Tibetan Self-Immolations:

Sacrifice and the Tibetan Freedom Struggle in Exile, India

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Figure 1: Tashi Norbu, *Self-Immolation*. 

Tibetan Self-Immolations: 
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Abstract

There is an undeniable connection between nationalism and dead bodies. According to Katherine Verdery (1999) dead bodies have enjoyed political life since far back in time. Based on nearly seven months of fieldwork among Tibetans in Dharamsala, India, this thesis concerns the political life of dead bodies in an exile context. It describes and analyzes how self-immolations (the act of setting oneself ablaze), a new form of protest, in Tibet, are understood and made meaningful among exiled Tibetans in Dharamsala. Although potentially immoral as a form of violence and suicide within a Buddhist framework, this thesis shows that the self-immolations are understood as a form of sacrifice and non-violence, and that the self-immolators have the uncontested status of heroes. Building on Michael Lambek’s (2007) theory of sacrifice as a kind of beginning, I propose that the self-immolations can best be understood as an attempt at substantiating a beginning of exile politics, which again carries the potential for changing the present political situation in Tibet.

Moreover, I analyze this special kind of sacrifice within the anthropological framework of “good” and “bad death”, where the self-immolations clearly are made to be a “good” form of death. My central argument is that the perceptions of the self-immolations and the connected practices of commemoration are best analyzed in relation to the nationalist project in exile, which is conditioned by faith in certain values and goals. As a “good death”, the self-immolations can be seen to reinforce the nationalist project in exile, and to ensure a continuity of the Tibetan freedom struggle and certain values.
Acknowledgements

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Anthropology is the sort of discipline that involves personal as well as professional commitments. You cannot be an anthropologist without these. Our commitments are to peoples and places in good times and in bad, and to knowing and thinking hard about systems and structures and sentiments. Our commitments are to making sense of the frustrations, the possibilities, the unknowns.


"Don’t get emotional. Keep an objective distance. These international journalists get too emotional”.

The historian Tashi Tsering’s advice to me.
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“To whom do the dead belong?”

Introduction

This was just any other day. I began the early morning walk from my Tibetan Ama-la’s (mother’s) house to the Boudhanath Stupa,1 before beginning my day at the Tibetan language school. The sky was blue and the air felt light. The summer mornings at Boudha were comfortable until the midday heat swept over the Kathmandu Valley. School children with square backpacks – too heavy for their tiny bodies – were on their way to school. As I was approaching the Stupa I ran into Pamela, an elderly Australian lady who was one of my schoolmates. She decided to join me for my daily morning kora.2 We began chatting about the beautiful morning weather. The Nepali and Tibetan ladies were, as usual, seated along the narrow street leading to the Stupa, selling butter lamps to be offered there. As I passed them I could feel the heat from the lamps trying to embrace me. Watching the little flames of the lamps was so peaceful that I, as always, could not turn my glance back to the street.

As we continued a few steps further, my entire body suddenly trembled from the sound of a loud and penetrating scream coming from the Stupa. I was not sure whether I wanted to continue, but my body still carried on. Pamela came running down, but then ran back up, terrified by whatever she might have witnessed. “I can’t watch this”, she said, her voice trembling as she threw me a quick glance and ran back up the street. I continued walking, quite alarmed, and the first thing that caught my glance on seeing the Stupa, was a Western woman, screaming from its top. Shifting my glance to the left, my mind turned completely still as, in the midst of the chaotic scene, I saw flames emerging from the Stupa. In a state of shock I slowly moved to the side, staring at the flames and what I understood was a self-immolation. A huge crowd was gathered in front of me and on the top of the Stupa. Some were taking photos. Not a single sound was to be heard from the person on fire. We who stood outside the Stupa were spared the sight of his body on fire. A few Tibetans continued with their kora. One of them, an elderly man, was shaking his head either in anger or disappointment.

Within a few minutes people managed to extinguish the flames and several took out their cell phones to take a photo. Others ran inside the Stupa and climbed to the top to see the person’s charred body. A few hours later, these photos were shared online. Soon the crowd began moving in different directions and so did I, to do kora and pray for yet another Tibetan who just had self-immolated and died. The kora, which at this hour of the day would usually be filled with throngs of people, was now quite empty. As I approached the spot

1 Tibetans see the Stupa as the figuration of the Buddha’s body, speech and mind (Levenson and Hamani 2003, p. 28). Walking around a Stupa – known as kora – is practiced to purify negative karma and gain merit. The Boudhanath Stupa is one of the holiest places for Tibetan Buddhists in Nepal.
2 Ritual circumambulation.
where the last self-immolation had taken place in March, a group of armed Nepali policemen came running and seized the dead body, just as they had done at the last self-immolation in February 2013. Soon they left, taking with them the self-immolator’s corpse. I continued my kora, and was soon joined by more Tibetans. Everything seemed to be back to normal, without the slightest trace of the terrible incident of 15 minutes ago. The world carried on as usual.

Figure 2: The Boudhanath Stupa. The self-immolation took place inside the white wall, approximately at the spot where the multi-colored prayer flags can be seen on the left.

The above scene describes the self-immolation of Karma Ngedon Gyatso on August 6, 2013. A self-immolation is the act of setting oneself on fire, with the intention of dying. To self-immolate involves dousing one's body with kerosene or petrol, in some cases swallowing the liquid, and then lighting a match and setting oneself on fire (McGranahan, 2013).

Karma Ngedon Gyatso was a thirty-year old monk. Before becoming the 127th Tibetan self-immolator, he bought butter lamps, paying 1500 rupees (ICT). Unlike some of the other self-immolators, he did not leave any message behind. In exile, the self-immolations are generally understood as a political protest against the Chinese occupation. When this incident took place, I was in Kathmandu to learn Tibetan to prepare for my fieldwork in Dharamsala on the perception of self-immolations among exile Tibetans. After witnessing one, I became even more determined to carry out this project.

This thesis is about a special type of sacrifice and the Tibetan freedom struggle in exile. The self-immolations are understood by exile Tibetans as a form of sacrifice, non-violent in its nature, and the self-immolators have the uncontested status of heroes. However, when the first self-immolation took place in 1998 in New Delhi, and later when the wave of self-immolations in Tibet started in 2011, the opinions were more diversified. A new form of protest, Tibetans did not know how to make sense of such drastic acts. The self-immolations raised many questions,

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3 [http://www.savetibet.org/dismay-over-hasty-secret-cremation-of-tibetan-monk-who-self-immolated-in-nepal/](http://www.savetibet.org/dismay-over-hasty-secret-cremation-of-tibetan-monk-who-self-immolated-in-nepal/) (acc.29.06.2015). The authorities cremated him at night the same day, without Buddhist rituals. His name was Drupchen Tsering and he self-immolated on February 13 – the third day of the Tibetan New Year (losar), also celebrated in exile for the first time as Tibetan Independence Day (chapter 5).

4 Taken from a talk on the self-immolations at Yale University in December 2013: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDLqEVMu7WY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDLqEVMu7WY) (acc.29.06.2015).

one of the most often discussed issues, by both Tibetans and the international media, was whether the self-immolations could be said to be an accepted form of protest within a Buddhist moral framework, where killing oneself is regarded as a great sin. This raised another related question; whether setting oneself ablaze was in accordance with the non-violent approach of the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama had earlier even been critical of hunger strike as a form of protest in the Tibetan freedom struggle, defining this as a form of violence. However, as the self-immolations have continued inside and outside Tibet's borders, these questions are only seldom heard among exile Tibetans, and the self-immolations are perceived and talked about as a form of non-violent sacrifice.

Based on fieldwork among Tibetans living in exile in Dharamsala, north India, I explore why this has come to stand as the dominant understanding, and how the self-immolations are made meaningful as a sacrifice. My central argument is that it is vital to contextualize these actions within the political project in exile. Applying Michael Lambek's (2007) understanding of sacrifice 'as a kind of beginning', I suggest that the self-immolations can be viewed by exile Tibetans as an attempt at substantiating a new kind of beginning. For exile Tibetans, this beginning, I hold, should be seen as a potential for changing the present political situation in Tibet. Lambek further argues that self-sacrifice stands in contrast to the classic gift (Mauss, 2002; [1902]) because reciprocity is not possible in the former. It is a 'first' gift which can be neither cancelled nor returned. Thus, he holds, the only choice is to honor it (Lambek, 2007, p. 29). This applies to the self-immolations, too, and I argue that the relationship between the self-immolators (the dead) and those left behind (the living) is invested with morality. The memory of the self-immolations as a sacrifice creates an active, moral relationship in which those alive are in debt to the former. I will show that in the exile context, the way the self-immolations are remembered and the relation between the dead and the living, is deeply influenced by the nationalist discourses defined by central political actors: the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) and the NGOs. These, I will argue, are engaged in a power struggle to define the aims of the self-immolators. Hence, this thesis concerns the dominating narratives of the self-immolations as constructed by exile Tibetans, or, using Katherine Verdery's expression, it is a thesis about "the political lives of dead bodies" (1999 [2004]).

Building upon Verdery's perspective Charlene Makley (2012) has also explored the political lives of dead bodies of the self-immolators, however, within the context of People's Republic of China (PRC). She regards the self-immolations as a form of "mass media", called forth by severe state repression and dispossession on the one hand, and both PRC state and foreign media spectacles on the other. Makley considers the self-immolations to be "primarily situated forms of communication", telling us something about the "tragic intensification" of political lives.

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of dead bodies in certain regions from 2009 when the first self-immolation took place in Tibet. While Makley’s article concerns the political life of dead bodies of the self-immolators post 2009, and of others who died as a result of the violent crackdowns in Tibet in 2008, as well as exploring what these deaths communicate, I turn my focus not so much towards what the self-immolations communicate, but rather their interpretations among Tibetans in Dharamsala, India.

**Clarification of the terms “Tibet” and “Tibetans”**

Robert Barnett introduces three dominating conceptions of Tibet (Tibetan: Pö): one recognized by the People’s Republic of China (PRC), referred to as the “Tibetan Autonomous Region” (TAR), equivalent to the area ruled by the Dalai Lamas until 1950, a second referring to a vast area with a common cultural and historic heritage throughout the Tibetan plateau; and a third which implies one single political entity (Barnett, 2014, p. xix). The latter is composed of U-Tsang (TAR), Amdo (Qinghai, parts of Gansu and Sichuan) and Kham (parts of Sichuan and, a corner of Yunnan), and is commonly known as “Pö Chö(l)kha Sum”, meaning three regions of Tibet (Shakya, 1993, p. 13). Today, Tibetans from these three regions are regarded as one ethnic group, on the basis of which national identity is asserted (Tibet.net). In exile, the term “Tibetans” (pöpa), as promoted by Central Tibetan Administration or NGOs, refers to one unified, homogenous group, which blurs local and regional identities (Korom, 1997; McGranahan, 2005, p. 573), and I also use the term in this way. I use “Tibet” to refer to the three regions.

**Nationalism and dead bodies**

The theoretical framework of this thesis is the connection between nationalism and dead bodies. I explore the Tibetan nationalist discourse in Dharamsala by focusing on the perceptions and practices surrounding the self-immolations. Thomas Hylland Eriksen writes, “death is often important in nationalist symbolism: individuals who have died in war are depicted as martyrs who died in defense of their nation” (2010, pp. 129-130). Giving up their lives is possible because nations inspire love, “and often profoundly self-sacrificing love”, as Benedict Anderson (1983, p. 141) has argued. Further, Anderson points out that this love is clearly visible in nationalism’s cultural products, such as poetry, art or music, which it certainly is in the Tibetan case.

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7 Makley has published a more elaborate article on the political lives of the self-immolators more recently (August 2015), but unfortunately due to time limitation I have not been able to incorporate it here.

8 A similar distinction is between “political” Tibet, which is the historical Tibet ruled by the Dalai Lama, equivalent to today’s TAR, and “ethnographic” Tibet, which includes also the Tibetan regions of Amdo and Kham (Goldstein & Kapstein, 1998).

9 However, despite this, regional identities continue to have a practical and symbolic importance (McGranahan, 2010, p. 17), something I also found.

10 This is evident also in the Tibetan nationalism expressed in exile, for instance by poets and writers Lhasang Tsering (2012) or Bhuchong D. Sonam (2012), or by artists such as Karma Sichoe, Tashi Norbu or Tenzing Rigidol.
In her book *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, Verdery (1999) has discussed the connection between nationalism and dead bodies in more detail, arguing that dead bodies have enjoyed “political lives” since the ancient past. She points to the connection between nationalism and dead bodies in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where, following communism’s fall, dead bodies became central in the project of nation building. Choosing a specific number of dead was a way of creating collective identities, as well as rewriting history and shaping the future. Today, I will show, the Tibetan self-immolators occupy a similar role in the exile community, i.e. as a national symbol of resistance and as a metaphor for the political situation inside Tibet, a situation often expressed as, “Burning Tibet” (chapter 3).

In other words, there is an undeniable connection between nationalism and dead bodies, particularly visible in the Tibetan case since the wave of self-immolations in recent years has resulted in many deaths, transformed into symbols of Tibetan nationalism. Following Benedict Anderson I understand nationalism as a “cultural artefact” (1983, p. 4). Nationalism, he argued, should be treated as if it belongs to “kinship” and “religion”, rather than political ideologies (1983, p. 5). Because nationalism is based on indicators of common origin or ethnicity such as appearance, color, language or religion (Horowitz, 1985, p. 17), it evokes intense emotions and sentiments, whereby “the nation is created as an object of devotion” (Kapferer, 1998, p. 1). By focusing upon nationalism as a form of kinship, we will also be better equipped to understand “the force and persistence of national identification and sentiment” (Eriksen’s reading of Anderson, in Eriksen, 2010, p. 120).

To provide a working definition of nationalism, I follow Verdery who, building on Anderson’s suggestion, understands nationalism as a kind of ancestor worship, “a system of patrilineal kinship, in which national heroes occupy the place of clan elders in defining a nation as a noble lineage” (1999, p. 41). Nationalist discourses are filled by kinship metaphors, she argues, such as “fatherland” or “motherland”. Thus, Tibet is commonly referred to as *phayul* (“fatherland”). For followers of nationalism, members of the same nation are also imagined as one’s brothers and sisters (Verdery 1999, p. 41). The nun Sangay Dolma who self-immolated on November 25, 2012 in Rebkong, Amdo, applied these kinship metaphors in her last message: “Look, my Tibetan brothers and sisters, look at the land of snow, our destiny is on the rise”. In the last lines of her message she refers to Tibetans as “children of the snow lion”, another name for Tibet.11

Tibetan nationalism has above all grown and flourished in exile (Sharling, 2013; Anand 2000). Houston and Wright (2003, p. 219) point out that Tibetan nationalism stems from the Chinese occupation which caused exile. However, the present nationalist discourse in exile is, I argue, tightly interwoven not only with the Tibetan diaspora, but also with Tibetan Buddhism.

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Buddhism: from proto-nationalism to nationalism

Religion and politics are impossible to separate in the Tibetan case. I argue that the particular form that the Tibetan nationalist discourse has taken today is conditioned by Buddhism with the Dalai Lama in the forefront, and with compassion and non-violence as its core values. The Dalai Lama is the reincarnation of Tibet’s protector deity, Avalokiteshvara (the Bodhisattva of compassion, called Chenrezig in Tibetan), and is thus the highest spiritual leader of the Tibetan people and the central symbol of the Tibetan nation (Kolås, 1996, p. 64). Buddhism is thus regarded by most Tibetans as the basis on which national identity is asserted in both exile and inside Tibet. Although the majority of exile Tibetans are not devoted Buddhists, the Dalai Lama’s faith in values grounded in Buddhist ethics, despite being contested, dominates the exile community.

Nevertheless, I do not regard the emphasis on Tibet as a Buddhist land as a modern creation only. Prior to the Chinese invasion, Buddhism was the main reason for Tibetans identifying themselves with the “pure land surrounded by snow mountains” (Dreyfus, 2002, p. 39; 1994), at a time when the full-blown Tibetan national identity, taking shape from the late 1950s, had not yet emerged. As mentioned the “Land of Snows” invoked a larger, cultural Tibet, and not a politico-national entity (Barnett, 2014, p. xlii).

George Dreyfus (1994; 2002), argues that there has been, a form of proto-nationalism, at least in Central Tibet, since the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, involving a perception of belonging to a distinct country. This proto-nationalism was based on the idea of Tibet as a barbarian land that was civilized into a Buddhist country, a transformation in which Avalokiteshvara occupied a central role through the manifestations as kings who introduced Buddhism, and for that reason, the emphasis on Buddhism in today’s nationalist discourse cannot be dismissed as a modern creation only. Tsering Shakya lends support to Dreyfus’ argument when writing that when opposing Chinese rule, even at a time when the idea of an independent Tibet was non-existent, Tibetans mobilized in the name of faith (1993, p. 10). Dreyfus’ argument also points the central role of the current Dalai Lama in the development of a full-blown nationalism taking shape from the late 1950s.

Despite the continuity of the Buddhist tradition, that does not, however, mean that it remains unchanged, or that Buddhist ethics are not reinterpreted in accordance with the present social and political context. Compassion and non-violence, the two core values in today’s nationalist discourse, became prominent after the coming into existence of a Tibetan exile

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12 Here I will not engage in the discussion about “religious” and “secular” nationalism. My aim is primarily to shed some light on the Dalai Lama’s central role in the development of a Tibetan national identity.

13 Not only in exile, but also inside Tibet, as shown by certain religious teachers’ emphasis on vegetarianism in Kham and Amdo (Buffetrille, 2014).

14 The 5th and the 13th Dalai Lama, who took up military force against intruders, exemplify that non-violence has not always been a dominant value in Buddhism as practiced in Tibet (Sperling, 2001) and that Buddhist ethics are open for interpretations.
community, and were reinforced after the Dalai Lama received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 (Houston and Wright, 2003, p. 1), for his "consistent resistance to the use of violence in his people's struggle to regain their liberty" (Nobelprize.org).15

This thesis will explore how Tibetan nationalism finds expression in the local context of the exile community in Dharamsala (McLeod Ganj) by focusing on diaspora, values, commemorative practices, and the political lives of dead bodies. The understanding and meanings of the self-immolations, as well as commemorative practices for the self-immolators bring to fore certain values and, can tell us something about nationalism among exile Tibetans. A focus on dead bodies will also show that nationalism, although having homogeneity as one of its aims (Wade, 2001, p. 853), is not one single thing, but rather something which is contested.

To explore the connection between nationalism and dead bodies, I intend to analyze the self-immolations within the framework of anthropology of "good" and "bad death". In order to understand why the self-immolations have become a part of the nationalist discourse in exile, we need to look at why and how the self-immolations are made into a culturally meaningful death, and further how this affects relations between the living and the dead. I take the concept of "good" and "bad death" as another way of studying Tibetan nationalism, because the ideas of "good" and "bad death" are never given, but are negotiated and guided by the ideology and concerns of the living. Framing the self-immolations in the context of "good" and "bad death" will also help us to understand the self-immolations from a larger perspective, where nationalism is not only about politics, but is also a source of meaning and hope. Verdery argues that our understanding of the political dimension has become too narrow and flat, as a result of having been too exclusively guided by rational theory. She insists on “enchanting” our understanding of politics, meaning enlivening or enriching it. Inspired by Verdery’s (broad) understanding of politics (1999, p. 26-27), I suggest that in the exile Tibetan case the politics of dead bodies is not only about rational political strategies, it is also about the wider existential concerns of healing and creating hope.

**Anthropology of death: “good” and “bad death”**

The anthropology of death is not a vast field. Among the first studies addressing the topic of death were those carried out by E.B. Tylor and James Frazer who approached the issue primarily in relation to the origin of religion and the continuous unfolding of culture (Palgi and Abramovitch, 1984, p. 387). Durkheim challenged their evolutionary perspectives with his study of suicide, where, he argued that beliefs and ideas of death are far more complicated, showing how “collective representations” unite and simultaneously specify the separate identities of individuals (Metcalf and Huntington, 1992, p. 29). Durkheim made a lasting contribution to the anthropology of death by pointing out that grief experienced at the death of a fellow human

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being is expressed “collectively in culturally prescribed ways of mourning” (Robben, 2004, p. 7). Later, Robert Hertz, a student of Durkheim, carried out the first elaborate anthropological study of death rituals (Hertz, 1905, translated in 1960 by Rodney and Claudia Needham), drawing his material largely from Indonesia and focusing upon secondary death rituals.

Like Durkheim, Hertz studied the social ramifications of death, in which he paid specific attention to the moral obligations of the living towards the body of the deceased. For Hertz, “death has a specific meaning for social consciousness; it is the object of a collective representation” (1960, p. 28). Further, Hertz suggested that death cannot merely be viewed as an ending of an individual’s life, but rather is a “social event and the beginning of a ceremonial process by which the dead person becomes an ancestor” (Kaufman and Morgan, 2005, p. 323); death is thus understood as a transition (Abramovitch, n.d.).

Hertz’ study became highly influential, being, as Metcalf and Huntington argue, “a forerunner of the modern tradition of social anthropology” (1992, p. 34). Hertz showed that the meaning of facts lies in their interrelation, and not separately in themselves, and as Evans-Pritchard pointed out, it is revealing these interrelations that is the art of anthropology (1960, p. 15). Hertz made the double disposal of the dead meaningful by showing its relation to beliefs about ghosts and to the rules of mourning. As I will also attempt to show throughout this thesis, the understanding of self-immolations and the way these actions are made meaningful has to be comprehended in relation to a range of past and present social and political factors in Tibet and in exile.

An important contribution, influenced by Hertz’ work, was made by the volume edited by Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, Death and the Regeneration of Life (1982a). The book discusses many prominent themes in the anthropology of death, the most important one for me in the present context being that of “good” and “bad death”.

The idea of “good” as well as “bad death” is present all over the world, even though these categories can only become meaningful with reference to the ideological orientation of a society. Hence, the categories of “good” and “bad” change in accordance with the ideological orientations or concerns of the living, something that, according to Bloch and Parry (1982b), is due to death’s ambiguity. Similarly, Verdery (1999) holds that the prerequisite for incorporating the dead into society is that they are ambiguous, i.e. they do not have one single meaning, but are open to various interpretations. Verdery’s insight plays a crucial role in this thesis.

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17 Despite the strengths of Hertz’ analysis, it is also flawed in several ways, as pointed out by Metcalf and Huntington (1991), for example by his attempt to try to cover many human activities, such as the symbolic, the social, the pragmatic and the emotional (1991, p. 36), with “limited and secondhand data” (1991, p. 37). Still, Hertz’ study stands as one of the most original analyses on death from the 20th century, and his remarks on how our attitudes towards death are socially determined, continue to be the cornerstone of ethnographic analyses (Palgi and Abramovitch, 1984, p. 389).
Bloch and Parry define "good death" as a type of death which "suggests some degree of mastery over the arbitrariness of the biological occurrence..." (1982b, p. 15), while a "bad death" involves a lack of control, such as suicide, homicide, or sudden or unexpected death (Bloch and Parry, 1982b, pp. 15-17; see also Abramovitch, n.d.). In the literature on the anthropology of death, sacrifice is everywhere classified as a "good death", sometimes as the best of deaths (Parry, 1994, 1982 [2004]; Malik, 1999). Sacrifice is described as a death from which the living (and the dead) have the potential for accumulating resources, blessings, prosperity for the community etc.

What constitutes a "good death" for a Hindu (Parry, 2004) is not the same for the Chukchi in Siberia (Willerslev, 2009) or the Wari in the Brazilian rain forest (Conklin, 2004). Further, Bloch and Parry suggest that a "good death" is a death that ensures the regeneration of life; it's a life-giving death (1982b). In his study of the devastating consequences of the Vietnam War, Heonik Kwon, makes a similar point, arguing that a "good death" ensures the regeneration of life by reinforcing corporate solidarity and revitalizing historical continuity (2006, p. 14), in others words, bringing "a renewal of the world of the living" (Bloch and Parry, 1982b, p. 16). I will explore how Tibetans in exile have attempted to ensure this. While a "good death" can be understood as a beginning, in the sense of a regeneration of life (Schömbucher, 1999; Simpson, 2001; Willerslev, 2009) through which the dead person becomes an ancestor (Palgi and Abramovitch, 1984, p. 388 [Hertz 1960]), a "bad death" in most cases implies an ending, leaving the survivors in despair and hopelessness. Death rituals or commemorations play an important part in "transforming death into fertility" (Bloch and Parry, 1982b), and helping the living with handling death and creating meaning. Such practices are also very important in the aftermath of a self-immolation, which will be dealt with in chapter 4.

With his work from two Vietnamese communities where the Vietnam War resulted in "bad deaths" on a grand scale, bringing disturbance in the traditional Vietnamese cosmology, Kwon also makes visible the mutable connection between the living and the dead, and the differing implications "good" and "bad deaths" have on this connection. He also exemplifies that the meaning of "good" and "bad death" is guided by the (present) ideological orientations, controlled by the Vietnamese state. In Kwon's study, dead bodies are an important vehicle for rewriting the past and shaping the future. In Verdery's work, the dead have the same significance, the raising and tearing down of statues and holding political reburials of selected dead bodies being a means to rewrite history and shape the future. Both Kwon's and Verdery's ethnographic work bring to fore the relevance of dead bodies in the creation of social history, collective identities, and national consciousness.

In this thesis I attempt to explore how these insights can be applied to the Tibetan self-immolators. Both works are of particular importance for my thesis as they illustrate how beliefs around death are not only about "culture" or religion, but are also conditioned by political and
In addition, they exemplify how local traditions interact with a wider global context. I shall attempt to move in this direction, and away from the traditional anthropological approaches to death, where the universal phenomenon of death was analyzed holistically only in relation to the religious beliefs of the local community. This approach was criticized by Johannes Fabian (1972) as the anthropological study of “how others die” and an exoticization of death, as well as a process of parochialization, contributing to the anthropological discipline losing its potential for exploring the universal phenomenon of death. In the same way, Robben (2004) writes that this (parochialization) is a result of anthropologists’ hesitation to make generalizations or all-encompassing theories. According to Palgi and Abramovitch (1984, p. 385) this has left the discipline bereft of a theoretical dimension. They, too, called for anthropological approaches which move beyond the “local”, and attempt to understand the phenomenon of death from a larger perspective than that of isolated “cultural” beliefs. This thesis is an attempt at following their advice. Understanding a highly political subject such as the self-immolations in relation to religious or cultural beliefs only, is a narrow view. These acts have to be explored in relation to the current social and political situation in exile as well as in Tibet. In addition, understanding the notion of sacrificing one’s life for the nation in the local context of Dharamsala has to be understood in the perspective of how the “local” context interacts with the “global”. The theoretical framework of nationalism and dead bodies is an attempt at bringing this to the fore.

**Methodological considerations**

This thesis is primarily based on fieldwork among Tibetans in McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, as well as short visits to other places in India along with my interlocutors, and a couple of final weeks in Choklamsar in Ladakh. I arrived in McLeod Ganj on January 3, 2014 and stayed here until June 25, 2014. On June 25 I left for Ladakh together with Gu-chu-sum, an organization I had spent much time with. My purpose was to work with them during the Kalachakra festival, a huge Buddhist festival, presided over by the Dalai Lama. We arrived in Choklamsar, Ladakh, on 28 June, and I left Ladakh for Norway on July 19.

For me the anthropological fieldwork was not merely a methodology for collecting data, but also a personal journey, during which I expanded my understanding of what it means to be a human. This understanding grew through daily interaction with many different kinds of people. Engaging in their daily life and listening to their stories as well as sharing my own, I was able to take part in their “life-worlds” (Wikan, 2012), as well as understand the social and political life

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18 Other recent studies on death and life apply a similar approach, see Lock (2002), Lee and Vaughan (2008) and; Simpson (2001).

19 I am aware that ideas of the “local” and the “global”, especially during the time of globalization which renders our traditional concept of boundaries and scales problematic, have been a much discussed topic in anthropology, for example by Ferguson and Gupta (1997).
in McLeod Ganj. Because of a dialectic engagement between myself and the people with whom I spent my time, I refer to them as “interlocutors”, rather than “informants”, to emphasize their active part in our relationship. In the following I will outline how I slowly became part of the McLeod Ganj landscape, and describe how I engaged in people’s lives and they in mine.

