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*Thresholds of Transcendence: Buddhist Self-
immolation and Mahāyānist Absolute Altruism*

Part One

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Thresholds of Transcendence:
Buddhist Self-immolation and Mahāyānist
Absolute Altruism, Part One¹

Martin Kovan²

Abstract

In China and Tibet, and under the gaze of the global media, the four-year period from February 2009 to February 2013 saw the self-immolations of at least 110 Tibetan Buddhist monks, nuns and lay-people. Underlying the phenomenon of Buddhist self-immolation is a real and interpretive ambiguity between personal, religious, altruistic and political suicide, and political suicide within the Buddhist saṅgha specifically, itself reflected in the varying historical assessments of the practice and currently given by global Buddhist leaders such as His Holiness the 14th

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Dalai Lama and the Vietnamese monk and activist Thích Nhất Hạnh.

Part One of this essay surveys the textual and theoretical background to the canonical record and commentarial reception of suicide in Pāli Buddhist texts, and the background to self-immolation in the Mahāyāna, and considers how the current Tibetan Buddhist self-immolations relate ethically to that textual tradition. This forms the basis for, in Part Two, understanding them as altruistic-political acts in the global repertoire of contention.

Introduction

In China and Tibet, and under the gaze of the global media, the four-year period from February 2009 to February 2013 saw the self-immolations of at least 110 Tibetan Buddhist monks and lay-people.³ An English Tibetan Buddhist monk, then resident in France, joined this number in mid-November 2012, though his self-immolation has been excluded from the authoritative accounts of the exile Tibetan and other documenters of the ongoing Tibetan crisis.

The reasons for this are various and non-explicit; some perhaps lie in the real and interpretive ambiguity between personal suicide, religious (or ritual-transcendental) suicide, political suicide, and political suicide within the Buddhist saṅgha specifically. Such ambiguity is reflected in the varying assessments of the practice given by globally significant Buddhist leaders such as His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and the Vietnamese monk and activist Thích Nhất Hạnh. Part One of this essay

³ By end-December 2013 this number had reached 125.

surveys the textual and theoretical background to the record and reception of suicide in Pāli Buddhist texts, and the background to self-immolation in the Mahāyāna. Part Two summarizes the Tibetan Buddhist monastic and lay self-immolations of February 2009 to February 2013 and, with the textual background in view, theorizes a non-endorsive but constructive account of them as a religious and political act in the “global repertoire of contention,” in order to clarify those claims for what is a critically urgent issue in Buddhist ethics.

One of the reasons for this lack of clarity to date is that little attention has been paid to the metaethical background for such acts. By surveying the empirical data of the cases of Tibetan Buddhist self-immolation, recent commentary has sought to adduce their heterogeneous valuations, motivations and ethical effects⁴ that themselves require responses that, also widely varying, leave these acts in ethical irresolution.

Many distinctions are relevant to this clarification. We need, ideally, to consider both the canonical record and its commentary, the orthopraxical monastic and lay responses to them, the lay and monastic suicides themselves, their varying motivations, and their political and transcendental-sacrificial dimensions. Many of those detailed tasks lie beyond this discussion, which generalizes from the given cases. Essentially contentious in nature, the self-immolations provoke a widely varying range of valuations rather than a univocal condemnation or praise. It may be that their ultimate ethical import is something that can only be comparatively resolved in a still-unknown future.

⁴ See especially the special edition of the *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* No. 25, December 2012: “Tibet is burning. Self-Immolation: Ritual or Political Protest?” The essays therein cover a wide range of political, historical, sociological and cultural-anthropological dimensions of the Tibetan self-immolations valuable to a deeper insight into their ethical status.

Thankfully, Buddhist studies scholarship of recent decades has developed textual analyses on which we can draw to consider relevant hypotheses.⁵ My concern here, however, will be to apply existing theoretical analyses to the contemporary Tibetan and Western cases in order to discern possible Buddhist-normative grounds common to them, and to the schools of the Buddhist tradition generally.

Accordingly, there are three main dimensions to the Buddhist self-immolations of 2009 to 2013 that both parts of this essay seek to address. The first, is twofold: 1) the Buddhist-theoretical background from the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions that understands suicide (and self-immolation) in a wide range of signification, and scholarly argument concerning it, and 2) how the current suicides relate ethically (more so than socio-historically) to that textual tradition—here, however, in immanent terms, and only secondarily in the more explicitly transcendental bodhisattvic discourse familiar from the *Lotus Sutra* and elsewhere. These analyses constitute Part One.

The second main concern, briefly, is the empirical circumstance of Buddhist self-immolation, in Tibet,⁶ and in the West; the third dimension is the normative and meta-ethical status of self-immolation vis-à-vis both Buddhist culture and its contentional relation to the extra-Buddhist world. These latter two dimensions are taken up in Part Two of this es-

⁵ This essay draws on recent scholarship in English, German and French. As Delhey (“Vakkali” 68) points out however, some recent Japanese-language scholarship has also broadly addressed the issue of suicide in Buddhist exegesis.

⁶ This concerns a complex sociological terrain too diffuse to survey here, for which reason my summary will be comparatively brief. (See again the special edition of the *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines* No. 25, December 2012: “Tibet is burning. Self-Immolation: Ritual or Political Protest?” for a wide range of discussion.) The online issue of *Cultural Anthropology* published April 9, 2012, also offers a range of anthropological surveys; see <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/93-self-immolation-as-protest-in-tibet>.

say. There, I've also been concerned to situate the "Western" self-immolation of the English monk Venerable Tunden in alignment with the ethical status of the Tibetan cases, but also differentiated from them instrumentally in its unique solidarity across social, economic and racial lines of identity.

Both Parts form a whole that should ideally be considered in juxtaposition, mutually informing issues addressed in each; the division of this essay into two parts is to facilitate thematic distinctions that are, ultimately, part of a unified discourse. All three areas of concern could be analyzed independently, and in much greater detail. My aims in this essay are synthetic and widely-focused, and I've treated each dimension in broad dialogue, in order to highlight certain commonalities between both cultural contexts and the larger Buddhist record, and as foregrounded by the more empirical and politically significant differences between them, as well.

Some orienting general remarks might be useful here. This essay is not focused on the sociology or anthropology of protest suicide or self-immolation in Tibet or Tibetan Buddhism as such, its normative relations with institutional praxes, or with the historical dimensions of self-immolation in wider Buddhist contexts. Rather it concerns some of the central ethical and theoretical issues generated by the current context of Buddhist self-immolations.

