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## Reflection: Fire and Buddha Image

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## **Reflection: Fire and Buddha Image**

*By Ashley Malin*

*Written for Jonathan Stockdale's class  
The Body in Comparative Religions, spring 2016*

The fiery body and the Buddha image present striking roles in the religious tradition that transgress Western scholarly rationale of Buddhism as solely a philosophy. Liz Wilson presents the fiery body in Buddhism as a source of self-discipline, and communicating the dharma. Wilson does not argue whether self-immolation is permitted in Buddhist monasteries; the symbol has a life of its own that predates Buddhism. She argues that the destruction of the body through fire is simultaneously a sacrificial act that communicates Buddhist understandings of impermanence. The practice of self-immolation in Buddhism presents a detachment to the body that goes beyond the body as representative of self. Western understanding of Buddhist philosophy shifts when self-immolation becomes perceived as an irrational, destructive, parinirvana, or “literally ‘the complete blowing out’ of a flame.”<sup>1</sup> The symbolism of fire draws to mind passion, violence, and death beyond the Western perceptions of Buddhism as peaceful or meditative. Rather than simply perceived as outright suicide, self-immolation presents a ritually controlled death that becomes a “symbol of transcendence.”<sup>2</sup> Physical and “special mastery over the element of fire”<sup>3</sup> draws parallels to self-discipline of the inner fire: emotions, desires, and attachments. The “snuffing out of the fires of ignorance, passion, and hatred that lead to further existence is itself often envisioned as a fiery state.”<sup>4</sup> This is not very far from Blaise Pascal’s allusion to the burning heart, or the burning Sacred Hearts of Mary and Jesus. Wilson cites the

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<sup>1</sup> Liz Wilson, “Human Torches of Enlightenment: Autocremation and Spontaneous Combustion as Marks of Sanctity in South Asian Buddhism,” *The Living and the Dead* (New York: State of University of New York Press, 2004), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, “Human Torches of Enlightenment,” 33.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, “Human Torches of Enlightenment,” 35.

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, “Human Torches of Enlightenment,” 33.

*Samyutta Nikāya*, a Theravada Buddhist scripture drawing this same allusion to the fire within: “I ignite an inward fire... the heart is the altar, self-discipline the flame.”<sup>5</sup> In the realization that there is no eternal self, Buddhist self-immolation presents control of the inward and physical fire as the “ultimate act of sacrifice”<sup>6</sup> and communication of enlightenment. Instead of communicating dharma teachings through words, monks who self-immolate make a dramatic statement whether religious, or political through the destruction of their bodies. The body, therefore, becomes a simultaneous canvas of destruction and extending Buddhist teachings.

During his visit to a Northern Thai Buddhist monastery, Professor Donald Swearer observes the deceased abbot’s image consecration. The image of the teacher, or Buddha serves not merely as a representation of that person, but evokes their living presence. Swearer brings to light the Western scholars’ tendency to downplay the miracles and supernatural elements of the Buddha.<sup>7</sup> He describes the religious tradition of sacred Buddha images through “efficaciousness, or power [...] by supernatural stories of origin or miraculous feats attributed to the image.”<sup>8</sup> Swearer’s description draws parallels to Tantric Buddhism, which involve a relationship between the body’s trance states with a religious image. He presents the veneration of the Buddha image as becoming the physical, living embodiment of the Blessed One.<sup>9</sup> The Buddha image and the living enlightened being gazing upon it create a mutual relationship where the novice, or enlightened student, has the opportunity to be in the presence of the deceased teacher.<sup>10</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> Wilson, “Human Torches of Enlightenment,” 34.

<sup>6</sup> Wilson, “Human Torches of Enlightenment,” 36.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Swearer, “Buddha and Buddha Image,” *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 13.

<sup>8</sup> Swearer, “Buddha and Buddha Image,” 12.

<sup>9</sup> Swearer, “Buddha and Buddha Image,” 18.

<sup>10</sup> Swearer, “Buddha and Buddha Image,” 16.

presence of the Buddha image is necessary, according to Swearer, for fulfilling personal and communal goodness as a result of the teacher's presence.<sup>11</sup>

The body of a renowned figure like the Buddha, whose image still exists even in death, presents to an extent a supreme body, or one that holds a position of respect and authority. Swearer presents the example of what I refer to as a supreme body referring to a respected figure, or teacher whose image retains presence "as a symbol of the deity; and as the deity itself."<sup>12</sup> The Buddha embodies the dharma and as a result, so does the image before students and devotees. The role of the body pervades a physical presence and extends to a mystic one of communication from the Buddha image. Swearer describes the presence of the deceased abbot as imbuing the entire space of the Thai Buddhist temple as a result of his venerated image.<sup>13</sup> Despite the actual person's physical body having long since disappeared, attachment to an image transmitting their essence and teachings remains.

