

CORH Values – Season 3, Episode 4

Jason Clower on Fire in Asia

Dr. Jason Clower talks with us about the key role of Fire in the Vedic rituals and imagery of Ancient India and we examine how Buddhists refigured that central metaphor. We then think about the role of Fire in China and look at the tradition of self-immolation that has been part of Buddhist practice in the region for some time, culminating with the Monks who have burned themselves in Tibet recently to protest Chinese policies there.

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Transcript:

Hello, welcome to the religion and humanities podcast produced by the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities at California State University Chico. I'm your host and chair of the departments. Daniel Veidlinger. This season's topic is fire. Over the summer. Northern California was assailed by a number of very serious wildfires. The Dixie Fire, alone, consumed almost 1 million acres of forest. And the skies were filled with smoke for weeks upon weeks. That drove us to think about fire as a theme. And we're going to be talking about different approaches to fire in different cultures around the world. The role of fire in various religions, the mythical origins of fire, and other metaphorical uses of the idea of fire. Our guest today is going to be professor and thinker of great thoughts. Dr. Jason Clower, who teaches at CSU Chico and specializes in East Asian religions. Professor Clower, welcome, it's great to be here. I love doing these podcasts. Yeah, Great to have you, we've gotten a lot of good responses to the previous podcasts that we've done together. So, I thought we should do another one. And indeed, this topic of fire that we have for this season is something that definitely ties into the kinds of research that both you and I do on Buddhism and Indian religion in general, fire seems to be a very commonly used metaphor in Indian religion all across the board. So, I think we'll have a lot to talk about and let's launch into it. First of all, for the listeners, I will point out that in Sanskrit, the word for fire is Agni. And many people have heard that the ancient language of India, Sanskrit, is related to the Indo-European languages, such as Latin and Greek and English thereby, and therefore, attorney, the god of fire and also the word for fire is of course related to many words that just in regular English, we use such as ignites to start a fire or igneous, igneous rock and forged in the volcanoes. So, Agni is a word that we can even relate to in English, which I find interesting. So, what's the word for fire in Chinese? Huo, Huo, okay, and is there a root, well I guess in Chinese They don't really have roots in the same. They kind of do. Some characters are certainly more fundamental than others. And you know this because they end up being included in later more complex characters. So, for example, the word to burn, shao is written using a small fire symbol next to a larger phonetic symbol that clues you in that it's pronounced something like shao. And so, you end up visually seeing that the word involves fire somehow and it sounds like shao and then, you know. Ah-hah. It's the one that means burn. That's really fascinating. I mean, the Chinese writing system is something that I would love to learn more about as I near retirement and have more time to go over these things because just so fascinating how they incorporate little symbols, of base words that everybody knows the meaning for the kind of use that to describe a little more about what's going on in the word at hand. It's much easier than people think. There's, it's far from being a bunch of arbitrary symbols, like the ten thousand or whatever symbols that are constructed, the parts that kind of makes sense on there. They make sense in just the same way that if you know a bunch of roots in Greek or Latin or Sanskrit and you can get a long, long way. Something like that works in Chinese too. It's very doable. I see. Okay. So, fire is one of the five well phases, the wuxing. That's right. And a fire and leads into, but there's an order for the wuxing, right? Unlike the Western four elements, earth, wind, fire, and water way, there's actually a specific order that you have to say them in Chinese because they are connected one to the other. I think there are five elements and they have two orders. There's a generative order. So, let's see. Earth generates wood. Wood generates fire, and then, so on. And then there's a destructive order Degenerative order, water quenches fire, fire burns wood and so on. That's precisely not elements. They're not elemental meaning that they can't be changed from one to the other because that's what it means to be an element. They can be they do change all the time and