I. Claims and Counter-Claims for Suicide in Canonical “Mainstream” Buddhism⁷

Western scholarly and orthodox views from De La Vallée Poussin to Keown

Across the textual spectrum, it could be said that suicide is regarded equivocally, tending to fall roughly into two uneasily opposed camps.⁸ The textual discourse is complex and contested, and between the Theravāda and Mahāyāna canons, despite their theoretical continuity, even mutually undermining.

As long ago as the early 1920s Buddhist scholars such as de la Vallée Poussin and Woodward suggested that despite the canonical insistence on non-violence towards others codified in both the First Precept and the third *pārājika* of the Vinaya proscribing homicide, the Buddhist tradition was equivocal about suicide. Despite texts that confirm, first, that suicide is not an ascetic act conducive to spiritual progress and second, that no *arhat* would ever suicide, Poussin proclaims “we are confronted with a number of stories which prove beyond dispute that we are mistaken in these two important conclusions.”⁹

⁷ “Mainstream” Buddhism refers to the increasing practice among some scholars (e.g., Gethin 190, 182; Williams 41ff & *passim*.) to refer to the common ground shared, in general terms, by the early Buddhist schools and the thought of the Indian Mahāyāna. As the Abhidhammic theory of *dharmas* in particular came to be disputed by the ontological critique of the Mahāyāna, the new trend nevertheless kept much of the older philosophy of mind in central place—hence its continuity in a “mainstream” of Buddhist thought and praxis.

⁸ See Delhey, Harvey and Keown.

⁹ Cited in Keown (“Buddhism and Suicide,” 10). The subsequent discussion of Poussin’s claim is wide and various. See Keown (“Buddhism and Suicide”) and Delhey (“Views on Suicide”; “Vakkali”) for surveys of this interpretation.

Since then a number of scholars¹⁰ have rehearsed Poussin's claim, notably Lamotte who "believed that Vakkali's case represented the normative position of early Buddhism according to which an *arhat* may kill himself" (Delhey "Vakkali," 72 note 12). These vicissitudes in textual interpretation have been admirably surveyed by Delhey ("Views on Suicide"; "Vakkali") and don't require repeating here, but with a view to historical continuity it could be claimed that the earlier Poussin-Lamotte "transcendancy hypothesis"¹¹ countered more recently by Keown, Harvey (291) and Young (71-130) could be said to be represented in even H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama's very recent (March 2013) Gelug-orthodox statement. There he states that the essential arbiter for judging the value, meaning and effect of suicide lies in the intention or motivation of the agent that informs it, *cetanā* being paradigmatically the deciding factor of any wholesome (*kusala*) action, whether toward self or other.¹² Should that intention involve the poisons of desire (or fear) (*lobha*) or aversion (*dosa*), they are necessarily unwholesome (*akusala*). The Dalai Lama's statement reads:

Actually, suicide is basically (a) type of violence but then question of good or bad actually depend on the motivation and goal. I think (as) goal is concern, these (self-

¹⁰ See van Loon, Wiltshire, Lamotte ("Religious Suicide"), Becker, and Florida (41) among others.

¹¹A recurrent feature of some readings of Buddhist ethics, according to which (at least in this case) "a liberated person like an *arhat* can transcend moral rules, since he is 'beyond good and evil'" (Delhey "Vakkali", 72 note 11).

¹² It is important to not then read Buddhist ethics in this case as purely intentionalist, which runs the risk of reifying its process-philosophy of mind and event. Nevertheless, a causal "intentionalism" runs very deep in its discourse, and as Perrett (80-81) points out, citing Alexandra David-Neel, in the Tibetan Buddhist context includes the depth-psychological agency of dream-states and their dream-acts. Cf. Tsongkhapa (193) who following Candrakīrti includes dream-conduct in the full spectrum of *śīla*.

immolators) people (are) not drunk, (do) not (have) family problem, this (self-immolation) is for Buddha dharma, for Tibetan National interest but then I think the ultimate factor is their individual motivation . . . If motivation (consists) too much anger, hatred, then it is negative (but) if the motivation (is) more compassionate, calm mind then such acts also can be positive. That is strictly speaking from Buddhist view . . . Any action whether violence or non violence, is ultimately depend on motivation.¹³

From another viewpoint, Damien Keown consistently (“Buddhism and Suicide”; “Suicide”; “Buddhist Ethics”) refutes this basis for reasoning as giving rise to a subjectivist meta-ethics that fails to account for what should objectively determine the culpability of an act of homicide, and *by extension* for him, suicide also. His concern in this argument seems to be less with critiquing Buddhist psychology per se and more with a normative systematization of Buddhist ethics outside that Abhidhammic psychological context.

Briefly, for Keown, if we have objective reasons (as Buddhism does) for condemning the murder of sovereign others, these reasons cannot rely on the purely subjective mental states and intentions of the agent. Rather, those reasons are grounded in the sovereign rights of the other as an autonomous person, where that sovereignty is threatened in deed (far more than word or thought). For this reason, subjective motivation cannot be the final arbiter for the value, meaning or effects of an act of killing *or/and* suicide, for equal reasons: “In suicide, of course, there is no victim, but the comparison [between murder and suicide] il-

¹³ “Dalai Lama talks about self-immolation” *Phayul News* website, March 26, 2013. (Quoted as in original.)

illustrates that moral judgements typically pay attention to *what is done*, and not just the actor's state of mind" (12).

For Keown the act itself is unjustifiable in altruistic or compassionate terms, though he bases his argument not on a prior Buddhist and general claim about *suicide* but on a more typically Western-ethical conceptualization of *homicide*, conflating the two cases where there might be a critical constitutive difference¹⁴ between both Western-ethical and Buddhist reasoning in this case, but *prima facie* suicide and homicide as well. (This difference becomes explicit in the presentation of self-immolation in the *Mahāyāna*,¹⁵ where transcendental claims for the praiseworthy ritual offering of the body undermine just the subject-object dualism to which Keown appeals.) Regarding whether an act is "suicide," there are other differences relevant to the current Tibetan cases, such as the distinction between ordained *saṅgha* and lay-people (however much it seems preferable not to emphasize that particular difference). I can only address them obliquely in the following.

I will consider Keown's argument later in more detail. For the moment, it can be seen in the context of a general dispute around whether suicide, as an act of killing,¹⁶ should be more appropriately con-

¹⁴ Of the kind perhaps that Thích Nhất Hạnh made explicit to Luther King, Jr. in 1963 when he strongly disagreed with the conception of self-immolation as suicidal "since suicide is an act of destruction" (Buffetrille 11).

