Vietnamese who were now gathering. I was too shocked to cry, too confused to take notes or ask questions, too bewildered to even think...As he burned he never moved a muscle, never uttered a sound, his outward composure in sharp contrast to the wailing people around him.⁹

Malcolm Browne's award-winning series of photographs capturing the event were published in countless international publications. President Kennedy received the infamous photo on his desk that very day.¹⁰ The international media effectively engraved the powerful image of the "burning monk" into the collective consciousness of the world's population. Quang Duc's self-immolation roused the Vietnamese "engaged Buddhist" movement to action and eventually led to the overthrow of the oppressive, American-backed Diem regime in November 1963. On a less tangible level, Quang Duc brought the suffering of the Vietnamese people to the forefront of international thought. As Hanh wrote, "By burning himself, Thich Quang Duc awakened the world

6. Hanh (1967), 106.

7. J.A. Benn, "Self-cultivation and Self-immolation: Preparing the Body for Auto-Cremation in Chinese Buddhism," 15 February 2000 Available: <http://helios.unive.it/~pregadio/aas/benn_no_char.html> (February 2003): 1.

8. Jan Yiin-Hua, "Buddhist Self-Immolation in Medieval China." *History of Religions* v.4, n.4 (1965): 265.

9. D. Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*. (NY: Random House, 1971), 211.

10. R.T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis and the Politics of Nostalgia*. (Oxford Press, 1997).

to the suffering of the war and the persecution of the Buddhists.”¹¹ All these results contribute to the significance of Quang Duc’s actions, however, the motivations and meaning of his act can never be fully understood.

Careful study of the events surrounding Quang Duc’s self-immolation can help provide insight into the meaning of the event. A series of letters written by Quang Duc several weeks prior to the act and the volatile political-religious atmosphere in South Vietnam reveal some possible motives. On May 8th 1963, a group of Buddhists in the city of Hue flew religious flags as part of a celebration of Buddha’s birth. Ngo Dinh Diem, the pro-Catholic president of South Vietnam, had banned the use of Buddhist flags despite Vietnam’s 80 percent Buddhist population, ordered the flags torn down, and the crowd dispersed. Government troops opened fire on the crowd, killing seven children and one woman.¹²

This event galvanized the Buddhist population against the oppressive Diem regime and sparked widespread protests. Quang Duc along with the Unified Buddhist Church wrote several letters to the Diem government requesting “legal equality with the Catholic Church, an end to arrests, greater freedom to practice their faith, and indemnification of the families of victims of the May 8 shootings.”¹³ The Diem government ignored these requests and arrested large numbers of Buddhist activists. In 1968, of the 1,870 prisoners held in Chi Hoa Prison, Saigon, 1,665 were listed as “Buddhists” and only fifty as “Communists.”¹⁴ These political events set the immediate backdrop for Quang Duc’s self-immolation. After the Hue Massacre, Western reporters in Saigon were made aware of Buddhist plans to escalate the protests through “staged suicides.”¹⁵ The Buddhist community was privy to the fact that their peaceful protests were not impacting the Diem government nor receiving coverage by the international media therefore Quang Duc and his fellow monks began preparing for his self-immolation.

On the day of the immolation, 300 monks blocked the streets surrounding Quang Duc and prevented anyone from interfering with the event.¹⁶ While there was clearly some collaboration between Quang Duc and the Buddhist community, the exact degree of involvement remains unknown. Hanh explains that “Self-immolation usually occurs at a most unexpected moment and is not included in the program of action. No one has the courage to arrange for someone else’s self-immolation. Whenever a person has declared his intention to burn himself the Buddhist Church has appealed to preclude the tragic act. But once such an important decision has come to a man, the authority of the Church is no longer important.”¹⁷ Despite Nhat Hanh’s comments, there is ample evidence (the hints to reporters, gasoline tests by monks, protestors blocking emergency vehicles passage, etc.) to suggest that Quang Duc made others aware of his intentions and was in turn aided by his peers. True, there was no official endorsement of Quang Duc’s self-immolation by the Unified Buddhist Church in Vietnam, but the actions of the Buddhist community in the weeks prior to the event and during suggest an implicit and explicit support of Quang Duc’s act.

Opposing Buddhist Interpretations of Self-Immolation

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11. T.N. Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), 43-45.
 12. S.B. King, “Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church: Nondualism in Action.” In C. Queen & S.B. King (Eds.) *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996): 327.
 13. G. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam*. (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 149.
 14. King (1996), 334.
 15. L. Skow & G. Dionisopoulos, “A Struggle to Contextualize Photographic Images: American Print Media and the ‘Burning Monk.’” *Communication Quarterly* v.45, n.4 (1997): 393.
 16. M. Browne, *Red Socks and Muddy Boots: a reporter’s life*. (NY: Times Books, 1993), 9-10.
 17. Quoted in King (1996): 336.