influence each other. That's exactly right. They're not elements, they're not things or substances, they're phases. And in fact, in Chinese they're called the Five wuxing phases. Actions, functions. They move. Yeah, and has fired devastated many of the great cities over time and China. Because if you think about the Western world and we just had two years ago, Notre Dame was devastated by fire. You know, every time you go to Europe and you see the great buildings, it's always, there's a plaque somewhere saying this was destroyed by fire on such and such a day. There's the great fire of London and most cities have had their major conflagrations. I'm wondering if that's like a thing in Chinese history and the way that there had been some celebrated burnings of places. Chinese citizens in modern Chinese schools, have, are taught many, many units on what they call the (translation). The century of national humiliation and the hands of Western powers. And so, an episode it's always taught and retaught is the burning of the Summer Palace in the mid-19th century by the body wall, the gene, the Allied armies of eight nations who invaded Beijing as part of the Opium War struggles. And, and you can still go today to the ruins of the Summer Palace and visit the visit the ruins that include some really incredibly good Italian Renaissance architecture built by the famous Jesuit Matteo Ricci. Uh-huh. Yeah, at the Imperial Court. Oh, I see them. 17th century. Interesting. Okay. Well, I'll have to check it out someday. But before we, before we get into East Asia, I'd like to ask a little bit about fire in the early Indian religions and specifically in early Buddhism. It's been a long time since I read Richard Gombrich's early work. But I seem to remember that at 1, he reinterprets the fire sermon as being a kind of him taking fire as a meme from Vedic fire sacrifice and re- Figuring it. If you think it's interesting, would you tell us a little bit about that and tell me whether you think it holds water. Well, for sure. Then wait, let me be clear. You're saying that Gombrich is re-interpreting how people viewed or that Gombrich is saying the Buddha reinterpreted that the Buddha, yes, of course, no, that's, I think that's for sure, right. That fire was a key element of ancient Vedic religion. That every Vedic citizen in good standing has to keep their eternal fire going in their house. And it probably goes back deep into human history that we became human beings through fire. I mean, it is really through the conquest of fire that humans became true humans. It was the earliest technology that we developed. And it's something that allowed us to cook our food. So, there's some anthropological research being done, talks about how much energy it takes to digest food that is raw. So, by cooking food in a fire and eating it, that allow the body to send more energy to our brains instead of distributing the energy more evenly between our brains and our stomach. Yes, so literally cooking food helped us to become the intelligence Superintelligence geniuses that we see before us looking at, yes, in this very room. And of course, it allowed us to survive during different climates and all of that. I mean, fire is absolutely crucial to humans being humans. Hence, many religions have fire as a core element. And amongst the various religions, none has really explored the depths of the meaning of fire more than the ancient Vedic religion of India, I would say, I mean the rituals that they developed on how to honor fire, how to start fire, how to worship at how to use it. Probably more extensive than any other religion, I would say. I only just started this, but do we know about connections between Vedic fire religion and Zoroastrian? Sure, cultic practices, I was going to say other than Zoroastrianism. But not other than, but alongside with, I think they probably both have a similar irreverence towards fire and they both branched off from the same brand so early in the Iranian peoples, okay, at nothing You mentioned that it's a very interesting thing that there's a specific kind of Japanese Buddhism shingon Yes, that's right. That has homa as well. Yes, yes. Yes. And it seems I always quip that. I think that when East Asians famously appropriated Buddhism and kind of put their own spin on it. I often joke that East Asia succeeded at turning Buddhism right back into Hinduism. Yeah. And in this case, if Gombrich is right and you know, part of Buddhism's early as defining characteristic is that it was a refusal of Vedic fire sacrament. Just terribly ironic that, yeah, that's right hand is because it reinvents fire sacrifice as a Buddhist practice? Yes, that's right. Exactly, Yes. So, to get that Gombrich, so so having said that, I think it's very key. It very clear that fire was a central motif around which Hindu, all of ancient Vedic religion or early Hinduism, whatever you want to call it, revolved. Hence, Buddhism as an offshoot of that, a heterodox way of thinking had to deal with fire in one way. They couldn't just a voice right. Because it was so you had to take a position on it, say contact. And therefore, their position was the fire that we're interested in is not a physical fire burning, but the fires of desire that burn inside all people. But rather than cultivating the fire like the Sanskrit based Brahmanical traditions going to do. We want to put out these fires, right? And the word nirvana means to put out a fire, right? Right. That's what the word means. Like people often say, well, what happens when you go to nirvana? Is it somewhere that you go or is it a kind of annihilation? Well, literally if you have a flame burning in a candle and you blow it out, That's the core meaning of the word nirvana. So, when you apply to a human being, what does that mean? Well, it