¹⁵ See Filliozat and Benn.

¹⁶ Delhey makes this issue the point of a critique of one of Keown's premises. For Delhey it is not canonically clear that suicide "must invariably be regarded as a breach of the *ahiṃsā* doctrine and of the first and most important moral commandment to abstain from killing living beings . . . there is plenty of evidence from historical Buddhist sources that according to large parts of the tradition these moral commandments refer to killing *other* living beings" (Delhey, "Vakkali" 72 note 11). Harvey (287) however, makes the same assumption.

ceived as destructive or productive of value, and of whether its self-reflexive nature modifies its ethical normativity, especially in the context of Buddhist adepts who (in the readings Keown criticizes) warrant antinomian exclusion from Buddhist teachings on *ahiṃsā* or non-violence.

II. Buddhist Suicide and Textual Normativity

Channa's suicide and the Buddha's sanction

In “Buddhism and Suicide: the Case of Channa,” Keown examines what he considers the only indubitable example of three major suicide cases among the saṅgha found in the Pāli Canon, in the *Channovāda Sutta* of the Majjhima Nikāya. Channa is critically ill, and although faithful both to the Buddha and the Dharma, avows he will “use a knife,” and despite receiving relevant teachings on Buddhist forbearance from his two visitors, Sariputta and Maha Cunda, cuts his own throat.

When told of the episode, the Buddha assures Sariputta that Channa will not be reborn and thereby deserves no censure for his action. Keown concludes that the Buddha's response is not a condoning of suicide as such; it is merely an exoneration of *Channa's* act specifically, an apparently exceptionalist excusing of it because, as he suggests, Channa was, in fact, an *arhat*. The Pāli commentaries subsequently go to some lengths to justify the Buddha's sanction by suggesting that Channa attains awakening in the very course of the act itself (sudden enlightenment in the course of, or immediately following, the act of suicide is not uncommon throughout the Buddhist literature¹⁷), thereby maintaining

¹⁷ Schmithausen (37 note 56) cites the *Tattvasiddhi*, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* and *Nyāyānusāriṇī*. See also Keown (“Buddhism and Suicide” 26 note 48).

the integrity of the institutional teaching on suicide, along with the Buddha's ostensible reason for excusing it.¹⁸

Accurately perceiving the critical difference between the exoneration of a circumstantial context and a universal endorsement of that action in a theoretical abstraction from it, Keown's reading is convincing and supports the many assertions in the Pāli Canon repudiating any potential value in suicide (or self-harm of any kind). It also confirms the orthodox Buddhist-psychological stance of H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama, if not the latter's normative conclusions.

Keown voices a common-sense conclusion that "In the eyes of the commentary, Channa was an unenlightened person (*puthujjana*) who, afflicted by the pain and distress of a serious illness took his own life. Presented in this light, few ethical problems arise: suicides by the unenlightened are a sad but all too common affair" (28). (This, for example, is how Ven. Tunden's suicide apparently has been understood.) Yet this view is not conclusive, and as Keown concedes, despite the wealth of canonical reasons supporting it, "no single underlying objection to suicide is articulated" (29-30).

The Pāli commentary also states that Channa is really a *samasīsin*, someone who dies and attains *nibbāna* simultaneously. He is far from ordinary in the usual sense of the unenlightened *puthujjana*, except at the moment he *initiates* his deed, according to Keown and the para-canonical commentary to which he appeals. But it is also clear that Buddhist psychology asserts that the great virtue and insight incumbent on awakening does not emerge without cause or from a contextual vacuum, and that any mental-continuum giving *immediate* causal rise to the attainment of the Path of Seeing cannot be understood as normal or otherwise

¹⁸ Such a need appears to undergird much of Buddhaghosa's sometimes weak commentarial rationalizations with regard to suicide. See also Delhey ("Vakkali" 83-84).

heavily defiled. Rather, very strong meritorious causal bases must abide in the immediately-preceding continuum of mind. It appears unwarrantable to assert that Channa is a wholly benighted soul lost to his own self-destructive defilements.¹⁹

Mahāyānist transcendentalism and its problematics

There is then still cause to consider what lies at the bottom of the Buddha's exceptionalist (and for Keown, unique) claim for Channa. If it is a genuine sanction of suicide, it has by the time of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (*Lotus*) and *Samādhirāja Sūtras* become, in somewhat typically inflated Mahāyānist terms, a virtual paean of praise for suicide by self-immolation. Perhaps, however, it is best not to conflate the two. For those sūtras, self-immolation is an act of the greatest meritorious self-sacrifice to the buddhas and bodhisattvas and a demonstration of the highest realization of emptiness. It is in that case thereby reserved for bodhisattvas, and to the degree the act is an expression of the realization of selflessness, only implicitly possible for the *arhats* of the Śrāvakayāna.

For Nāgārjuna (by attribution) in the *Mahā-prajñā-pāramitā-sāstra*, the Vinaya itself indicates that suicide evades the karmic fault (*āpatti*) and merit (*punya*) that respectively ensue from wrongs done to others (*para-viheṭhana*), or benefit done them (*para-hita*) (Lamotte 740-2.) Here suicide entails karmic effect only insofar as it is motivated by delusion, attachment or hatred—which returns to the psychological-karmic claim of H.H. the Dalai Lama quoted earlier. Failing the psychological impetus

¹⁹ See note 31, below, for the similar case of Vakkali, and Delhey's survey (in "Vakkali") of recensional variations in justifying the Buddha's exoneration of his suicide, and the canonical commentarial claims that see it as integral to a spiritual praxis (85-86). Of course, their canonical status doesn't of itself render them correct.

of the three poisons, suicide is left in karmic-moral indetermination (cf. Gethin 190). It should also be noted that chapter XI of the same text explicitly describes the categories of *dāna* in which the Inner Offering (judged as more significant than the Outer) includes “giving away one’s head or marrow, or even one’s whole body or life” (Yün-Hua 256-7). For this canonical Mahāyāna text there would seem to be no greater act of selfless virtue. What “giving away” such cherished worldly objects actually signifies is however a significantly different question, which we will consider below (and further in Part Two).

