

Self-immolation, suicide and self harm in buddhist and western traditions.

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In the west self-immolation (and self mutilation) is conceived of trough the **lens of psychiatry and associated disorders.**

In other cultural settings there is a far greater emphasis on **spiritual, psychological and social factors.**

In Buddhist tradition:

- Actions lacking in compassion towards living beings are understood as being ‘unskilled’.
- Craving for annihilation is ‘unskilled’
- Human death (suicide or not) does not represent and escape of past actions.

BUT

**Generosity** may be a viable reason for self sacrifice in certain circumstances.



ending the suffering of others, bring peace and hapiness to others, eliminate his own attachments to his body, or repay the kindness of ones parents. These are critical factors in determining the ‘appropriateness’ of self-sacrifice. In this sense *both spiritual and political*

In several stories highly spiritually developed people attain ‘Arahat’, (individuals that have extinguished all defilements and afflictions, and that will enter nirvana after death.) as they commit suicide, often trough concious, spontaneous self-immolation .

This is often marked by a disregard for their own death, because it is overshadowed by another priority, such as the Buddha’s teachings or spiritual advancement

Durkheim on suicide

different forms of suicide:

- Egoistic
  - anomic
  - fatalistic
  - altruistic
- obligatory* (Seppuku in Japan. Stomach was considered the seat of emotions, cutting it open is a display of purity)
- optional* (Sati in Hinduism)
- acute* ( for the joy of sacrifice, to be seen as doing something

Up until recently, burning of fingers was not an uncommon practice in Chinese buddhist mon-estaries. In addition to others, this was seen as having spiritual consequences, and yielding material results such as stopping wars or bringing rain.

Interestingly:

In a study in Japan authors related the prevalence of self immolation to a perceived **lack of religious engagement** in Japan

In Buddhism there are clear indications that self harm is not to be undertaken for inconse-quential resons. And in some traditions, especially in India, that it should be interpreted in a metaphorical way. The author also makes a point of articulating the big difference between the buddhist context and -for example- the self immolation of women in Muslim contexts.

My conception of the project I am doing is also very western in its own way. Not because I am so con-cerned with the mental condition these individuals are ‘suffering’ from, but because what is beautiful about this history, the poetry of it, is coming from a very western conception of art and ‘poetics’. A conception that, in my view, is shaped by cannibal-istic neocolonial mass-schizophrenia and express-es itself in (amongst other things) a mass crisis of meaning. Just imagine believing in something so much that you put yourself on fire for it. That is incomprehensible to most people that have been formed by the western context. (that includes me). When talking about this project I have had people very casually tell me that ‘The people that do this are just plainly mad’. Which is a shocking renounci-ation of ones own humanity.

This is not directly connected to the project but the term ‘unskilled’ being used in this way is so beautiful. I have only ever heard this term in the context of labor and productivity. To conceive of a lack of compassion for living things as a mat-ter of ‘lacking in skill’ is utterly correct.

Thinking of self-immolation as an act that can be the most intense expression of generosity possible to a person, can help understand certain cases. It is a bit strange because these individuals are not ‘giving’ anything tangible. If anything they are taking their own body and life. What is generous about it is the transformation from a person/body to an ‘image’. They are offering an object around which to unify. And in the context of protest move-ments unification is power. A fact well known to protesters and governments alike. In cases then where the body is not being offered to a coherent ‘cause’, or a cause around which no unification exists, it can appear more like a matter of person-al liberation or anguish. In this sense it is a very dramatic undertaking plausibly performed for the sake of oneself. I wonder if I should treat/ approach these cases differently. I will certainly lose the plot if I try to hierarchize cases.

I do not believe the nature of self-harm or suicide lies within these categories. It is a surface level observation about the contexts in which people undertake it. What moves people to harm or kill themselves is far beyond the categories we can come up with. Even more so in the case of self-immolation. The power unleashed in such an action does not stem from one or even all of the categories we can invent for it. it is simply *bigger*. More intense, spiritual, theatrical, poetic, violent, generous, ....