means whenever, wherever the plane goes, that's where you go. So, you can think, does the flame just stop existing? Or when you blow on it, you notice the flame kind of leave this world and just go into one another. This is one of the things that drove East Asia crazy about Buddhism and really, really bothered me that for good reasons. It sounded like a cult of annihilation. And yes, yes, it's a, it's a measure. They thought that too the same way that modern students who learn about it get tickets and I leave. I would say it's very difficult for a kind of reasonable human being. It's a reasonable avoid that interpretation even if they're quite sophisticated and of course as Buddhist. But the end, I'm sure that some very intelligent Buddhist topologists said to them, no, no, no, it's not. What do you think? We're not talking about extinguishing life. We're talking about extinguishing the flame of suffering. That, that never stopped people from hearing DBN, the nirvana extinction blown out. And thinking that that was something monstrous and basically negative and nihilistic. Since I came to the study of Buddhism. As a Buddhist, this still sometimes keeps me from seeing something as elementary has gone. Bridges point that fire is a basic metaphor in Indian religions and therefore in Buddhism. In that because we mustn't forget that within the Vedic tradition as well, the reformers also use the fire metaphor. So, when you had the yogic tradition emerge, they also view yogic practices as a kind of inner fire, right? To replace the form of listeners just to be clear about everything. So, the ancient Indian civilization of the Vedic people's focused around sacrifices, the main ritual. And when we say sacrifice, I mean, putting some item, often an animal, by the way, they were not vegetarian. He added this period, we're talking 500 BC. Everybody. So, they would make a fire, make an altar, build a fire, put an animal on it, and burden the animal up as an offering to the gods, the enemy gets a dead, right? That's what we mean when we say a fire sacrifice. So, Buddhism, as we'll talk about in more detail in a minute, rejected that and interpreted the fire in a different way, but also within the Vedic and what later became Hindu fooled. There were also people who rejected the idea of fire sacrifices. And they started a tradition that probably half of the listeners have done called Yoga, in which you replace the physical fire with what they call top US, which means heat. It's a heat, a spiritual heat that you generate in the body by practicing these yoga practices. And they say that the, the hot breath that emerges through the breathing techniques is the equivalent of the smoke of the fire that then rises up to the world of the gods. So is it fair to say the yogic tradition says, Okay, if you want to do a fire sacrifice, Here's your fire sacrifice. It's cultivating the inner fire heights of top US. Exactly right, Exactly right. So, everybody in India around 500 BC, right? Is really figuring the idea of fire and fire sacrifice in some way. Exactly. So, Buddhism is setting itself apart by saying, okay, here's our take on fire. Snuff it out. Exactly. You could kind of think of that as one of the litmus tests for what counts as a Vedic tradition or a heterodox practice. If in some way they interpret the fire imagery in a way that you want to keep the fire going and cultivate them. That it's Vedic, even if you don't do sacrifices, but you do yoga, it's still made it because you're doing a fire metaphorically inside. They literally viewed like in deep inside your belly is they thought there was a kind of fire which makes sense because our breath is hot, right in the body is hot. Why is it hot? There must be some kind of fire burning inside a human being, which there is, we call it chemical reactions. But they do create the same kind of heat the fire creates. So that they thought it was more like something is actually burning inside us. And by controlling it, we can perform a yogic sacrifice than the Buddhist, again, as you say, also talk about fire, but you want to quell the fire, not concentrate the fire. And that's what makes them not. Because I'm in the yogic practices were just as different from the ancient sacrifices at the Brahmans did as Buddhism it, yes, it just the metaphorically, they talked about their practices is continuing to fire. This strikes me as the perfect example of something that I know you're an expert on, which is the idea of an Axial Age. Again, early religions when for whatever reason, at about the same time, in broad terms, are about the same time in many regions of the world. People moved from very early religions that would feature things like sacrifice and burned offerings to some sort of internalized sacrifice or offering. Well, because the same thing happened amongst the ancient Jews, Right? Exactly the same thing with they also had a priestly caste that perform the called the Cohen's, that perform the various sacrifices of the temple that again involved building an altar, getting some combustible