It would seem natural to focus now on the Mahāyāna reception of suicide, especially insofar as it is in the Chinese transmissions of the *Samādhirāja* and *Lotus Sutras* in particular that self-immolation receives its explicit discussion and endorsement and undergirds the known cases of medieval Chinese Buddhist self-immolations. However, it is also the explicit invocation of the discourse of Mahāyānist emptiness as bodhisattva activity that makes its application to the current cases of self-immolation potentially misleading. That is, there is a danger of misapplying a transcendentalist Mahāyānist argument as a defense of the notion that the Tibetan immolators, along with their cohort Venerable Tunden, are bodhisattvas acting under power of a transcendental wisdom none others would be qualified to assess. That conclusion is not one I want to entertain (though it can never be strictly ruled out) because it is not finally productive of the most ethically sensitive reading we *can* confidently make of what we *do*, factually-speaking, know.

For this reason I skeptically (non-pejoratively) do not here claim bodhisattva status for Ven. Tunden, and do not believe it is possible or meaningful to claim it for any of the self-immolators. Any assessment by first-hand acquaintance is always vulnerable to inaccurate assumptions, fallible knowledge, or weak intuitions; no “objective” assessment is infallible. (There are good metaphysical reasons for this also, as we will see in

Part Two.) In the Buddhist context, it would require the clairvoyant powers and extrasensory cognition of a Buddha to assume infallibility.

Nevertheless, one significant empirical aspect of the self-immolations, one that comes to the fore in the well-known 1963 self-immolation of the Vietnamese monk Thích Quảng Đức, is the kind of witness that might be able to answer some of the theoretical quandaries implicit in the canonical discourse on suicide. It is confirmed of Quảng Đức and several others of the Vietnamese monks of the early 1960s who immolated in full meditation posture, that they were monastics of decades-long standing and deep meditative attainment. Biggs reports, “They demonstrated almost superhuman self-control by sitting motionless while burning to death. The Tibetan monks, by contrast, are generally young . . . There have been no equivalent demonstrations of physical mastery, to my knowledge” (“Self-Immolation” 146) and it is the case that much of the available film footage of recent Tibetan self-immolations indicate a traumatic response to pain. (I do not know the manner in which Ven. Tunden suffered his death.)

Although the extreme self-mastery, or simply the stoical forbearance of pain, demonstrated by the Vietnamese monks does not in itself guarantee their prior attainment of high-level wisdom states, let alone bodhisattvahood, nor is it a negligible aspect of them (at least in the Vietnamese cases).²⁰ What kind of observable or objective marker could ever provide that kind of knowledge?

Such hypothetical knowledge, as I argue later, is tangential to this reading of both the Tibetan and Western cases. The empirical data needed for its purposes is not finally relevant to the kind of verification that might justify orthodox Buddhist truth-claims (however interesting that

²⁰ The ability to easily withstand pain is commonly cited in the Canon (for example by Buddhaghosa) as integral to an *arhat*'s self-mastery.

analysis might prove in its own terms), but to a hermeneutic and ethical one. If the truth-claim intrinsic to the nature of such radical sacrifice were epistemically closed—that is, if only *arhats* could verify it—it would not carry the same ethical weight or enact the same dialectical function of a kind of maieutic persuasion. The sacrifices are sacrifices because they require us to empathetically interiorize and *understand* them, not merely *know* them, as demonstrating the value that (at least in part) fully *becomes* what it is because of its subsequent reassertion and cultural dispersion (Biggs, “Self-Immolation” 146). However, I will also argue, in Part Two, that absolute altruistic sacrifice embodies an inherent value, in these cases, that itself engenders meaningful re-appropriation.²¹

All that is required for that robust interpretation of the Tibetan self-immolations are the bare facts with which we are already presented (perhaps especially in the case of Venerable Tunden, as we will see). Even if we knew the self-immolators were high *bhūmi*-level bodhisattvas, it would not, for our immediate purposes, modify the ethical import of the act. It might rather detract from it, since it would then be the act of a comparatively invulnerable being rather than that of a normally sincere mortal renunciate burdened with the contested value judgments and ethical struggles true to the case under discussion. That esoteric question, however inviting, is not relevant.

What makes the actual (rather than religiously hypothetical) self-immolations existentially and ethically gripping is precisely their rarity and the extremity of the stakes they claim in the context of a known and

²¹ It is a central thesis of this essay that value-judgments around sacrificial phenomena are neither inherent with reference to the acts as such, nor to their interpretation, but occupy a dynamic middle ground as a *dependent-arising* between the suicidal agent, the act itself, its ethical witness, and the social polity that subsequently engages them as conductors of redemptive social-spiritual transformation. None of these four can be seen as a sole locus for understanding.

familiar *human-ethical* economy. As we will see, they describe a limit point of what can be said about Buddhist suicide before its potential theorization with regard to ultimate reality or truth (*paramārthasatya*). We are necessarily more concerned here, at least as a discursive ground, with conventional truth or praxis in its relative determinations.

III. Normative Heterogeneity and its Recent Commentary

For this reason we can return instead to what scholars since Keown have made of the Buddhist-normative understanding of suicide. Writing ten years after Keown in 2006, and in some opposition to him, Michael Zimmerman has claimed, echoing Delhey and others,

. . . against what seems to be the common scholarly view .
 . . Buddhist thinkers treated suicide as something distinctly different from killing other sentient beings and that, in contrast to Western notions of human life as sacred, life does not have such a basic value in Buddhism.
 (28)

Zimmerman's latter claim is arguable, even where it relies on an important finding. The conventional Buddhist truism that proscribes all acts of violence, including suicide, is in a still unresolved tension with the qualification Zimmerman identifies, a tension that exerts considerable ambiguity right up to the response to the current Tibetan self-immolations. Major Buddhist leaders such as H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama and Thích Nhất Hạnh continue to enact this normative schism with regard to suicide as a legitimate form of political and other agency.

One of its results has also been a considerable disjunction between concerted movements for political or social reform and the superstructure of religious and political authority that might give credence to

the same means to a common end. The major distinctions to be drawn for our purposes are between the understanding of suicide as an act of killing or as something else, and whether in either case its religious, political or other utility is a meaningful one for Buddhist ethics.

Suicidal self-sacrifice is clearly not the same phenomenon as homicide or suicide as personal pathology. In the framework of a general understanding of killing as a form of “symbolic naturalism” in which killing enacts various forms of ideological conflict, suicide as a political act clearly has a symbolic intention rather than being a pathological annihilation as appears to be signified in the category of *vibhavatrṣṇā* as the “thirst” for non-existence. Yet even here there is a wide range of ethical nuance implied by the same act of self-killing because “suicide” as a single term covers and masks a wide variety of symbolic intentions.²²

These distinctions are relevant to the entire history of Buddhist experience and do not conveniently resolve into a “traditional” or “modern” context. Martin Delhey in his surveys of suicide and early Buddhism claims that “there seem to be marked differences in the views on suicide expressed in the heterogeneous source material” (“Views on Suicide,” 28; also “Vakkali” 71-2), which again suggests possible parameters implicit in the range of divergence from a general norm. Among the significant primary Buddhist source-material to which he appeals is the earliest extant in the *Vinaya-piṭaka* and various texts of the Pāli *Sutta-piṭaka* and their Chinese recensions.