During the entire fieldwork I lived by myself, in a series of rented room. Though many anthropologists recommended living with a family during fieldwork, I do not regard having lived by myself as a disadvantage. As I will show, I spent the greater part of my day in the company of many different people. For this reason, I consider having lived on my own as a good thing since I had greater freedom to make appointments with others or just join someone for dinner if I wished.

Volunteering with NGOs

As a fresh fieldworker, I found it hard to know when my fieldwork actually began. Getting started meant forming acquaintances with different kinds of people. I planned to do this by volunteering to work with different NGOs, involved in political, social and educational work. Since NGOs are numerous in McLeod Ganj, volunteering presented a great opportunity for meeting Tibetans from various backgrounds. One of the NGOs I contacted was Lha, which provides language courses to Tibetan refugees, the majority of the students having been born inside Tibet. At Lha, I began as an “English-conversationist” as well as teaching basic English to two monks in their early 30s, both born inside Tibet, for two hours daily from January to April. Working with them, I gained monks’ perspectives on the self-immolations. Prior to my fieldwork, I had assumed that monastics held different opinions on the subject in contrast to lay people, but I rather found out that their opinions converged to a large degree. Spending time with these two monks, I also acquired knowledge on their early life in Tibet (Kham), and their experiences of living in India versus Tibet, among other things.

Another NGO I spent time with, was Students for a Free Tibet (SFT), a politically active NGO, where the majority of the professional activists are young men and women born in India. At the SFT office I could spend time with professional activists, which gave me access to participate in the various social and political campaigns and activities they organized. The most important of these were the candle light vigils which SFT organized in collaboration with other NGOs after a self-immolation. I also had contact with some professional activists from Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), the most politically controversial NGO, with whom I also conducted interviews.

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20 Such as “political activists”, “monastics”, “laypeople”, “politicians (members of the CTA)” – all of them including both Tibetans born inside Tibet and Tibetans born in exile. These categories are not rigid and were merely intended to help me sort out the great social complexity in McLeod Ganj.

21 Meaning having activism as a full-time job.
A third NGO I had contact with, was, Gu-chu-sum, an association for former political prisoners and their families. Here I was offered the task of having English conversations two hours daily, from mid-January until I left Dharamsala, with a group of seven students: three girls and four boys, who were all born in Tibet, and had lived in India for four to six years. They all lived in the Gu-chu-sum building. This came to be the NGO I would stay with during my entire fieldwork and the one where I would form the closest friendships, among the students as well as the staff. Through Gu-chu-sum, I became acquainted with Tibetans from many different backgrounds, both born in India and Tibet, people who had lived in India for a long time, and short time. Some were politically active, others were not. The most valuable of my experiences from Gu-chu-sum was that of getting to know the students and some of the staff members personally, spending much time with them, also “backstage”.

By mid-January, I had three main arenas in which to interact with people of various backgrounds, ranging from the age of 19 to about 45 and representing a mix of people born in Tibet as well as in exile. As Geertz (1976) established, ethnographic understanding is situated, thus subjectivity is unavoidable. For that reason, staying in contact with people from different backgrounds was for me an important technique for working towards achieving “objectivity” (Stewart, 1998, pp. 31-47), in order to obtain views on different subjects through multiple perspectives and thus, “transcend” both mine own, as well as my individual interlocutor’s orientation. For Stewart, “objectivity” is about being alert, keeping an open mind, being receptive to the view of others or showing empathy. To work towards the goal of objectivity, one has to strive to transcend not only one’s own perspectives, but also of one’s “informants” (1998, p. 16), an advice I attempted to practice.

**Engagement (participant observation)**

Having settled into a daily schedule, I let the surroundings and people take charge. I learned from my early encounters that the issue of self-immolation is considered sensitive, hence it was important for me never to impose this topic on people. In fact, often the topic was met with silence. The act itself is so drastic that most people do not know what to say. Moreover, I regarded it as vital to get to know my interlocutors’ personal stories and understand their daily and more general concerns, and let them be in charge of how the issue of the self-immolations was raised. Finally, taking part in people’s daily activities and listening to whatever they talked about, was a way of engaging in their lives and have good participative relations (Stewart, 1998, p. 22) with my interlocutors.

Engaging with various people involved different activities. With the students from Gu-chu-sum for example, it involved letting them choose what they wanted to talk about during language classes, which could be anything from the Tibetan yak to development and education. It also involved going on walks with some of them, usually to the circumambulation path
(korlam) and the Tsuglagkhang complex, or playing badminton, or occasionally preparing thukpa (Tibetan noodle soup) in the Gu-chu-sum kitchen on Sundays. Engagement with SFT mainly involved spending time at their office, watching the activists work and converse with them, or helping with simple practical preparations for various campaigns and participating in them, such as the candle light vigils.

Besides my daily engagement in various NGOs, I also began interviewing members of CTA toward the end of February. Conducting formal interviews was the only possible way of getting their perspective on the self-immolations and other subjects.

After having been in Dharamsala for about a month, I had become acquainted with many Tibetans, spending time in their company and some gradually becoming good friends.

I came to know many Tibetans through the snowball method, and then made an effort to stay in touch with some of them over time. Most of them were male, born inside Tibet, while a few were born and raised in exile, in India, ranging from the age of 26 to 35. As a female, it was easy for me to get in touch with men and some of them became good friends. In addition, I also kept in touch with some tourists over some months, and a few local Indians in the last month of my fieldwork.

It was important for me to stay in touch with people who were not involved with NGOs, the CTA or any kind of organized political work, in order to gain a different perspective on various topics, though many of them certainly had strong political opinions. This also enabled me to check and possibly correct my own observations of social life and politics in McLeod Ganj. Thus, one could also call this “respondent validation” (Stewart, 1998, p. 37; Moen and Middelthon, 2015) to work towards the goal of objectivity, although in my case it did not involve written feedback, but rather oral response through open conversations and interviews. It was also crucial to test the veracity or “truthfulness” of my findings because as a researcher one does make errors of interpretation or things can pass by unnoticed (Stewart, 1998, p. 19).

Hanging out in cafés, conversing and spending time with my neighbors, and doing kora on a daily basis, were ways I interacted with people, as well as simply observing them, both Tibetans and tourists.

**Techniques of data collection**

I applied specific fieldwork techniques such as the use of interviews, collecting short life histories (Mintz, 1979) of a few people, observing different events which took place in the community, and reading online blogs, newspapers and webpages of CTA and various NGOs to follow their activities, and also gathered other types of relevant documentation. Following Stewart’s (1998) advice, I chose to apply multiple modes of data collection to ensure veracity, as well as to have a comprehensive data account, in order to work towards objectivity. Both veracity and objectivity are necessary to achieve the goal of perspicacity, i.e. generating insights.
that might be applicable to other times and places (Stewart, 1998, p. 47; Moen and Middelthon 2015).

Interviews

I asked to conduct interviews with everyone I knew, including tourists and the local Indians in addition to the Tibetans. Many of these interviews, became either semi-structured or informal conversations. I used interviews simply because it was a valuable method for collecting people’s opinions about the self-immolations and other issues. I continued doing this from February until the end of my stay. I had developed an interview guide in advance which I followed with most people, but as I came to know of other issues in the community through conversations with people or by coming across them on news pages or blogs, I added new questions. I did not follow the interview guide strictly with everyone, apart from the CTA members. It was therefore possible to ask some uncomfortable questions or formulate them differently with people I was well acquainted with, and who felt they could trust me.

When I asked about the self-immolations, I always began by asking the following open question, “How would you describe these acts?” Some interlocutors referred to the self-immolations as either a sacrifice or a non-violent act, or both, in the first sentences of their answers, while others did not. I therefore asked the latter further questions about the sacrificial and non-violent nature of the self-immolations. The answer was usually an immediate “Yes” or “Definitely”, while some who were in doubt, contemplated for a moment before answering.

The interviews usually lasted from forty-five minutes to one and a half hour. I recorded the interviews because of their long duration and also because I did not want to risk misquoting people on these very sensitive issues. The use of an audio recorder was, however, a disadvantage in some cases, for example with activists from SFT who were very careful about expressing their opinions about certain sensitive political issues. I discovered that one professional activist from TYC, though rather outspoken compared to the SFT members, told me many unexpected things when I turned off the audio recorder. Some laypeople, not engaged with the CTA or the NGOs, were not affected by the use of the recorder, while others were. The latter also talked about more sensitive issues once the audio recorder was turned off. I therefore began to let people continue talking after the interview if they wished, and took notes in my notebook.

Because they are living in an English-speaking country, most Tibetans in India can speak good English, so I conducted most of the interviews in English. In the case of a few Tibetans who spoke very poor English, I had to use interpreters. The interpreters were a young woman and a man, both in their late 20s.

Throughout this thesis, I place direct quotes within quotation marks. In places where I have separated long quotes from the main text, I have always transcribed them from recordings.

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22 In total I conducted interviews with 30 Tibetans, four “Western” tourists (of which two were written feedback by email due to their time constraints), and finally, six local Indian residents.
My own position
During my fieldwork, I did not form close relationships with everyone, such as the activists from SFT, while I had no difficulty in getting close to the Gu-chu-sum students as well as laypeople around town.

The Gu-chu-sum students and other Tibetans I knew did not regard me as a researcher, although from time to time they would ask about how my research was going, or I would share my findings with them. I interacted with them, in a casual way, like their other friends, nor did I impose questions on them, and after some time, especially with the Gu-chu-sum students, I became a part of their daily lives. We also interacted inside the Gu-chu-sum building, which was their “home” at that time. It was the place they ate, studied and slept.

Something I regard as an advantage in my engagement with Tibetans in McLeod Ganj is my Indian background. Though I was a foreigner, people did not regard me as an inji (a word used for referring to people from “Western” countries). Somehow, I stood closer to the Tibetans than the injis. The Tibetan world, with all its religious rituals and prayers, was neither strange nor unfamiliar to me since due to my Indian background, I have been brought up in a similar environment. The open and warm Tibetan hospitality was also very Indian-like, so being with Tibetans was for me very similar to being in an Indian environment.

Limitations and challenges
The biggest challenge I faced was language, since I could not communicate with people well enough in Tibetan. Before I began my master’s degree in autumn 2013, I had studied Tibetan for two months in Kathmandu. However, in Dharamsala, most of the people I spent my time with could communicate in English, which they spoke from "well" to "good enough".

Despite not being able to communicate with people in Tibetan, I do not believe that this hindered us in understanding each other’s concerns in life. However, I think that being able to speak and understand fluent Tibetan could have brought me many advantages, also enhancing the veracity of my data. After all, a language is impregnated with a specific cultural knowledge. In addition, language also provides better access. Due to my inability to speak or understand fluent Tibetan, it became difficult for me to go “backstage” with some political activists.

Another reason why I was not able to go “backstage” with them could be depended on the role they assigned to me. At SFT, I was perhaps regarded as just another foreign student or researcher. For that reason they assigned me the role of a researcher, to whom they had to present themselves in a specific way, and keep a professional and distanced relationship. Since I spent my time with many different kinds of people, a fact they were aware of, this could also be a reason for not sharing all kinds of sensitive information with me. When I faced difficulties on approaching them, I naturally also ended up with by distancing myself from them.
Fortunately, I followed newspapers such as *Phayul, Tibetan Political Review, Tibet Telegraph, Tibet Sun*, blogs, and other social media on a regular basis. This was an important way I followed the various topics and discussions unfolding in the community, something I continued to do after my fieldwork. Discussions online weighed up for my poor Tibetan skills, and also confirmed the political disagreements that existed beneath the surface in the Tibetan community, but which had not always been expressed to me openly.

Another challenge was that as I formed friendships with people, it became important to take into consideration their needs and interests, which resulted in it becoming very difficult to bring up a sensitive subject such as the self-immolations. As conversations on death in most societies are avoided (Srivastava and Srivastava, 1997, p. 827), it became challenging for me to gather data on this topic. Hence interviews were an excellent method as they offered me a legitimate method to ask about everything on the topic, without feeling guilty for asking uncomfortable questions. Working with death does raise many moral dilemmas, as well as emotional challenges for the researcher. This has been pointed out by Palgi and Abramovitch (1984, [Abramovitch, ND]), who exemplify these dilemmas by citing Hortence Powdermaker's reluctance to take field notes during a death ritual. Powdermaker writes, “How can you take notes in the midst of human sorrow? Have you no feelings for the mourners?” (Powdermaker, 1933, pp. 84-85 in Palgi and Abramovitch, 1984, p. 386). These are feelings I can relate to both with regard to trying to bring up the self-immolations in conversations, and participating in the candle light vigils held in the aftermath of a self-immolation.

**Ethics**

As an ethical consideration, I have anonymized most of the people involved in my project, except in a few cases where the identity has been impossible to hide or hiding it has not been necessary. I provided all my interlocutors with a consent form which included basic information about my project and the interviewee’s role. I conducted and recorded all interviews with their written consent.

Another other ethical dilemma I wish to write about is of a more personal nature, and was present during fieldwork, and even more strongly in the writing process. Because of the delicacy of the subject of the self-immolations, and the sensitive nature of political disagreements in exile, I always felt a responsibility not to make the situation worse for Tibetans, or to put anybody in an unfortunate light. Rather, I always felt a responsibility to show solidarity with Tibetans, as well as to contribute something positive. It is worth mentioning that in the field of Tibetan studies many scholars have already felt the same “commitment to solidarity” that Per Kværne (2001, p. 62) writes about in his article on “Tibet images among researchers on Tibet”. This commitment or responsibility became especially prominent in the

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23 For example in chapter 3, regarding the two men who attempted to self-immolate.
writing process, which created many obstacles for me. I wanted to be loyal to my friends, loyal to the Tibetan cause and others who had taken me into their lives, so that at times I was unable to look at things critically. It took me a long time to drag myself out of McLeod Ganj, put the sense of responsibility I felt towards everyone to one side, begin taking responsibility for my anthropological subject also, and see things from a different perspective.

Chapter layout
Chapter 1 provides background information on the self-immolations, a short overview of the Chinese response as well as the initial response in exile in the beginning, followed by a brief presentation of the literature on the self-immolations. In chapter 2, I move on to the place of my fieldwork and present the social and political framework of the Tibetan diaspora in Dharamsala. In chapter 3, I present how the self-immolations are understood, and in what ways these actions are made meaningful: focusing on the activation of Buddhist values and nationalist sentiments, which also contributes in invalidating the Chinese narrative of the self-immolations. In chapter 4, I explore commemoration practices for the self-immolators and analyze how the self-immolations gain political force, and are transformed into a symbol in the nationalist project in exile. I argue that the commemoration practices for the dead also assist in reasserting exile Tibetans’ faith in particular values and goals, although the goals are interpreted differently by the main political actors in exile. In the final chapter, I argue that the understanding and handling of the self-immolations has to be understood in relation to the continuous emphasis on unity, which is a central characteristic of all nationalist movements. I close this thesis by a short summary and some concluding thoughts regarding future research.
1 The self-immolations

The first Tibetan self-immolation took place on April 27, 1998, during a hunger strike in New Delhi. It was carried out by Thupten Ngodup, a 60-year old ex-monk and ex-soldier.

Figure 3: Thupten Ngodup (photo: Shadow Tibet, Jamyang Norbu’s blog).^24

Thupten Ngodup was born in 1938 in the village of Gyatso Shar in Tsang, and fled to India after the Lhasa uprising in 1959. He joined the Indian army in 1963, serving in the Special Frontier Force, a secret unit with many Tibetan ex-guerilla fighters (Ardley, 2003, p. 49). After retiring from the Indian army, he moved to Dharamsala and began working as a cook for Tsechokling Monastery.

Thupten Ngodup actively participated in all kinds of demonstrations and meetings for Tibet. Before joining the Tibetan Youth Congress’s (TYC) “Hunger Strike Unto Death” in 1998, he had told his friend Tenzin that in case he died, Tenzin should sell all of his things and donate the money to TYC.

On April 23 1998, a few days prior to his self-immolation, Thupten was interviewed by the Norwegian-sponsored radio station Voice of Tibet. He began by saying, “I joined the Hunger Strike because I am a Tibetan and I have a duty to perform... No, there is no fear in my heart at all.” He ended the interview saying,

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\text{I am giving up my life to bring about peace and fulfilment to my unhappy people... I have one hundred percent confidence that the people inside Tibet will not only continue the struggle but will intensify it. They will never sit back and not struggle} \, \text{(Norbu, 1998).}
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On April 27 – the 49th day of the hunger strike – when the Indian police attempted to intervene, Thupten Ngodup decided to self-immolate (Buffetrille, 2015). He was immediately rushed to Ram Manohar Lohia hospital in New Delhi, where the doctors stated that he had nearly 100 percent burns, and thus no chance of surviving. On the evening of April 28, he received a visit from the Dalai Lama who told him not to nourish any feelings of hatred against

^24 [http://www.jamyangnorbu.com/blog/2008/05/12/remembering-thupten-ngodup/](http://www.jamyangnorbu.com/blog/2008/05/12/remembering-thupten-ngodup/) (acc.19.06.2015). The following references to Jamyang Norbu are from the same article.
the Chinese, and “that his act had created an unprecedented awareness of the Tibetan cause” (Norbu, 1998). He passed away on April 29, 1998 (Norbu, 1998; ICT).

Thupten Ngodup’s self-immolation left most Tibetans in a state of shock. It was a new form of protest, unknown to Tibetans. Still, some prominent activists like Jamyang Norbu immediately recognized and named it to be a sacrifice and regarded Thupten Ngodup as a “hero” (pawo). Thupten Ngodup’s self-immolation was, however, an exceptional case, and several years passed before another Tibetan carried out this form of protest.

The next self-immolation took place on November 23, 2006, in Mumbai, carried out by the regional TYC president of Bangalore, Lhakpa Tsering (24), during the Chinese president (at the time) Hu Jintao’s visit to India. Unlike Thupten Ngodup, Lhakpa Tsering survived. Four years later, the first self-immolation took place inside Tibet, on February 27, 2009, carried out by Tapey, a monk in his mid-twenties, from Kirti Monastery in Ngaba, Amdo (Sichuan), as a protest against the Chinese authorities’ prohibition of a prayer ceremony in his monastery. This came as a sequel to a brutal attack on the local community by the Chinese security forces in 2008, killing many people, followed by a crackdown on religion. The next self-immolation, taking place on March 16, 2011, was also carried out by a monk, Phuntsok (20), also from Kirti Monastery. The day of his self-immolation marked the day the Chinese security forces had attacked the local community in 2008 (ICT; McGranahan, 2014). Phuntsok’s self-immolation, countered by further violent crackdowns in the Ngaba region (ICT, April 15, 2011; Buffetrille, 2015), initiated the wave of self-immolations in recent years.

At the moment of writing (August 2015), 149 Tibetans have set themselves on fire, of whom 142 have done so in Tibet, and seven in exile – four in India and three in Nepal. Of the 142 self-immolators in Tibet, 20 are thought to have survived. The whereabouts of the majority of the survivors, however, remains unknown. In exile, three self-immolators have survived (ICT, April 30, 2015). In spite of the large number of Tibetans who self-immolated and continued to set themselves ablaze, they received little attention in the international media. In fact, in 2011, *Time Magazine* named the self-immolations one of top ten underreported stories in the world (December 7, 2011), something that remains applicable today.

According to exile Tibetans, the main reason behind the self-immolations is China’s illegal occupation of Tibet and more than 60 years destruction of Tibetan civilization. This is highlighted in the exhibition on the self-immolations in the Tibetan Museum in Dharamsala,

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28 http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101344_2100858_2100859,00.html (acc.29.06.2015).
organized by CTA as part of its “Solidarity with Tibet” campaign. A statement issued by CTA on March 26, 2012, gave seven reasons why the Chinese authorities were responsible for the self-immolations (Tibet.net).29 The white paper, “Why Tibet is Burning?” was published by CTA on January 28, 2013.30 A pamphlet on the repressive policies inside Tibet by the former cabinet minister Kirti Rinpoche was published in February 2013, a series of five books (Tibetan Self-Immolations 1998 to 2012: News, Views & Global Response, 2013) was published by Kirti Monastery in Dharamsala, and statements and reports were also published by NGOs such as TYC and an The International Campaign for Tibet.31 Furthermore, the self-immolations have to be understood in the light of more recent political events in Tibet. Prior to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, several riots took place in Lhasa. This unleashed a wave of protests throughout the Tibetan plateau, eventually taking the form of self-immolations. As a result of these protests, the Tibetan landscape was transformed through a strong military presence, and China’s political control over Tibet increased. Tapey’s self-immolation was a result, among other factors, of this tighter political control. Cities like Lhasa – as well as county centers such as Ngaba where there have been many self-immolations – are today filled with Chinese military, and countless video cameras have been installed to monitor all activity in Tibetan urban areas. Many exile Tibetans, among them Lobsang Sangay, the exile Tibetan prime minister, regard the self-immolations as the only form of protest possible under China’s current regime (The Washington Post, July 13, 2012).33

31 By TYC: “Tibet Burning: Profiles of Self-Immolators Inside Tibet. February 2009 to May 2013”, 2013. TYC has also compiled a list with detailed information on the self-immolations so far (August 2015) on their webpage, which is updated when another self-immolation takes place: http://www.tibetanyouthcongress.org/category/tibet-burning/ (acc. 22.06.2015).
32 There are also other possible historical reasons, going back to the invasion of the Amdo region by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in the 1950s, which resulted in killings, imprisonment and torture on an immense scale, specifically in the Ngaba area where many self-immolations have taken place. The historical account of the Chinese occupation in Amdo region remains for the most part untold. Naktshang Nulo, My Tibetan Childhood (2014), is one of the few accounts of this period in Amdo’s history. Berounsky (2012) traces the large number of self-immolations carried out by monks from Kirti Monastery to its historical and political importance. Prior to the Chinese invasion, political power in Amdo rested with local kings or chiefs, and monasteries belonging to the Gelukpa school. Thus Ngaba, although ruled by local kings, was under the influence of Kirti Monastery (Shakya, 2012b, p. 35). Historical awareness among the Kirti monks remains strong, Berounsky (2012, p. 75) states, and he sees this as one of the reasons why it became the centre of protests, and later of the self-immolations.
33 http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/for-tibetans-no-other-way-to-protest/2012/07/13/gJOA13wniW_story.html (acc. 22.06.2015). This article was written by Lobsang Sangay himself, with the title “For Tibetans, no other way to protest”.

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The wave of self-immolations from 2011

A wave of self-immolations began in earnest after Phuntsok sat himself ablaze in Ngaba on March 16, 2011, carried out by men and women, monks, nuns, students, nomads, and lay people from all walks of life. Of 142 self-immolations in Tibet, 117 were carried out men and 25 by women, while the seven self-immolations in exile were all carried out by men. The age of the self-immolators has ranged from 15 to 60, but most of them were young, between the age of 17 and 30 (ICT; Buffetrille, 2015). Most of the self-immolators have been from Amdo, others have been from Kham. Two self-immolations have taken place in Lhasa, carried out, however, by Tibetans from Amdo. In most cases, they have taken place close to a monastery or public building, showing the political and religious character of these actions (Buffetrille, 2015).

Up to February 19, 2012, self-immolators inside Tibet were monks or ex-monks, mainly belonging to Kirti Monastery or other monasteries of the Gelukpa school. In the course of 2011, 12 Tibetans, including a nun, sat themselves on fire inside Tibet. In addition, two self-immolations took place in exile, in New Delhi and Kathmandu. The self-immolation in New Delhi was carried out by an exile-born Tibetan man, Sherab Tsedor, outside the Chinese embassy. In Kathmandu, it was carried out by a monk, Bhutuk from Kardze in Kham (Sichuan), who set himself on fire, having draped himself in a Tibetan flag. Hence, counting in the self-immolations in exile, a total of 14 Tibetans self-immolated in 2011. In 2012, the frequency of self-immolations picked up speed, and already by February 19, 10 more people had self-immolated, including the first layperson to do so inside Tibet. From then on, laypeople – students, nomads, housewives – also chose this form of protest.

2012 is the year when the greatest number of self-immolations took place, sometimes several occurring on the same day. Thus, on November 7, 2012, five Tibetans self-immolated – four in Amdo and one in the TAR. Three of the four self-immolations in Amdo were carried out by monks from the Ngoshul monastery in Ngaba. Two of them were 16 years old, while the third was 15 years old, the youngest so far. The fourth was a woman who self-immolated in Rebkong. A total of 85 Tibetans inside Tibet set themselves on fire in 2012. A Tibetan man, Jamphel Yeshi, self-immolated on March 26 in New Delhi, making the total number of self-immolations 86.

Self-immolations continued in 2013. In May, however, the pace slowed down, with one in May and one in June and July. The next self-immolation took place on September 28, followed by one in November and two in December. Altogether 27 Tibetans self-immolated in Tibet in 2013; in addition two took place in exile, in Kathmandu on February 13 and August 6, the latter described in the opening of the thesis. A total of 29 Tibetans set themselves on fire in 2013.

In 2014, during my fieldwork in Dharamsala, the self-immolations still continued, though with less frequency compared to the first four months of 2013. Six Tibetans set themselves on fire between February and April 2014. For some months it remained quiet, before two persons set fire to themselves on September 16 and 17. In December, in the space of less than ten days,
three Tibetans self-immolated. In total, eleven Tibetans set themselves on fire in 2014. In 2015, the self-immolations have continued, although intermittently. At the present moment (August 2015), six Tibetans have self-immolated in 2015, the last one being a monk, Sonam Topgyal (late twenties), on July 9, 2015, three days after the Dalai Lama’s 80th birthday, in the main square of Kyegudo, Amdo.

**The response of the Chinese authorities**

When the first self-immolation took place on February 29, 2009, People’s Armed Police responded by firing at the self-immolator, extinguishing the fire after he had fallen to the ground. This was followed by tight security control in the area, taken to new heights after Phuntsog’s self-immolation two years later on March 16, 2011. This time, too, the police extinguished the flames, but then began beating Phuntsog severely. He passed away the next day, and it is difficult to know whether he died as a result of his burns or the violence inflicted by the police. The Ngaba area faced a massive crackdown in the aftermath, in the course of which Kirti Monastery was completely isolated, while the monks were forced to undergo a “patriotic education” campaign. Around three hundred monks were deported for the purpose of “legal education” (ICT – fact sheet on self-immolations). The monastery was also raided by the police, two Tibetans being shot dead as they were holding a vigil outside Kirti to offer the monks protection. Hoping to stop the self-immolations, the authorities implemented a new strategy which still stands today: they began arresting people who attempted to save the self-immolator by giving the person medical treatment or offering any kind of assistance in the aftermath. Three monks who took Phuntsog back to Kirti after he had been beaten by the police and tried to give him medical treatment were detained, accused of “intentional homicide” by having plotted and assisted the self-immolation, and given sentences from 10 to 13 years (ICT). The Chinese authorities have continued to follow this policy, further intensified from 2012, by criminalizing the self-immolations (ICT Special report; Amnesty International UK, February 10, 2013). This also involved sentencing people to prison who find themselves in the area of a self-immolation, and as Buffetrille (2013) writes, the same goes for people who possess photos of the self-immolators or attempt to help their families by offering small gifts (n.24 and 25 in Buffetrille). Another common practice is to take away the dead body of the self-immolator by force, either to the hospital or for cremation (n.23 in Buffetrille, 2013), thus preventing

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traditional funeral practices. In a few cases, Tibetans have opposed the police and stopped them from taking the dead body, for example following Tsewang Kyab’s self-immolation on October 26, 2012 in Kanlho, Amdo (Gansu), when people honored his dead body with *khata* (silk scarf) offerings before carrying his body to his home.\(^{38}\) From 2012 onwards, the Chinese authorities have labeled self-immolations “suicides” motivated by economic or personal and family issues. While exiles attempt to tie these actions to the political context, the Chinese authorities attempt to do the opposite. Furthermore, in Chinese media the self-immolators have been depicted as mentally disturbed, as criminals, “Tibetan or violent "separatists" and even as “terrorists” (*The Guardian*, March 7, 2012; Yeh, 2012; Carrico, 2012).\(^{39}\) The understanding of the self-immolations in exile, I suggest, is closely tied to the Chinese response to these actions. No information is found in the Chinese press concerning the demands expressed by Tibetans, the self-immolations being characterized as a threat to national unity (Jagou, 2012, p. 82). The tight security control in the area of the self-immolations is thus justified in order to maintain national security.