material usually would getting an animal slaughtering and burning it on the altar as an offering to God. So very, very similar. Like India, over time, those sacrifices died out. I mean, it came rather suddenly when the Romans destroyed the altars. They use the same imagery, but translated it into something more portable. In this case, pray, right? So rather than meditation and yoga, they said that our offering of the prayers are similarly, our words are going to be a metaphor for the smoke of the animal going up to, to God. Do you know this? Do you know if Zoroastrian fire sacrifice also went through some kind of Axial Age period where they, they re-interpreted higher something internal. Now, that is a good question. I'm pretty sure that it did. Do they sacrifice anything onto the fire or is it just the lighting of the fire? I know

that they've got like 18 types of fire in good. You know, in though our petition, they divide off I had to fire started naturally. Fire started by stone, fire started by wood. And it's one of those kinds of things. For their big ritual, they have to, they have to put a piece of burning ember into the main fire. That is, that is derived from one of each of the eight seen different kinds of fresh is something like that that goes up? Yes. Now, I mean, I'm not an expert on this, but it's something really interesting like that, where they have a big fire. And then part of the ritual is you take a burning ember that was made from a match, from a lightning strike and put it in. You take a burning ember that was made from rubbing sticks together. You take a birdie or is made from rubbing Flint to get the different tribes. But there's eight scenes. I don't know where they got them all from, But you're so right though. The Indian really tears it's love numbers. And they had, this always strikes me as a person who's steeped in Chinese religion. Don't, it doesn't seem to matter to them much whether the number is somewhat arbitrary. This, in fact, this I think, is maybe the most under appreciated difference between Chinese religion and thinking and Indian thinking. China demands that if there are numbers involved, they need to make sense. Like they need to be nice and symmetrical, round based on four off and a yeah. Right? And but really, they work very hard to produce it all to one. Chinese religion and thought has a terrible problem with the idea of basic multiplicity in the universe. They really, really want to get to some kind of monism where, okay, if there are five basic substances, they're really forms of one basic substance. They want everything to reduced down to a nice symmetrical unity and something that fascinated and also bedeviled Chinese people early on about Buddhism was they just thought, well, there are, there are certain physical substances and there's a certain number of them down. You probably know what the number is. I forget, you know, x number of dharmas to get right. Well, there's 52 mental factors in the Abhidhamma system. And then there's the 70 something physical gathering ray. It is just almost arbitrary number. In the way that it just so happens that on our planet, the gravitational coefficient, yes, exactly. 9.8 per second per second, right? The end China would just be terribly bothered by that y 9.8. Yeah. Why not nine or 9.6, right? It doesn't make any sense. It seems so arbitrary eyes. An Indian religion just has no problem accepting that. In some ways, the universe just is kind of uneven somehow. Just is the way it is. And to finish my crazy rant by my pet hypothesis about what makes a Japanese thought and particular art and aesthetics much different from Chinese is that they are okay with asymmetry. In China. If you have a poem, it has to be bilaterally symmetrical. All the lines have to balance. In Japan, you can have a rock garden and it can be visually completely unbalanced. And maybe that looks very good to you. Japanese fine pottery. I have a tea pot here that's exquisitely made in Japan and it's lopsided. And that's beautiful in a Japanese aesthetic. Whereas it would have been thrown out in the craftsman shop in most versions of Chinese aesthetic. Anyway. I want to point out one more thing about the depth of the fire metaphor. So, we're talking, when we're talking about the Vedic period, by the way, everybody, we're talking like 1000 BC to kind the 300 BC. That's basically the period we're talking about here. Until that start to become eclipsed by what developed and to Hinduism. But fire was so central. The word to cook food is pook. That means to cook. So, the word pook actually came not just to mean to cook, but it actually comes to mean good. So, anything that is has gone through fire is regarded as cooked, proper or good. So even the modern-day country of Pakistan, the word pack means good. So, Pakistan is the good country. That's what it literally means. But it's also a play on words because it uses key for Punjab, a for Afghan, and K for cashmere pook. So, the main regions of Pakistan also spell out the word pack, which means good. So that's how you get the name. This is fascinating. I am, I'm struggling to think of any way in which fire it. Is that important or basic 0 or positive in the Chinese