The commentary on homicide in the Vin. (III) 73-74 with regard to inciting another to suicide in which the act of suicide itself is *not* a

²² King (195) rues this wide variety of symbolic exchange as the potential ethical weakness of self-immolation as a form of political contention, particularly with regard to the Buddhist-ethical bases on which many have been, since the 1960s, ostensibly modeled. Cf. also Biggs (“How Suicide”) 19ff.

forbidden offense for inclusion among the third of the four *pārājika* has been frequently noted, and in some cases taken to imply the normative permissibility of suicide for *arhats* (for example Lamotte “Religious Suicide” 105). More simply, insofar as a successful suicide obviously makes redundant any expulsion from the order (which is what the *pārājika* designate) its absence from the rule is contrasted with three acts that, when successful, are equivalent to murder: instigating others to kill; consensual mutual killing; and coercing others to kill. The exception, in the *Vinaya* of the Mahīśāsakas, of the Buddha’s mention of suicide as a grave offence (as preamble to Vin. III 73-74 paraphrased above) falling just short of *pārājika* status, is significant not merely for its unique claim regarding suicide, but still more for begging the question of why it doesn’t qualify (insofar as it is legally defined in this instance) as an offence entailing full “defeat.”

Harvey reports two cases from the Theravāda *Vinaya* of a monk who attempts suicide by plunging from Vulture’s Peak only to accidentally kill an innocent other in his fall. Elsewhere, a group of monks throw a stone off the same site, with the same result. The response of the Buddha is to the effect that both events are “not an offence entailing defeat, but something approximating to one, of which there are two grades: a grave offence and an offence of wrong-doing, the latter being less serious” (Harvey 289-290). For Harvey this common judgment suggests that the decisive factor in both is the harm done to another, insofar as “that in the first case, the offence did not reside in its being a case of attempted suicide” (290).

As in many similar cases, suicide itself appears as the indirect case that eludes every rule. Nevertheless, the central function here of intention, and its concomitant effect on others (including the collective integrity of the monastic institution) is what appears to decide the prescription. Suicide, on the other hand, is inherently self-reflexive, howev-

er it may seem contrary to the First Precept of non-violence (on which Keown heavily depends in his arguments against the permissive view of suicide in early Buddhism).

The absence of any direct prohibition against suicide continues in the commentarial *Vinaya* literature. Mutual suicides or suicide attempts occur within the *saṅgha*; the Buddha responds²³ with a negative appraisal, again not because of *self-harm*, which in some cases proves minor,²⁴ but because of the harm to innocent *others* which they have incidentally entailed (most critically causing accidental death). In sum, suicide is neither equivalent to, nor a form of, the offence of murder: yet suicide and murder are implicitly conflated, on the basis not of the intrinsic harm they engender, but on the effects they produce in an environment of significant others (Harvey 287).

The instances in the *Sutta-piṭaka* that concern suicide (mostly variations on the tale of Channa recounted above) as a potentially acceptable (*vaṭṭati*) act, share at least three conditions: first, they occur outside the monastic context; second, involve presumed *arhats*; and third, are essentially cases of compassionate auto-euthanasia²⁵ (most of the cases combine all three). These cases both confirm and diverge from the monastic emphasis on avoiding harm to others: in these contexts suicide is problematic by virtue of factors intrinsic to the renunciate-, awakened-

²³ For example in *Vin.* III 71; III, 82

²⁴ This is echoed in Sarvāstivādin recensions of the *Vinayapiṭaka* that have the Buddha offering only incidental disappraisals of suicide in the context of other-harm.

²⁵ This is significant. Commentary on the *Vinaya* includes two acceptable cases of self-starvation to the death in cases of the terminal illness of highly-attained monks (though not, it appears, *arhats*). See Harvey 290-291. It could safely be claimed that in the early Buddhist context it is *only* cases defined by the issue of auto-euthanasia that can be considered as permissible suicide. Of course, the very different context of Mahāyānist self-sacrifice undermines that claim entirely.

and critically ill- *self*, rather than the monastic *other*. One explanation for this variability might lie in part with the nature of the self germane to different socio-religious spheres of life (within which even single cases offer exegetical variations that are themselves far from homogeneous).²⁶

At least two of the three individual suicide cases concern critically ill monks living in isolated seclusion (with in some cases a single attendant). This suggests that the *pārājika* rules (initiated in and) structured around a communal body are attenuated in solitude, which itself frames suicide as a solipsistic rather than socially conditioned act (as it is for the Vinaya).²⁷ Psychologically too, the *arhat* is the Theravādin exemplar who has realized *anattā* and is thus freed of the self-construction true of the unrealized layperson,²⁸ but also the monk-in-training, both bound to the karmic causality of the illusory self.²⁹ The seriously ill (as

²⁶ See for example Delhey's discussion of the case of Vakkali across three recensions of the *Vakkalisutta* (in Pāli in the *Samyuttanikāya* III, 87.).

²⁷ The notorious mass-suicide of monks as recounted in the Vin. *Suttavibhaṅga* (III, 69) and *Samyuttanikāya* (V, 320) only confirms the same reading, insofar as in that communal monastic context the Buddha's condemnation of suicide is unequivocal and suggests nothing of the 'particularism' of the responses he appears to bring to the solitary monks in the other cases. (It is likely that the similarly unequivocal exegeses of this canonical event have drawn scholars to focus on the more nuanced cases of Channa and Vakkali in trying to ascertain the criteria that might be brought to understanding the Buddha's apparently heterogeneous response to suicide.) Nevertheless, it remains an open question to what degree the 'near-mass' suicides of the Tibetan self-immolations would hypothetically agree with the Buddha's judgment of the former case, or whether Ven. Tunden's comparative solitariness (while still a properly monastic case) would disqualify it from the same hermeneutic.

²⁸ I am unaware of canonical accounts of lay suicide that prompt *direct* response from the Buddha, but it can be safely presumed that what apply for the saṅgha as grave and wrong offences apply in some measure to all practicing Buddhists.