However, another side of the Chinese response should also be mentioned. By late 2011 the authorities began expressing their “sympathy” for the self-immolators in public statements, portraying them as “hapless victims” (Barnett, 2012, p. 47). Chinese delegations to other countries also declared that the authorities had provided medical treatment to the dying self-immolator, as well as offered help to the family (Barnett, 2012, p. 47). The Chinese prime minister, Wen Jiabao, particularly expressed his sympathy in March 2012 during a press conference in the Chinese parliament, stating, “The young Tibetans are innocent and we feel pained by such behavior” (Barnett, 2012, p. 47). This public response has to be seen in relation to their violent criticism of what they termed “the Dalai Clique”, blaming the Dalai Lama for master-minding the self-immolations (*The Telegraph*, January 11, 2012).\(^{40}\) The “innocent monks” were thus portrayed as “victims” of a protest carefully planned and instigated by the exile leadership with the Dalai Lama at the forefront. In the state media the propaganda was taken to new heights by comparing the Dalai Lama with Hitler (Carrico, 2012).

The whereabouts of the majority of the survivors of self-immolations in Tibet, around twenty, remains unknown, for example Lobsang Kunchok and Lobsang Kelsang who self-immolated on September 26, 2011 in Ngaba. While some have been imprisoned in conditions of strict isolation, others who have been set free have not been heard from (ICT special rapport on survivors, April 2015, n. 27).

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\(^{38}\) [http://www.savetibet.org/second-tibetan-self-immolates-today-in-sangchu/](http://www.savetibet.org/second-tibetan-self-immolates-today-in-sangchu/) (acc.29.06.2015). Tibetans consider that after death, the dead body should be left in peace for three days.

\(^{39}\) [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/07/tibet-selfimmolations-monks-aba-china](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/07/tibet-selfimmolations-monks-aba-china) (acc.23.06.2015). The Chinese authorities have also called the war against the Dalai Lama a war against “terrorists” (Makley, 2012).

Their messages
In some cases (at the present time about thirty), self-immolators have left behind messages, while others have shouted slogans before setting themselves on fire. Several have conceptualized their self-immolation as a sacrifice of the body or an offering of light. In their messages, most have called for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet or in addition offered prayers for his long life. Other common demands have been the preservation of Tibetan language and culture, religious freedom in Tibet and unity among Tibetans, while a few have also called for independence. Buffetrille suggests that calling for the return of the Dalai Lama can also be understood as a metaphor for independence, as he is the symbol of the Tibetan nation (2015).

Some of the self-immolators have wished to draw attention to specific issues (which I will return to in chapter 3), such as land rights, freedom of language, requests to Tibetans not to slaughter animals, or eat meat, or fight among themselves.

**A list of all the self-immolators so far (August 2015) is attached in Appendix.

The response in exile
As this thesis is devoted to exile Tibetan perceptions of the self-immolations, I will briefly outline the Dalai Lama’s response at different points of time compared to the response of some Tibetan political activists.

Exile Tibetans regard the self-immolations as the ultimate call for freedom inside Tibet. In the beginning, opinions were divided with regard to the self-immolations, the most critical being the Tibetans’ spiritual leader (lama), the Dalai Lama, who occupies a central role in the lives of most Tibetans. The political guidelines of the Dalai Lama, the most central being the principle of non-violence, and from 1988 also the Middle Way Approach, carry great authority. Through this “approach” the Dalai Lama seeks genuine autonomy for the Tibetan areas, while remaining a part of the People’s Republic of China. Although the Dalai Lama resigned as the political leader of the Tibetan people in March 2011, non-violence and the Middle Way Approach, despite being challenged, firmly hold their ground in the exile community.

In the beginning, the Dalai Lama was ambiguous with regard to the self-immolations; he did not praise them, instead expressing the view that they violated fundamental Buddhist ethics. These actions were also problematic according to the Dalai Lama’s non-violent stance, as a self-immolation involves inflicting violence on a body. Further, he questioned the effectiveness of such acts. During a conference in Sydney in 2013 he said, “It’s a sad thing that happens. Of course it’s very, very sad. In the meantime, I express doubt how much effect (there is) from such drastic actions” (The Telegraph, June 13, 2013).

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41 As I will show with my empirical findings, it is interpreted as such by those exile Tibetans who support the goal of independence.
However, although The Dalai Lama has stated that he does not support these acts, he has never publicly told Tibetans inside Tibet to stop setting themselves on fire. The Dalai Lama has expressed that he is in a difficult position for several reasons. He stated his concerns in an article in July 2012, calling the self-immolations "a very, very delicate political issue". Here he expressed that it is best for him "to remain neutral", adding, "Now, the reality is that if I say something positive, then the Chinese immediately blame me". "If I say something negative, then the family members of those people feel very sad. They sacrificed their... life. It is not easy. So I do not want to create some kind of impression that this is wrong."\(^{42}\) (quoted in Buffetrille, 2012, p. 14). Since the Chinese leadership continuously blame the Dalai Lama for instigating the self-immolations, he has to be very careful (Binara et.al 2012). In 2012 and in 2013 the Dalai Lama referred to the self-immolations as a form of sacrifice and non-violence (Daily News & Analysis, November 18, 2012; The Tibet Post, October 24, 2013),\(^{43}\) pointing to the underlying motivation and to the fact that a self-immolation causes no physical harm to others. In the article in The Tibet Post he is quoted as having said, 

*These sad incidents show that the people involved believe in non-violence. These people are not drunk or overwhelmed by family problems and they could have turned to violence against others. Instead they chose to sacrifice themselves. Tibetans remain committed to non-violence.*

More recently, he has refrained from saying anything at all.

While the Dalai Lama at the outset was, and still is, critical of the self-immolations, some Tibetan political activists, have from the beginning praised the self-immolators as heroes and martyrs. The self-immolations have not only challenged communist China, but also certain values and beliefs in the exile community, regarding taking one’s own life and the meaning of non-violence. Nevertheless, in this thesis I will attempt to show that today the self-immolations are generally seen as lending support to central Buddhist values such as compassion and non-violence, and as strengthening the political project of exile Tibetans.

**Literature on the self-immolations**

So far two international seminars about the self-immolations have been organized. The first took place in France in December 2012, published in *Revue d'Études Tibétaines*, edited by Katia Buffetrille and Françoise Robin. The second was organized in New Delhi in April 2013. The papers presented there are available online. In addition, *The Journal of Cultural Anthropology (JCA)* published a special issue on the subject in April 2012, edited by Carole McGranahan and Ralph Litzinger, the first academic writings on the self-immolations. I draw upon many of these


contributions throughout this thesis. Here I shall provide a brief introduction, and focus on a few chosen works which discuss the response to the self-immolations in the exile community.

The special issue of the *JCA* was entitled “Self-Immolations as protest in Tibet”, and the title indicates the analytical approach. The act of protest is analyzed from various angles by contextualizing the self-immolations within the political situation inside Tibet and in relation to Buddhism. It also takes a look at the Chinese response to the self-immolations, as well as the Tibetan responses in exile. The various authors (Craig; Makley; McGranahan; Paldrön; Tan) attempt to make sense of these acts, as well exploring the political and historical factors leading to them, as Shakya (2012a) and Fischer (2012) attempt to do in a more elaborate way.

The issue also includes contributions by Tibetans, of which the most relevant for me is that of Dhondup Tashi Rekjong (2012), addressing online debates on the self-immolations among Tibetans in exile. Dhondup introduces the reader to four stages which have dominated the discussions online. At the first stage, immediately after the self-immolations, Tibetans unanimously expressed solidarity with the self-immolators. However, as he points out, starting with the second stage, opinions began diverging over whether these were violent or non-violent acts, while at the third stage, arguments over whether the self-immolators were calling for independence (*rangzen*) or the “Middle Way Approach” arose. At the fourth and final stage the question over whether the self-immolations should continue was brought to the surface. These are topics I also found relevant during my fieldwork, especially that of violence and non-violence, that of the aim of self-immolators: *rangzen* or the Middle Way, as well as the importance of showing solidarity, and they will be addressed in the following chapters. However, the fourth and final stage that Dhondup Tashi mentions, was not addressed by my interlocutors. This might be related to the fact that during my fieldwork the frequency of self-immolations had slowed down, compared to 2012 when Dhondup Tashi wrote his article. His article also confirms that in the beginning, the self-immolations elicited different opinions, exemplified through online debates. He made an important remark, namely that the question of violence and non-violence was not introduced by exiles, but by the Chinese authorities who proclaimed that the act of setting oneself ablaze was violence. The exile Tibetans responded by calling the self-immolations non-violence. This highlights how the understanding of the self-immolations in exile is closely tied to the Chinese response, in other words, there is a dialectic relation between the Tibetan diaspora and the Chinese authorities.

The contributions in the French seminar were more tangible – based on empirical data – and analytical than those published in the *JCA*, which were more reflexive, open, and introduced various ways of understanding the self-immolations.

The publication of the French seminar opens with contributions analyzing the subject within a historical and contemporary political framework. This is followed by debates and interpretations on the self-immolations made by both Chinese and exile Tibetans. The rest of the
contributions make use of a comparative perspective by discussing self-immolations in other parts of the world, with contributions from specialists on social and religious movements, among others James Benn (2012) who had done research on self-immolations in the Buddhist tradition in China.

One of the contributors who presented interpretations of self-immolations by exile Tibetans is Chung Tsering (2012). In the same way as Dhondup Tashi, he bases his article on material from the internet, drawing on articles written by Tibetans. Chung Tsering’s paper is an informative summary rather than an analytical study. Like Dhondup Tashi, he presents some ongoing themes around the topic, differentiating between converging views and issues of debate. The views converge on the causes of the self-immolations, which according to all contributors are the Chinese policies in Tibet. The other converging view is that the self-immolators are very courageous. Regarding the issues of debate, Chung Tsering presents the question of violence/non-violence, Buddhist/non-Buddhist, whether the self-immolations should continue, the success of the "Middle Way Approach", and whether exile Tibetans are doing enough to fulfill their moral obligation.

As I will show in the course of the thesis, the question of violence/non-violence is no longer highly contested, and there exists a high degree of consensus on the self-immolations as non-violence. Still, the success of the Middle Way Approach continues to be questioned by rangzen supporters, as well as whether exile Tibetans are sufficiently active in the Tibetan struggle. Regarding the success of the Middle Way Approach, the filmmaker and writer Tenzing Sonam (2013) also reflected upon this in his paper "Rethinking the Tibet Movement", presented at the seminar on the self-immolations in Delhi. His conclusion was that the Middle Way is, "Inadvertently assisting the very process of cultural annihilation that the policy seeks to protect. The longer we wait in this limbo of political ambivalence, the more time we give China to carry out its final solution, and the more in vain the sacrifices of our compatriots will be. The time has come to rethink the Middle Way Approach and reinstate Tibet’s independence as the cornerstone of our struggle".

What Tenzing Sonam’s paper exemplifies, is that the interpretation of the self-immolations in exile is also conditioned by the political project. Building upon the work of Dhondup Tashi Rekjong, Chung Tsering, and others, in the following I explore the response to the self-immolations two years later in Dharamsala.
Figure 4: The *korlam*.
2 McLeod Ganj and the Tibetan diaspora

With numerous Tibetan shops, cafes, restaurants and a few monasteries, McLeod Ganj is known as “little Lhasa” (Anand, 2002). This is also the location of the Dalai Lama’s modest temple, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) and a number of Tibetan NGOs, making this small hill station the Tibetan religious and political center in exile. For many tourists it is a Shangri-la in exile.

McLeod Ganj is forever changing along with the seasons and people continuously coming and going. As winter sets in with foggy days, covering the small hill station in a blanket of snow, people retire into the warm comfort of their woolen jackets or shawls, enjoying hot bowls of thukpa – Tibetan thick noodle soup – endless rounds of glasses of boiled water, or snuggling beneath heavy Indian blankets in cold rooms. The streets become empty compared to the hectic summer tourist season.

As spring was followed by summer, the town slowly but surely woke up from its winter sleep. The nuns from the monastery on Jogiwara Road got out on the rooftop in the evenings for their debating classes and the sound of their hands clapping could be heard from a distance. Cafes reopened and the streets pulsated with movement as the residents once again moved outdoors and loads of tourists began arriving. The streets were filled with new and strange faces and the never-ending din of car horns. Late night fights on Mount View between Indian tourists, and occasionally between Indian tourists and Tibetans, became common events. McLeod Ganj again became chaotic, but for many people these hectic months presented opportunities for business and for forming new acquaintances. Only during the early, quiet mornings, or on days of heavy rainfall followed by fog enveloping the lush hilltops, would McLeod Ganj once more settle into silence.

Figure 5: A January morning in McLeod Ganj.

44 The romanticizing myth of Tibet as Shangri-la has always held a strong appeal to the western imagination. Tibet is imagined as a mysterious land, “esoteric and beyond ‘ordinariness’ ” (Shakya, 1991 p. 2), inhabited by wise lamas, simple monks and people who are all devoted to Buddhism, living in perfect peace and harmony (Lopez 1998).
McLeod Ganj – the town and its history

Dharamsala is divided into two parts, ‘lower’ and ‘upper’ Dharamsala, situated approximately 10 km apart, the latter also being known as McLeod Ganj. My fieldwork was mainly carried out in McLeod Ganj, which I generally refer to as “Dharamsala”, sometimes including the surrounding area where Tibetans live. It is also here that most of the political activities of the Tibetan exile community are conducted.

Dharamsala is located in Kangra District, in the state of Himachal Pradesh in northwest India. It is a place of ethnic diversity, with a history of migration. During the Raj period, it used to be the summer ‘hill station’, of the British. Following India’s independence, the Muslims living in Dharamsala left for Pakistan, while Hindus from Pakistan moved to Dharamsala. The local population, known as Gaddis, are mostly seminomadic goat herders, numbering around 20,000 (Diehl, 2002, p. 39; Grent, 2002, p. 112). From the 1960s, Dharamsala began providing shelter to Tibetan refugees as well. The Tibetan population of Dharamsala is estimated to be around 15,000 (Tibetan Review, July 29, 2014)\(^{45}\), with the majority being engaged in tourism, handicrafts, retail business, medical services, military service, work for the Tibetan government or Tibetan and other NGOs (Grent, 2002, p. 112). For the most part Tibetans live in McLeod Ganj or in Gangkhyi (Gangchen Kyishong), halfway between McLeod Ganj and lower Dharamsala; the latter houses the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Men-Tsee-Khang\(^{46}\) and Nechung Monastery.

The road from lower Dharamsala to McLeod Ganj, Jogiwara Road, is steep and twisting. About 1.5 km after the Tibetan settlement in Gangkhyi the main road bifurcates; whereas Jogiwara Road continues straight ahead, becoming even more narrow and steep, the other Temple Road, turns left, and is named after the "Dalai Lama's temple"\(^{47}\) which is situated on this road. Encircling the temple is the korlam (‘circumambulation path’), where Tibetans practice ritual circumambulation to gain merit, and some exercise (see chapter 4).

Jogiwara and Temple Roads are the two main roads of McLeod Ganj. Only one-way traffic is allowed – cars drive up Jogiwara Road to Main Square, the center of town where all the roads in town meet, and down along Temple Road.\(^{48}\) From the tiny and always busy Main Square, where one can expect to run into familiar faces at any time, smaller roads lead the visitor in different directions.

\(^{45}\) [http://www.tibetanreview.net/to-be-or-not-to-be-a-citizen-the-tibetan-dilemma/](http://www.tibetanreview.net/to-be-or-not-to-be-a-citizen-the-tibetan-dilemma/) (acc.08.05.2015)
\(^{46}\) Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute.
\(^{47}\) A commonly used name.
\(^{48}\) Temple Road from the Dalai Lama temple (Tsuglagkhang) to lower Dharamsala was at the end of June 2015 named “Potala Road” (after the Dalai Lama’s palace in Lhasa) by the government of Himachal Pradesh to honor the Dalai Lama’s 80\(^{th}\) birthday on the 21\(^{st}\) of the Sixth month (Tibetan lunar calendar) and July 6 (Western calendar).
In exile

Kham, the eastern part of Tibet was invaded by the People’s Liberation Army on October 5, 1950 (Goldstein, 1989, p. 690). Following an unsuccessful appeal to the UN on October 19, 1950, the small Tibetan army surrendered. On May 23, 1951, the Tibetan government was forced to sign the so-called “17-Point Agreement”, in which it was declared that Tibet should return to the “big
family of the Motherland – the People's Republic of China” (Goldstein, 1989, p. 763), thus renouncing the claim to Tibetan sovereignty

Between 1951 and 1959 Mao Zedong tried to follow a policy of persuasion in Lhasa. When the Chinese entered Tibet, they pledged to support “freedom of religion”. With the launching of the so-called “democratic reforms” in 1956 in the regions adjacent to China, a change of attitude was evident, the Communist Party becoming increasingly hostile towards monasteries and the practice of religion (Norbu, 1986, p. 132). In Kham this led to armed revolt (McGranahan, 2005, p. 571). The situation further deteriorated in 1958 when Mao Zedong launched a more aggressive campaign, mainly in Amdo and Kham. The same year, the resistance army Chushi Gangdruk (‘Four Rivers Six Ranges’) was formed, which not only fought the Chinese army, but also played a crucial role in securing the Dalai Lama’s escape to India following the uprising in Lhasa in 1959 (McGranahan, 2010; Dunham, 2005).

The Dalai Lama fled Lhasa on March 17, 1959, entering Indian territory two weeks later (Shakya, 1999, p. 207). He has remained in exile ever since. By the end of June 1959, some 20,000 Tibetans had followed him into exile, the number rising to more than 100,000 over the next year. According to official exile Tibetan sources, the Chinese invasion, involving war, imprisonment, execution and famine, has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Tibetans and the destruction of thousands of monasteries (Houston and Wright, 2003, p. 220).

Most Tibetans residing in Dharamsala today were born elsewhere, but live there because of studies or work. Many come from Tibetan settlements in South India such as Bylakuppe or Mundgod, or from Ladakh, Bir, Dehradun or Darjeeling in North India, while others are born in Tibet, having escaped to India over the last 10-15 years. Many Tibetans in Dharamsala make a living from tourism, running shops, cafes, restaurants or hotels (Vasstveit, 2009, p. 34). Another important source of income is the ‘sweater business’. Tibetans buy cheap sweaters from lalas in nearby Ludhiana, Punjab, and then sell them with surplus on the street in big Indian cities in winter.

However, not all Tibetans are engaged in paid work, and there is much concern about lack of work opportunities. Most of the young Tibetans who have arrived in recent years, known as “newcomers”, have neither work nor other sources of income, and spend their days wandering up and down the streets of McLeod Ganj.

49 In the Seventeen Point Agreement, China also undertook “to safeguard the social and cultural independence of Tibet” (Fjeld, 2005, p. 9), including religious freedom.
50 An ancient name for Kham (Jamyang Norbu, 1994).
51 Tibet.net: 128,014 persons, according to the 2009 survey.
52 There are about 35 different Tibetan self-sustained settlements in India, all under the authority of CTA. Of approximately 130 000 Tibetans living in exile, 75 percent reside in India (Brox, 2012, p. 453; McConnell, 2012, p. 79). The main source of income among Tibetans in the settlements in South India is agriculture, while trade dominates in North India.
53 A common name for the Hindu caste kayasth, the majority of whom in the state of Punjab are involved in business.
Central Tibetan Administration (CTA)
The Tibetan parliament in exile was instituted in 1960 by the Dalai Lama and is regarded by the exile community as a continuation of the Lhasa government that ruled an independent Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion (Brox, 2012, p. 453). The "Constitution of Tibet", promulgated by the Dalai Lama in 1963, stated that the Tibetan government in exile was committed to returning to Tibet and that a future independent Tibet would be governed on the basis of democracy. It also stated that if Tibetans remained in exile longer than anticipated, a democratic governance was also to be deployed in exile (Brox, 2012, p. 454). In 1991 the Constitution was revised, and as Brox points out, "Democratization was pushed forward using principles of institutionalized separation and balance of powers: it distinguished between the legislative, executive and judiciary" (2012, p. 454). Being a democratic institution, the government in exile thus represents a break with the traditional political system in Tibet. In an effort to make the exile governance more democratic, the Dalai Lama resigned from his political position in March 2011, a decision that was strongly opposed both by the Tibetan leadership and the people. Nevertheless, after 2011 the Dalai Lama’s function is officially limited to that of being the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people.

Members of the Tibetan Parliament are elected by Tibetans who hold a valid Green Book and are above the age of 18. As CTA aims to represent Tibetans both inside Tibet and in exile, the elected members represent the three Tibetan regions – U-tsang, Amdo and Kham (ten delegates from each region) – regarded as constituting traditional Tibet; the five main religious traditions (two representatives from each tradition) – Gelug, Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and the Bon religion; and, finally, four seats are reserved for exile Tibetans outside India, with two representatives being elected from North America and two from Europe (2012, p. 459). In May 2011, a few months after the Dalai Lama’s withdrawal as the political leader of the Tibetan people, the government in exile changed its name to from Government in exile to "the Central Tibetan Administration".

Two political strategies: autonomy or independence
While CTA seeks to represent all Tibetans, there has for a long time been a split in the exile community with regard to political strategy and the defined aim for Tibet's future status. While

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54 The Green Book is issued by CTA, and has almost become the passport of Tibetans in exile. It is on the basis of this that Tibetans claim their rights from CTA and is also used for school admission, university scholarships, and employment within CTA or businesses run by CTA [http://tibet.net/support-tibet/pay-green-book/](http://tibet.net/support-tibet/pay-green-book/) (acc.27.04.2015).

the stated aim of CTA and the Dalai Lama is to achieve meaningful autonomy within China, also known as the “Middle Way Approach” (umey lam), several Tibetan organizations work for independence, rangzen.\footnote{Margaret Nowak writes that the term \textit{rangzen} is of recent origin. She argues that prior to the Chinese invasion and indoctrination (from 1949), no standard Tibetan words for modern political concepts like “independence”, “socialism”, or “exploitation” existed (1984, pp. 31-32).} Conflicts between people sympathizing with either of these two strategies also challenge the notion of the diasporic identity as continuous, uniform and stable, a theme I will return to later in this chapter. These strong conflict lines are, I will argue, crucial to understanding the strong emphasis on unity in the Tibetan exile community. As a background to the following chapters, I provide an outline of the two opposing positions, viz. that aiming at autonomy and that aiming at independence. I shall do this by introducing the central political actors in Dharamsala, positioning them within the political landscape of the Tibetan exile community.

\textbf{CTA and the Dalai Lama}

Based on Tibet’s de facto independence in 1950, the Dalai Lama and the exile government defined Tibetan independence as their political aim in the 1960s. However, in 1988 the Dalai Lama changed this aim to the current “Middle Way Approach”, seeking meaningful autonomy within the PRC. A year later he received the Nobel Peace Prize, after which the Tibetan leadership regarded it as difficult to again adopt the rigid goal of independence.

This change of approach should also be seen in relation to the talks in Beijing between representatives of the Chinese government and the Tibetan exile government. After the 1988 riots in Lhasa, Beijing announced that if the Dalai Lama gave up his campaign for Tibetan independence, he could return to China (although not necessarily to Tibet). In other words, adopting autonomy as the political goal was the condition for the Dalai Lama’s return (Goldstein, 1997, p. 87). However, these and subsequent talks led nowhere. In official exile circles, the change of stated political aim from independence to autonomy is explained differently, with an emphasis on continuity in policies. According to one of the parliamentarians I interviewed, the Middle Way Approach was not adopted suddenly, but developed over a period of time, beginning already in the 1970s. This parliamentarian pointed out that this had a number of reasons, the most urgent being the increasing migration of Chinese into Tibet. The hope of the Tibetan leadership was that if the aim of independence was abandoned, the Chinese authorities might be persuaded to save Tibetan civilization from the threat of extinction.

When the Dalai Lama retired as political leader in March 2011, CTA chose to continue to flag “autonomy” as their official political strategy. A pamphlet published by the exile Department of Information and International Relations stated that the essence of the Middle Way “is to secure genuine autonomy for the Tibetan people within the scope of the Constitution of the PRC” (2009, p. 5). Although CTA no longer seeks an independent Tibet, it still holds that the three...
main regions, U-Tsang, Amdo and Kham, together constitute Tibet, and that Tibetans constitute a single national group. The Middle Way Approach is inspired by the Buddhist idea of the value of the middle ground between two opposing ideas, playing on the connotations evoked by the prestigious Madhyamika ('Middle Way') philosophical school, which is of fundamental importance in Tibetan monastic culture. The main means of achieving such ground is through non-violent action, which the Tibetan leadership has been advocating ever since coming into exile, trying to engage with the Chinese leadership through dialogue. Non-violence has not yet been successful in producing results, but it remains a strategy that all Tibetan organizations, including those who advocate independence as their political aim, share with CTA.

**Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) and Students for a Free Tibet (SFT)**

From the 1970s a new generation of exile Tibetans began graduating from universities and college, a generation that was far more critical in their thinking than their parents (Kolås, 1996, p. 58) Young Tibetans in exile soon decided to hold a conference with the purpose of uniting exile youth. The Dalai Lama agreed and covered all the expenses for the conference (Avedon, 1985, pp. 140-141). TYC was founded on October 7, 1970 with the Dalai Lama’s blessings, and soon became a loud voice criticizing the exile Tibetan establishment. Over the years TYC continued to grow and today has 71 regional branches with over 15,000 members worldwide (Houston and Wright, 2003, p. 224), and is mainly funded through membership and voluntary donations. As Boyd writes, “The Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) has been a main ingredient in this growing awareness of the place of dissent in a democratic polity” (2005, p. 90). On its foundation it incorporated the Dalai Lama’s goal of independence – a goal that the Dalai Lama held at the time – and continues to fight for an independent Tibet. Apart from organizing political campaigns such as hunger strikes and protest marches, TYC engages in social and educational campaigns, and also organizes workshops, for example in leadership training for Tibetan youth. For the TYC activists, Tibet’s pre-1950 independence is an historical fact, and they refuse to settle for less than what they hold Tibetans are entitled to.

The relation between TYC and the exile leadership has become increasingly tense over the years, especially after the Dalai Lama adopted the Middle Way policy in 1988. Criticism from the younger generation has not been welcomed by the exile leadership, but is rather seen as disrespectful and “at worst a threat to their legitimate power” (Boyd, 2005, p. 93). TYC also has a contested reputation in the exile community as many label the organization as “anti-Dalai Lama” due to its focus on independence. One TYC activist told me that they are labeled as “traitors” in the exile community: “We are traitors in China, and in Tibet. Also here we are being

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57 TYC has organized many hunger strikes, for example the one in 1998 during which the first Tibetan, Thupten Ngodup, self-immolated. During my fieldwork, TYC organized a March from Dharamsala to Delhi, (Figure 20, chapter 4).

58 See also Brox (2012, p. 462).
treated as traitors by our own government. Our desire is rangzen [independence], and since rangzen is considered bad, those who stand for rangzen are treated accordingly”.

The activists, however, hold that difference of opinion is a fundamental right in any democratic society, and the main TYC office in Dharamsala firmly holds upholds independence as the organization’s main goal. Nevertheless, due to increasing pressure towards unity and conformity in exile, eight local TYC branches have accepted the Middle Way.

Students for a Free Tibet was established in 1991, aiming to engage students in the Tibetan struggle for freedom. Along with TYC, SFT also holds an independence stand, but enjoys a better reputation in the exile community, one reason perhaps being that TYC through the years has been led by people who have played an important role on the political scene, and were among the first to publicly voice opinions which did not harmonize with the politically correct views.

Along with smaller NGOs, such as the Regional Tibetan Youth Congress of Dharamsala and the Regional Tibetan Women’s Association of Dharamsala, SFT is one of the main organizers today of the “February 13” campaign (chapter 5), also known as Tibetan Independence Day, as well as well-established events such as the celebration of the Panchen Lama’s birthday or the candle-light vigils for self-immolators. SFT also organizes social or educational events, such as talks to raise awareness of the popular social medium WeChat or organizing film evenings, such as the Lhakar59 film series.