imagination? It doesn't. I can't think of some counterpart to the Holy Spirit appearing as a flame or something being cooked or flame treated being a good thing or even a mature thing. Even the word for cooked food is it's the word from a tour. It's a, it's a plant metaphor. Yes. So, there might be more agrarian, really good metaphor is inside these. Yes, yes, yes, yes, That's right. And in China, of course, Chinese mythology is full of early culture heroes. Your Mythical beings who sort of broadest civilization. I can't think of any one of them who was a fire bringer? Uh-huh. They were bringer of agricultural things, of irrigation, of the techniques of farming, even of astronomy. Which isn't as random as it sounds, because in the ancient world, that's how you know when to plant, right? So, and Geomancy is called Fengshui? Yeah. Which means water at what is it? We didn't wind and water. Right? So, like in India, you wouldn't have an art form like that, or I guess a science. They would call it, and arranging things and laying out. That doesn't involve. And if it's going to involve the word wind and water, it's also going to have the word fire in there, so they wouldn't think it's interesting. So, water connects to irrigation and I mean, India's also race-based culture. Of course, they also need water for irrigation. The race but certainly liked is a great thing. Yeah, In China, but it's associated more with heavenly bodies. Sunlight and maybe

moonlight. Brightness is a great thing, but there's, it's not especially fundamentally associated with fire. We've had in the traditional like Confucian period China when they had, they had spirits, I guess that they worshiped. Confucius talked a lot about the right rituals. It ought to be done. Those rituals involve fire sacrifices to these because there are no, this is very interesting. I, I'm, I'm far from an expert on any kind of sacrifice, but I, I seem to remember that anthropologists of religion sometimes make a fundamental distinction between the cultures that do burnt offerings and cultures that do cooked offerings. And then have people eat the cooked food. Yeah, China is the second kind. Food offerings are essential. Nobody can neglect those, but they also then become a meal for the people. Now I want to talk a little bit about some of the disturbing reports that one hears over the past couple of years of Buddhist monks burning themselves, immolating themselves in Tibet in order to protest the Chinese oppression of their religion. This is something that has been going on for some time. And of course, the listeners might be aware of a very famous picture from Vietnam in the sixties of a monk who burned himself alive to protest, well, not the Vietnam War. Everybody thinks that C is protesting the Vietnam War. Do you know when he was protesting? He Yes, I do. This was the picture that you've probably seen is the Vietnamese monk. Take one look. And he was protesting the treatment of Vietnamese Buddhists by their Catholic rulers. It was not a protest against the war. He was in 1963 when he was, I don't think the Vietnam War was especially hot at that moment. But no, he was. That the government of Vietnam consisted largely of Catholic people, converts under French influence. And Buddhists felt that they were being sidelined and denied privileges that, that the Catholic Vietnamese had. And that was what was being protested against when, to my knowledge, and East Asia, whenever self-immolation happens as any sort of political symbol, it's, it is a protest against the maltreatment of one's own group. Okay. And so Thich Quang Duc took in the sixties, He's not the first to do this. So, this is something that I understand has been done even for like hundreds of years. This incidence of monks immolating themselves in East Asia. Oh, my goodness, monks had been ablating themselves in East Asia or parts of themselves almost since Buddhism got there. And can I geek out here for a few minutes? So, they're flipped where it here for a moment ago I was careful to say something about just draw a distinction about monks immolating themselves for political purposes. Because mostly it's not that when Buddhism arrived in East Asia, one of the biggest, most popular scriptures that it brought with it was the Lotus Sutra. It, right? And I, I don't know how big the Lotus Sutra really was in India or Central Asia. But when it got to China, it was big. And one of the things that it celebrates is people making offerings and sacrifices to the Buddhas. And there's a tail in there about one Bodhisattva who decides after he's offered many, many, many, many presses things to the Buddha's all kinds of precious incenses. It's kind of runs out of stuff. And he thinks, Wow, that's just still don't feel satisfied. I want to offer something really cool and precious and rare. Any decide. Ah-ha. Instead of burning incense, I'm going to burn my body as an offering. And he does this. And it's important to remember as scholar James Ben kind of the leading authority on East Asian Buddhist self-immolation. He points out that if you are a Chinese person reading this text, you had no reason to think that this was anyhow or in any way figurative and that it was symbolic. Know, as