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

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Thresholds of Transcendence:
Buddhist Self-immolation and Mahāyānist
Absolute Altruism, Part Two¹

Martin Kovan²

Abstract

In China and Tibet, and under the gaze of the global media, the five-year period from February 2009 to February 2014 saw the self-immolations of at least 127 Tibetan Buddhist monks, nuns, and lay-people. An English Tibetan Buddhist monk, then resident in France, joined this number in November 2012, though his self-immolation has been excluded from all accounts of the exile Tibetan and other documenters of the ongoing

¹ An earlier (non-academic) version of this essay appeared in *Overland Journal*, in print and online, under the title *The Year of Great Burning*, in April, 2013. A subsequent version presented for a seminar hosted by the Australasian Association of Buddhist Studies (AABS) at Sydney University, April 2013, benefitted from audience comment, for which the author is grateful.

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Tibetan crisis. Underlying the phenomenon of Buddhist self-immolation is a real and interpretive ambiguity between personal, religious (or ritual-transcendental), altruistic, and political suicide, as well as political suicide within the Buddhist sangha specifically. These theoretical distinctions appear opaque not only to (aligned and non-aligned, Tibetan and non-Tibetan) observers, but potentially also to self-immolators themselves, despite their deeply motivated conviction.

Such ambiguity is reflected in the varying historical and current assessments of the practice, also represented by globally significant Buddhist leaders such as His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and the Vietnamese monk and activist Thích Nhất Hạnh. This essay analyses the symbolic ontology of suicide in these Tibetan Buddhist cases, and offers metaethical and normative accounts of self-immolation as an altruistic-political act in the “global repertoire of contention” in order to clarify its claims for what is a critically urgent issue in Buddhist ethics.

Introduction

Part One of this essay surveyed the textual and theoretical background to the record and reception of suicide in Pāli Buddhist texts, scholarly argument concerning it, and the background to self-immolation in the Mahāyāna. It also considered how the current Tibetan Buddhist suicides relate ethically to that textual tradition, and concluded with an attempt

to mediate between the varying and often contested historical and scholarly claims regarding this record.³

Despite its heterogeneity, it can however be asserted of the Buddhist record regarding suicide that the exoteric teaching of both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna vehicles properly sustain the conventional value of *ahiṃsā*, both with regard to others and the self (just as does H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama in his position as the Mahāyāna tradition's most visible global spokesman). To suggest otherwise would falsely repudiate the very great majority of normative claims consistently expounded by the Buddhist Dharma.

Yet it is also clear that in any ultimate analysis, the trans-ethical value of altruistic suicide, most explicitly endorsed in the sacrificial acts recounted in the 23rd chapter of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sutra*,⁴ which is determined not by consensus, but by the deep structure of mental-ethical motivation, is something that for the Mahāyāna also lies on the border between the conventional and transcendental realms. For Mahāyānist altruism this signifies the religio-ethical threshold between karmic dualism and a non-dual surrender, an a-causal and trans-karmic access, to Buddhist awakening.

³ The use of the word “suicide” is equivocal in the context of the Tibetan self-immolations, and in Buddhism more generally (see Part One of this essay). Perhaps taking a cue from Thích Nhất Hạnh in his 1960s decrying of self-immolation as a form of suicide (see below), many commentators resist using it as a misleading descriptor. The use of the word here is meant in the technical sense of intentional self-killing simpliciter, without connotative judgment of the many and various symbolic forms of “killing” that may be entailed. That issue of symbolic constitution is considered later in the essay.

⁴ *Bhaiṣajyārājapūrvayogaparivarta*: “The Elaboration on the Ancient Yoga of Bhaiṣajyārāja.”

For the Mahāyāna, a mind long-practiced in the dual paths of merit-accumulation and wisdom could conceivably offer such an absolute sacrifice of the prime worldly object of attachment—the mortal body which in any case must die—to that cause of awakening to the transcorporeal dimension of ontological truth, where the body, no less than the self, is known as empty of inherent existence. The body is exactly that object of attachment⁵ closest to the reified self. To awaken in a Buddhist sense means having cognized the illusory nature of both that reified body and self. The Mahāyāna valorizes that insight as constitutive of the awakening that makes conventional altruism not merely productive of positive karma in its amelioration of suffering, but also the culmination of the Buddhist path as one of transcendental wisdom.

In Part One of this essay, however, I was concerned to not subsume the contemporary Tibetan Buddhist self-immolations wholly within that Mahāyāna transcendentalist context, even where it remains religiously significant, for the hermeneutic, and centrally ethical, reasons detailed therein. For the analysis of the self-immolations that follows, I'm rather concerned to respond to the causes and conditions giving rise to them, grounding any possible analysis in a fidelity, where possible, to actual circumstance. It is to that empirical foundation that we must initially turn.

⁵ The theme of the contemplation and ending of attachment to the body as desirous and impure (*aśubhabhāvanā*) by analysis of the impermanence and deceptiveness of the *skandhas* is central to (especially early) Buddhist dogmatics. Delhey finds explicit appeal to it in the case of Vakkali's suicide in at least one of its textual recensions ("Vakkali" 87), where even the body of the Buddha is disdained as an object of attachment for the same reason. Delhey views this "rationalistic" means of insight as partially cause for the Buddha's sanction of the suicide of Vakkali, if not other canonical monastic suicides as well. See also Part One (Section III) of this essay.