²⁹ It is significant that the question of whether suicidal *arhats* are in fact already awakened, or only become so during or after the act, becomes of critical importance for the commentarial exegeses (such as that of Buddhaghosa) of the *suttas* concerning them.

Channa and Vakkali without question are) also may or may not be realized, but are seemingly judged by the individual case. The Buddha's exoneration of Channa's suicide (that Keown accepts as the single exception that proves the canonical rule) was case-specific, and, for Delhey, so was that of Vakkali ("Vakkali" 78), and conceivably that of Godhika as well, whose arhatship following his suicide is similarly confirmed by the Buddha.

Delhey's claim that "it is impossible to detect a uniformly negative view on suicide in the canonical texts. Rather . . . different views on suicide . . . seem to differ not only according to the person and circumstances involved in each case [. . .]" ("Views on Suicide" 36) tends to confirm a particularist reading that endorses neither a purely permissive nor prohibitive account of suicide in early Buddhism, insofar as *both* features are evident in the textual record. (Ascertaining the full nature of the orthopraxical dynamics that might underlie the differences is a task for another study.)

In the *Pāyāsi Sutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*, for example, it is suggested that a virtuous ascetic might be an exception to the norm; given his virtuous karma, were he to commit suicide he would be surely destined for a better rebirth. The *sutta*, however, concludes otherwise, using a rationale familiar from much recent Western moral theory: that a virtuous life is itself inherently meaningful. The Buddhist addition is that first, embodiment in this life allows for the further accumulation of merit (*puṇya*), and second, remaining in the *saṃsāric* world allows for further charity in the forms of compassion and wisdom extended to suffering sentient beings. Both of these reasons for rejecting suicide are found as well in the Mahāyāna context and come to form the exoteric bases for the bodhisattva's motivation in the broad ethical nature of the Greater Vehicle.

The *sutta* concludes by claiming that, as he is not yet realized, the ascetic's hurrying death by suicide would be as premature as an induced premature birth; analogously, "awaiting the maturity of the fruit is wiser than trying to shake it down before it is ready to drop."³⁰ Many other texts appear to in part articulate a "natural ethics" of the spiritual life for monk, layperson and the critically-ill alike, where each contextual life- and mind-world forms the psychological-ethical matrix for an incrementally awakened embodiment that looks both within, and increasingly without, to the suffering world, and is determined by *that* reciprocal evolution rather than a normative Archimedean fixed-point vis-à-vis suicide *in abstracto*.³¹

The Buddhist self and symbolic-transcendental sacrifice

From this perspective, it is unsurprising that the realized *arhat*, while beyond the constraint of forming the new karma relevant to rebirth in *saṃsāra*, embodies an example of the path to others that suicide would clearly compromise (and as reflected in the broad textual presentation of, especially monastic, suicide). *His* value is one not intrinsically for or in himself, but *for others*. Yet the instances of suicide as a transcendental renunciation that explicitly emerge in bodhisattvic exemplarism only hyperbolize the same theme.

³⁰ D. II 332. Harvey (287) discusses a similar analogy in *Miln.* 195.

³¹ In a case such as that of the monk Vakkali, a wide repertoire of actual and explanatory possibilities are rehearsed across the history of textual recensions. As Delhey reports of the commentary of the Chinese *Ekottar(ik)āgama* recension of the Pāli *sutta* (probably representative of a lineage of the Mahāsāṃghikas), it "comes up with a very original new explanation of how Vakkali consciously used the suicide not only as a means to escape disease but also to cut off the fetters which bind him to *saṃsāra*. Therefore, in this text rather a new reason is given for why his suicide was *justified*" ("Vakkali" 85).

On the other hand, it is not surprising that no Theravādin self-immolation has yet been recorded, even though a number of texts of the Vinaya³² qualify Theravādin *arhats* with the metaphor *aggikhandha* (or *agnikhandha*)—"mass of fire." The Theravāda hadn't (and hasn't) established universal compassion as its guiding soteriological norm; its logic is rather centered in the self-centric praxes of self-enlightenment.

For the Mahāyāna, self-immolation signifies the total sacrifice of that conventionally most cherished object—the human body—in a wisdom-purification of ignorance by fire. Self-immolation either approaches, or fully epitomizes, the most conventionally radical "total self-renunciation" (*ātmaparityāga*). It occupies a certain threshold of transcendence, one that worldly consciousness *as ignorant* (*avidyā*) is by definition only partially able to apprehend or judge to its fullest extent.

The Buddhist attitude to suicide evolved from the early implied indifference to the sanctity of life as such (as claimed by Zimmerman, above) towards overtly valorizing it in the Mahāyāna in some cases *in order* to demonstrate the virtue of its great self-sacrifice—in the Jātaka tales, the fourth chapter of the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, the *Vyāghrīparivarta*, *Suvarṇabhāsaśūtra*, and *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sutra*. This might be seen as indicative of not merely the socio-historical growth of the Buddhist religion, but as legitimating the recognition of the different capacities of those engaged on the path of the accumulation of wisdom and compassion, not defined by denomination or doctrine alone but also by the a-temporal constitution of mind, and self, of each practitioner. This possibility could be seen to underpin not only the Mahāyāna record but even

³²Mahavagga, I, 26,27; Dipavamsa, VI, 38; Samanātapāsādikā, I, 36 I, 67 (*Dhammarakkhita*); Paramatthadīpanī, II, 89.

the early Pāli record in its wide and otherwise causally obscure variations.³³

As a willed act of the self, suicide is at least formally paradoxical: the mental continuum *qua* ego willing its own annihilation *asserts itself*. Perhaps to resolve real ambiguity, the conceptual frame for suicide in the Vinaya identifies the harm it does to *others* as the rational basis for its indirect proscription. Where self-harm is not explicitly proscribed, it is also not clear that the conceptually paradoxical structure of suicide, especially given the added importance of *anattā* to early Buddhist discourse, is made explicit, and where it might inform the wide differences to which Delhey and others refer.

If, for Buddhism, there is ultimately no autonomous willing self, who or what agency determines the ethical-intentional status of the act of self-annihilation? (This is distinct from willed action directed with reference to another person or object, which as Keown rightly recognizes, constitutes a fully objective intentionality. Suicidal action is also in one sense objective, but only with reference to *the body* of the suicide, and not another's.) With suicide, early Buddhism had a serious epistemological as well as ethical problem on its hands.