far as you knew, you were reading an actual document describing something actually done, carried out by a highly advanced human, highly advanced being that you wanted to do. And so of course, Chinese Buddhists were inspired to do this and this was kind of held out to them as well. Maybe the apex that you could aspire to. And it's also worth pointing out that in the Lotus Sutra, it's not even a monk who does this. It's a lay person. It's a lay person, like most of the people reading it, like most of the people listening to this podcast. And so, it seemed to invite people to go and follow suit. And they did. Even more commonly, people would burn parts of themselves. So, we limit this. Uh, yeah, so yeah, it sounds like because I've also heard of this too, that this Lotus Sutra incident I think was his name serve as such by periodontium now maybe in Sanskrit. Said, Yeah, I've never heard it in Sanskrit before, but yes, Right. I guess in this case with the Chinese name be a translation or a transliteration. Translation, Translate rest of syrup. All being in the popular for Kumarajiva translation. Okay. At any rate. So, it sounds like this is not done as a protest, that was just done as a positive thing to show your devotion to the Buddha. It exactly the idea protest, it's not really proud of it yet. Not one bit. Okay. It's an achievement. So okay. And then lay people would burn parts of their body lately, but cut off a finger and burn that kind of thing. I think that what I'm about to describe was done chiefly among monks. The only cases I can think of are among monks, but Chinese Buddhists got really into relics. And austerity. This is a funny thing because we're always taught that Buddhism is the path of the middle way, but not in East Asia anyway. In East Asia, people loved biographies of outstanding past and Buddhists. And one of the ways that you could be outstanding in these biographies was to be outstanding for asceticism. Because here's the thing. You can't. It's very hard to

write a compelling story about somebody who's heroically moderate. You can't really stand out from the crowd by moderation. But asceticism, you can stand out for. That could be a lot of acetic one-upmanship. People letting insects feed on their bodies, let wild animals eat their flesh. Isn't there a Japanese game show? I think there's a gap Japanese game so about almost everything. But yes. So at least in East Asia it, Buddhists loved doing asceticism, especially really flashy asceticism. And so, at one point, people decided, Hey, maybe I don't want to offer my whole body as a living candle to the Buddha's, but I could offer a finger. In fact, the Lotus Sutra even says this. The Lotus Sutra says innumerable merits. If you just, just burn off a finger, heck, even a toe, it would be good. Wow. Okay. And so, we'd many, many documented instances of people by burning off maybe their pinky finger as a devotional candle to the Buddha. And there's a special procedure for doing this. You take cord that's been soaked in flammable material and then you wind it very tightly around the pinky from bottom to top. Uh-huh. And then you join your hands in prayer and light the top of the pinky. And it burns down, down, down, down just like a candle or a stick of incense. Wow, I did not know this. And I'm told that the pain is bearable because the finger has been wrapped in the nerves that are somehow compressed, right? So, this would happen a lot. Play. And it, it sure got attention for Buddhism and positive, but also very negative. Yeah, I'm sure some people would have disapproved of it. And it's interesting that the authors of the Lotus Sutra, it didn't, it didn't occur to them. The people might actually start to do this because it is dangerous to have an admonition like that in your sacred text. It, people could get the wrong idea. Is there any, is there any indication at all that maybe people didn't do this in India? I don't know about this kind of thing. I have not really heard of it. It's not a tradition in India that I know about. Certainly, asceticism is often when I think about Indian Buddhism, I just think there's so few documents past a certain point in time. I always wonder could something had been going on and we simply lack the evidence for it. But don't forget, India, everybody has burned at the end of their life. So, I think the idea of sacrificing some part of your body now, they just bigger. Well, I'm burned anyway. At the end of life, yes. That's, we have to remember that all of this stuff is said from within the culture in which everybody is cremated, right? So, they are offering themselves. It's just that they're already dead. Usually it's a difference in timing, but not in kind. Well in fact how are Chinese non-Buddhists buried? What, or not buried but how is the body disposed of? Are they buried? in China and Sorry, cremated or what, buried Buddhist monks are still cremated, right? But most Chinese people choose burial. It's a very old tradition, would have burial, it's a burial culture. And even now that the Chinese government is trying all kinds of measures to get Chinese people to be cremated just so they can save space. Of course, with the population that big, they still, it's