**Gu-chu-sum**

Gu-chu-sum was formed on September 21, 1991 by former political prisoners from Tibet. The name refers to the numbers, 9, 10 and 3 – representing three specific months when large-scale protests in Lhasa took place, viz. September 1987, October 1987 and March 1988. Many of the first members of the organization had fled Tibet after their participation in these demonstrations. Gu-chu-sum wishes to create awareness of the situation inside Tibet as well providing welfare services to former political prisoners and their families in exile. Since the organization was formed by Tibetans who had been imprisoned because of their commitment to rangzen, ‘independence’ was at the start the political aim of the organization. In September 2013, Gu-chu-sum unexpectedly changed its political goal of rangzen to autonomy, a decision that remains contested among the Gu-chu-sum employees and the members of the organization who had been imprisoned in Tibet for demonstrating for independence.

During my fieldwork, only a handful of people expressed to me their frustration at the conflict between upholders of rangzen and the Middle Way respectively. There is, however, still considerable tension beneath the surface (chapter 5). Although ‘autonomy’ is the official

59 I will return to Lhakar below.
position, it continues to be challenged, not only by organizations calling for rangzen, but also by individuals working in the CTA or in organizations that support the official position of negotiating with China for autonomy. The fact that self-immolations continue is seen by some of my interlocutors as an indication of the failure of the autonomy approach. One of them suggested,

*In exile, after 33 or 34 years of middle way hasn’t produced any change. Instead it has produced friction among the Tibetans themselves. His Holiness is no more our political leader, and also people inside Tibet are noticing that the Chinese are not responding to the middle way and maybe that we should go back to [demanding] complete independence, since the middle way has shown to be ineffective. This will gain momentum and will increase.*

Throughout this thesis the conflict line between autonomy and independence will move under and over the surface, both in the perceptions of the self-immolations and the practices commemorating these. Challenging the need for unity often found in diasporic settings, these conflicts often remain muted and, as will be clear in the following, represents a problematic issue in Dharamsala.

**The Tibetan diaspora**

*"I am Tibetan
But I am not from Tibet.
Never been there.
Yet I dream
of dying there"

Tenzin Tsundue, poet and activist (2013, p. 13).

The term ‘diaspora’ has traditionally been reserved for a group of people who for political or other reasons have migrated or sought exile in other countries. Thomas Hylland Eriksen writes in *Ethnicity and Nationalism* that the term was originally used for Jews in Europe whose primary identity – although they might have lived in Europe or elsewhere for generations – was connected to their ancestral land (2010, p. 186; see also Cohen, 2008). Further, he points out that the term diaspora emphasizes “continuity, stable collective identities, territoriality and boundaries” (2010, p. 187). Moreover, as Chris Vasantkumar points out, ‘diaspora’ often carries an inherent idea of a spatially and temporally distinct homeland to which the diaspora community looks (2013, p. 229).

Since 1959, the exile Tibetan community might also be called diasporic. Tibetans are in exile for political reasons, and the term diaspora also connects their primary identity to their ancestral land, carrying the inherent idea of a distinct homeland. Diaspora also emphasizes a continuous, homogeneous and stable collective identity, which is crucial for securing unity. I will
show, however, that in the exile Tibetan case, the emphasis on continuous and stable identities is problematic, because identities remain contested on the ground, as Houston and Wright (2003) also have argued. Instead they suggest studying diaspora both as a process and as a condition. According to them, viewing diaspora primarily as a condition, implies the unified and homogenous representation of identities, set by the nationalist discourse in exile. Diaspora as a process, on the other hand, makes visible the lived refugee experiences where the dominating representations are enacted and made meaningful in various ways. Studying diaspora both as a condition and as a process shows the dynamic interplay between ideas or representations and action. In the following, I draw on Houston and Wright’s understanding of diaspora and aim to show how “Tibetan-ness” carries different meanings for different people in Dharamsala. In order to show ways in which Tibetan diasporic identities are contested, in the following I shall describe events and debates around the Indian national elections in May 2014, an event that brought conflicting concerns to the fore.

**Indian elections and the question of Indian citizenship**

One day, right after the elections, Lhasang, the General Secretary of Gu-chu-sum, called me into his office. He sat at his desk, pointing at his computer screen. His Facebook page was open, showing a photo of the Dalai Lama greeting Modi, India’s prime minister-to-be. He had written the caption for the photo as “India’s next Prime Minister Narendra Modi”, and wanted me to check his spelling. Many Tibetans added Facebook postings about the Indian elections, often accompanied by a photo of the Dalai Lama meeting Modi. Lhasang did not vote in the elections, yet he, like many other Tibetans, whether born in Tibet or in exile, followed them anxiously.

The Indian elections brought to the surface discussions concerning Tibetan identity and the relation of exile Tibetans to their host country. All Tibetans born between 1950 and 1987 were given the right to vote, in spite of not having Indian citizenship. The Indian Citizenship Act, §3(1) (a) states, “[e]very person born in India, (a) on or after the 26th day of January, 1950, but before the 1st day of July, 1987; [...] shall be a citizen of India by birth” (landinfo.no). Although Tibetans born within this period have the right to apply for Indian citizenship, most of them choose not to do so. As an alternative, the Indian government grants them a Registration Certificate (RC), which has to be renewed annually. For those Tibetans who have become Indian voters, their RCs could be relinquished, meaning they would no longer have the status as

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60 [http://www.landinfo.no/asset/2958/1/2958_1.pdf](http://www.landinfo.no/asset/2958/1/2958_1.pdf) (acc.07.05.2015).

61 Even though Tibetans have the right by law to apply for Indian citizenship, to acquire it has never been easy, as Lhagyari Namgyal Dolkar’s case from 2008 shows. Although she was born in 1986, and thus had the right to apply for citizenship, she was denied it. However, she took her case to the High Court in New Delhi, and was finally granted citizenship in 2010, after two years of legal battle. [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/25-yr-old-first-Tibetan-to-be-Indian-citizen/articleshow/7323090.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/25-yr-old-first-Tibetan-to-be-Indian-citizen/articleshow/7323090.cms) (acc.01.06.2015).

62 The Tibetan Green Book, issued by CTA often has to be claimed on the basis of a RC.
“foreigners” or “self-claimed refugees”. My interlocutors did not know whether their RCs would be have to be relinquished by voting, causing considerable confusion, partly a result of the lack of clear guidelines from CTA, which has never encouraged Tibetans acquiring Indian citizenship.

Despite – or rather, because – of the lack of legal clarity, debates over the possible consequences of voting arose in Dharamsala around the elections. These debates did not merely address Tibetan participation in the national elections, but also the issue of applying for Indian citizenship. The elections brought to the surface concerns about the future of the Tibetan freedom struggle in exile, as well as preservation of Tibetan identity, challenging the notion of collective, stable diasporic identities.

Indian elections and Indian citizenship: loyalty, opportunities and dignity

A few days prior to the announcement of the election results, I had observed a discussion regarding the acquisition of Indian citizenship between two Tibetans, Shamba and Drukmo, at the SFT office. Shamba, a man in his late 20s, worked for SFT in Dharamsala, whereas Drukmo, in her early 20s, worked for Tibetan Women Association (TWA). Their discussion centered on the question of loyalty to the phayul (‘fatherland’), i.e. Tibet, on the one hand, and opportunities in India on the other. On the basis of this discussion I wish to argue that for some Tibetans the acquisition of citizenship, is not only a question of identity, but also dignity.

Drukmo was seated on the couch next to me and seemed to be busy with her work. Because it was Lhakar day, she was wearing traditional Tibetan clothes, a chupa she had inherited from her mother. Lhakar (meaning "white Wednesday"), initiated after the major uprisings in Tibet in 2008 (Lhakar.org), is a movement devoted to the preservation of Tibetan identity. It is marked every Wednesday, both in exile and some places inside Tibet, encouraging Tibetans to wear Tibetan clothes, eat Tibetan food, and speak Tibetan language. Soon a heated discussion arose between Drukmo and Shamba: whether to apply for Indian citizenship or not. During the discussion Drukmo was literally jumping out of her chair. “She is too emotional”, Shamba laughingly said to me. Shamba was in favor of Tibetans participating in the Indian elections, and did not seem to be against the idea of Tibetans applying for Indian citizenship. Tibetans will obtain greater rights, he argued. Although not having an Indian passport, he was

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63 I use the term “self-claimed refugees” as Tibetans in India are not officially classified as refugees, but as foreigners, since India is not bound by any international refugee convention. The term “self-claimed refugees” is also used by a Tibetan activist in this article: http://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/they-would-rather-be-tibetan-refugees-than-indian-voters/ (acc.08.05.2015).

64 There were also discussions as to whether the loss of RC would lead to the loss of the Green Book as well, which grants Tibetans specific rights.

65 The SFT office was the place where everyone came together during the lunch hour, including some women from TWA.

66 Known as the "soul day" of the Dalai Lama.

67 Some of the opinions expressed here are paraphrased; those which are direct quotations are marked by quotation marks.
considering applying for one, despite being discouraged by CTA. Drukmo, in contrast, was strongly against participation in the elections and acquiring Indian citizenship, emphasizing that if Tibetans became citizens of India, it would disable them from legitimately fighting for a free Tibet. Besides, she said, her loyalty lay with Tibet, not with India.

Drukmo’s arguments were not uncommon. In the media, the well-known poet and activist Tenzin Tsundue had also argued against voting, invoking the same reasons (Tibetan Review, July 29, 2014). For him the main goal of Tibetans is still to return to their homeland. A CTA member expressed similar opinions to me:

*Since you are here (in exile) then you have to take care of your children, take care of your family, but at the same time Tibet. So I have been telling my people why we came to India. We did not come here to settle down. We came here to carry on with our struggle, and eventually go back to Tibet. That should be the first motivation. Living here, you of course have to live, take care...but still if every Tibetan starts thinking about themselves, then who will struggle for Tibet? You look at His Holiness, at this age he is still travelling, travelling here and there. Why he is doing so? For him there is no need, but still he is doing it for us.*

Citizenship and the struggle for Tibet were however not directly related for all my interlocutors. Shamba insisted that his Tibetan identity was deeply ingrained. A piece of paper can’t strip him of his Tibetan identity or decide where his loyalty lies, was his opinion. To support his point he said that his family is Tibetan, he speaks Tibetan, eats Tibetan food and is also working for the cause of Tibet. For Drukmo, on the other hand, the acquisition of citizenship is more than just a piece of paper; in the long run it will effect Tibetans’ self-representation, and their involvement with the Tibetan struggle will diminish as a result of having tied a legal bond to India. According to her, Tibetans in exile hold a particular political responsibility.

Shamba disagreed: most Tibetans, who are not directly involved in politics, don’t give that much consideration to political affairs. They are living their personal lives and have goals that don’t always correlate with the political interests of CTA or the political activists.

This debate between Shamba and Drukmo represents the two dominating positions during the elections, conceptualized in terms of a conflict between loyalty to Tibet and access to opportunities. The argument for opportunities is based on the need of asserting one’s dignity as a human being. A female professional activist from Gu-chu-sum, Metok, holds an Indian passport. She expressed to me the same opinions as Shamba, but in addition she argued for participation in the elections and her own acquisition of Indian citizenship in terms of “rights”. I suggest that obtaining citizenship in terms of ‘rights’ is, on a more fundamental level, perceived as a matter of dignity.

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Metok was one of the Tibetans in Dharamsala who was determined to vote. “I have to use my right”, she told me. So she left for Dehra Dun (her “hometown”) to vote on May 7. Her case was somewhat unique. She was a descendant of a royal family that had ruled Tibet for a long time, yet she had made the decision to become an Indian citizen. Still, this did not in any way diminish her Tibetan identity or loyalty to Tibet. She is a committed supporter of independence, and on one occasion said that one of the reasons why she could not support autonomy, was that she could never stand witnessing the Chinese flag on Tibetan soil. Her strong bond to Tibet was related to her noble background, as well as the fact that her late father had been a political prisoner for over 20 years.

Despite Metok’s strong emotional bond to Tibet, her life in India evoked sentiments for her host country as well. In May I joined Metok and her Indian friend, Nandini, for a short visit to Delhi, and as we were passing through Connaught Place, our glance fell upon the gigantic Indian flag flying in the wind in Central Park. Both Nandini and I were touched and had a feeling of pride; Metok felt the same, saying, “Even though I am Tibetan the Indian flag still touches something in me”.

However, Metok told me that this was not the reason why she applied for Indian citizenship, nor was it simply due to the opportunities citizenship could open. Rather she saw it as her right, as she repeated on several occasions. Having been born and raised in India, she regarded citizenship as her right. I believe this emphasis on rights is a matter of dignity, in terms of having value as a human being, which the status of being a refugee denies. Being a stateless refugee or a foreigner gives no access to rights on a national level. Ingsel, a man in his late 30s, made the point that for him citizenship is about gaining dignity and value as a human being, and he was planning to apply for citizenship soon. “With a passport, I will have more dignity, more value”, he said, adding, “I can take my family for vacation or something, you know”. When disputes between the local Indians and Tibetans take place in Dharamsala, a common insult directed at Tibetans is their status as ‘refugees’ or ‘foreigners’. Although Ingsel’s move might be thought to have negative consequences for the Tibetan freedom struggle, still, as the father of two children, it is more important for him to secure their future.

Due to his family commitments, it is not possible for Ingsel to actively contribute to the Tibetan freedom struggle in exile. He expressed this in the following way:

If a man goes to the market to buy vegetables or something else for his family, and hears an announcement for a protest, political happening or gathering or whatever, will he just drop everything and join that? No, because he has a family he has to go to. He has other priorities in life.

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69 To me Metok came across as “more Tibetan” than other India-born Tibetans. For example, she always referred to her boyfriend with the honorific term “la”, as well as expressing that she could never imagine marrying a non-Tibetan, and certainly not an Indian. Fjeld (2005) argues that the nobility in Lhasa regards themselves as cultural custodians, which sheds some interesting light on my own observations.
Still, he had been politically active in his younger days, participating in many demonstrations and, once even getting locked up in Tihar jail in Delhi with fellow demonstrators. People hold multiple identities, although some identities are more heavily invested in than others (Moore, 1994 in: Winther, 2008, pp. 204-205). Ingsel is not only an exile Tibetan struggling for the freedom of his country, as Tibetans usually are portrayed by CTA and NGOs. While this part of his identity was more predominant in his younger days, today his role as a father and a husband is more heavily invested in than other identities. Today, Ingsel is well-settled in India, married with a house of their own and plans for a small business.

Another of my interlocutors, Kalsang born and raised in exile who also was well-settled in India, had in spite of firmly expressing to me that Tibet was "his country", at the same time expressed (on the condition that he was anonymized in my thesis) no wish for returning or settling down in a free Tibet in the future. When asked why, he replied, "To be honest, I am afraid. Tibetans who live there are very different from us". In Dharamsala I heard many rumors, circulated by both Tibetans as well as local Indians, that the Tibetan 'newcomer' boys have an aggressive nature, and do not hesitate to stab people during fights. Kalsang's reluctance to move to Tibet was partly related to these rumors, which he had himself repeated. In addition, he said, all his relatives are in India. "I have everything in India. Why would I settle down in Tibet?" Almost 60 years have passed since the uprising in Lhasa in 1959, and this has created a gap between Tibetans in exile and those in Tibet. Nyima, a full-time activist from SFT, told me, "When Tibetans from Tibet come into exile, we see that there are many gaps between us. I mean it has been 60 years. They have been raised differently and we have been raised differently".

In contrast to Kalsang, however, Nyima wishes to return to a free Tibet in the future. "I will go back, obviously, I am working so hard for it. I know if I go back, everything will not be smooth. But if we don't go back then who will?" Nyima's last sentence expresses concerns that are similar not only to those of CTA members, but also Tibetans who are not engaged in politics on a professional level. In one of my conversations with, Jigme, a former monk in his mid-40s, I mentioned to him that a neighboring ama-la ('mother') in her late 50s was well-settled in India. I added that she had no memories of Tibet since she came into exile in the age of six or seven. To my surprise Jigme became irritated, saying, "These people need to be taught a lesson, maybe then she will remember something from Tibet". Later on he repeated, as he had in many earlier conversations, that Tibetans in exile are getting too comfortable in India and are only concerned with earning money. For Jigme, renewing his RC annually is something rather satisfying, for "it reminds me that I belong somewhere else".

I describe these observations to show that, identities remain contested among exile Tibetans, pointing to the fact that "Tibetans" in Dharamsala are far from being a homogenous
refugee community. It also illustrates a concern with preserving a cultural and ethnic identity which is felt especially strongly in a diasporic community.\(^{70}\)

**Identity as process and product\(^{71}\)**

The meanings of “Tibetan-ness” or “refugee” are not univocal, they are constantly negotiated and changing. Different backgrounds and circumstances lead people in different directions or imply different experiences of living in exile in India. For some, a concept like ‘refugee’ is a vital part of their Tibetan identity and their self-representation (in other words, is more invested in than the other identities the individual holds), thereby being one of the important reasons for their continuous political work. This is the case with Tibetans like Drukmo or Tenzin Tsundue. Others, such as Metok, Shamba or Ingsel, though they share with other Tibetans the experience of being refugees, and also their love for Tibet, they do not wish to be labeled as refugees or being treated as such.

Identifying oneself as Tibetan does not mean the same for all Tibetans. One way to understand the differences is to concretize commonly used abstractions in order to capture the interplay between ideas and processes, as suggested by Roy Wagner (1986 [1981]). Wagner argues that ideas or abstractions are meaningless unless concretized with reference to human activity. For Tibetans who argued against participation in the Indian elections, this implied recapturing the meaning of Tibetan-ness in terms of loyalty to their fatherland Tibet. Their ideas of Tibetan-ness were, to use Wagner’s word, “extended” (Wagner, 1981, pp. 38-39)\(^{72}\) with the example of Tibetans who voted; those who voted were understood to become “less Tibetan”. For those that did vote, their ideas or conventions on Tibetan-ness were extended as well; being a Tibetan could also mean casting a vote in the elections or holding Indian citizenship.

Identity is never something ready-made, but rather is, as Anand argues, “a product of constant negotiation and renegotiation among several interrelated discursive and material factors” (Anand, 2000, p. 284; Lisa Malkki, 1997, p. 71). Here I understand values, exile and Indian politics, or religion as discursive factors, and education, economy, family situation, or legal status as material factors.

\(^{70}\) Another major concern expressed to me, for the most part by Tibetans born inside Tibet, is the preservation of the Tibetan language. Two full-time male activists, one from TYC and another from Gu-chu-sum, said that Tibetans born in exile do not speak “pure” Tibetan, since it is too mixed with English, nor do they, in their opinion, excel in written Tibetan. They believe that the Tibetan language is the most important aspect of Tibetan identity. These concerns for the preservation of the “pure” Tibetan language are also discussed by a young Tibetan, born in USA, on Lhakar Diaries: [http://lhakardiaries.com/2014/04/30/speak-tibetan-stupid-concepts-of-pure-tibetan-the-politics-of-belonging/](http://lhakardiaries.com/2014/04/30/speak-tibetan-stupid-concepts-of-pure-tibetan-the-politics-of-belonging/) (acc.08.05.2015). The article also addresses concerns, of racial purity among Tibetans. Childs and Barkin (2006) also discuss these concerns writing that CTA has attempted to discourage Tibetans from having social relations with Indians and Westerners. Further, they also write that some leaders have publicly spoken against Tibetans marrying non-Tibetans, on the grounds that it will dilute the Tibetan race (2006, pp. 46-49). During my fieldwork, only one Tibetan openly expressed this opinion to me.

\(^{71}\) A formulation by Anand, 2000.

\(^{72}\) See: Sørum (2003), for another application of Wagner.
That identities are “dynamic, processual, and contextual”, as for instance Zdzislaw Mach (1993, p. 5) points out, is well known in anthropology today. Identities emerge through our involvement with the world (or others), through action, much as Ingold describes the identity of a stone: a stone’s “stoniness is not in the stone’s ‘nature’, in its materiality. Nor is it merely in the mind of the observer or practitioner. Rather, it emerges through the stone’s involvement in its total surroundings” (2011, p. 32). Likewise, what Anand terms the discursive and material factors together constitute the “total surroundings” for exile Tibetans, in relation to which a variety of diasporic identities form.

There are situations when exile-born-Tibetans feel a strong connection and belonging to India, as Metok did on seeing the Indian flag in Connaught Place, or when Tibetan youngsters are listening to Hindi songs, or when India plays cricket against Pakistan. When ‘diaspora’ and being a ‘refugee’ is understood merely as a condition, identities become reduced to homogenous and static ready-made products. The lived refugee experience in the context of diaspora as a condition becomes conventionalized. For Wagner (1986 [1981]), conventionalization involves a limitation of meaning, indeed becomes meaningless, if it is not concretized so that the relationship between the idea of being a Tibetan and of Tibetan-ness and the persons supposed to represent these ideas becomes visible. Thus for Tibetans who participated in the elections or followed the debates about the elections, a new set of meanings was added to being Tibetan.

Though identities remain contested and are constantly negotiated, the idea of diaspora as a condition whereby “Tibetan identities assume a singular, unified and homogenous form” (Houston and Wright, 2003, p. 217) is appealing because it succeeds in strengthening a sense of unity and belonging in the diaspora. Cohen lends support to this: “While the increased complexity and deterritorialization of identities are valid phenomena and constitutive of a small minority of diasporas, ideas of home and often the stronger inflection of homeland remain powerful discourses” (2008, p. 2), a statement which certainly rings true in the case of the Tibetan diaspora.

As Tibetan youngsters grow up with stories from Tibet, concepts such as “Tibetan”, “refugee” or the Dalai Lama himself, give them a sense of belonging in environments considered far from home (Venturino, 1997, pp. 101-106). In the long run, specific concepts become a vital part of their own self-identification and self-representation, though meaningful in different ways. The following chapters will show how attempts are made at reproducing Tibetan identity by highlighting specific values and goals, in other words, at creating collective homogenous identities in exile and thus keeping the Tibetan community intact in a diasporic setting.
Figure 7: Children practicing Tibetan traditional dance, Tibetan Children’s Village (TCV) Day School.

Figure 8: Making soap bubbles, Panchen Lama’s birthday on April 25, TCV Day School.
3 Self-immolation: sacrificing one’s life

“I am giving my body as an offering of light to chase away the darkness, to free all beings from suffering”.

Last message of Lama Sobha, self-immolated on January 8, 2012

In this chapter my aim is to present how the self-immolations are made meaningful among Tibetans in Dharamsala, drawing on interviews as well as informal conversations, observations, online discussions, literature on the self-immolations and publications and statements by the CTA, the Dalai Lama and various NGOs.

The self-immolations are, as already mentioned, understood by Tibetans in exile to be a sacrifice. This understanding is often based on the notes and messages self-immolators have left behind, stating they are “offering” or “sacrificing themselves”. While it is not possible to know in what ways each self-immolator understands his or her action and to grasp the complexity of the motivation behind the act, I focus on the efforts of Tibetans in exile to interpret the self-immolations in terms of a culturally meaningful death. Their interpretation is guided by faith in certain values, and should therefore also be seen as a response to the Chinese leadership’s condemnation of the self-immolations as suicide and the self-immolators as criminals (*The New York Times*, January 31, 2013), or even as terrorists and ‘bad Buddhists’ (Jagou, 2012, pp. 84-85). This categorization, I suggest, can be viewed as an attempt to reduce the self-immolations to a “bad death”, and hence to undermine acts that the Chinese authorities regard as a threat to national unity (Jagou, 2012, p. 82).

As noted in the introduction, self-immolations have been understood as sacrifice ever since the first one, when Thupten Ngodup self-immolated in New Delhi in 1998. Today Thupten Ngodup is commonly referred to as “Pawo Thupten Ngodup”. *Pawo*, literally ‘hero’, is now frequently translated as ‘martyr’. Tsering Shakya reports that the Tibetan community in North America holds an annual basketball tournament in Thupten Ngodup’s honor, and a song has also been written about him (2012a, p. 21). Further, Tsering Shakya writes that his “death has now become ritualized and a part of the political memory of the Tibetan diaspora” (2012a, p. 21). In Dharamsala, April 29 – the day Thupten Ngodup died – is commemorated as Martyr’s Day.74


See also: [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/07/tibet-selfimmolations-monks-aba-china](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/07/tibet-selfimmolations-monks-aba-china) (acc. 27.05.2015).

This chapter starts by introducing the role of religious offerings in Tibetan Buddhism and as a central aspect of Tibetan daily religious practice, looking particularly at fire offerings. Although the self-immolations are politically motivated, it is also important to contextualize them within Tibetan Buddhism, also because the first self-immolators were monastics or former monks. Further I describe how the self-immolations are made meaningful among Tibetans in exile. I will analyze the self-immolations as a sacrifice by applying Michael Lambek’s (2007) understanding of sacrifice ‘as a kind of beginning’, because I suggest that they can be regarded as an attempt at substantiating a beginning for Tibetans in exile, not be confused with change, although a new beginning of course carries a potential for change. As Tendor Dorjee, a Tibetan activist, told me, "the self-immolations are just a spark, which kindles the actual fire." Towards the end of this chapter, I shall go further into the notion of sacrifice, suggesting that self-immolations are made to be a "good" form of death for exile Tibetans.

**Tibetan Buddhism and offerings**

Offerings are a central aspect of the daily religious practice among Tibetans. Geoffrey Samuel argues that Tibetan Buddhism is relevant to lay people as a practical religion, its main goals being protection of the communities and ensuring the good health and prosperity of its members (2012, p. 165). The act of offering is an important part of this practical religion, as both modest daily offerings and occasional large-scale ones are part of a transaction which serves to gain merit and ensure good karma. The most common form of offering is that made to monks, monasteries and lamas, in the form of food, clothes or money (2012, p. 168). Making offerings to monasteries on a regular basis is regarded as the most important kind of offering, since lay people depend on the monks for carrying out significant rituals, such as the death rituals.

An important category of offerings performed by monks are ‘fire offerings’. There are different kinds of fire offerings; some are performed by lay people, others by Buddhist tantric practitioners. In Tibetan Buddhism fire is associated with the highest religious goals; it is a symbol for the meditative state (the inner fire bringing non-duality) and enlightenment. In all
cases of fire offerings, be they internal or external, fire is believed to transmit, transpose, and transform, creating and annihilating at the same time (Bentor 2000, pp. 606-610).

Following Van Gennep’s insights (1960, as discussed in Metcalf and Huntington, 1992, pp. 29-33) on identifying a common set of features in different rituals, I suggest that a self-immolation can be seen as a fire offering. In the quote at the beginning of this chapter, Lama Sobha called his own self-immolation "an offering of light", which, although annihilating the person carrying it out, also has the potential for creation, in the sense of transforming that person into a martyr. Understanding the self-immolations as fire offerings, inspired by a religious tradition, is one of several possible interpretations. Whether this interpretation is valid for all the self-immolators is impossible to know. However, as I will show, my interlocutors consider religious interpretations relevant and should for that reason be taken into account, although, I hold, interpretations based on Buddhist terminology and ideas also have to be understood in relation to the nationalist discourse in exile.

To better comprehend how the narrative of sacrifice is tightly intertwined with the current nationalism among Tibetans in exile, it is necessary to apply a historical perspective. In the following I want to point to similar forms of protests, and to self-immolation referred to in Buddhist texts. I suggest that the contemporary Tibetan self-immolations should also be reflected upon in relation to these texts.