The central problem arises out of the tension between religious suicide and the Buddhist doctrine of non-violence. How can such a seemingly violent act be reconciled with Buddhist ethics? Hanh begins his defense of such acts by making a clear interpretative distinction: self-immolation is not suicide. Hanh states that “Suicide is an act of self-destruction, having as causes the following: (1) lack of courage to live and to cope with difficulties; (2) defeat by life and loss of all hope; (3) desire for nonexistence (*abhaya*).”¹⁸ The Vietnamese monks who burned themselves did not embody this definition of suicide, according to Hanh, “It was because of life that they acted, not because of death.”¹⁹ In fact, the self-immolations during the Vietnam War were examples of the Buddhist concepts of selflessness and Hanh’s “engaged Buddhism.” Hanh starts from the premise that the first principle of action is to eliminate suffering. Since all things are interconnected and codependent, humans must be able to empathize with both the victim and victimizer. Quang Duc’s, and others, actions “expressed the unconditional willingness to suffer for the awakening of others.”²⁰ Hanh therefore conceives of self-immolations as a sacrifice whereby monks are willing to share in the sufferings of others. Yiin-Hua agreed with Hanh’s assessment stating that self-immolation demonstrates the great acts of selflessness that are elevated in the Buddhist tradition.²¹ It seems that the crux of Hanh’s argument is that the intentions of the monks who sacrifice themselves outweigh or offset the violent nature of the act. This is a familiar notion in Buddhism where merit is gained from the intentions of the person and not the act itself. Thus, it was the selflessness, empathy, and sincerity motivating the monks’ actions that compensated for the violence involved.

Despite the apparent advocacy from Hanh and others, there is a latent recognition that self-immolation is a morally flawed act. Nhat Chi Mai, a lay disciple and friend of Hanh, famously burned herself to death on May 16, 1967. Before her death, she had a conversation with Buddhist Sister Cao Ngoc Phuong, which is recorded in Phuong’s autobiography:

“Mai,... I asked the Executive Council of the Buddhist Church to support eight of us in a fast until death as a prayer for peace. But the Council did not approve, and, without their backing, we knew that our act would be useless.”

“Of course they wouldn’t approve!” she interrupted. “Who would care for your aged mother?”

“I know that I would commit the sin of impiety towards my mother by killing myself, but if my death should help shorten the war and save lives, I would be willing to pay for the sin of impiety in another life.”²²

This exchange shows that there was an open acknowledgment of the demerit accrued by renegeing on one’s social duties. This could be a reflection of the Confucian influence in Vietnam, which stresses filial piety and fulfillment of rigid societal obligations. There appears to be a karmic calculation involved in the decision to kill oneself: if the motivation is selfless and pure, then merit will be gained; on the other hand, one will collect negative karma due to the violence involved and harm caused to others in the community (family obligations, etc.); therefore, one who “willingly

18. Hanh (1967), 107.

19. D. Berrigan & T.H. Hanh, *Raft is Not the Shore: Conversations toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 61.

20. Hanh (1993), 43-45.

21. Yiin-Hua: 250-265.

22. C.N. Phuong (Chan Khong), *Learning True Love: How I Learned and Practiced Social Change in Vietnam*. (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), 96-97.

accepts the negative karma that is due is in fact freed of all negative karmic consequence.”²³ Clearly, there are conscious moral considerations, both positive and negative, involved for Buddhists considering self-immolation.

Although Hahn praises self-immolation in his writings, he is extremely cautious to openly endorse the act or even label it as morally acceptable: “We do not intend to say that self-immolation is good, or that it is bad. It is neither good nor bad. When you say something is good, you say that you should do that. But nobody can urge another to do such a thing.”²⁴ This attitude recognizes the potential ills that may arise from self-immolation abuses. As previously stated, the Unified Buddhist Church never officially endorsed any of the self-immolations in Vietnam, however, Quang Duc’s heart, which supposedly did not burn, was enshrined and treated as a sacred relic.²⁵ There seems to be a disconnect between official Buddhist positions and informal reaction to the self-immolators. The Dalai Lama commenting on the 1998 self-immolation of Thupten Ngodup, who was protesting the brutal Chinese occupation of Tibet, states that the incident was “most unfortunate” and that he has always urged “the Tibetan people to eschew violence.”²⁶ As Sandie King points out, it is not what the Dalai Lama said but what he left unsaid. His statements contain no direct condemnation of the act and no unequivocal decree that others should not follow Ngodup’s example.²⁷