still an impossible really think, yes, because in Japan and most people are cremated, Japanese are much more Buddhist as culture than China in Japan, for so long, Buddhism was, functioned as a kind of arm of the government. Yeah. I'm told that like even today, births and deaths in Japan are recorded where? At the nearest Buddhist temple? Yeah, right. Never been like that in China, at least not for any length of time. They're a burial culture and a lot depends on the Feng Shui of your deceased relatives grave. And so, authorities can try to get people to cremate. But as soon as their backs are turned, people will try to have traditional style graveyards. I had no idea, actually always just assumed that they were cremated. The government wishes they would be and. It would help things lot, yeah. Among other things, China's graves are Big, yep. So that's a problem when you have a population of that size. It's a terrible problem. I see, they've got people often forget that's that China has about the same land area as the United States, but it's way more mountainous. Oh yes, there's not much arable land in China. So anyway, getting back to the question. So, this is somebody was done as a form of worship rather than protests for hundreds of years? Yes. Okay. And then do you know when the earliest period it was used as a kind of protest? I, this is just going to take a flying leap and say the 1300s, like against government policy of some sort. It's well before modern times. Before modern times, yes. When when Thich Quang Duc did that He didn't make that up, right? It was just that it was filmed and that made all the difference and made all the difference. And it was filmed and shown in the West from what I'm told. It is pretty new to Tibet though. And particular, and nor Japan. Japanese, I think it's a particular Chinese thing. I was curious about this. There was reading about Thich Quang Duc's famous self-immolation. And one of the things I wondered was, how long do they let him burn for? I would I think until it went out, Yes. Yes. He burned until he just poof and all that was left was a little bit of his heart. Yeah. I mean, he did there was human bodies don't burn that easily. He had to be re-cremated I see, but yeah, the heart survived that second cremation too. Yeah. But I wondered about this because in Japanese seppuku the, The committing suicide by sword and it's also extremely painful, lingering death. And so mostly people who committed seppuku would be dispatched by helper standing behind, done. That. They

would begin to disembowel themselves and then the helper would take the head off. I see. So, I I was I was wondering after the picture was taken, then one and yes, I learned that he was just allowed to burn and burn and burn. And of course, that it made sense to me because in the Lotus Sutra, the, the burning is a, you're burning yourself like incense. And of course, you don't. You go start burning a stick of incense and they go rescue it. Burned all the way down. If you have certain Buddhist attainments. After you've burned yourself, there are the relics leftover, which are not ashes, but I mean, I don't know exactly how this works. If it's they really find them in the pile or they just get them elsewhere and say they found them. But like little gems, basically, someone in much of the booths will you see what they called relics? But they don't look like a pile of ash. It looks like gems, like almost something that has solidified and it's like a little colorful stone or something like that. Yeah, I think that's the case with Thich Quang Duc as well that they would, like the literature says all that was left was his heart that had kind of solidified into a diamond like mass. I don't know what that really was, but that's what it says. And that's a long Buddhist tradition as well as finding these gems or beautiful stones inside the pile of ashes, the ones that I'd seen at intertwined and Buddhist temples, these relics have always been sort of darkish pellets. They talked about like gemstones, but the ones that I've seen haven't really been colored or bright. But here's a piece of homework for myself. Chico State happens to be the home of a nationally known anthropological expert on burnt human remains. And I know this because I've worked with her in search and rescue and identifying human remains dry after fires. I want to ask her about, are these, relic pellets that we find in Buddhism, are they legit, and where do they come from? The general Buddhist community probably does not approve of these actions when injuring yourself is certainly not a general Buddhist ideal. You're not supposed to commit suicide for various reasons. One of them being that if you are emulating itself like the Tibetan monks did to protest Chinese treatments in modern day two bits of the mugs, doesn't that show an undue attachment to a certain issue which you are supposed to do away with in your spiritual progress in the world I come from. Monks are pretty human and they have, they have issues that they care about and political agendas at a lot of points in Chinese history. It's the monks who are the War Hawks. To me, it doesn't seem like a super baffling self-contradiction that you