Some orienting general remarks might be useful here. This essay is not focused on the sociology or cultural anthropology of protest suicide or self-immolation in Tibet⁶ 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. The Empirical Circumstance

By December 10, 2012, the International Day for Human Rights, ninety-five ethnic Tibetans inside the formerly Tibetan Chinese territories of Qinghai and Sichuan, and the Chinese-occupied Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) had set themselves aflame. Of these, seventy-eight are known to have died from their wounds. By the end of February 2014, the number had climbed to 127; of these 106 are confirmed to have died. A further six Tibetans have self-immolated in exile, all in India and Nepal; of these only two survived their wounds.⁷

⁶ This concerns a complex sociological terrain too diffuse to survey here, for which reason my summary will be comparatively curtailed. See 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 at <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/93-self-immolation-as-protest-in-tibet>. See also Woesser and Lixiong (2014), and the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) publication *Storm in the Grasslands: Self-Immolations in Tibet and Chinese Policy* (2012) for extensive coverage of empirical data.

⁷ For testimony from one survivor, see "Protestors' Stories: Sherab Tshedor and Tibet," in Burke, J. *The Guardian*, January 2012 and also Bartholet, J. "Tibet's Man on Fire," *National Geographic*, November 2012.

The harbinger of this five-year phase of the Tibetan resistance from February 2009 to 2014 was the uprising of thousands of monastic and lay protestors in Lhasa, and across the Tibetan plateau, prior to the torch relay of the Beijing Summer Olympics in 2008. This was the largest single popular demonstration against Chinese occupation since 1959. The paramilitary People's Armed Police quashed large-scale rioting, arson, and looting, killing up to one hundred Tibetans. Although some two dozen Han Chinese also died, no casualties were reported by official Chinese accounts. Those unacknowledged deceased (as the many thousands during the earlier Maoist era) as well as the forced disappearances and state media censorship that accompanied them, no doubt haunt the beginnings of what would soon prove to be a new and very different kind of revolt (see Makley, in McGranahan and Litzinger).

The first modern self-immolation inside Tibet, that of a teenage monk named Tapey, took place in February 2009 at the Kirti Monastery in far western Sichuan Province. It followed an earlier first immolation of a Tibetan former monk Thupten Ngodrup, in Delhi in 1998, which in its shocking unprecedance has been referenced by subsequent immolators inside Tibet, most notably a senior Lama Sobha (a.k.a. Sonam) who immolated in January 2012 (Buffetrille 2).

Tapey's act⁸ at the Kirti Monastery was followed in 2011 by nineteen more immolations, largely by Buddhist monks and nuns, but increasingly also by lay-people, including villagers, a mother of young children, a teenage woman, and even nomads whose traditional grazing-lands have been appropriated for Chinese mass-settlement programs or

⁸ Tapey, unlike the majority of the self-immolators who followed him in 2011-2012, survived to later give testimony of some of the reasons behind his groundbreaking act (Shakya "Self-Immolation" 36). However, there are conflicting reports regarding his current whereabouts and condition.

resource extraction. For more than fifty years, Chinese security and policing abuses have included forced disappearances, extrajudicial detentions, summary death penalties, the persecution of lawyers and the torture of activists and their collaborators. The term “cultural (or religious) genocide” has long been used to describe the sixty-year persecution of Tibetan ethnicity (for some controversially, see Sautman), and not least by H. H. the Dalai Lama himself who in 2011 openly claimed this as the cause of the self-immolations up to that point.⁹

Despite initial accusations from Chinese officialdom, the immolations appear not to have been directly affiliated with any of the exile Tibetan organizations, such as the Tibetan Youth Congress, the Tibetan Women’s Association, the Tibetan Political Prisoners Movement, the Students for a Free Tibet, or the National Democratic Party of Tibet, which openly orchestrated non-violent marches in many global political centers in March 2008. In November 2012, a month which saw twenty-eight separate immolations, the official Chinese response condemned the burnings as a form of terrorism: “ugly and evil acts intended to achieve the separatist goal of Tibetan independence . . . used by the Dalai group to incite unrest in an attempt to split the nation” (HRW: “China: Tibetan Immolations”).

According to the U.N. Council for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, and the International Campaign for Tibet, among others, if there is any terrorism being committed on Tibetan territory, it is unarguably the violent Chinese policing of Tibetan lay and monastic communities and now the persecution of the families of self-immolators. If the Communist Party of China (CPC) addressed Tibetan grievances rather than blaming the Dalai Lama, the immolations would almost certainly, at least

⁹ See “Dalai Lama blames Tibetan burnings on ‘cultural genocide,’” *Reuters* online Nov. 7, 2011.

temporarily, cease. It is significant that many of these claims have been borne out by the October 2013 ruling by Spain's highest court indicting former CPC Chairman Hu Jintao of genocide in Tibet.