**Suicide as sacrifice in Tibet**

Robert Barnett argues that suicide is not an uncommon response to political events in Tibet, citing numerous cases during the Cultural Revolution and more recent years (2012, pp. 58-59). During the Cultural Revolution, in Lhasa, "it is said that guards had to be posted along the Kyichu river to prevent people, even entire families, jumping into the river" (2012, p. 58). Moreover, Tsering Shakya (2012a) states that although there is no history of self-immolations as political protest in Tibet, the act itself is not unknown in Buddhist scriptures that are well known in Tibet. For instance, the *Lotus Sutra* describes a self-immolation, committed by prince Bhaishajyaraja as an offering to the Buddhas. His act is said to be motivated by the highest aspiration in Buddhism, being performed for the benefit of all living beings. For this reason his self-immolation is praised in the *Lotus Sutra* as a form of sacrifice and the prince as a Bodhisattva (Kern, 1965, pp. 378-380). Another example is Tsuklak Trengwa’s history of Buddhism in Tibet from the sixteenth century, where he describes the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk, Dolchung Korpon, in the 11th century, who self-immolated in front of the most sacred statue in the main temple in Lhasa, the Jowo, "for the purpose of ensuring moral conduct among monks" (Warner, 2012; Tsering, 2010). Tashi Tsering also mentions Karma Chagme (1613-1678), "who gave one of his left fingers as an offering lamp to the Jowo" (Tsering, 2010 in Buffetrille 2012, p. 9).
As Shakya (2012a) points out, there is no Tibetan word which is exactly equivalent to the word “sacrifice”. In Chinese Buddhism, on the other hand, self-immolations are well-documented since the fourth century AD (Benn, 2012). Shakya suggests that it was the Chinese Communists who introduced Tibetans to the political act of self-sacrifice, in the 1960s. He argues that Tibetans have appropriated the concept of sacrifice “from the language of resistance coined and championed by the Communist Party” (Shakya, 2012a). ‘Sacrifice’ in the Tibetan context therefore has to be understood within the evolving discourse of Tibetan nationalism.

With this historical background in mind, I will move on to present my own empirical findings on how Tibetans in Dharamsala talk about the self-immolations, validate them as a sacrifice, transforming the act of setting oneself ablaze into a meaningful death, as well as proclaiming and manifesting particular values.

**Self-immolation as sacrifice**

Upon my arrival in McLeod Ganj, I met an established consensus on the self-immolations as a form of sacrifice and an act of non-violence. Moreover, there was a consensus that the one and only reason causing these horrendous acts was the Chinese policy inside Tibet, involving the ongoing repression and discrimination of Tibetans. There were, however, different opinions as to whether such actions should be applauded or not and what role they should have in the Tibetan political struggle. Nevertheless, the self-immolators’ status as pawo (‘heroes’ and, by extension, ‘martyrs’) in the Tibetan community is, I will argue, uncontested. These findings are based on 30 interviews with Tibetans from various backgrounds: CTA members, professional activists from TYC, Gu-chu-sum, SFT and International Tibetan Network, monks, lay people, as well as informal conversations with many others in Dharamsala.

In the following I will present a selection of quotes that represent these views. Thereafter I will present the views of two Tibetan men who set themselves on fire (but survived), based on my interviews with them.

The use of the words ‘sacrifice’ and especially ‘non-violence’ when speaking of the self-immolations is so common that Tibetans used them without elaborating (unless asked) on their sacrificial and non-violent nature. In some of the quotes presented below, Buddhism is explicitly invoked to address and justify the acts as sacrifice. The reference to Buddhism is important, firstly because killing oneself normally constitutes a form of suicide in Buddhism, and secondly because it is Buddhism, with the Dalai Lama at the forefront, that conditions the discourse of Tibetan nationalism. The quotes referring to Buddhism are thus not only religious explanations, but also, I hold, grounded in the nationalist discourse.

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Although suicide as a form of martyrdom is known to have taken place among Buddhists, it is still a controversial practice (Jerryson, 2010). *Vinaya*, the corpus of regulations governing monastic life in Buddhism, gives clear sanctions against the taking of life, including one’s own (Craig, 2012; Jerryson, 2010). Well-known examples are the suicides of Buddhist monks during the Vietnam war, starting with the monk Thich Quang Duc’s self-immolation in 1963.
Karma, a male CTA member in his mid-50s, expressed it this way:

*In Buddhism it is said that among taking lives, taking one's own is the most sinful. There is an ongoing debate whether these acts are in conflict with Buddhism. The motivation for this kind of sacrifice is the conviction that 'my life is the most precious thing I have and I am giving it up for the good of the Tibetan people.' So with that selfless motivation, Chinese leaders can also escape the sin of killing and torturing the Tibetan people. This is the highest form of sacrifice, benefitting other sentient beings.*

Karma invoked Buddhism to address the sacrificial nature of these acts, and thus highlighted the altruistic motivation inspiring them. The monk Bhutuk (26) referred to the well-known story of the tigress to illustrate the sacrificial nature of the self-immolations:

*It is a very great sacrifice. In Buddhism there are stories about the Buddha's previous lives. In one of his lives he sacrifices his life to a very sick tigress, by cutting his limbs and feeding her. The self-immolations in Tibet are like that. The self-immolators self-immolate for the sake of Tibetan culture, which will be very helpful for the world if it is preserved.*

These quotes exemplify that although there is no tradition of self-immolation as a form of offering or protest in Tibet, religious explanations of the self-immolations are offered and religious meanings activated. Indeed, as these quotes illustrate, self-immolations are characterized as offerings to benefit all sentient beings, on the basis of the underlying motivation.76 Buddhism contributes to making sense of these actions as “good deaths”. At the same time, this invalidates the Chinese categorization of the self-immolations as suicide and the self-immolators as criminals and ‘bad Buddhists’. The messages left behind by the self-immolators referring to their act as a sacrifice or offering, is often activated upon making the self-immolations meaningful as a sacrifice, as for instance Lama Sobha’s message quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Another interpretative frame, found in the second quote, are the *Jataka* tales, describing the Buddha in his previous life sacrificing his body with an altruistic motivation, thus achieving a “good death”. Among the *Jatakas*, one of the most popular tale is the story of the hungry tigress to which Buddha offered his body as food in to order to save the lives of her cubs (Craig, 2012). The self-immolators are ascribed by most Tibetans the same altruistic motivation. Lama Sobha also mentioned this tale in the audio message he left behind: *“I am sacrificing my body with the firm conviction and a pure heart just as the Buddha bravely gave his body to a hungry tigress. All the Tibetan heroes too have sacrificed their lives with similar principles”*.77

Other Tibetans invoked nationalist sentiments rather than Buddhism. To them, self-immolation is a sacrifice, an action undertaken for the Tibetan nation, transforming the self-immolator into a martyr. Blood sacrifices play an important constitutive part of all nationalist

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76 See Williams (1997, pp. 205-230) on the significance of motivation in Buddhism.
identities according to Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle (1996). The willingness to sacrifice oneself is “the sign of the patriot, the proven and the true member of the nation-group” (1996, p. 773). That is exactly how the self-immolators are talked about in the following quotes.

Metok (26), the female professional activist we met in the previous chapter, expressed the opinion that,

For me, it is a pure martyrdom. It is not something easy to decide upon, saying ‘I want to sacrifice my life for this nation’, you know. For the cause, we know in exile, there are like so many politics going on, but for these people, it is just the purity, like no selfishness. It is just, ‘I am going to sacrifice my life for this nation’ – and this is just it – its pure martyrdom, a self-immolation. So I really look up to these people, I respect what they have done. These are like true martyrs for me.

For Metok the self-immolators are the true patriots, “the proven and the true member of the nation group”. These are people she identifies with, imbuing her identity with nationalist sentiments. When addressing the self-immolations, many Tibetans, while recognizing their sacrificial nature, emphasized that they cannot be regarded as “desperate acts”, as often claimed by the Chinese authorities. Thus Nyima, a female professional activist in her late 20s, said:

For me, these are not even desperate acts as many call them. I think it’s like they are trying to say they have control over their own bodies. The Chinese government can control the land, whatever they want, but they themselves have control over their bodies and I am going to choose how I am going to end it. It’s not an easy thing to do.

I suggest that since suicide is normally understood as a desperate act and accordingly as a “bad death”, it was important for many Tibetans to insist that the act of setting oneself on fire cannot be regarded as desperate. On the contrary, it is important for exile Tibetans to focus on their heroic nature, motivated by national sentiments. They are an act of taking control over one’s own body, (Parry, 2004, p. 269) and hence of resistance to a state that claims ownership of these bodies. A young Tibetan man, Pempa (28), expressed it in these words:

Sacrifice and suicide are different. Suicide is about accepting that I lose to my problems, my pain. It is an act of giving up. Sacrifice is not giving up: ‘I am dying for my nation. Rather than letting the enemy win, I rather die’.

Central to the distinction made above between suicide and sacrifice is the question of motivation. In the first quotes Buddhist knowledge is taken in use to explain the motivation while in the latter ones by applying national sentiments. Even when Buddhism is not referred to explicitly, it is still activated discursively in order to argue against the condemnation of self-immolation as a suicide. These excerpts exemplify what I found to be a common way for exile Tibetans to make the self-immolations meaningful as a sacrifice, namely pointing to their underlying motivation, regarded as inspired by altruism and unselfishness, virtues that rank as
the highest in Mahayana Buddhism,\textsuperscript{78} transforming the self-immolations into moral acts. At the same time, the sacrifice is understood as being made for a higher cause – the Tibetan freedom struggle.

These are the dominating ways of talking about the self-immolations, but I also met Tibetans who talked about it differently. Although they also understood the self-immolations to be a sacrifice, this did not involve an acceptance. Such opinions were only expressed to me by lay people who were born in Tibet and not involved in politics professionally.\textsuperscript{79} In the following I will present some of these views, which are critical to this form of protest, and also question whether the motivation behind them is the same in each case. I argue that the latter views points towards a complexity of motivation, something which is difficult to generalize about.

**The problem of generalizing**

Pema, a man in his late 20s, expressed his opinion in this way:

*First thing, it is a big waste of human life. I believe there are better options. These people have faith in religion, love for their country and people. They have much courage and determination, but if you look at the sacrifice and action afterwards – there is a big gap. If it was me, I wouldn’t self-immolate. There is no change... How much does a human life mean? It is too much waste of strong people.*

Though Pema regards the self-immolations as a form of sacrifice, he believes that the sacrifice has not served its purpose; it has not brought any significant change. He also expressed the view that the self-immolations are a result of a lack of knowledge among Tibetans in Tibet, saying that they do not know how things function on an international level. Similar views were also expressed by other young men who were born in Tibet.

While Pema said that he did not approve of self-immolations, two other young men born in Tibet, Wangchuk and Dhondup, expressed doubts as to whether one can really fully know the motivation behind these actions. Wangchuk was quite outspoken, while Dhondup was quiet and mostly nodded in agreement. According to Wangchuk, the physical act of setting oneself on fire is a form of suicide, although it most certainly is a sacrifice also. When I mentioned to him that the majority of the activists I had spoken to characterized these acts as a great form of sacrifice, he waved his hand at me in a resigned way, saying, "These people know what to say", an opinion also expressed by other Tibetans, born both in exile and Tibet, who encouraged me to speak to "normal" people, instead of professional activists. Furthermore, Wangchuk found it hard to generalize about the self-immolations, because in most cases it was impossible to know the motivation behind them. "Confusion comes when we do not know the motivation", he said. In the

\textsuperscript{78} The Vietnamese Thich Quang Duc who self-immolated in Vietnam in 1963 is remembered in South Vietnam as a "A being close to attaining Buddhahood" (Gouin, 2014, p. 177).

\textsuperscript{79} This does not mean that all lay people born inside Tibet spoke of the self-immolations in such terms. Most of them spoke of the self-immolations as presented earlier.
last second of their life people can shout they are doing this for their country or people, Wangchuk continued, “But who can really know anything about their motivation?”

Wangchuk struggled with generalizing about the motivation behind these actions. However, he did not refer to the self-immolations, apart from the physical act, as a form of suicide. As I know from my experience of talking with ordinary Tibetans, many find it hard to state definite opinions on the topic. Lobsang (30), a monk born in Kham, also found it difficult to talk about the self-immolations. He differentiated between two “categories” of self-immolators on the basis of motivation: “One type of self-immolation is Buddhism, the other is not Buddhism”. For him, the latter category is often accompanied by anger, resulting in bad karma. Even though Lobsang expressed that this category of self-immolations was “not Buddhism”, this should not be taken to mean that he regarded them as invalid. It rather meant that from a Buddhist perspective, anger at the moment of death is not considered good, as it can be regarded as a form of violence.\footnote{When the Dalai Lama visited Thupten Ngodup at the Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital on April 28, 1998 – the day before he passed away – he made a request to Thupten Ngodup: “The Dalai Lama told the conscious man that he should not harbor any feeling of hatred towards the Chinese” (Jamyang Norbu, Shadow Tibet, August 6, 1998). In Tibetan Buddhism, harboring anger at the moment of death can result in an unfortunate rebirth.}

I believe that this is what Lobsang meant, for although he distinguished between the self-immolations according to Buddhist views on the importance of the state of mind at the moment of death, he also compared these acts to similar acts on another level, asserting that whether “Buddhist” or “non-Buddhist”, the self-immolations are “political” and “good for Tibet”. He also justified killing oneself for the sake of others, which he believes the self-immolators are doing, but based on his separation between “Buddhist” and “non-Buddhist” self-immolations, I argue that for him it is rather a question of distinguishing between violence and non-violence.

In fact, the question of whether the self-immolations are violent or non-violent is addressed more frequently than whether they are sacrifice or suicide. The dominant opinion among exile Tibetans is that they constitute the highest form of non-violence. If Tibetans refer to the act of setting oneself on fire as “violent”, it is only in relation to the physical violence inflicted by the individual on his or her own body.

**Self-immolation as non-violence**

In addition to suicide being, generally, regarded as a sin in Buddhism, thus potentially rendering the self-immolations contested, violence is in direct conflict with the Dalai Lama’s political strategy which, in turn, is based on Buddhist ethics. At the outset, the Dalai Lama stated that he opposed the self-immolations since it would appear to be a form of violence against oneself. After Thupten Ngodup’s self-immolation in 1998 he expressed,

*I am deeply saddened by this. For many years, I have been able to persuade the Tibetan people to eschew violence in our freedom struggle. Today, it is clear that a sense of frustration and urgency is*
building up among many Tibetans, as evidenced by the unto-death hunger strike and the tragic incident of yesterday.81

In recent years, however, his position has become more ambiguous, as will be seen below. When the question of violence was addressed by a number of my interlocutors, it became clear that they did not understand self-immolation as a form of violence. In fact, Tibetans with whom I discussed this all agreed that self-immolation constitutes a form of non-violence. Motivation was put forward as defining self-immolation as non-violence. Their non-violent nature was also justified with reference to their effect, as they did not result in harm to others. This understanding of non-violence represents a Gandhian view, for according to Gandhi, non-violence can legitimately involve infringing violence on oneself for the sake of others.82 In recent years the Dalai Lama, too, has characterized self-immolation as a form of non-violence due to its underlying motivation which does not involve causing harm to others (Daily News & Analysis, November 18, 2012).83 The CTA likewise holds that the self-immolations show the respect of Tibetans for the Dalai Lama’s principle of non-violence.84

Gandhi’s non-violence also points to the connection between nationalism and dead bodies, as the violence a self-immolator inflicts on his or her body is legitimized by being regarded as being done for the sake of others: the Tibetan people. Gandhi’s definition of non-violence thus makes self-immolation a patriotic (heroic) act. Kirti Rinpoche85 said the following:

*The act itself is violent. Burning yourself, fire, is quite violent, but it is not harmful. The self-immolators have not even hit anyone, caused others harm. They are sacrificing their life only. It is a violent act, but it is not harmful. They did not even direct bad words to the Chinese government. They have written messages which we can read and in these they have not written any bad words. They only want freedom and return of His Holiness.*

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81 http://www.tibet.to/tyc1998/tyce.htm#09 (acc.18.05.2015). In Buddhism inflicting deliberate self-harm to oneself is not acceptable (Ardley, 2003, p. 48). Prior to the 1998 hunger strike, however, TYC had requested the Dalai Lama not to intervene or attempt to stop the hunger strike, something he had agreed to (Ardley, 2003, p. 47).

82 http://www.mkgandhi.org/africaneedsgandhi/gandhi’s_philosophy_of_nonviolence.htm (acc.12.05.2015). In exile, the former prime minister Samdhong Rinpoche has for a long time expressed his adherence to Gandhi’s ideas.


84 http://solidaritywithtibet.org/faqs/ “Solidarity with Tibet” is a campaign launched by CTA in December 2012. Here CTA describes the self-immolations as a form of non-violence, insisting that they cause no harm or violence to others: “Tibetan self-immolations are the ultimate selfless form of civil disobedience for a greater common cause” (acc.18.05.2015).

85 The highest lama of Kirti Monastery in Dharamsala. Kirti Monastery in Ngaba County, Sichuan, is one of the biggest Tibetan monasteries along with Drepung and Sera. 13 of the 142 who have self-immolated so far were monks in Kirti Monastery, while 11 of 142 were former monks at the same monastery (ICT, April 14, 2015) https://www.savetibet.org/resources/fact-sheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/.
Kirti Rinpoche defines the self-immolations as non-violence because the self-immolators do not cause physical harm to others, nor mental harm with their last words. Dorjee, a professional activist in his mid-30s, understands non-violence in the same way:

*This is definitely non-violence. It is the ultimate form of non-violent protest. It looks violent, definitely. When you see somebody burning, it’s a very graphic image. People are turned off by it. Sometimes even I can’t see those videos, you know. They are setting themselves on fire to not harm anybody else. They could put on a bomb and walked into a Chinese office or a supermarket you know. But they chose just to sacrifice their bodies without harming anybody else. So I think it is the ultimate form of non-violent protest.*

Dorjee argues for the non-violent nature of the self-immolations by contrasting them to suicide bombings, as the self-immolators do not harm others. In other words, their motivation is non-violent.

Karma, a male CTA member in his mid-50s, defined violence in the same way, but also connected the non-violent nature of the self-immolations to Buddhism:

*A person who has decided to take his life will have no hesitation to kill as many people as possible first, as you see in the USA. That could have been done by these now 127 or 128 people, but has not happened. That is the wonderfulness of Tibetan culture and what we have imbibed from our religion.*

Jamyang another CTA member in his late 50s, related the non-violent nature of the self-immolations directly to the non-violent strategy of the Dalai Lama, which for him is the main reason why the Tibetan protests have remained non-violent. In his view this is a clear sign of the respect Tibetans have for their spiritual leader:

*And self-immolation itself, I think, in a way is a form of respect for the non-violence principles upheld by His Holiness. It's your life, 'I am harming myself and not others', this kind of thing. I think the self-immolation grows out of the non-violence philosophy so dearly upheld by His Holiness.*

Although non-violence, in the last two quotes, is explained with reference to Buddhism, this explanation differs from the Dalai Lama’s early understanding, where inflicting harm to oneself is also categorized as a form of violence. The quotes also exemplify how the Buddhist principle of non-violence is applied to understand the self-immolations as moral acts and meaningful as a “good death” within a Tibetan cultural framework. What all the quotes have in common with those presented in the beginning (on the sacrificial nature of self-immolations) is that they refer to Buddhism, where non-violence stands as a core value.

**Complex motivations**

In the following I will present the opinions of two Tibetans, Lhakpa Tsering and Sherab Tsedor, who attempted to self-immolate in India. Then I will present a few other cases of self-
immolators. I aim to show that the motivation behind the self-immolations is more complex than what is captured by the generalizing ways of talking about it in exile, because in some cases the self-immolators wish to call attention to multiple issues.

Lhakpa Tsering, born in 1982 in a small town in Tibet, attempted to self-immolate in Mumbai on November 23, 2006, during the Chinese president Hu Jintao’s visit to India. At the time, he was the president of RTYC in Bangalore. Sherab Tseor (28), born and raised in exile, attempted to self-immolate on November 4, 2011. Explaining the motivation behind his self-immolation, Lhakpa Tsering said:

*I self-immolated because I didn’t have any other option left. Hu Jintao was the first Chinese president, communist president who came to India. Also he was the leader of the so-called Chinese TAR region – Tibetan Autonomous Region. He was the leader during 1989 and at that time he ordered martial law inside Tibet and killed thousands of Tibetans, innocent people. That’s why it was a big opportunity for us to protest in front of him. So I chose to self-immolate to paint his face black. In that way the world governments could realize who he really is. That’s why I did it. I needed attraction of the world, so I did that.*

Sherab Tseor, sharing a personal story, explained his motivation differently:

*I am just a common Tibetan who wants to enjoy my life. When I was released from Tihar jail (after a protest) in Delhi, my father gave me a khata. He said, ‘Today I truly feel proud of you for the first time’. That is why I began engaging in activism. I engaged to make my father happy. After one year I felt that it was not only for my father, but for all human beings. After about two years, I began to understand the importance of our struggle for our future. This made me sacrifice. I self-immolated because I felt I have to raise the voice of the self-immolators inside Tibet. I felt a responsibility for the martyrs inside Tibet.*

Lhakpa Tsering’s motivation was above all to ridicule Hu Jintao; at the same time, his act also carried a potential for attracting the world’s attention to the political situation inside Tibet. In other words, it was also a political protest against Chinese policies of oppression. At the time of his self-immolation, in 2006, only one Tibetan, Thupten Ngodup, had self-immolated, so that neither in Tibet nor India had the narrative of sacrifice yet developed into its current form. When Sherab Tseor attempted to self-immolate, a far greater number of Tibetans had self-immolated. For that reason his motivation is somewhat different, because he also wanted to raise the voices of ‘martyrs’ who had set fire on themselves inside Tibet. However, his motivation for activism not only grew from a sense of commitment to the Tibetan freedom struggle and the self-immolators inside Tibet, but also from a wish to retain his father’s respect.

Lhakpa Tsering and Sherab Tseor exemplify that the motivation behind a self-immolation is more complex than what is captured by dominant generalizations. The motivation can be political protest, commitment to the Tibetan freedom struggle, or simply to the Tibetan
nation, and even personal relations. Lhakpa Tsering also expressed his conviction that although he recognizes the other self-immolations as a sacrifice, it is difficult to know or generalize about the underlying motivations,

*It is a sacrifice definitely. That is all I can say. Whatever they did, only they know what they sacrificed for. No one can tell why they sacrificed. It is definitely a sacrifice. That is all I can say, but why, I cannot say. Because they have their own reasons.*

The main motivations of self-immolators inside Tibet as presented by CTA and the NGOs, are the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet and freedom for Tibetans in Tibet. Overall, the self-immolations are interpreted as political protests for a national cause. Although the majority of the self-immolators have indeed called for the return of the Dalai Lama, the second motivation seems to be a generalized interpretation by exiles, based on a range of messages calling for different things. The most common issues are freedom of language, freedom of religion and unity among Tibetans inside Tibet. In his message, Lama Sobha put an additional emphasis on unity among Tibetans inside Tibet and urged Tibetans to avoid disputes over land and water. Such disputes are a result of the increase in Chinese mining and hydropower projects. In addition, although he begins his message by hailing Thupten Ngodup and all the other “Tibetan heroes who sacrificed their lives for Tibet”, regarding his own sacrifice, on the other hand, Lama Sobha says, “I offer this sacrifice as a token of long-life offering to our root guru His Holiness the Dalai Lama and all other spiritual teachers and lamas.” His message exemplifies complex motivations; it is an “offering”, to the Dalai Lama and other spiritual teachers, an offering calling for the return of the Dalai Lama, expressed later on his message, as well as calling for unity among Tibetans inside Tibet. As a monk, he conceptualized his self-immolation in Buddhist terminology, and his last words also seem very much inspired by Buddhist ideas.

Messages by other self-immolators likewise show that it can be difficult to generalize concerning their motivation. Rikyo, a Tibetan woman (33) who self-immolated in Ngaba, Amdo on May 30, 2012, left the following message:

*Prayers for world peace and happiness! To ensure His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s return to Tibet, do not indulge in slaughtering and trading of animals, do not steal, speak Tibetan, do not fight.*

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86 Although in some cases, “freedom in Tibet” has in fact been demanded, for example by Gudrub on October 8, 2012, or Dolkar Tso, August 7, 2012. Still, “freedom in Tibet” can be interpreted by exile Tibetans in different ways (chapter 4).

87 Many other self-immolators have called for unity among Tibetans inside Tibet, among them Ngawang Norphel and Tenzin Khedrup who self-immolated on the same spot in Kham on June 20, 2012. Buffetrille also writes about the concern for unity among Tibetans inside Tibet, and emphasizes that some self-immolators have called for this (2014, p. 10).

Bearing all sufferings of sentient beings on myself, I do not resist by fighting if I get into Chinese hands alive, be united, study Tibetan culture.\(^{89}\)

Rikyo calls for a whole range of issues, including requesting Tibetan not to slaughter animals. Her statement expresses concerns with the preservation of Tibetan identity, which for her is necessary to ensure the return of the Dalai Lama.

Another example is Chagmo Kyi, female (26), self-immolated in Rebkong, Amdo on November 17, 2012, stating, "Return of His Holiness to Tibet! Freedom of language! Equality of nationalities. China’s new leader Xi Jinping must meet with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Peace".\(^{90}\) A third example is Passang Lhamo, female (62) from Kyegudo, Amdo, who self-immolated in Beijing on September 13, 2012. She is believed to have survived the self-immolation, and although she did not leave a message, she is thought to have self-immolated as a protest against the central authorities’ seizure of land. This followed in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake which leveled the town of Kyegudo. Passang Lhamo had travelled to Beijing to appeal to central authorities "to allow her to retain her ancestral home" (ICT),\(^{91}\) pointing to personal as well as macro-political motivations.

These examples illustrate that there can be different motivations behind the act of setting oneself ablaze. Although the majority of the statements refer to Tibetans as a distinct group, or Tibet as a distinct place or nation (Barnett, 2012, p. 55), many also include other themes, for example related to ongoing local politics and development. These are, however, blurred in exile representations, and generalized as calls for freedom for Tibet or Tibetans as a national group. The opinions I have presented from my own interviews and conversations exemplify that activists, CTA members and lay people all emphasize macro-political issues, connected to identity or nation, although some are reluctant to generalize on motivation. The self-immolations are justified as moral acts, as sacrifice, because they are believed to be carried out for such larger macro-political issues, but as Passang Lhamo’s case exemplifies, this is not always clear.

**Self-immolations as ritualized acts**

In the following, I shall analyze self-immolations in terms of ritual as I believe this will help us in understanding why nearly all Tibetans regard these act to be a form of sacrifice.

David I. Kertzer shows how ritual plays an important part in modern politics, as “politics is expressed through symbolism” (1988, p. 2). One of these symbolisms are, in his view, seen in rituals. He regards ritual action (in contrast to habitual action or custom) as being wrapped in a web of symbolism; moreover, it is standardized as well as repetitive, “channeling emotion,

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\(^{89}\) [http://www.india-seminar.com/2013/644/644_last_message.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2013/644/644_last_message.htm) (acc.01.06.2015).

\(^{90}\) [http://www.india-seminar.com/2013/644/644_last_message.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2013/644/644_last_message.htm) (acc.01.06.2015).

guiding cognition, and organizing social groups” (1988, p. 9). Furthermore, our beliefs about the world are acquired, reinforced and eventually changed through rituals (1989, p. 9). This, I suggest, characterizes the self-immolations as well. The burning bodies of the self-immolators have become a vivid symbol of the Tibetan resistance against the Chinese occupation, expressing strong nationalist sentiments in exile, as well as reinforcing resistance against the Chinese occupation. Moreover, the self-immolations have come to symbolize the ‘body politic’ (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987) that constitutes Tibet inside PRC. In the exile community today, “burning Tibet” is a commonly used metaphor for the situation inside Tibet, painted on walls (Fig. 10, 11) and printed on T-shirts, bags and other items.92

![Figure 10: Mural by TYC on Jogiwara Road, honoring the self-immolators, depicting Tibet “on fire”.](image)

![Figure 11: From a popular hangout among Tibetan youth and tourists.](image)

Barnett also suggests that the self-immolations should be seen as a form of ritual, pointing out that Tibetans have ritualized the act of self-immolation by "giving it a specific form, and conducting it in public space" (2012, p. 59). It is the ritualization of the acts which has, he argues, contributed to transform the self-immolations into a sacrifice, and hence they stand apart from political suicide during the Cultural Revolution and in the post-Mao era. Political suicides were more private in nature and did not take on a specific form. In contrast, the public nature of the


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self-immolations as well as their standardized form have contributed to reframe the notion of suicide as “a clear, emphatic statement embodying high motives and collective purpose, one in which the act of self-killing is noble, virtuous, and beneficial to the nation” (Barnett, 2012, p. 59).