From class readings exploring the body in Buddhism, I am struck by the way Western scholars have reduced Buddhism to solely a philosophical lens, disregarding the religious practices and contradictions within the tradition. A friend from China whom I met while studying abroad brought up the subject of Buddhism when I told her I was a religion major. She asked me, "Do you think Buddhism is a philosophy or a religion?" At the time I really couldn't give a constructive answer, except say, both. I remember she remarked, "I don't understand how Americans simply think of Buddhism as a philosophy. It's a religion." Her understanding of Buddhism was more complex because she had been exposed to the tradition beyond a Western Enlightenment lens.

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<sup>11</sup> Swearer, "Buddha and Buddha Image," 17.

<sup>12</sup> Swearer, "Buddha and Buddha Image," 18.

<sup>13</sup> Swearer, "Buddha and Buddha Image," 11.

The tradition is layered with stories that contradict each other, like Gavampati's self-immolation realizing "no abiding essence ever remains"<sup>14</sup> in comparison to the cremation of Master Myozen's whose ashes left "over 360 crystalline fragments."<sup>15</sup> Both stories contain the element of fire, but in the latter, the relics of the crystalline fragments become the remaining essence and presence of Master Myozen. Relics contain merit, but instead of being considered "eternal bodies"<sup>16</sup> like Catholic saint relics, Buddhist relics are impermanent; they will inevitably one day disappear. The relics of Shakymuni Buddha "will be parinirvanized; from now on, there will be darkness [...] the body of the Buddha will be seen no more."<sup>17</sup> Studying the rich presence of Buddha relics has offered a new perspective of their importance in the tradition as simultaneously a religious and contradictory element. I have always been skeptical over the role of relics in Catholicism, however, in Buddhism, the relics communicate the dharma. Relics are not simply a representation of the Buddha, but emphasize his real presence as a teacher in the tradition.

In relation to Buddhist emphasis on impermanence, Wilson's critique of the role of bodhisattvas in Mahayana Buddhism is equally as thought-provoking. Liz Wilson points out that "the good of all sentient beings is not always well served by postponing the attainment of final *nirvana*."<sup>18</sup> There is actually the possibility of the problem of there being too many Buddhas that the teachings are overexposed and taken for granted. The lack of attachment to immortality and the teacher choosing to pass on in "ritually controlled circumstances"<sup>19</sup> becomes an act of

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<sup>14</sup> Wilson, "Human Torches of Enlightenment," 39.

<sup>15</sup> Kazuaki Tanahashi, editor, "Record of Bringing Master Myozen's Relics," *Enlightenment Unfolds: The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dogen* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 31.

<sup>16</sup> John S. Strong, "Buddhist Relics in Comparative Perspective: Beyond the Parallels," *Embodying the Dharma*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 43.

<sup>17</sup> Strong, *Embodying the Dharma*, 43.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson, "Human Torches of Enlightenment," 40.

<sup>19</sup> Wilson, "Human Torches of Enlightenment," 36.

humility and a “communication of wisdom.”<sup>20</sup> Choosing to enter nirvana can be interpreted as an act of humility, while postponing enlightenment to preserve the *sangha* can equally be viewed as an act of compassion. Another striking element was that, instead of the constant presence of bodhisattvas, the Buddha’s image itself retains merit and exemplifies the dharma.

I continue to be fascinated by anthropologist, Talal Asad’s theoretical lens, which defines “practice bodies,” as skilled, or religious bodies held in high esteem. One of the best examples of this is presented in Donald Swearer’s case study of Buddha image consecration in Northern Thailand. He writes, “The monks invited to meditate for this occasion are often renowned for their attainment of extraordinary powers associated with trance states (*jhana*).”<sup>21</sup> The monks represent privileged bodies who can transfer their trance states to the image during the ritual. “The transformation of an object into a living reality”<sup>22</sup> brings to mind parallels of the Eucharist’s transubstantiation into the living body of Christ. Buddhism has furthered my personal understanding of Catholic traditions I have been exposed to over time. These Catholic parallels to Buddhist religious practices include veneration of saint relics within churches and the reoccurring image of fire in stain glass iconography. The role of relics and privileged, or “practiced bodies” present another complex facet of the body in Buddhism complementary to the symbolism of fire and Buddha’s realized presence in images.

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<sup>20</sup> Wilson, “Human Torches of Enlightenment,” 41.

<sup>21</sup> Donald Swearer, “Creating and Disseminating the Sacred,” *The Life of Buddhism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 39.

<sup>22</sup> Swearer, “Creating and Disseminating the Sacred,” 39.

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