Opinions regarding self-immolation among the Buddhist community vary greatly. Sallie King asked three Southeast Asian Theravada monks, five Thai Buddhist laymen, an American-born Theravada monk living in Thailand, and two Tibetan monks about their feelings concerning the practice of self-immolation.²⁸ Even in this limited sample, a multiplicity of opinions emerged. Of the Southeast Asian Theravada monks two opposed self-immolation and one supported it. Those in opposition cited the first precept prohibiting violence and that the extreme nature of the act furthers division rather than reconciliation. The supporter of self-immolation said it was *dana-paramita*, the perfection of giving, in his words, “the greatest gift is to give a life.”²⁹ The American-born Theravada monk strongly supported self-immolation given the proper intentions. The Thai laymen, although divided in their support, interestingly pointed out that self-immolation is more acceptable in Mahayana Buddhism, which emphasizes the selfless acts of the bodhisattva, than in the Theravada tradition. Neither of the Tibetan monks felt self-immolation was wrong, but expressed that it is an advanced act meant only for a qualified bodhisattva.

Conclusion

As commonly found with other Buddhist issues, there is no unified stance on self-immolation, but rather a variety of opinions, each justifiable in different manners. Some argue that historians should only analyze the Vietnamese self-immolations within the context of the war, where thousands of innocent people were killed daily and the word “shocking” was reserved only for the most unprecedented and obscene cases. The problem is that the self-immolations of Thich Quang Duc, Nhat Chi Mai, and the thirty-five other monks during the Vietnam War were not confined to the extreme circumstances of that specific time and place. My analysis focused on the implications of the original and truly unique death of Thich Quang Duc, but what about those who

23. S.B. King, “They Who Burned Themselves for Peace: Quaker and Buddhist Self-Immolators During the Vietnam War.” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (2000): 10.

24. Berrigan and Hanh, 62.

25. J. Schechter, *The New Face of Buddha: Buddhism and Political Power in Southeast Asia*. (NY: Coward-McCann, 1967), 179.

26. King (2000): 13.

27. *Ibid.*, 13-14.

28. *Ibid.*, 13

29. *Ibid.*

followed his example? What about “the imitators”? With each act of self-immolation that initial shock value decreased. In fact, in my research I could not even find a list of names for all thirty-seven Vietnamese Buddhists who took their own lives in such a disturbing manner. Instead, the same few names appeared over and over in the literature: Thich Quang Duc, the first to commit self-immolation; Nhat Chi Mai, the only woman and layperson; Norman Morrison, the Quaker who burned himself to death in front of the Pentagon in 1965. The frequency of self-immolations even caused Madame Nhu, an influential figure in the Diem regime, to callously refer to the acts as “barbecues.”³⁰

Even more alarming are the self-immolations performed by persons without a “noble cause” or religious background. Many Buddhist leaders in support of self-immolation commented that it is a practice that should be restricted to the most enlightened and learned of men. However, there is no way to prevent or predict the influence that a bodhisattva’s “justified” self-immolation will have on a random person who is, perhaps, not completely sane or easily influenced. In 1996, Kathy Change burned herself to death on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania for no clear reason and was said to have been incoherent at the time.³¹ It would be unfair to assign blame to Thich Quang Duc for this unforeseeable event, but the fact remains that there is a connection between modern self-immolations and those which occurred during the Vietnam War. As Sallie King states, “If the indirect, but inevitable, consequence of a self-immolation is imitation of that act by others of quite varied motivation, then the original self-immolation bears partial karmic responsibility for those imitations.”³² Thich Nhat Hanh’s remarks that self-immolation should not be labeled “good” because that would on some level recommend they act, are unfortunately not reflected in the actions of the Buddhist community at large. Authoritative condemnations of self-immolation are almost non-existent in Buddhism.

The question inevitably arises as to whether the ends justify the means. It is fairly unequivocal that Thich Quang Duc’s self-immolation had powerful effects in Vietnam. The rise of Buddhist activism, the fall of the Diem regime, and an increased international awareness of the suffering occurring in Vietnam can all be linked to Quang Duc’s self-immolation. While these events were incredibly significant, the war situation and correspondent suffering of the Vietnamese people continued to escalate for the next ten years. In other words, I find it difficult to classify self-immolations as entirely effective means for abolishing suffering in Vietnam. My views are of course inextricably bound to the confines of Western thought. I lack the cultural background necessary to fully comprehend the Buddhist perspective on self-immolation. Having acknowledged this fact, I still find the obviously violent act of burning one’s self to death contrary to Buddhist ethics.

30. King (1996): 327.

31. King (2000): 12.

32. Ibid.