In Abhidhammic terms, suicide is the effect of an extreme configuration of unwholesome motivation (*akusala cetanā*) and afflicted volition (*saṃskāra*). The intentional mind, as Gethin has suggested, has no power to supervene, whatever its conscious good intention, on the deeper determinants of unwholesome motivation. Gethin claims rather that a potentially compassionate motivation (most relevant in the context of

³³ Delhey (“Vakkali” 67-8) reads these shifts as essentially historically (externally) determined, and not accidental (72). His admission however of wide variation even within certain temporal strands of textual stratification appears to imply criteria *internal* to these exegetical trends as well.

euthanasia or assisted suicide) informing *homicide* is psychologically untenable (where it is not made explicitly ethical):

. . . that intentionally killing a living being is wrong is not in fact presented in Buddhist thought as an ethical principle at all; it is a claim about how the mind works, about the nature of certain mental states and the kinds of action they give rise to. It is a claim that when certain mental states (compassion) are in the mind it is simply impossible that one could act in certain ways (intentionally kill).
(190)

In summary, if (1) Buddhist normativity is determined not so much by public proscriptions as by psychological bases, including less conscious ones, on which such norms are superimposed, and (2) the status of killing is finally a question of the deepest layers of such psychological intention and the contextual mind which it informs, it seems likely that the motivational substructure for suicide is no different. Thus it would seem that Keown's equivalence between homicide and suicide is not, at least psychologically, misguided after all, and the permissibility of the latter can (in Gethin's Abhidhammic terms) be determined with the same reasoning as the former. But is this completely clear?

Keown's argument from homicide

Keown's argument against the permissive view of Buddhist suicide is made in his article, "Buddhism and Suicide: the Case of Channa," and centrally relies on a claim for the ethical equivalence between suicide and homicide. It is, firstly, an exegetical argument against a heterogeneous reading of the textual record, but more strongly, the ethical possibility of a heterogeneous view of suicide in early Buddhism. I will only address the latter issue here, insofar as Keown's argument from homicide

can be reversed to support an argument that makes suicide categorically *not* equivalent to homicide because (as Nhất Hạnh suggests) their intentional objects are psychologically as well as ontologically distinct.

Keown's argument is in straightforward *modus tollens*: if (*p*) subjectivism, as an argument for the permissibility of suicide in Buddhism, is used to justify homicide generally, then (*q*) this results in an absurd permissibility of killing sovereign others. As this is unacceptable (*not-q*), so too is the initial premise (*not-p*). An unstated premise is that suicide is as much an instance of killing a sentient being as is homicide. This is surely true—a living (often young and healthy) body is taken from the sum of sentient life forms, all of them alike embodying the high value of sentience itself. The argument is valid, but are the premises sound?

Keown's argument hinges on the ontological otherness and autonomy of the victim of homicide as being the conditions for its proscription (in Buddhist and Western-secular ethics alike):

The "roots of evil" approach to moral assessment . . . is subjectivist to the extent that it claims that the same action (suicide) can be either right or wrong depending on the state of mind of the person who suicides: the presence of desire (or fear) makes it wrong, and the absence of desire (or fear) makes it right . . . In murder a grave injustice is done *to someone*, regardless of the murderer's state of mind. To locate the wrongness of murder solely in desire, is to miss this crucial moral feature of the act.(12)

However, an analysis of suicide undoes Keown's argument by its own terms: suicide is done *to/by/for* the self, not *to/by/for* someone else, and in the religio-political context, *in order to* serve the moral betterment, awakening and free-ing of the other. Concretely, it is not another's

living body that is either neutralized (as in homicide) or symbolically value-exchanged (as in ritual sacrifice), but one's own.

Keown's argument appears to suggest that it is the living body and hence autonomous will of *the other* that is at stake in determining the moral culpability of homicide (and by Keown's extension, suicide). However, these two factors—another's living body and another's will—are precisely what is *not* at stake in suicide; rather, suicide puts *one's own body*, and *one's own will* at stake precisely by virtue of the affirmative action of that same will. (Note, however, that that will may be fundamentally characterized by unwholesome motivation, which preserves Gethin's Abhidhammic argument but does not support Keown's argument from homicide.)

In other words, the ontological and psychological, and therefore ethical, terms of suicide evade the premises of Keown's argument. They do not thereby justify suicide, but nor do they implicate it in the sense Keown assumes with his claim for homicide-suicide equivalence. Two further questions can initially be asked more generally of his premises: first, is it simply the living body of the other that is sought in an act of homicide? Or rather, second, can the body be conceived *apart* from the constitutive will of the other? It makes little sense to claim the "mere body" of the other *per se* as what is at stake in the judgment against homicide, because we cannot conceive of a meaningful "other" apart from the freedom of self-determination (as Keown implies) the other as *person* embodies.

Similarly, an obvious objection might be that the value at issue in Keown's argument is neither the body nor the constitutive will of personhood but the "life" it instantiates. To that objection the same refutation obtains: to conceive of the sense of human "livingness" requires also that sense in which it is always a life *for* a subject (however minimal or

compromised) for whom it is or always becomes a question what that, and still more *their*, being-alive signifies for them.³⁴

In that case also, what is ultimately if not always consciously sought in the act of homicide, via the body, is *the autonomy and will of the other*. If the preservation of the will and autonomy (just as much as the body and life of the other) is what is decisive for Keown for the proscription against homicide and suicide alike, suicide must escape it: for suicide is the one act that expresses an unconditional assertion of both individual embodied will and personal autonomy (and as against a possibly constraining other).³⁵ Keown goes on to suggest,

To say that suicide is wrong because motivated by desire, moreover, is really only to say that *desire* is wrong. It would follow from this that someone who murders without desire does nothing wrong. The absurdity of this conclusion illustrates why a subjectivist approach to the morality of suicide is inadequate. (12-13)

This argument achieves two things: first, it demonstrates that conceiving suicide as conceptually identical to homicide leads to absurd conclusions (which itself infers the faulty premises of such a proceeding); second, granted that suicide is in these terms for Keown *unlike* homicide, then suicide appears to require an alternative interrogation. This

³⁴ This emphasis differs from that of Evans, who does not address subjective equivocation as such and assumes that suicide *necessarily* implies a devalorization of the suicide's own life. That claim is presumably true of the "pathological" suicide but not of cases of altruistic self-immolation, which gain ethical force just because personal life is so valued, via its sacrifice to a greater collective value.

³⁵ An illustration of this might be in the well-known phenomenon of WWII resistance fighters preferring the proud autonomy of suicide, where the integrity of the self is kept 'intact,' as against dying at the "dirty hands" of the enemy.

would seem to necessarily grant its inherently subjective nature, insofar as it is phenomenologically defined by its being a largely unobservable sequence of transactions between the afflicted volitions (*saṃskāras*), intentional will (*cetanā*), deeper mental-contextual motivation (*hetu*), and material form (*rūpa*) of the same autonomous living being, where his or her own, not another's, living sentience, is at stake.