anymore then the thought that Christians maybe would go to war, yeah, and Western policy. The actual Buddhist monks, they don't actually focus all day and night on trying to rid themselves of desire. Know, they are, as I often say to my human beings, you have to understand it. Monks and nuns are not desireless human beings. They are human beings who hope to become desireless and it may be several lifetimes. It could be billions of years, yes. Now, anyway, I mean, burning yourself as a particularly the extreme example, but there's many examples of monks and nuns doing things that demonstrate they have desires and interests and whatnot outside of that all the time. For sure, speaking as a Buddhist, I, I always want people to know that Buddhism has sex scandals. To. Buddhism and Buddhist organizations have every kind of extravagance and abuse, that happens in every other agree every other religion. So, I want to how successful these protests have been in China. I know that when the Tibetan monks emulate themselves, what often happens is I think that the Chinese government then, well, you can't jail the dead person, but you can certainly jail their relatives distant in order to disincentivize future monks from burning themselves. So, it's because it's very bad PR, yes, for sure. When people burn themselves in protest of something, especially in today's age with social media and everything, it can become quite a craze. And I'm sure that the Chinese government, very afraid of one day this thing really catching on just people burning themselves left, right, and center, and it will just create a huge problem for them. So, then the question arises about what forgetting passionate attachment to some social issue which according to the early Buddhist texts, is not really something that you ought to do, but according to the way Buddhism plays it on the ground or something people do all the time. But then there's the question of suicide in general, in Buddhism, is that allowed? And there's different opinions on that. Well, I mean, what would you say if I were to ask you is suicide allowed in Buddhism as a general principle? Heck, like when the Buddha was an elephant and he jumped off a cliff to kill himself so that hungry hunters could take his meat back to their starving Villa? Yes. Exactly. I was going to say there's many jataka tales. Tales by the way are stories of the Buddha and past life before he was the Buddha. Many where animal sacrificed themselves to help others in terms of that animal well as an incarnation of the Buddha. Previously, there's a famous king Sivi, who there was a blind man and he needed to see. So, the king took out his own eye. Ah yes, right? So, injuring yourself to help others is certainly a common theme in the jataka tales for sure. Not to mention that in the final life of the Buddha, when he was the Buddha, there is a story in which she said I am old and getting ready to leave you to the associated monks. And they all said, oh my Lord, we will miss you very much. And they kind of wait around and then it actually says, you know, it's time for me to die. But I do want to

point out, if any of you had begged me to stay, I would have stayed. I have enough powers to continue my life in this body for many, many years. But since nobody asked me to stay, I'm now going to die. So, in a sense that the kind of suicide and just like pulling the plug in a hospital, like you have artificial means that he could have, this was magic not he could have artificially prolonged his life, but he decided not to. The stories say that the Buddha died because he ate food that had gone off and that and he, he must have known this because he specifically told his attendants not to eat this particular food. That's exactly right. That it's clear that he knew that it had gone bad and that they shouldn't eat it. So, another yeah, so in a way that's also, not only did he commit suicide and by neglecting to use his magical powers to prolong his life but even actively to just eat something that he knew would kill him. So, Jason, this is a really fascinating discussion. I learned a lot. I say this after every podcast that I learned a lot, but I generally do. I really enjoy doing this and learning a lot. And I hope they're listening to about fire and emulation in East Asia helped me think more about my own research into these matters in South Asia. So, thank you again, I really had a good time today. I did too and I'm all fired up to learn more. Fantastic. See you next time. If you'd like to learn more about the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities, please go to our website at CSU Chico.edu slash C O R H. That's CSU Ch ICO.edu slash C O R H. I just found out that the noted Buddhist monk and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh died today. So, I wanted to dedicate this episode to his memory. I want to point out that the opinions expressed here and do not necessarily reflect those of the faculty and staff of our department. [I'm here with Jason Clower who is, has](#) a PhD in what is it in Asian Studies. no, it's business and finance, business and finance, but I decided that it would be much more lucrative to be a professor of comparative religion.