There are examples of Tibetans who have killed themselves in recent times for the cause of Tibet, but without being conceptualized in the same way as the self-immolators. One such case is the 26-year-old Dhondup Phuntsok who on April 2, 2012 jumped from the Howrah Bridge in Kolkata, wearing a “Free Tibet” T-shirt (phayul.com, April 8, 2012).93 Though he was referred to as a martyr by political activists, for example by Tenzin Tsundue, his death is not incorporated into exile community in the same way as those of the self-immolators. Photos of Tibetans who have killed themselves for the cause of Tibet in non-ritualized ways are not displayed in NGO offices or public places in Dharamsala. Moreover these deaths – in contrast to the self-immolations – are not reported in any official document, such as the International Campaign for Tibet webpage. Following Barnett, I suggest that in the symbolism of nationalist politics in exile, self-immolations have become the one main ritual that contributes to reinforce Tibetan nationalism. Self-immolation is today synonymous with making an offering to the Tibetan nation, or “a higher cause”, as some Tibetans call it. This ritualization is taken further and reinforced through the display of photos and statues of self-immolators in public places in McLeod Ganj, as Shakya (2012b) also has observed. The commemoration of self-immolators through candle light vigils in Dharamsala is also an important and crucial action which has contributed to this ritualization.

The specific form of the self-immolations and the fact that they take place in public has contributed to their ritualization, giving them certain meanings while excluding others. These meanings, serve to remind the Tibetan community of the sacrifice that has been made, so that the legacy of the self-immolators’ sacrifice is incorporated into the future. I will return to these processes of ritualization in McLeod Ganj in the next chapter.

Here, however, I turn to the specific meanings of a sacrifice. The activist Tendor Dorjee, was quoted, at the start of this chapter, as saying, “The self-immolations are just a spark”, and it is this beginning that I will explore by taking Lambek’s (2007) understanding of sacrifice as my starting point, and also by comparing it to other acts which are also understood as a form of sacrifice.

**Sacrifice as a beginning**

Lambek (2007) writes that, “...each act of sacrifice is simultaneously a passion; each turns us irrevocably in a certain direction, locates us on a certain path; and each invites identification and repetition”. In his article *Sacrifice and the Problem of Beginning*, Lambek (2007) suggests considering sacrifice as a kind of beginning. He points out that beginnings are not naturally

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given, but should be seen as active and human-made (2007, p. 22). Sacrifice, whether of animals or humans, is always an attempt to change the course of things, or to initiate new beginnings which are beyond control. According to Lambek, beginnings and endings are two interrelated processes as one cannot exist without the other: "endings form and substantiate beginnings" (2007, p. 27). Rane Willerslev's (2009) work on voluntary death among the Chukchi in Siberia can illustrate Lambek’s point. Voluntary death involves the killing of a family member who expresses a wish to die (2009, p. 693), regarded as an offering to the deceased, ensuring "the maintenance and furthering of life through the act of taking life" (2009, p. 701). Willerslev treats voluntary death as a form of sacrifice, and not as a form of suicide, arguing that voluntary death is a ritualized event, following a set of definite rules and proscriptions. It is an established part of the Chukchi's cultural knowledge and therefore a meaningful death.

Considering that the self-immolations are understood as a form of sacrifice among exile Tibetans, they could be seen as an attempt at changing the course of things and initiating a new kind of beginning. Further, I suggest that the ritualization of the self-immolations through representation in public places is an attempt at consolidating the beginning they have substantiated, as well as defining what this beginning should be, something I will return to in chapters 4, and 5.

Lambek argues that blood sacrifice or self-sacrifice stands in contrast to the classic gift, because reciprocity is not possible in the case of the former. The sacrifice and the sacrificer are one and the same. For that reason, "blood sacrifice or self-sacrifice makes an especially good beginning, a first gift because it is a gift that does not – indeed, cannot – return to its origins. It is the gift that cannot be returned, or cancelled, or withdrawn. The only thing to do with it is to honor it" (Lambek 2007, p. 29). This is also valid for self-immolations and leads to an important point: the Tibetan community remains indebted to the self-immolators. The relationship between the self-immolators and those left behind is invested with morality. A female CTA member, Dolma, explains:

... these acts of supreme sacrifice are made with great expectations that are put on the rest of us, and people in the free world. Therefore, every time there is another self-immolation the responsibility on us becomes bigger, becomes larger. And obviously we are pained because we have no control over it.

Another CTA member, Rinchen (40), put it similarly,

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94 For an elaborate study on another form of sacrifice, which is similar to the self-immolations regarding the extremity of the act, but is different in many other ways, see Nasser Abufarha’s study on Palestinian self-bombers (2009).

95 Lambek differentiates between ‘sacrifice’ and the ‘gift’ on the basis that sacrifice is the ‘first’ gift; the original source of the “hau” to which the gift must return. This distinction is according to him unaddressed in the analysis of Mauss’ and his successors. As every gift following Mauss engenders return, “how do we know that any given gift is not always a return. How is a gift marked as first?” Lambek (2007, p.29) asks. He suggests that sacrifice is one way to mark a gift as ‘first’.
I have tremendous respect for these people and of course it’s our duty to do what they have left. They have sacrificed for us. Their sacrifice shouldn’t go in vain. So it’s our duty to do more for Tibet. I have tremendous respect for these people.

The significance of remembering the self-immolations as a form of sacrifice, as well as the ritualization of their representation in public places, is, I believe, that it serves as a reminder of the obligation Tibetans believe they have to continue, or substantiate, the beginning which the self-immolators have initiated by ending their lives.

By looking at the self-immolations in terms of sacrifice we understand only one, albeit important, aspect. I believe that Lambek’s idea of sacrifice as a new kind of beginning can be taken a step further. Why is it that a sacrifice, in contrast to a suicide, necessarily substantiates new beginnings? What kind of death is a sacrifice, as opposed to a suicide? By relating the concept of sacrifice to the framework of the anthropology of “good” and “bad death”, new insights regarding self-immolation can be developed. My argument is that the categorization of the self-immolations as a form of sacrifice fundamentally is about the concern of the living with “good” vs. “bad death”, and not merely with the self-sacrifice itself. Importantly, it is also a way of relating the living and the dead.

“Good” and “bad death”
The remembrance of the self-immolations as a form of sacrifice and a non-violent action is a way of categorizing them as a “good death”. This is necessary in order to create social continuity and consolidate the beginnings which the self-immolators have initiated. Thus the dead are also written into history and incorporated in society as heroes or martyrs. The notion of sacrifice is a way of classifying the self-immolations as a “good death”, which alone can secure new beginnings or the regeneration of life. Following the anthropological literature on death (Bloch and Parry, 1982; Hertz, 1960; Palgi and Abramovitch, 1984), self-immolations can be interpreted as a “good death”, because it has been made culturally and morally meaningful through an emphasis on motivation and cause found beyond the individual: they have given up their life for the sake of the Tibetan people. Moreover, it is carried out in a non-violent way, bringing no physical harm to others. The motivation behind these actions or their nature, regarded as altruistic, unselfish, and non-violent is what ultimately makes the self-immolations a good way of dying. For exile Tibetans, a self-immolation articulates and manifests important Buddhist values, also at the core of the political project in exile. Another such culture-specific aspect is the setting: all self-immolations are carried out in public places, either in the town center, or in front of a monastery or the town hall. Finally, it is a “good death” because it is an act of resistance against an authoritarian state. Through this act Tibetans take control of their bodies. A “good death” is characterized by control over one’s own death, symbolizing a victory over death (Bloch and Parry, 1982b). Overall, it is a ‘heroic’ death. Self-immolation among
Tibetans has been transformed into a culturally meaningful death, in a similar way as voluntary death is among the Chukchi. Following, the self-immolations carry the potential for regeneration and continuity.

The living and the dead

Remembering the self-immolations as a sacrifice as a "good death" forges a connection between the living and the dead, securing social continuity. In the Tibetan case it also serves to connect the Tibetans inside and outside Tibet. Here memory should, as Lambek has argued in an earlier article, be understood as something actively created between people (1996, p. 239). It is a cultural practice, a practice that "is to be understood as moral rather than simply technical, intellectual or instrumental" (1996, p. 235). The memory of the self-immolations as a sacrifice creates an active, moral relationship between the self-immolators and those left behind, the latter having the obligation for pursuing the self-immolators wishes and thus honoring them. Lambek and Antze (1996, pp. xi-xxiv) take memory to be an "identity-building project" (Lambek, 1996, p. 249), a process that is never neutral. Following them, I suggest that also in the Tibetan case memory of the self-immolations serves to imbue exile Tibetans' identity with national sentiments, reminding them of specific values and obligations.

In this chapter I have presented a general, analytical understanding of sacrifice as an attempt to change the course of things or to invite new beginnings. What is the beginning in the Tibetan case, and how do the living attempt to pursue it? The next chapter will discuss this by contextualizing this act of sacrifice further in the exile Tibetan context. This will bring to the front the living who define the beginning, (or actively create a relation between the self-immolators and those left behind), and how it is to be pursued through faith in certain values and goals, such as compassion and non-violence. While this chapter has exemplified how these values are articulated as well as transforming the self-immolations into heroes, the next chapter will focus on how these values are consolidated and reproduced.

The next two chapters will, accordingly, explore practices through which attempts are made to consolidate and continue the self-immolations into the future as a "good death", practices through which the living attempt fulfill their moral obligations. While, this chapter has looked at the general understanding of the self-immolations by Tibetans from various backgrounds, in the next chapter my attention will be devoted to central political actors – the NGOs and CTA – because it is they who form the dominating narrative(s) regarding the self-immolators.
Figure 12: Butter-lamp offerings in the korlam.
4 Self-immolations: practices of commemoration

Commemoration is a social and cultural process of healing and reclaiming, through thought and memory, through action and ritual.

(Kwon, 2006, p. xii)

This chapter will explore commemoration practices – candle light vigils and representation of the self-immolators in public places in McLeod Ganj – through which Tibetans with authority in the exile community in Dharamsala attempt to incorporate the self-immolators into the lives of their compatriots. I aim to show that these practices contribute to producing consensus with regard to self-immolations as a sacrifice and a form of non-violence, and the self-immolators as heroes and martyrs. I also argue that these practices are necessary if the self-immolations are to continue to be regarded as a “good death”.

Death always causes disorder in social life, society being “stricken in the very principle of its life in the faith it has in itself” (Hertz, 1960, p. 78), leading to a possible threat of “potential demoralization” (Abramovitch n.d.). Commemoration of self-immolators in public places is therefore crucial “to reassert core cultural values” (Abramovitch n.d.), and thus to avoid such danger of a “potential demoralization”. Accordingly, commemoration may be seen as a way of reasserting faith in certain values that are at the core of the exile Tibetan political project. If Tibetans should lose faith in these values, the freedom struggle could fall apart, and the self-immolations would be transformed into a “bad death”. Commemoration is therefore vital to transform “death into fertility” (Bloch and Parry, 1982b).

I will first describe the candle light vigils held in Dharamsala, organized jointly by three NGOs. This is the most immediate form of commemoration in the aftermath of a self-immolation, and hence an episodic event. There is another, more permanent, practice of commemoration through which the self-immolators become immortalized and remain present in the political landscape of McLeod Ganj: the representation of self-immolators in public places, in the form of statues and photos. I shall apply Verdery’s (1999) ideas about the political lives of dead bodies to analyze these representations. I then wish to take a closer look at the politics of commemoration, which, far from being neutral, are always guided by faith in certain values and goals, and, conversely, I hold that commemoration of self-immolators plays a vital role in the reproduction of these values. Finally, I will discuss the relevance of these two commemoration practices in reinforcing Tibetan nationalism, and keeping alive the Tibetan freedom struggle, which I interpret to be “the beginning” for political actors.

According to Verdery, dead bodies are given political life all over the world (1999, p. 1). Her work sheds light on the political life of Tibetan dead bodies through pointing to the cultural

work of commemoration, transforming bodies into political symbols. Following Kwon (2006), I understand commemoration as a culturally defined moral practice of remembering the dead, and reclaiming them and thus incorporating them, “vertically into society and horizontally into history” (2006, p. xi). According to Verdery’s examples, commemoration could be erecting statues and holding reburials of a handful of chosen dead. In McLeod Ganj, the commemoration practices are also moral practices of remembering the dead, to be undertaken by the living in order to fulfill their moral obligation and honor the sacrifice made by the ‘heroes’.

In exile, commemoration of self-immolators is guided by two important motivations. Firstly, commemorating the self-immolators as heroes is motivated by the intention of invalidating and disempowering the Chinese state narrative of the self-immolations as suicides, driven by personal or family tragedies, and the self-immolators as criminals and terrorists. In addition, the Chinese authorities’ seizure of the burned bodies, dead or alive, has become a standard practice. This can be interpreted as an attempt to regain control and subjecting individual bodies to the Chinese state. Accordingly, commemoration in India can be seen as a way for Tibetans of taking back the self-immolators, or reclaiming ownership of them in a political sense.

Secondly, these commemorations are motivated by the faith of the organizers in certain values and goals, on the basis of which the self-immolators are reclaimed and incorporated into society. Their commemoration contributes to the reproduction of these values, as well as to reassert Tibetans’ faith in them. Although self-immolators are believed to have died for a political cause, and a few have in fact left behind messages stating their motives, once they are dead they have to be reclaimed in order to be written into exile society as national heroes and martyrs.

Candle light vigils – a commemoration ritual

In McLeod Ganj, the candle light vigils have been held ever since the uprisings in Tibet in 2008 in connection with the Beijing Olympics (Stephan, 2009). Photos and videos from the vigils in 2008 show huge gatherings of Tibetans, standing together around photos of naked, lifeless protesters with bloody and unrecognizable genitals or swollen faces where the eyes are barely visible. People stand with candles in their hands, and with tearful eyes attempt to chant a prayer for the dead. When the self-immolations began in earnest in 2011, the candle light vigils were resumed, and they continue to be held in memory of any Tibetan who is killed or severely injured in Tibet while protesting against Chinese policies. The vigils are organized jointly by three main NGOs: Students for a Free Tibet (SFT), Regional Tibetan Women’s Association (RTWA) and Regional Tibetan Youth Congress (RTYC). Because of the strong rangzen symbolism involved, such as the Tibetan flag, singing of the national anthem, and because two of the organizers, SFT and RTYC, hold rangzen aspirations, CTA members do not usually attend, participating instead in their own
organized prayers in the Tsuglagkhang, together with monks from Namgyal Monastery and others. While candle light vigils are a new phenomenon, CTA and the monks perform the traditional death rituals.

A candle light vigil is always organized when information on a self-immolation has been received, usually on the same or the next day. Thus they are not planned in advance. The Chinese restrictions, which become even more severe after a self-immolation has taken place, make it harder to obtain information from Tibet, and the vigils take a spontaneous form when information arrives.

I regard the vigils as a commemorative practice, or more specifically as a political ritual, due to the context in which they take place, the intentions of the organizers, and the perceptions of others of the performance (Dodin, 2012, p. 80). I will elaborate on this later. My focus now will be on the organizers and their motivations. I argue that there are three main aspects of the candle light vigils: firstly, it is a practice through which the living fulfill their moral obligation and honor the sacrifice that has been made; secondly, the self-immolator is reclaimed as a hero or martyr; thirdly, the vigils are also an attempt at healing, and creating motivation and hope. Moreover, I regard the vigils as a (political) commemorative rituals which Paul Connerton argues differ from other kinds of rituals by their ability to evoke social memory and to remind a community of its identity (Connerton, 1989, p. 71). Applying Connerton's understanding, I attempt to show that through this political action the organizers attempt to remind exile Tibetans of their national identity and their core values.

However, I will not analyze the vigils using an elaborate ritual theory, primarily because a vigil is never something planned, or held at regular intervals, nor do the same people attend it every time. Although in my experience a volunteer from RTYC always made an announcement with a megaphone around McLeod Ganj a few hours prior to the vigils, most Tibetans and foreigners who join the vigils do so spontaneously, their motive being simply to show solidarity and respect.

I regard them as a ritual for analytic purposes, and also because like all rituals, the vigils are formalized, stereotyped and repetitive (Connerton, 1989, p. 44). Tibetans, however, do not refer to the vigils as rituals. I am aware that analyzing a ritual by focusing on the audience’s participation is a common anthropological today, but in this case, however, it turned out to be rather difficult. Because the vigils were each time attended by different people, whom I did not know, it became difficult for me to analyze their participation in terms of motivation or effect. Still, I made several attempts at analyzing participation by applying Bruce Kapferer’s analysis of a Sinhalese exorcist ritual (Kapferer, 1984), by focusing on the location, form and content of the vigils; I found it difficult, however, to state whether the rituals opened up ‘reflexive rooms’ (providing people the opportunity to view their society from outside) for the participants. Whenever I asked people about the importance of the vigils, or why they attended them, they simply replied that it was an act of solidarity, or a prayer for the dead. It is difficult to know what such answers really signify. Regarding reflexivity, Kapferer also asks whether a ritual is reflexive for the anthropologist (who is an outsider and a researcher) or the audience (1984, p. 203), especially when certain rituals, such as the vigils, have become a normal part of people’s lives.
Candle light vigil – March 30, 2014

In a candle light vigil, Tibetans and non-Tibetans gather in memory of the deceased, forming a line, each with a lit candle in their hands. The number of participants varies between 40 to 50 people, which is few compared to 2008 and considering the number of Tibetan residents in town. The vigil is usually, though not always, led by monks. It is also flexible, bystanders sometimes joining it along the way. The vigil usually begins close to 6 pm and lasts for about an hour. Reciting prayers, people go two or three times around a small Tibetan temple, located by the hectic Main Square of McLeod Ganj, making the vigil visible to everyone in the area: Tibetans, local Indians and foreigners. The procession then continues down Temple Road to the Tseglagkhang, approximately 400 meters away (see figure 6, chapter 2). As an example, I will in the following give a detailed description of a candle light vigil that took place on March 30, 2014, following 128 self-immolations inside Tibet and seven in exile.

Preparations – at the Main Square

It was a Sunday, and the clock hit quarter to six. Most of the NGO workers were, as at previous vigils, already in place at the Main Square, busy sticking candles in small, square pieces of cardboard. The NGO representatives were mainly from RTWA in Dharamsala. Tibetans each took a candle, while most of the foreigners, who were not so familiar with the event, waited to be handed one. A few activists were handing out flyers with basic information about the self-immolator, in whose memory the vigil was being held (fig.13). The information was identical with the press release made by the NGOs. Since I knew the organizers, I squatted on the ground to give a hand with sticking the remaining candles in pieces of cardboard.

This time the vigil was held for a nun from the Kham region in Tibet, who had self-immolated the previous day (March 29, 2014). The Bathang area, where the self-immolation had taken place, had witnessed its first self-immolation. The flyer entitled “TIBET BURNS WITH 129TH SELF-IMMOLATON”, included a drawing of a nun on fire, portrayed within flames and standing peacefully with her eyes closed and crossed arms. It also gave basic information about the self-immolation: time and place, and includes a statement by a CTA member, Bawa Kalsang Gyaltsen, a native of Bathang province: “The Chinese security forces have surrounded the hospital area and flooded the whole region with armed security personnel fearing Tibetan protest”. Statements from two NGO workers are also included. One of them reads, “All the Tibetan self-immolators have called for the return of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and demanded freedom for Tibet”. Names of the three organizing NGOs – RTWA, RTYC, SFT – are listed at the bottom of the flyer.

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99 Of 50 participants, about five to ten would usually be tourists.
100 Sometimes, procession continues to the TCV Day School after finishing the rounds around the temple, and the vigil ends there instead.
As we were in the middle of the preparations, Gawa, a male volunteer from RTYC, holding a megaphone, made an announcement about the self-immolation, first in Tibetan, and then in English. In the English announcement the self-immolator was referred to as “our brave martyr”, as at previous occasions, and Gawa requested people to join the vigil. It was always Gawa who made the announcement for the vigils around town a few hours prior to its beginning.

*The vigil – the prayer and kora*

The vigil began close to 6 pm. The participants formed a line and immediately began chanting the usual prayer. Some hurried to light their candle so they could join the line of people. Nyima, one of the SFT workers, was being interviewed on the side by an Indian cameraman. Jinpa, the monk I knew well from Gu-chu-sum, led the vigil. The vigils are usually led by monks, though not always. Jinpa carried a big laminated photo of the Dalai Lama with a silk khata\(^{101}\) draped around it. The photo was always carried in the front by the person leading the vigil, to show that the Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. The Tibetan national flag was carried by a few participants. On some occasions activists from SFT bring flags from their own office, as they did on the very first vigil in 2014, on February 7. An old Tibetan man who participated in all the vigils carried his own flag in one hand and a lit candle in the other. As the Tibetan and non-Tibetan participants began the vigil, the NGO activists stayed on the sideline coordinating the lines, so that people did not create any hindrance for the traffic passing by.

In the first part of the vigil the participants, Tibetans as well as tourists, walked three times around a small monastery located on the way from the Main Square. As we walked round the monastery, a RTYC volunteer walked beside us as usual, stepping the ground with greater determination and reciting the prayer more powerfully than the rest in an attempt to encourage the participants, as well as persuading bystanders to join the vigil.

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\(^{101}\) A *khata* is a thin, silky ceremonial scarf (usually white) presented to people, statues and holy objects as a sign of respect. Tibetans bring them when they attend an audience with the Dalai Lama.
Towards the Tsuglagkhang

After the kora, the procession began moving down Temple Road, towards the Tsuglagkhang. It was difficult to keep the candles lit, and many stopped to re-light them. Tourists stood on the side of the road and watched curiously, taking photos. The NGO activists, too, remained for the most part on the sideline, and continued coordinating the line. Temple Road is lined by shops, most of which are owned by Indians, especially Kashmiris. Some of the shop owners stood outside their shops, their hands tucked under their armpits, silently watching the vigil pass by. I never spotted any Kashmiris or local Indians attending the vigils. They seemed indifferent.102

Tibetan National Martyrs' Memorial

Entering the Tsuglagkhang complex, the participants gathered in front of the Tibetan National Martyrs’ memorial (Fig. 19, p. 83), located in front of the Tibetan Museum. The memorial itself is a nearly two meter high square pillar of black stone, with the inscription “Tibetan National Martyrs’ Memorial” in English, Tibetan and Hindi. A small stone globe is placed on top of the memorial, on which “TIBET” in capital letters is written, as well as the names of the three major regions. A wall through which bodies of Tibetans seem to be stretching out, shouting with their arms raised in the air, is also part of the memorial.

Holding candles, participants in the vigil stood shoulder to shoulder, while the activists in the front started to sing the Tibetan national anthem. The Non-Tibetans, including me, listened silently. One minute of silence followed, broken by a series of speeches. A young woman in her late 20s from RTWA introduced the speakers, first a monk and then an activist. The monk, probably in his 30s, held two sheets of paper which I assumed to be his speech. After having spoken in Tibetan he said something in English, reading out from the flyer, but finding pronouncing some of the English words difficult. Next Tenzin Tsundue, the poet and well-known activist representing RTYC, gave a speech in English, as he often does during the vigils, mainly targeted at the foreigners that were present. He focused on the reasons behind the immolations and why they also should be of concern to the international community. He particularly spoke about international trade with China, which, he claimed, was indirectly contributing to the political situation in Tibet and the rest of China. It was also important for Tenzin Tsundue to highlight why people are being forced to choose this dramatic form of protest,

In other free countries there is for example the media to speak to, there is the judicial activism, through legal processes, but all of them are not possible in Tibet because everything is being run by the Chinese government and they have being dictatorially running all of these mechanisms in the interest of the Communist Party.

He also emphasized the importance of non-violence as the value driving the Tibetan struggle:

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102 This was confirmed when I conducted informal interviews with them.
We have an unflinching faith in the power of non-violence. And non-violence is the one that is not only sustaining our freedom struggle, we know and have absolute conviction that this non-violent path, the true guiding principle of His Holiness, and the basic principle of Buddhism that we practice – we believe and we know that it will take us, deliver freedom for Tibet and also benefit the Chinese people and the Chinese government. And therefore we have our unflinching conviction in the power of non-violence, which comes from our love and compassion. These are the practices that we have been maintaining.

He mentioned that there was as yet no information about the physical condition of the nun who self-immolated, and briefly described how the Chinese authorities had handled previous self-immolations. Finally, he requested the foreigners to spread “this message of love and compassion”, to share it with acquaintances at home and to take action.

The woman from RTWA took the microphone and addressed the Tibetan crowd with a powerful voice, being on the verge of crying, before Tenzin Tsundue spoke once again, this time only to the Tibetans. Thereafter the gathering broke up, everyone shouting ”Pö gyel-lo”, “Victory to Tibet”, three times, the Tibetans raising their fists in the air.

Figure 14: Candle light vigil, April 15 2014, held in memory of Thrinley Namgyal, a 32-year old man who had self-immolated the same day at noon (local time) in Kardze, Kham (Tibet).

The vigils are filled with traditional Tibetan elements, but also with national symbols – the Tibetan flag, singing the national anthem, gathering in front of the National Martyrs’ Memorial and shouting ”Pö gyel-lo” – which make the political nature of the vigils visible. On the other hand, the more traditional elements can give the impression that Tibetans are carrying on with Tibetan death practices, for example praying for the deceased, a practice which is
characteristic for cremation rituals.\footnote{There are four Tibetan ritual practices for disposing a corpse. The most practiced among them in Tibet is sky burial, which involves cutting up the corpse and feeding it to vultures. Cremation is commonly used in exile, while in Tibet it is reserved for incarnate lamas (See Klass and Goss, 1997, p. 384). However, the self-immolators (of whom the majority have been laypeople) are entitled to ritual cremation carried out by monastics, Buffetrille writes. She suggest that, “it is a sort of transubstantiation which materializes the change of status of the self-immolator from being an ordinary person before his act to a ‘holy being’ after his self-immolation” (2015). The reaction of some Tibetans confirms this, according to Buffetrille, as in certain photos online one can see Tibetans prostrating before the self-immolator.} I nevertheless hold that in this context the traditional elements also should be understood as political action. Overall, I regard the vigils as a political ritual.

Despite the presence of Tibetan traditional rituals, such as performing *kora* while reciting prayers, which communicates certain shared meanings, I argue, following Dodin (2012, p. 80), that traditional rituals gain political signification in the context of the organizer’s intentions and the perception of the vigils among participants and onlookers. The context makes the ritual political because they are organized in the aftermath of a self-immolation, an act which in itself is regarded as a political protest; secondly, the first part of the vigils is carried out in the middle of McLeod Ganj, with the intention of attracting everyone’s attention and informing them about the political situation in Tibet; thirdly, the vigils are political because they are perceived as such, for example by CTA members who do not attend them, mainly because they are regarded as part of a political campaign, initiated by the NGOs, two of them being *rangzen* groups, and at the same time a political protest challenging the Chinese state.

Although the participants of the vigils vary from time to time, the NGO organizers are always present. They have a crucial role in organizing and carrying out the vigils. They are the central actors, so the motivation behind the vigils must be understood from their point of view, which I will elaborate on in the following. They also inform the perception of the vigils among the general public.

**A basic act of solidarity**

All NGO activists expressed to me their conviction that the candle light vigils are an act of showing solidarity with the self-immolators, their families and Tibetans inside Tibet. Sonam, a male professional activist in his late 20s, said it in this way,

*It is a simple act of showing solidarity. In case of self-immolations or shootings inside Tibet, at the very basic, least and immediate level we can at least show solidarity. They deliver a strong message unity among the Tibetans inside and outside of Tibet. It also highlights for the Tibetans inside Tibet that Tibetans outside are aware of the situation inside Tibet and shows a high degree of solidarity.*

Every Tibetan I spoke to, whether they participated in the vigils or not, stressed their importance as acts of solidarity. Showing solidarity can be regarded as the most important motivation for the organizers as well as the participants. I take this as indicating that showing
solidarity is a way of fulfilling a moral obligation and honoring the self-immolator; thus this also helps exile Tibetans to renew the connection between themselves and Tibetans in Tibet. Further, through the ritual process, motivated by showing solidarity, other transformations also take place: the self-immolator is reclaimed as a national hero or martyr, and finally the vigils attempt to heal by giving comfort and consolation, partly achieved through the act of solidarity. The three aspects – solidarity, reclaiming the hero and healing – are all part of the vigils, but I separate them for analytical purposes. Overall, the vigils, being a political commemorative ritual, remind Tibetans of their national identity, through values and goals highlighted in them.