All of those features are inherently subjective given it is just the nature of *the subject* that is being contested in suicide, and that subject's relation to an observing (and perhaps even reciprocally invested) social world. The objective fact of such subjectivity is that it is determined by factors that are always and only meaningful with relation to a subject, no matter how many or what kind of social features are secondarily derived from them.

Keown subsumes such subjective factors into social ones, and fails to take them ontologically or conceptually into account, so that his argument, where applicable to the other-directed nature of homicide only secondarily and indirectly applies to suicide (at least in the first instance). Gethin's conclusion from the Theravāda record remains in force (and despite, as we have seen, its lack of definitive articulation against suicide on a *moral* basis):

Although the *Abhidhamma* model of the way in which the mind works can accommodate a set of circumstances where genuine compassion might play some part in an act of killing a living being, it does not allow that the decisive intention leading to the killing of a living [being] can ever be other than unwholesome and associated with some form of aversion (*dosa*). (189)

The Abhidhammic claim is in the first instance psychological; it is only secondarily ethical, and hence prey to degrees of reified misrepre-

sentation, such that the psychological apprehension of self, the inherently reflexive self-awareness of the subject, can become (perhaps very easily) the “objectively” fixed religious dogma signified even in the comparative correctness of *sammā diṭṭhi* or right view.

Hence, Keown’s conceptual framing of the problem (as Gethin suggests of the context of homicide) undermines both the conclusions it seeks to arrive at, as well as the nature of the problem of suicide in Buddhism as such, even where it relies implicitly on sound psychological intuitions. All the foregoing, however, does not justify suicide in the Buddhist context. In refuting Keown’s argument my aim is *not by implication to endorse a permissive view* of Buddhist suicide—whether personal, political or religiously altruistic (cf. further discussion in Part Two, Section III & Conclusion). It only suggests that the problem of subjectivity with regard to apprehending the nature of suicide is stubbornly and irrevocably constitutive.

Conclusion

The problem of suicide in Buddhism is, however, still more than purely psychological. Although the psychological aspects of suicide are in some senses open to articulation in scientific-objective and social-normative terms, suicide is, much moreso, an “existential nexus” linking the phenomenology of self, the body, and the values inhering in these vis-à-vis an observing world.

It begs the old and deep Buddhist and general philosophical question involving the self, whether that be an idealist constitution of self and world or a realist one which, however empty of inherent existence or however ultimately lacking all self, nevertheless tacitly relies on ontological claims for conventional existence to justify its this-worldly norms. A norm such as the First Buddhist Precept has determining agen-

cy, where the living body is a conventionally real value encoded in it, not least as its primary phenomenal-material signifier in an otherwise immaterial economy of transcorporeal dhammic values.³⁶

In idealist terms, however, the ontological basis for such values would not in the first instance lie in the apparently objective bodies that “stand in” for them in the consensually-shared physical world of contested value; rather, value is already constitutive of that world, and living bodies are the real fictions that phenomenalize it, performing the “karmic drama” that is expressing the matrix of mind that generates, for example, the appearance of living bodies in conflict. In both idealist and realist terms, these bodies are loving, hating, killing, or even committing suicide by virtue of the karmic mind that so wills them.

It seems likely that Buddhist ethical thinkers (like other ethicists) will tend to one or other of an implicit foundational construction of the ultimate ground for contested values, even where doing so leaves the ontological understanding of the contested living body itself largely indeterminate. From this arises much of the opacity of the symbolic functions of “the body” as a signifier of value as well: where its corporeality is not in question, the values it functionalizes (e.g., in consensual war or terroristic conflict) are what remain uncertain, but contested nonetheless.

For instance, most forms of *other-directed* killing, however ethically problematized, are not ontologically in question: it is clear that what-

³⁶ This does not imply an ontological dualism: the locus for the attainments of Buddhist insight, mind, is not separate from the world on which it performs ultimate de-reifying analyses (including itself). Conventionally, however, *nāma-rūpa* is unique in reflexively analyzing (unlike non-human sentient minds) its own apparent division into material and non-material form, and the entailments (for Buddhism, salvific) inherent in that non-dual condition.

ever is 'in error' is not the status of the body itself, but the values it variously represents for contestation. For example, the physical body in abortion (unwanted fetus), capital punishment (transgressor of the highest law), and counter-terrorism (ideological terrorist), to take three sites, all instantiate different (literal) *forms* of consensual value. (Without analyzing their symbolic structure, it is clear that the object of the first is maternal-biological, the second criminal-legal, and the third ideological-existential.)

The symbolic status of the object of suicide, however, is again various and obscure because there is no publicly verifiable external marker for its transactional value, despite its radical facticity, only a subjective one. Of course the same thing could be said of capital or lethal retributive punishment, insofar as it is purely a question of public consensus whether its *value* is to be legitimated or not. (The punished loses his life, no question, just as the suicide does, but that is surely not an object of value from his perspective. For the altruistic suicide, however, it is, absolutely.)

Suicide, especially in its symbolic dimensions, literalizes the metaphysical tension between a subjective or objective-consensual world, and the body-in-the-world as the phenomenal-noumenal nexus between them: it remains ethically contested in the Buddhist tradition (as outside it) because the metaphysical issues that underlie that ontological problem also undermine conventional discourse around it. For this reason also, more constructively, the ethical and philosophical equivocation around suicide in Buddhism remains a prime site to generate further thought on the metaethical (and not least metaphysical) problems it raises.

Part Two of this essay seeks, among other things, to address questions regarding the symbolic ontology of suicide in Buddhist terms, and articulates metaethical and normative approaches to its evaluation. In

doing so it hopes to contribute to the understanding of the current religious-political self-immolations in Tibet and those outside Tibet that are affiliated with them.

Abbreviations

- D. *Dīgha Nikāya* (tr. T.W. and C.A.F. Rhys Davids), *Dialogues of the Buddha*, 3 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1971 .
- Miln. *Milindapañha* (tr. I.B. Horner) *Milinda's Questions*, 2 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1964.
- S. *Samyuttanikāya* (tr. F.L. Woodward), *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, Part III. London: Pali Text Society, 1954.
- Vin. *Vinaya Piṭaka* (tr. I.B. Horner), *The Book of the Discipline*, 6 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1938-66.

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