**Showing solidarity, reclaiming and, healing**

It is the moral duty of the NGOs to remember and honor the self-immolator, and second, to inform the Tibetan and the international community, including the Chinese authorities, about the sacrifice. The public nature of the vigils is crucial to achieve these aims. Thupten, a professional male activist from TYC in his mid-30s, expressed this sense of moral responsibility,

*The self-immolator died for us and to do prayer is our moral responsibility. And candle light vigil is also same. This person died for the cause of Tibet, for the happiness of 6 million Tibetan people, for the freedom of 6 million people. So that’s why we are organizing the candle light vigil.*

For the organizers such commemorative events are also important as solidarity events, since they also renew the connection between Tibetan outside and inside Tibet. Sonam, quoted above, insisted that vigils show that all Tibetans stand together. Nyima, a female activist in her mid-20s, put it very well,

*Candle light vigil is a kind of medium between Tibetans inside and Tibetans outside. They self-immolate and we do a candle light vigil. It shows that we are together.*

This clearly shows the connection between Tibetans in exile and Tibet. They are believed to become more connected through the self-immolator who is reclaimed as a national symbol of Tibetan resistance: as a hero and martyr, uniting Tibetans as one ethnic group.

**Reclaiming**

Through the act of solidarity the self-immolator is also reclaimed immediately or as soon as possible after his or her self-immolation and the Chinese authorities’ seizure of the dead body, and incorporated into the exile community as a national hero and martyr. The martyr role is clearly expressed in the public announcement of the vigils and at the square right before the vigils begin. The incorporation of the self-immolators as martyrs is also highlighted when the participants gather in front of the National Martyrs’ Memorial, singing the national anthem to honor the self-immolator’s memory. Through this ritual process of reclaiming, the main goal is the national Tibetan cause for which the self-immolator sacrificed her or his life, while values
such as compassion and non-violence are also emphasized. Thus compassion is highlighted in the prayer recited by the participants. Tashi, a professional TYC activist, explained to me that the prayer is for the strength to be compassionate, and that the very act of self-immolation is driven by love and compassion because the self-immolator sacrificed his or her life hoping to bring freedom to other people.104 “So we pray that people everywhere should have a mind like that. And also the person who self-immolated wished that”, he added. Compassion is also highlighted in the speeches, for example in Tenzin Tsundue’s speech on March 30, where he said, “We have our unflinching conviction in the power of non-violence, which comes from our love and compassion”. He concluded by urging the foreigners who were present to take the Tibetans’ message of “love and compassion” back to their own countries. Compassion is also believed to be the reason why these vigils have remained non-violent. Tenzin Tsundue highlighted the value of non-violence in his speech, and people I interviewed did the same.

Through this process of reclaiming the dead, certain values, which can be seen as being at the core of the Tibetan movement, are highlighted, values which especially appeal to the international participants, as they represent the Tibetan movement as guided by moral concerns.

Healing
Finally, the vigils are also an attempt at healing – giving consolation, sowing the seeds of hope. Here I particularly have in mind the self-immolator’s family and Tibetans inside Tibet. The latter, despite their absence from the vigils, are still a very important audience for the organizers. It is they who first and foremost motivate the NGOs to hold the vigils, and taking action and standing together in solidarity is a genuine attempt to console and give hope to Tibetans both inside Tibet and in exile.

This action also has the potential to inspire the participants in the vigils; this, too, can be considered as a form of healing, something Kavita, from SFT, expressed in this way,

It is a space to mourn. Mourning is important, grieving. It empowers you to take action. Candle light vigils give you a space to come to terms with each individual who have burned themselves. It is also a way to give respect for their courage and stand in solidarity with their families... The first step is to face the fact, okay today there is another person. And then tomorrow I have to do something, challenge my anger, frustration into some meaningful action. I, myself at least think like this after having participated in such a vigil.

However, she also added that,

There was a period when you had many self-immolations and then also many candle light vigils, sometimes every day. People felt a bit hopeless, like ‘how is this helping’? For the large part it is a

104 See chapter 3.
space for mourning, but it is also problematic because you feel like, 'I am helpless', I can only light a candle... Because of the frequency of the self-immolations, and the frequency of the candle light vigils some Tibetans feel disillusioned about the effects of having a candle light vigils.

This is an important point. During my fieldwork, the vigils were not attended by many. None of my friends (except Jinpa, from Gu-chu-sum who had lost his cousin in a self-immolation) or acquaintances, often men in their late 20s to late 30s, both born in exile and Tibet, participated. They expressed the view that a vigil was a hopeless act, and did not regard participation as taking action, nor as anything that could provide consolation and hope. A male friend, Kunchok, in his mid-30s, explained that he regarded the vigils as futile, since they did not lead to any change, an opinion shared by Sherab, also in his mid-30s, born and raised in exile: “People are setting fire on themselves, and they are fucking walking around with candles”, Sherab once said, quite upset. The “they” he referred to were the NGOs, who according to him were not taking effective action. This could be interpreted to mean that according to Kunchok and Sherab, the living are not fulfilling their moral obligation by honoring the sacrifice made by the martyrs. Although the organizers of the vigils try their best to heal, there is no possibility of their succeeding. It is a difficult and perhaps an impossible task. As Metcalf and Huntington point out, although rituals “make a show of power” (1992, p. 6), there is still the risk that, like all other shows, they may fail.

A commemorative ritual
As the vigils can be seen as a commemorative ritual, centered on the self-immolator, they serve, through the values and goals they highlight, to remind Tibetans of their national identity. According to Connerton, commemorative rituals serve to remind a community of its identity more effectively than other rituals because the values and goals of a community are highlighted through the person being commemorated. Connerton refers to this feature as “re-enactment” (1989, p. 61), and regards re-enactment as being of “cardinal importance in the shaping of communal memory” (1989, p. 61). In the same way I would argue that memory is shaped through some of the values which are highlighted, especially compassion and non-violence. In addition, memory is also formed through the fundamental reason for the self-immolations, namely the continued Chinese occupation, which is also at the heart of what is being communicated or shared. Because of their collective character, the vigils bring Tibetans together through an act of solidarity. Moving in a line together and standing shoulder to shoulder singing the national anthem, are actions which by bringing people together remind them of their common background and identity in a diasporic setting.

Tibetan identity in exile is formed and reformed through such commemorative practices. Within the context of diaspora such events hold a particular significance, since, to use the words of one parliamentarian, they are “a way of keeping the community intact”. Despite the fact that
the vigils are attended by very few Tibetans, they still leave a mark on people merely through their presence, and for a short time remind Tibetans of who they are, why they are in exile, and of their responsibilities.

In the following I wish to present the other type of commemoration of the self-immolators: their representation in public places. While the vigils are episodic, and become a part of the past after an hour or so, representation has a permanent character, making the self-immolators accessible to all Tibetans. Even those who are absent from the vigils are confronted by the self-immolators, if not daily then at least occasionally. The legacy of the self-immolators is secured through putting up photos and erecting statues of them in public places. As I will show, this activity also represents a hierarchy of values and goals.

The representation of self-immolators in public places

Although people talk about the self-immolations at home, displaying their photos in private homes is, with a few exceptions, not common.105 By contrast, the presence of the self-immolators is strongly felt in public places. Moving around McLeod Ganj, Tibetans are continuously reminded of them. The representation of the self-immolators is mostly confined to the Tsuglagkhang complex, including the korlam ground – areas to which Tibetans can claim ownership and one of the most important and sacred or “powerful” places (Huber, 1999a, p. vii) in exile (Fig. 6). It consists of the Dalai Lama’s residence, Namgyal Monastery, the Tsuglagkhang temple106 itself and the Tibet Museum. Around and within the Tsuglagkhang complex photos and statues of the self-immolators have been set up by monks from Nechung Monastery, by TYC, RTYC and CTA, but as I will argue later, TYC (RTYC) and CTA’s representation constitute different ways of portraying the self-immolators. The area is visited daily by Tibetans and tourists, as well as being a place of pilgrimage where Tibetans make kora and offerings. Thus, as Huber writes concerning Tibetan sacred spaces and powerful places, the Tsuglagkhang, being the main Dalai Lama temple in exile, can be regarded as an ‘extraordinary’ or ‘empowered’ place for Tibetans, “as being both of this world yet somehow apart from it” (Huber, 1999a, p. vii), as it involves a specific relationship between the place itself and Tibetans who move through it, performing different practices, including kora (Huber, 1999b, p. 77).

Photos of self-immolators are also displayed in semi-public places, such as the various NGO offices, for example that of SFT and the TYC office, both of which displayed one photo each of the self-immolators. In the main office room of SFT, a photo of Karma Ngedon Gyatso, who I witnessed self-immolate on August 6, 2013 in Kathmandu, rested on a desk with a khata around it, while the main TYC office displayed a photo of Jamphel Yeshi who self-immolated on March

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105 Jinpa, at Gu-chu-sum, had a photo of Thupten Ngodup’s self-immolation in his room. Jinpa was a very politically active layperson, and had participated in demonstrations in Amdo in 2008; in addition, his own cousin, Sangye Tashi, self-immolated in Labrang, Amdo on November 27, 2012.

106 The equivalent of the Jokhang, or Tsuglagkhang in Lhasa, the most sacred place in Tibetan Buddhism.
26, in 2012 in New Delhi. In the latter case, the photo was framed and hung on a wall in the entrance room along with photos of the Dalai Lama. “Pawo Jamphel Yeshi, age 27” was typed in big green letters below. On the one side was a smiling portrait of Jamphel Yeshi, and on the other a photo of him engulfed in flames. These photos were separated by the slogan “Pö gyel-lo”, the slogan that was shouted at the conclusion of the candle light vigils.

Outside the Dharamsala office of RTYC a big poster with photos from Jamphel Yeshi’s self-immolation is hanging on a wall (Fig. 15). The office is located in a lane branching off from the Main Square. Even though this lane is hidden, it is still busy, many Tibetans and foreigners passing through it on their way to a popular restaurant located a few meters from the RTYC office. The poster hangs on the opposite side of the office, on a low brick wall. It shows the same two photos: one is a portrait of a smiling Jamphel Yeshi, while the other one shows him running, enveloped in flames. Under these two photos there are five smaller photos from his self-immolation, arranged chronologically. The last one is a close-up of Jamphel Yeshi after his self-immolation. His face is black, partly covered in pieces of bandage and his eyes are barely visible. The photo is very unpleasant to look at and gives one chills upon closer inspection. Two hands, held in a praying position, are drawn on each side of the two big-sized photos. At the top of the photo, a Tibetan inscription translates as: “Patriotic hero, Jamphel Yeshi, victory to you”. Next to it there is another plastic poster with the heading, “Proof of Tibet’s independence”.

Photos of Jamphel Yeshi and Thupten Ngodup are more widely circulated in the exile community than those of other self-immolators. There are several reasons for this. While Thupten Ngodup was the first Tibetan to self-immolate, Jamphel Yeshi’s act brought attention to the Tibetan struggle in international media. By the time of Jamphel Yeshi’s self-immolation in 2012, 30 Tibetans had already put themselves on fire inside Tibet, without any significant
international attention having been paid to their sacrifice. When Jamphel Yeshi self-immolated, this changed. Photos were shared online within a few hours. *National Geographic* elaborately covered his self-immolation (*National Geographic*, April 28, 2013).\(^{107}\) The self-immolations inside Tibet, on the other hand, are impossible to cover as the Tibetan population as well as the media are strictly controlled; mobile phones are usually confiscated after a self-immolation, so the documentation is poor, and it is virtually impossible to interview witnesses or friends and families of the self-immolators without putting them in danger. In the case of Thupten Ngodup and Jamphel Yeshi on the other hand, information is readily available and photos circulate freely. As the Tibetan writer, Topden Tsering writes, “... Jamphel Yeshi, in one single stroke, amplified the new radicalization of the Tibetan freedom struggle”, (*Rangzen.net*, April 2, 2012).\(^{108}\) Moreover, he argues that the self-immolators as well as other protesters who had been “rendered invisible by China’s strong arm” were “given an intimate face” through the photos of Jamphel Yeshi.

Both of them self-immolated during political protests in Delhi, which leaves no doubt regarding the motivation behind their acts. Moreover, they had clearly expressed their motivation: a free Tibet, a cause for which they chose to give up their life.

It is important to note that since Thupten Ngodup’s and Jamphel Yeshi’s motivation, “a free Tibet”, understood as independence, *rangzen*, is identical with that of TYC and other *rangzen* support groups, their photos and names are frequently used by them as examples, to support their own nationalist aspirations. This points to the relevance of the political framework of exile for understanding how the self-immolations are made meaningful.

**The Tsuglagkhang complex**

The representation of self-immolators displayed in and around the Tsuglagkhang has been put in place by the Nechung Monastery, TYC and RTYC. Thupten Ngodup and Jamphel Yeshi are also represented here, but in a context where self-immolators inside Tibet also occupy a prominent place. In the following I will take the reader on a walk around the Tsuglagkhang complex where the other self-immolators also are remembered. I wish to show that their representation – on the *korlam*, and within the complex (the Tibetan Museum) – can be seen as different ways of remembering and reclaiming the dead.

A little further down from the Dalai Lama temple there is a path, called *korlam*, that leads into the woods, encircling the temple and leading back to its entrance. Many Tibetans do their *kora* here every day, encircling\(^{109}\) the Dalai Lama temple. There were never very many young people to be spotted in the *korlam*; none of my friends used to walk there. Often I would ‘force’ the Gu-chu-sum students Jinpa and Tashi along with me. When Tashi, for instance, came along,

\(^{109}\) Circumambulation is a way of honoring a sacred person or place in Tibetan Buddhism (Huber, 1999b).
he would finger his prayer beads and jokingly mumble, "Om mani padme hum" in an attempt to imitate the prayer of elderly. The first part of the korlam is hidden among trees, which is the usual hangout of some cows and a large group of monkeys. Many Tibetans bring along food to feed the animals, which is seen as a form of offering. Small stones with carvings of the "Om mani padme hum" mantra are placed on the sides of the path. The space between the trees is filled with the five-colored Tibetan prayer flags.

The first part of the korlam ends in a large open space. Below there is a nursing home for elderly Tibetans and a big prayer wheel on the right, followed by a wall in which are mounted smaller prayer wheels. This open space is now also devoted to the remembrance of the self-immolators. Photos of 120 self-immolators are framed and hung on a board on which flames are painted (Fig. 16, p.81). The name, age, place and the date of each self-immolation are given in Tibetan and English on the photos, the last one being dated April 24, 2013. This board has been set up by Nechung Monastery, which owns this part of the korlam. A row of benches with soft meditation cushions are placed against the wall, underneath the board.

Numerous electric candles are placed close together in front of the board, which can be seen as modernized fire offerings. Three pictures are placed on top of the board: in the middle is a smiling Dalai Lama sitting in front of a huge gold statue of Buddha Shakyamuni. Pictures of two deities are placed flanking his photo, resembling the traditional way of framing the Buddhas in religious paintings. On the right side of the board hangs a big poster with information in English about the Chinese invasion of Tibet and its effects. It also explains the Middle Way policy of the Dalai Lama. The last paragraph is devoted to the self-immolators. Here “Freedom in Tibet” and “The return of the Dalai Lama of Tibet” are stated to be the two main requests of the self-immolators. They are referred to as "brave" and their act as a "sacrifice". The message concludes:

“In order to leave behind a fresh memory of the sublime, sincere and heroic aspirations of these martyrs in the minds of surviving Tibetans, and to ensure the blessings of the three jewels and all the divine protectors for them, we have framed the portraits of all the martyrs with this prayer:

"O protector Chenrezig, may you compassionately care for
Those people who have undergone myriad hardships,
Fully sacrificing their most cherished bodies, lives and possessions,
For the sake of the holy Dharma, teaching-holders, people and the nation."

This prayer was composed by the Dalai Lama in 1960 for all those who had lost their lives as a result of the Chinese invasion. The first time I saw the board I was moved to tears. The board was big and the photos so many. It was overwhelming, even though it did not include the

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110 The historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama.
111 These are the Buddha, the Dharma (Buddhist teachings) and the Sangha (the community of monks and nuns), constituting “Buddhism”.
112 The Tibetan name of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion.
16 who self-immolated after the board had been set up. One day in February as Jinpa, Tashi and I approached the board during our kora, Jinpa silently stood watching the photos, before he saw one that was hanging crookedly. Noticing this, he walked over to the photo and straightened the frame, saying, “Tibetan heroes. Very important.” Although Tibetans do not come here on a regular basis, it is still a meaningful and significant part of the political landscape in McLeod Ganj, giving rise to many emotions. The annual martyrs’ day (see chapter 3) on April 29, is marked in front of this board.113

A few meters from this spot a small memorial (Fig. 17, p.81) with busts of Thupten Ngodup and Jamphel Yeshi stands on a black stone, between two trees – a memorial for the cause for which they gave up their lives, an independent Tibet, is highlighted. Pawo Thupten Ngodrup, as he is styled, has a broad smile while Jamphel Yeshi has a proud expression. Several khatas are tied around their necks. The black stone on which the busts rest is inscribed with some information about the two Tibetan martyrs, both in Tibetan and English. It is stated that they self-immolated for Tibet’s independence, and further states, “This memorial statue is the symbol of the relentless sacrifices made by all Martyrs for the cause of Free Tibet”. The memorial is an initiative by TYC and has been sponsored by a Tibetan family residing in the USA.

From this memorial, the korlam continues uphill. Another big prayer wheel is placed on the right hand side, in an open pavilion. Two metal plates on one of the walls are said to date to May 25, 2012. They display the names in Tibetan and in English of self-immolators up to May 2012. The English list has the following heading: “Listed below are the names of the heroes and the heroines who are known to have passed away by offering their bodies to fire for the sake of the Tibetan community”. Below the names, the prayer composed by the Dalai Lama, quoted above, is written. Further up the hill, a new poster made by RTYC (Fig. 18, p.81) has been taped above a few small prayer wheels. The poster includes all the self-immolations inside Tibet up to May 2014, though photos of 35 of those listed in the poster are missing. The photos are framed by flames, and the heading is “Sacrifice of life for Tibet”.

The korlam continues steeply uphill before flattening out. The elderly make their way slowly, some resting on the benches along the path. Walking the last part was always a pleasure. On the one side is Dalai Lama’s lush garden, surrounded by a tall fence, and on the other side, a view of the Kangra Valley.

113 TYC began a march from Dharamsala to Delhi on February 8, reaching Delhi on March 10 – the day of the 1959 uprising in Lhasa. The march began from this particular spot in the kora, after the conduction of prayers (Fig. 20, p.89).
The entrance to the Tsuglagkhang complex is, on most days, a hectic place, especially during the tourist season. A big poster with photos of the self-immolators, made by TYC, used to hang inside the entrance gate. This poster had the same heading: “Sacrifice of life for Tibet”. Later it was moved further inside the complex and hung next to the Tibetan National Martyrs’ Memorial.

One thing which all the representations of the self-immolators described so far have in common, is that they are portrayed expressing heroism and dignity rather than as pitiful victims of a cruel system. Although the photos and statues have been set up by different actors (Nechung Monastery and TYC), the act of self-immolation is always referred to as a sacrifice and the self-immolators as ‘martyrs’. As I showed in the previous chapter, the motivation for this sacrifice is regarded as selfless and collective in its nature. Further, the self-immolators are also believed to have chosen this specific form of protest because of their faith in the Buddhist principle of non-violence, which for Tibetans in exile confirms their selfless motivation. I argue that their representation in public, as well as their commemoration in the candle light vigils, conveys these
specific values. The self-immolators are reclaimed because they represent values that are at the core of the political project in exile, values such as commitment to non-violence, unselfishness, patience, compassion, courage and love for Tibet. Displaying photos and putting up statues is a way of honoring people in any society, and presenting them as examples to be followed by others. In the same way, the representation of the self-immolators within the korlam, a sacred place for Tibetans, confers dignity and heroism on them.

The representation of Thupten Ngodup and Jamphel Yeshi through statues, however, differs from the other forms of representation. Because all exile Tibetans are familiar with the names of these two individuals, they also give a face to all the self-immolators. Since they clearly expressed their motivation as being an independent Tibet, they are also chosen by TYC to represent all other self-immolators, thus giving support to TYC's struggle for Tibetan independence. In addition to this memorial, a larger statue was erected towards the end of my fieldwork. This statue of a monk on fire (Fig. 19), erected in the Tsuglagkhang complex in May 2014, is yet an example of the values with which the public representation of the self-immolators are impregnated. It is placed next to the Tibetan National Martyrs' Memorial – a few meters from the main entrance of the Dalai Lama's Temple.

This statue was donated by a Chinese artist and unveiled on the Tibetan Uprising Day, March 10, 2014 (Voice of America, February 20, 2014). The inscription on the stone on which the statue rests was not yet in place, and at that time a paper was taped on it, with the inscription, “Burning Tibet (1998-2013). Please remember them. In Tibet 122”. This statue was presented by overseas Chinese Tibet supporters on 10 March 2013”.

The monk's glance is turned upwards, his mouth slightly open. After having seen the statue, Sonam, a professional activist, posted the following statement on his Facebook page, "Came across this powerful sculpture this morning at the temple and it reminded me of their compassion and courage!"

The monk's face has a thoughtful expression. The flames that engulf him, on the other hand, seem to be in motion. Photos of self-immolators are painful to watch and now one is faced with a self-immolator, frozen in time; for those who visit the temple daily, it is a strong reminder of the self-immolator's pain, courage and strength. Nothing gives a stronger indication of the self-immolators' status as national martyrs than this statue, placed next to the memorial for all national martyrs. It also highlights a value which is at the core of the Tibetan movement today, shared by all political actors: non-violence. In April 2015 another board, including photos of all the self-immolators inside Tibet so far, has been set up by RTYC to the left of the memorial.

In the following I will present how CTA officially represents and remembers the self-immolators in public places, which I argue is different from the representations discussed so far. Although in their interviews with me CTA members referred to the self-immolations as a sacrifice, their official representation of these acts is more neutral and cautious compared to that of the NGOs.

**The Tibet Museum**

The Tibet Museum also has an exhibition featuring the self-immolations, consisting of large-sized posters providing basic information. On several occasions I noticed that the museum was mostly visited by Indian tourists, though some foreigners also dropped by.

The exhibition is part of the “Solidarity with Tibet” campaign initiated by CTA in 2013. Currently this is the only public representation of the self-immolations initiated by CTA in McLeod Ganj. It provides factual information, such as what the self-immolations are, the reasons behind them and who the self-immolators are. The action is not referred to as a sacrifice, but as “an ultimate act of civil disobedience”, nor are the self-immolators referred to as ‘heroes’. Their photos are printed on a simple white poster. The causes of these actions are given as the repressive Chinese policies inside Tibet, and the two main demands of the self-immolators are stated to be “The Return of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Tibet” and “Freedom for Tibetans”. Two exhibition posters give the last statements of eight self-immolators. All address the lack of cultural and religious freedom in Tibet, which CTA is working to achieve. None of the

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115 The Tibet Museum is a part of the Department of Information and International Relations, CTA, and was established in 1998, “as a platform to promote the idea of Tibetan cultural distinctiveness, acknowledge their otherwise overlooked history, and launch an assault against the power of China in matters of museum representation” (Harris, 2012, p. 166).
statements, however, say anything about Tibetan independence. In contrast to the representation of the self-immolations described above, here these acts come across as desperate and as the result of the political situation inside Tibet, where, it is implied, there are no other possibilities of protest.

This exhibition is a different form of remembrance, since it is presented within the official context of the museum. Compared to the other representations, it is pedagogical rather than inspiring. The primary intention is to inform Indians and foreigners about the political situation inside Tibet. One of the posters referred to above lists six appeals, all of them urging the international community to take action. Although the CTA's representation focuses on the actions as such and their underlying causes instead of emphasizing the self-immolators' heroic status, it still acknowledges them as a national (and non-violent) symbol of Tibetan resistance by placing them alongside other examples of peaceful resistance. This more neutral and cautious approach is confined to the museum.

**Reclaiming and healing**

As I have argued in the previous chapter, one of the main reasons why the self-immolators have become an important political symbol is the ritualization of the act of itself, to which the representation of the self-immolators in public places in Dharamsala also contributes. In addition, I also argue that the public representation contributes to the creation of a consensus regarding these acts as a form of sacrifice and the self-immolators as heroes. Even though the CTA's exhibition does not mention the word ‘sacrifice’ or refer to the self-immolators as ‘heroes’, the self-immolations are not referred to as a ‘suicide’. They are called acts of “civil disobedience”, acts which everywhere are thought to demand courage and determination. In addition, as the exhibition is presented in the museum, the self-immolators are given a place in Tibet's national history.

The presence of statues and photos of dead people in public spheres is never neutral. It is driven by faith in certain values and goals, which also involves choosing between the dead and how to portray them.

As discussed in the introduction, Verdery (1999) argues that political reburials, and statues can be seen as a way of reclaiming the dead and changing the socio-political order. These practices “mark a change in social visibilities and values” (1999, p. 19). Erecting statues is a way to stabilize the landscape by freezing particular values in it. In the exile Tibetan case, I suggest that this is also achieved through photos. Furthermore, the values in question are expressed through the Tibetan political project in exile. For the professional activist, Sonam, seeing the statue of the monk on fire reminded him of the self-immolators’ “compassion and courage”. Since the self-immolators today stand as the strongest symbol for Tibetan resistance, their representation is also a way of placing memories of the Chinese occupation in the landscape.
TYC’s choice of erecting a statue of Thupten Ngodup and Jamphel Yeshi serves as a reminder of the cause they gave up their life for: an independent Tibet, an important value in TYC’s discourse on nationalism. For rangzen supporters the self-immolators call for “freedom in Tibet” or “freedom for Tibetans” is interpreted as calls for independence. Lhasang (mid-50s) put it the following way,

*Most of those who have committed self-immolations, as you say, there are two main slogans: the return of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and a free Tibet. What do these two things mean? If one looks deeply into this, they don’t want His Holiness to return under the present situation. You see this is a deeply political thing. According to my interpretation, people they are saying, ‘We have our own leader, under the position of the Dalai Lama. You Chinese are not our leaders. His Holiness must return. Our leader must come back and you fake leaders (laughs), must move out of Tibet’. Free Tibet, free from what? Free from Chinese and their wrong policies. The actual demand of the slogans is: Independence, an own country.*

The CTA’s selection of certain statements of the self-immolators, only addressing the lack of human rights inside Tibet, is more in line with CTA’s political stand, and in contrast to rangzen supporters they do not interpret the self-immolations as calls for an independent country. A CTA member, Jamyang (late 50s), interprets the aims of the self-immolators thus,

*So, we are saying, we have our own culture, we have our own, you know this, world view, and we don’t want to change that. But politically we are happy to live under the, you know, auspices of the Chinese constitution. So if there is respect on the part of China and willingness to give freedom to develop our own culture, and live as we appeal, then I don’t think Tibetans would, you know, pose this problem for China. So this is the way I think we should look at why young Tibetans are self-immolating.*

These different representations of the self-immolators can be seen as different ways of reclaiming or taking ownership of the dead and incorporating them into society. Various political agents – CTA and the NGOs – present the self-immolations as a sacrifice and a national symbol of resistance, representing values such as compassion and non-violence; however, the meaning of their sacrifice for the political struggle is interpreted differently, leading to the production of two different narratives on the self-immolators. While TYC presents the self-immolators demand as rangzen, CTA interprets it to be human rights inside Tibet, such as cultural or religious freedom. I will return to this in the final chapter.

Statues and photos of self-immolators in public places are both an important way of honoring the self-immolators sacrifice, which contributes in carrying these deaths into the future as a “good” and culturally meaningful death. This contributes to maintaining the self-immolations as a “good death” because setting up statues and photos, is a way of bringing the self-immolators “into the realm of the timeless or the sacred, like an icon” (Verdery, 1999, p. 5).
Thus their commemoration in public places can also be regarded as a process of healing for the Tibetan community. When Jinpa sees the photos of self-immolators in the *kora*, he thinks they are heroes, and it evokes pride, while for Sonam, seeing the monk statue reminds him of their compassion and courage. Their heroic representation, especially their location next to the martyr’s memorial, and in a sacred place (the Tsuglagkhang), evokes pride and admiration, as well as providing the solace that they died for a cause.

**Politics of commemoration**

"Where does this illusory appearance of the past originate? Is it indeed an illusion?"

Maurice Halbwachs (1992, p. 49)

Following Verdery (1999), Kwon (2006), and McGranahan (2010), I regard commemoration as a practice for forming social memory, and social memory as the dynamic impulse for creating as well as forgetting histories (McGranahan, 2010, p. 19). The memory of the self-immolations as a non-violent action illustrates the political discourse of non-violence. In other words, commemoration as a practice is about forming the past, and the future, through a selection of dead who are seen to represent values and goals which suit the present social and political reality.

McGranahan argues that, "The work of history and memory takes place in a social domain that is always already hegemonic and laden with issues of power, representation, and reproduction" (2010, p. 19). This is a valuable insight for understanding the commemoration of the self-immolators and their representation as a political symbol for Tibetan resistance. I argue that one of the main reasons why the self-immolators have come to stand as an uncontested political symbol of resistance is the consensus regarding these acts as a form of non-violence, which is the most important value of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan exile establishment. The self-immolators do not (at least no longer) challenge the narrative of the Tibetan struggle as a non-violent one. Despite disagreement regarding their motives, there is, however, no disagreement as to the peaceful and non-violent nature of the self-immolations. I suggest that non-violence can be seen as the dominating value, or even conditioning value, in the Tibetan exile community.

Based on Louis Dumont’s (2013 [1980]) theory of hierarchies of values, non-violence can be understood as the dominant value which encompasses other values. Although NGOs such as TYC or SFT have a *rangzen* stand, which is in conflict with CTA’s and the Dalai Lama’s Middle Way policy, they still make sure to highlight the non-violent nature of the self-immolations, thus supporting the Dalai Lama’s policy of non-violence as well as his position as the leader of the Tibetan people. Since “high” ideas both contradict and include “low” ideas (Dumont, 2013, p.

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116 Here I differentiate between memory and history, based on McGranahan who argues that, “If history is narrative, memory is what drives historical narratives; that is, memory consists of the stuff and the energy with which histories are forged or forgotten” (2010, p. 19).
301), TYC or SFT emphasizing non-violence (the high idea) and stressing its importance can be understood to create an acceptance of their political stand of independence, as well as granting them the right to represent the self-immolators, which is crucial if they also want to claim the dead. This can be regarded as an important motivation for the NGOs’ acceptance of non-violence as the dominant value.

The Tibetan narrative of non-violence, which has so far succeeded in granting widespread sympathy and support for the Tibetan cause, can be understood as another motivation for the NGOs. The Tibetan struggle in exile has always distinguished itself as a non-violent one. It was the Dalai Lama’s Nobel Peace Prize for his non-violent approach which brought the world’s attention and support to the Tibetan cause. As a result, the majority of the professional activists also have gained faith in non-violence as a strategy and firmly established it as their core political strategy. The value of non-violence is highlighted in communication with foreigners because it lends support to the Tibetan freedom struggle, and in addition, to a certain extent also contributes to keeping alive the imagination of Tibet as a Shangri-la, an imagination that has had a strong appeal to outsiders, in particular in the Western world.

Commemoration is a means of forming the social memory of a community and motivating people to pursue the values and goals of the one who is commemorated. In the exile Tibetan case, commemoration is a means of maintaining the self-immolators’ death as “good” by reclaiming them as national heroes of the Tibetan people. But how do the two commemoration practices described in this chapter contribute to preserving the self-immolators’ death as a “good death”? Or more specifically: how do these commemorative practices contribute to ensuring the beginning the self-immolators have attempted to substantiate?

Pursuing the beginning

I argue that these commemorative practices are an attempt to pursue the beginning or “the spark” the self-immolations have ignited, as they contribute to transforming death into fertility (Bloch and Parry, 1982b) by reasserting faith in certain values (and goals) and keeping alive the Tibetan freedom struggle. The living have to undertake this as a moral obligation since they

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117 Although the fantasy of Tibet as a Shangri-la has succeeded in attracting the Western world, it can be argued that it has actually brought more disadvantages than positive outcomes for the Tibetan cause. Shakya (1991) argues that this myth is the reason why the Tibetan political struggle has never been taken seriously, being treated “as a question of sentimentality versus political expediency” (1991, p. 23). See also Dodin and Rather (2001, pp. 409-413). Maher (2010) argues that Buddhism has always been viewed as an entirely pacifist religion and Tibet as a place which turned into a Shangri-la with the introduction of Buddhism. In his article, he attempts to show a different and a violent side of Tibet, by focusing on how religious violence was justified and legitimized during the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama. As I argued in chapter 3, today the self-immolations are justified in a similar manner. Sperling (2001), in the same way as McGranahan, challenges the official exile narrative of non-violence, by bringing to fore the fifth Dalai Lama’s support of military force to defend Gelugpa interests, and points to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, “who actively sanctioned armed attacks on the Qing forces in Lhasa” (2001, pp. 324-325).
remain indebted to the self-immolators. At the same time, this process also contributes for exiles to invalidate the Chinese narrative concerning the self-immolators.

Without these commemorative practices, the self-immolators’ sacrifice cannot be honored. They are necessary to secure the beginning the self-immolators have substantiated and this beginning is about (as interpreted by political agents as well as the general public) keeping the political freedom struggle alive. In exile, an attempt is made to pursue this beginning by telling the international community about the situation in Tibet through the self-immolators’ presence in public places and also through the political action of the candle light vigils, which the tourists can witness and participate in. Moreover, and most importantly, an attempt is made to achieve this beginning by awakening the social memory and national identity of Tibetans. A young Tibetan woman, Metok, born in India, said the following about the effect of the self-immolations on Tibetans in exile,

*The self-immolations have had the positive effect of awakening people’s ‘Tibetan-ness’, their love for Tibet. People feel we have to do something. Earlier it was old people who came out to protest – like on 10th of March. Now the scene has changed; now youngsters are coming out.*

However, as I have showed in this chapter, TYC and CTA represent the self-immolators differently, highlighting different goals. Therefore, I suggest that although commemoration practices for the self-immolations contribute to consolidate one common beginning, namely keeping alive the freedom struggle, nevertheless, the beginning differs for rangzen and Middle Way supporters due to their contrasting goals. Thus, the struggle over control of dead bodies, and the power to shape their narratives, is not only played out between the Chinese state and the exile community, but also between two main political groupings in exile. Still, in the end it is the narrative of sacrifice and non-violence which dominates in the exile community and triumphs over the diverging interpretations. In the final chapter I will explore why this so by insisting on understanding this in relation to the emphasis on unity, which is a common characteristic for nationalist movements.
Figure 20: Pursuing “the beginning”: the TYC March from Dharamsala to Delhi, beginning in Dharamsala on February 8 in the korlam, ending in Delhi on March 10 (1959 Uprising Day).
5 The “good death”: unity and continuity

In this concluding chapter I shall focus on how the understanding of the self-immolations is guided by the need for unity among Tibetans, a need which is emphasized again and again in the exile community. With regards to the self-immolations, I argue that the emphasis is motivated by the wish to secure the social continuity a “good death” ensures. The creation of unity and homogenous identities is a central aspect of all nationalist movements (Wade 2001; Samper 1997), especially movements which grow in exile (Malkki, 1995). In the Tibetan case also, nationalism “flattens identities” (Houston and Wright, 2003, p.222) in the name of unity. Thus, regional and religious affiliations which prior to the Chinese invasion were important are submerged in the nationalist project (Houston and Wright, 2003, p. 222; McGranahan, 2005, p. 4). Likewise, political disagreement between Middle Way and ranguen supporters is also underplayed in the name of unity, although relations are, in fact, far from harmonious. I hold that it is in the context of the tension between these political differences and the simultaneous emphasis on unity that we have to understand the way self-immolations are handled and made meaningful.

Conflicts over strategies and the future of Tibet

The exile political landscape split with the official adoption of the Middle Way Approach in 1988. Conflicts between Middle Way and ranguen supporters have been present ever since, and are regarded as a threat to unity, raising concerns regarding the future of the Tibetan freedom struggle. They become visible not only in the interpretations of the self-immolators’ motives (chapter 4), but also in many other arenas and events. Although it can be hard for an outsider to discover these conflicts, as they are hardly ever played out in public, they are, however, continuously clearly expressed online, in blogs, articles, or comment boxes. Due to the emphasis on unity and the fact that most of the professional activists were reluctant to talk about the conflicts to an outsider, I sometimes questioned whether there were any conflicts at all. During my first days in McLeod Ganj, the author and filmmaker, Tenzing Sonam, told me that with regard to politically delicate issues, my biggest challenge would be to get behind people’s words, which proved to be true. In interviews most of the activists and CTA members emphasized that there were no major disagreements, referring to them as “discussions” or “debates”. The

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118 See for instance the inaugural speech of Prime Minister Lobsang Sangay, August 8, 2011: http://tibet.net/2011/08/inaugural-speech-of-kalon-tripa-dr-lobangsangay/# (acc.29.07.2015), referring to “unity, innovation and self-reliance” as the guiding principles of the exile community.

119 The reservation of seats for Tibetans from the three main regions and the five main religious traditions (chapter 2) is also an attempt at securing unity by giving all these groups representation in the exile parliament. The lack of political parties is another important means to hinder fraction and secure unification: “The fundamental idea of the parliament-in-exile is that there is no need for political parties since Tibetans share a common interest and are bound together in unity (Brox, 2012, p. 462).
following statement by a female CTA member, Dolma (35) regarding CTA's disagreement over the celebration of a Tibetan independence day by the NGOs, would be a typical way of glossing over disagreements,

See we are in exile, but it is a democracy. You do need differing ideas, it would be really really intelligent if everyone applauded everyone and there were no conflicting ideas. I think the essence of democracy, the whole beauty, the whole intellectual strength lies in the fact that people are able to debate, and not follow one way blindly. And yeah I do agree there have been discourses, conflicting, differing ideas on this, but they were all well-meant...That was not the conflict at all, it was not the issue at all. In a democracy that is welcome and I think we need that. Because that way people can judge, people can think, and that way we are able to engage a larger section of society.

Despite the fact that potential conflicts are swept under the carpet in order to promote unity, they nevertheless surface once in a while. The clearest example would be the events around March 10 (the annual commemoration of the Lhasa Uprising in 1959) in 2015, when the conflict between these two political strategies and their supporters became evident publicly for the first time, especially in New York. Here the conflict resulted in violent clashes between Middle Way and rangzen supporters, as the latter used independence slogans such as “Free Tibet” or “independence for Tibet” which the CTA had advised against. In Dharamsala, Middle Way oriented NGOs, such as TWA and Gu-chu-sum, pulled out of the annual traditional march for the same reason, and for the first time SFT, TYC and NDPT (National Democratic Party of Tibet) carried out the march alone.

The events around March 10 are an example of the tense relations between the two political aspirations, as well as the social control rangzen support groups are subjected to by CTA. The NGOs, therefore have to carefully maneuver between working towards unity and at the same time diverging from CTA’s guidelines. It is within this framework the NGOs operate; how the self-immolations are made meaningful and handled must, I argue, be understood in this context. As discussed in chapters 3 and 4, they are talked about and represented in public places

120 http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?qc=4&t=1&id=35872&article=Commemoration+or+Rewriting+March+10th%3F#.VQn0Py24aYc.facebook (acc.09.05.2015). Following the March 10 incident, the RTYC president in New York was suspended by the executive office in Dharamsala, because he had “failed” to “uphold the very objective of the TYC – unity among Tibetans”, and also because he had breached important political guidelines of the organization by repeatedly having declared himself a Middle Way advocate. http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=35927&article=Largest+pro+independence+group+suspends+president+of+NY+NJ+chapter (acc.29.07.2015).

121 NDPT is a political party established by TYC in an attempt to introduce a party system in the exile community in order to make it more democratic, attempt which has met with little success. However, NDPT still exists and has its own office below the SFT office.


in similar as well as divergent ways. Thus, the self-immolations are at once both a unifying as well as a disuniting symbol. The reason why they can be added multiple meanings is, I argue, related to the ambiguous nature of dead bodies which makes them a particular potent symbol in nationalist politics (Verdery 1999).

**Maneuvering between unity and divergence**

Verdery suggests that because dead bodies are silent and ambiguous, they allow many different readings (1999, p. 28; Cohen and Othiambo, 1997), and thus it becomes fairly easy to “discern different sets of emphasis, extract different stories, and thus rewrite history” (1999, p. 29). I hold that her suggestion is also valid in the Tibetan case, where the self-immolators' aims are interpreted according to different political standpoints (chapter 4). The self-immolators who have survived inside Tibet are also silenced as their voices cannot be heard in exile, most of them having been imprisoned and not heard from after their release. The fact that the self-immolators also are used politically was pointed out to me by a few of my interlocutors. Chodar (33), an independent political activist who had served as president of a local RTYC chapter and remained an eager rangzen supporter, said the following,

*Most people generally say, they are doing it (self-immolating) for the preservation of culture, language or they can’t stay inside China. Some are, according to their political interest saying, ‘they are struggling for rangzen’. Some are saying for umey lam (the Middle Way Approach). For me these are all like bullshit things. Whatever they did they have their own reasons. We can’t say anything. Some have left behind notes and these we don’t have to elaborate. Whatever he says there, he did... In exile community I have found a lot of issues. Some are using them for their own political interest. They are misusing it. For me, it is bullshit things. They can’t use the martyrs for their own interests. Nobody can say why they are doing this. They have their own reason.*

Another independent activist and monk, Namdak (late 20s), who currently supports the Middle Way Approach in spite of having independence as his highest wish, pointed to the same, but directed his comments first and foremost at rangzen supporters,

*Rangzen supporters of course have the right to use the names of the self-immolators, but sometimes they use the self-immolators’ names to an extreme point. They are saying that majority of the self-immolators want independence. I myself have done research on the last requests of around 100 self-immolators. There are only around 10 or 11 who have said that they want rangzen. Majority of them said His Holiness should come back to Tibet. The slogans for rangzen are only around 10 or 11. Many have said they want freedom inside Tibet, which could mean many things. So the majority has not shouted independence slogans, but rangzen people in exile are saying so. And for that reason, according to them, we should strive for rangzen. That is a wrong thing to do, I think... Overall I don’t like rangzen or umey Lam advocates using the self-immolators for their own interests.*
These quotes make it clear that the self-immolations are open to different interpretations, and that the understanding of the self-immolators’ aims diverges. Although political agents can express their contrasting interpretations, these cannot be extended beyond the accepted freedom of speech if they are perceived as posing a threat to unity and the larger national struggle. The NGOs in particular, who are subjected to CTA’s guidelines, have to carefully maneuver through a complex political landscape, attempting to nurture new visions, but at the same time avoiding unnecessary conflicts. In the end, it is the spirit of unity that triumphs through the uncontested narrative of sacrifice and non-violence. Another example of how a focus on unity triumphed over divergence is the commemoration of Tibetan Independence Day – February 13 – by rangzen support groups.

February 13 – Tibetan Independence Day

February 13 is marked by SFT and TYC as “Tibetan Independence Day”, since the 13th Dalai Lama, whose predecessors had been ruling Tibet since 1642, declared Tibet’s independence on February 13, 1913. This followed the collapse, in 1911, of the Qing Empire, which had incorporated Tibet under its rule in the eighteenth century (Barnett, 2014, pp. xxvi-xxvii). The February 13 campaign was launched in 2013 by SFT to: “challenge China’s propaganda about Tibetan history as well as to strengthen the case for Tibetan self-determination on the global stage” (Phayul, February 21, 2013). A professional SFT activist, Dawa, told me that in the light of the massive wave of self-immolations, it became crucial to launch this campaign and celebrate Tibet’s past as an independent nation.

When the campaign was launched in 2013, it included big celebrations. I had been shown some photos at the SFT office, depicting, a number of Tibetan men, wearing Tibetan traditional dress and representing the three main Tibetan regions, riding through the two main roads of McLeod Ganj, in the evening there was a big concert. Naturally, after having seen these photos I was left with the impression that February 13 is a big day for the Tibetan community (though I had not been aware of this prior to my fieldwork). But I soon realized that I might have overestimated its importance and that not everyone shared the NGOs’ narrative of Tibetan history.

During my fieldwork, the day was not marked with the grand celebrations like the previous year, but it was celebrated more subtly and carefully. Importantly, this year (2014) the focus had shifted from the 13th Dalai Lama’s declaration of independence, to a stone-pillar

The second self-immolation in Boudhanath, Kathmandu was carried out on this day: http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=33030 (acc.03.07.2015).
125 In 2015, it also was the Tibetan flag:
which holds a historic significance for Tibetans, and to addition the three Dharma (Buddhist) kings. On this stone pillar, still standing outside Jokhang in Lhasa today, is inscribed a treaty between China and Tibet dated to 821/822 AD, stating,

“Tibetans shall be happy in the land of Tibet, Chinese shall be happy in the land of China. The solemn agreement now made shall never be changed. The three Precious ones, all the Aryas, the sun, the moon and the planets and stars are invoked as witnesses”. (See also Richardson, 1985, pp. 125-127).

This agreement between China and Tibet is from a time when Tibet constituted a great empire, expanding far beyond the area today known as TAR or “Pö Chö(l)kha Sum”. The Dharma kings ruled this empire. The independence celebrations in 2014 focused on celebrating “the legacy of the Tibetan empire” (from the poster on February 13, 2014), the pillar being regarded by the activists as proof of the historical reality of the empire. One can also find a copy of this pillar inside Tibet Museum in McLeod Ganj, with the above excerpt of the agreement inscribed on a golden-colored metal plate, written in Tibetan, English and Hindi.

I soon discovered that the focus on the pillar was due to a specific reason. In 2013, CTA had not at all been pleased with the celebrations, mainly due to the emphasis on the 13th Dalai Lama’s proclamation of independence, giving rise to disagreement between CTA and the NGOs. The disagreements from CTA’s side concerned the status of Tibet in 1913, a CTA member questioning, “whether it meant the independence of the entire three provinces”, or merely the region which is equivalent to TAR today. Due to this disagreement, the activists had focused on the pillar, celebrating “the legacy of the Tibetan empire”, a safer and unifying symbol because

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126 Bringing focus to Tibet as a Buddhist country, which, as Dreyfus and Shakya has noted, is what unified Tibetans before the rise of a nationalist ideology (see introduction).
CTA does not deny the legacy of the empire, a copy of the pillar having also been erected by CTA in the Tibet Museum.127

Disagreements around February 13 can, I suggest, be seen as another example of conflict between rangzen and the Middle Way Approach, and illustrates how the NGOs chose the emphasis on the pillar – a unifying symbol. The NGOs also succeeded in introducing a new campaign by carefully maneuvering through the political landscape and avoiding further potential conflicts. In a similar way, I argue, the self-immolations have also been transformed into a consolidating symbol by emphasizing the unifying narrative of sacrifice and non-violence, and sweeping divergent interpretations under the carpet.

**Consolidating the beginning through continuity**

The sacrifice of self-immolation is “a spark” or a “beginning”, regarded as carrying a potential for changing the present political situation inside Tibet. However, I suggest that a beginning does not necessarily always imply something radically new, but can also be a re-activation or regeneration of something already existing. Thus the sacrificial beginning can, as in this case, be seen as a continuity, which also characterizes a “good death” (cf. Willerslev 2009), securing a continuity of the Tibetan freedom struggle in exile with non-violence as its core value.

As the spark that the self-immolators are understood to have ignited is interpreted differently by various political actors, the sacrifice carries a potential for two beginnings, one realizable through the Middle Way Approach and the other through rangzen. But in the end it seems that unity and consensus triumphs, securing social continuity or regeneration of important values and by reproducing and reinforcing national sentiments, thus contributing to keeping alive the imagination of Tibet as phayul. This is particularly crucial in the context of diaspora where Tibetans are moving in different directions, some even applying for Indian citizenship (chapter 2). Reminding Tibetans of their national identity based on specific values also forges a connection between Tibetans in exile and in Tibet. The self-immolations have brought an upsurge of national feeling and identification, and through their sacrifice impose a moral obligation on exile Tibetans to keep this connection alive and pursue the goal they hope to achieve: freedom for Tibetans.

The final responsibility of realizing the beginning continues to rest on the living, on those left behind. Just as Hertz (1960) brought attention to the moral and social commitments of the living towards the deceased’s body, Tibetans carry an obligation to those who have sacrificed their lives to realize the potential beginning which is necessary if the self-immolations are not to be transformed into a “bad death”. In this case, the movement is not only directed towards

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127 I have collected more material on February 13 from observations of the day in 2014 and interviews with CTA members and professional activists from SFT and TYC, but unfortunately due to space limitations I am unable to present them.
securing one cultural unit (continuity with the past), but also as a cultural and national unit in the future.

With their continuing presence in exile through various commemoration practices, the dead (i.e. the self-immolators) are made to inform the living of their national identity. They serve as a reminder of their past and of where their future lies, as well as shaping the narratives of new generations of Tibetans. The self-immolators are regarded as Tibetan national heroes, who lay down specific moral values and goals to be pursued in the future; everyone, however, due to the ambiguous nature of dead bodies, has the freedom to interpret them and pursue them in their own way. The self-immolations are, however, made meaningful by all political groups in the Tibetan exile milieu as a sacrifice, not as a suicide or another desperate act, which can be understood as constituting a “good” form of death, because it contributes in ensuring a social continuity and relating the living and dead. As a “good death”, the self-immolations will continue to carry the potential to “reinforce cooperate solidarity” among Tibetans as one ethnic group, and in “revitalizing historical continuity” (Kwon 2006, p. 14), by continuing to reproduce national sentiments, and contribute to keeping alive the imagination of Tibet as phayul, “fatherland”.

Summary
This thesis has looked at how the act of setting oneself on fire is understood and made meaningful among Tibetans in Dharamsala, India, by analyzing it within the framework of “good” and “bad death”, and further contextualizing these ideas in relation to the nationalist framework of exile, conditioned by faith in certain values and goals.

The self-immolations are understood by exile Tibetans to be a form of sacrifice, and the self-immolators have the uncontested status of national heroes, an understanding which has developed dialectically to the Chinese response to these actions. Further, Buddhist myths, patriotism, and most importantly Buddhist values of compassion and non-violence – the latter being the dominant value in the political project in exile – are activated to transform the self-immolations into a culturally meaningful or a “good death”. Making use of Lambek’s understanding of sacrifice as ‘a kind of beginning’, I have argued that the self-immolations can thus also be understood as an attempt at substantiating a new kind of beginning for the Tibetan people, carrying a potential for changing the present political situation in Tibet. The sacrifice of the self-immolators also creates a moral relation between them and the living, the latter forever standing in debt to the self-immolators. Since a sacrifice is a gift that cannot be returned, the living have a moral obligation to honor the sacrifice, and consolidate the beginning the self-immolators have begun. This is also vital if the self-immolations are to remain as a “good death”.

Further, I have explored how these actions gain political power and become a national symbol of resistance in the political projects of CTA and NGOs by looking at commemoration
practices for the self-immolators. I have suggested that the living fulfill their moral obligation through commemoration, also carrying the self-immolations into the future as a "good death". I have argued that through these commemorative practices, the self-immolators' legacy is honored by highlighting and reproducing Tibetans' faith in the values and goals for which they are believed to have given up their lives, and by awakening exile Tibetans' social memory and infusing their "Tibetan-ness" with national sentiments. At the same time, these commemorative practices are also motivated by the Chinese authorities' callous handling of dead bodies, and their representation of the self-immolators as 'criminals', 'mentally disturbed' or 'terrorists'. The commemoration practices challenge the Chinese state narrative by reclaiming the self-immolators into exile society as national heroes. These practices, I suggest, can be seen as a way of consolidating the beginning, because they contribute in reproducing certain values, reinforcing nationalist sentiments in exile, and thus keeping alive the Tibetan freedom struggle, which is particularly important in order to keep the community intact in a diasporic setting.

However, based on my empirical findings I have also argued that the self-immolators are written in exile society in different ways by CTA and rangzen support groups, highlighting different aims or goals. Still, due to the emphasis on unity in exile, in the end the unifying narrative of sacrifice and non-violence triumphs over divergent interpretations. By way of conclusion, I have argued that it is necessary to relate the uncontested understanding of the self-immolations as a non-violent sacrifice to the need for unity, which is a central characteristic of all nationalist movements. As a result, I suggest that the sacrificial beginning consolidated in exile can be seen as a continuity, something a "good death" also secures. Exemplifying a "good death", the self-immolations secure the continuity of the nationalist project in exile with non-violence as its core value.

**Concluding thoughts: suggestions for future research**

Something that was confirmed over and over again during my fieldwork was a reluctance to speak about sensitive topics. Due to an over-emphasis on consensus and unity, conflicting or unsuitable opinions are glossed over. Another inappropriate subject, besides those mentioned already, is to criticize the Dalai Lama. Although some activists have earlier done so, this has not been without subsequent sanctions.

I remember one particular incident during my fieldwork when I was talking to a SFT activist. I told her that one well-established Tibetan scholar in Dharamsala had encouraged me to trace the reason for the self-immolations to the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. "It is about time these Dalai Lama people get a hard time", he had said. Soon after he said this, I had begun to make connections, and as I shared these with the SFT activist, she looked at me, a bit stunned and said, "But Harman, you cannot say that loud", laughing lightly. The reason was that I had related the self-immolations to the Middle Way policy of the Dalai Lama, adopted one year prior
to the Nobel Peace Prize, and implied that the Middle Way was the indirect cause of these desperate protests. This connection was not entirely my own, but had been expressed to me by a few rangzen supporters who, while some uttered it directly, others did so more subtly. A possible topic for future research, and more extensive fieldwork than mine, would be to look more deeply into the creation of consensus in exile, and in what ways it is produced and maintained. Another related but not sufficiently studied topic is the exercise of social control in exile, especially at a time when conflicts arise in more explicit ways, and how they are kept from openly erupting. As the Dalai Lama grows old, it would also be interesting to look at possible directions in which the exile movement could evolve, and in what ways unity and continuity could be secured after the passing of the Dalai Lama.
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**Kirti Monastery:**


**TYC:**


**International Campaign for Tibet:**

1. “Self-Immolations by Tibetans”
http://www.savetibet.org/resources/fact-sheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/
2. "Storm in the Grasslands: Self-Immolations in Tibet and Chinese Policy" rapport: 

3. "Tibetan Survivors of Self-Immolation: Repression and disappearance" rapport

Frequently used webpages:
1. www.tibet.net (CTA)
2. www.tibetanyouthcongress.org
2. www.phayul.com
3. www.savetibet.org (International Campaign for Tibet)
Self-immolations after December 16, 2014 (not included in the map):

141 Tsepey, F, 19, 22 Dec 2014. Ngaba, Amdo (Sichuan).

142 Kalsang Yeshe, M, late 20s or 30s, Monk, 23 Dec 2014. Tawu, Kham (Sichuan).

143 Norchuk, F, late 40s, 5 Mar 2015. Ngaba, Amdo (Sichuan).

145 Yeshi Kandro, F, 40s, Nun, 8 Apr 2015. Kardze, Kham (Sichuan).

146 Neykyab, M, 40s or 50s, 16 Apr 2015. Ngaba, Amdo (Sichuan).

147 Tenzin Gyatso, M, early 30s, 20 May 2015. Tawu, Kham (Sichuan).


149 Sonam Tobgyal, M, late 20s, Monk, 9 Jul 2015. Kyegudo, Amdo (Qinghai).

The map has been put together by Christophe Besuchet and is taken from: [http://www.rangzen.net/downloads/Map_TsampaRevolution_20141216_EN_XXL.jpg](http://www.rangzen.net/downloads/Map_TsampaRevolution_20141216_EN_XXL.jpg) (acc.10.08.2015).
Look into the deep blue sky above
my lama has returned
into the tent with white rock steps
look, my Tibetan brothers and sisters
look at the peak of that snow mountain
the white snow lion has returned
look, my Tibetan brothers and sisters
look at the fortress in the forest
look at the beauty of the turquoise plain
my tigress has come back.

Some of the last words of nun Sangay Dolma,