It is hard not to appreciate the powerful ethical force motivating the current acts of self-immolation. But the moral ambiguity of self-immolation, intrinsic to the act itself and with regard to the response it succeeds or fails in eliciting, necessarily conditions any discussion of the Tibetan crisis. While we deplore the loss of life, we understand that it is a sacrifice for the high value of the genuine freedom of a sovereign people. We also sense, perhaps less consciously, that the meaning and status of that value has much to do with how it is honored by those still living, which includes not only Tibetans but a global audience of a (generally) sympathetic liberal society bannered together under a common adherence to the inviolability of universal human rights.

At least one of the self-immolators, Jamphel Yeshe, made the global nature of his audience clear: "The fact that Tibetan people are setting themselves on fire in this 21st century is to let the world know about their suffering, and to tell the world about the denial of basic human rights" (Biggs "Self-immolation," 147). In January 2012 the reincarnate Lama Sobha left an audio recording claiming, "[I am] giving my body as an offering of light to chase away the darkness, to free all beings from suffering" (Buffetrille 11-12).¹⁰ Yeshe and Lama Sobha's appeals could not be more clear, the one expressive of a claim for universal human rights recognition, the other solidly in the tradition of Mahāyānist universal altruism. Many other verbal and written testimonies fall into one or both of these categories, conflated into a broad religious and ethical appeal

¹⁰ An English translation of Lama Sobha's testament can be found in "Tibetan Lama Urges Unity, Nationhood Before Self-Immolating," at *Tibetan Political Review* online, Feb. 2, 2012.

that in the context of Mahāyāna Buddhism infer a natural mutuality that does not find an immediate correlate in Western ethical or political theory, especially secular theories.

The Tibetan government (in October 2012) and senior Tibetan lamas in exile, including the 17th Karmapa Trinley Thaye Dorje of the Karma Kagyu lineage,¹¹ have appealed for the self-immolations to end. In some distinction to them, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama has appeared to modify his judgment since 1998 when he first condemned political suicide as an intrinsically violent repudiation of the First Precept and of Buddhist non-violence in general (Buffetrille 2). He was then responding to the immolation of the former monastic Thupten Ngodrup, and in seeking a pacification of further conflict had reason to emphasize its potential misuse and misunderstanding.

By 2012, however, H. H. the Dalai Lama implied that he would seek neither to alienate the families of the dead nor encourage the sacrifice of those still alive (*Storm* 19-20). The consequent public, but ambiguous, neutrality of H.H. the Dalai Lama is interesting also for the contrast it draws with both Gandhi's active tolerance of suicide as a meaningful part of non-violent activism, and the Vietnamese Buddhist leader Thích Nhất Hạnh's praise of the self-immolations in 1960s Vietnam, as he then spelled out in a letter to Martin Luther King, Jr.: "To express one's will by burning oneself is not to commit an act of destruction but to perform an act of construction, that is to say, to suffer and to die for the sake of one's people" (Buffetrille 2). With this claim Nhất Hạnh endorses the view that altruistic sacrifice, far more than a

¹¹ "I strongly wish self-immolations would stop soon" L. Panicker, *Hindustan Times*, Dec. 11, 2012. See also the 2012 appeals of Tibetan commentators such as those led by Tsering Woeser (in Woeser and Lixiong, xxxvi).

likely craving for annihilation (*vibhāva-taṇhā*), is more affirmatively symbolic of aretaic normative value.

H.H. the Dalai Lama draws nearer to this affirmative view as the Tibetan crisis continues. In mid-June, 2013, he more explicitly described self-immolation as “itself a practice of non-violence” insofar as it does not entail grievous harm deliberately inflicted on others, as other-directed terrorism does (A.B.C. 7.30 Report). This surprising claim appears to represent for mainstream Gelug Tibetan Buddhism a new middle path between comparatively neutral exoneration and the more robust endorsement entailed in Nhất Hạnh’s view. (See also its larger resonance with the canonical record, detailed in Part One of this essay.)

While there is historical precedent for suicide as a political act inside Tibet, there is none for publicly-staged self-immolation (Barnett, Buffetrille), and only exceptionally within Buddhism itself (apart from the 20th century Vietnamese cases, the major notable exception, ironically, being in early-medieval China).¹² The immolations are not acts of terrorism, nor even of despairing disempowerment, even where it is clear that they emerge from decades of profound frustration. In their dramatic increase in frequency (through 2012 especially) they appear to demonstrate an absolute and unconditional commitment to freedom. All the existing written statements of the self-immolators make this clear.¹³

¹²See Yün-hua; Filliozat; Benn. This should not, however, ignore the contemporary presence of non-Tibetan suicide protest (including self-immolation) in the PRC and among some of its marginalized ethnic peoples. Shakya (“Transforming”) writes also that, “In Tibetan history, there is no tradition of sacrificing oneself for one’s nation or religion; this is an alien concept that Tibetans now have appropriated from the language of resistance coined and championed by the [Chinese] Communist Party.”

¹³ “Last-words analysis—Why Tibetans Self-immolate?” W. Lixiong: Phayul, Dec. 27, 2012; see also Barnett 54ff.; Biggs “Self-immolation,” 149; Buffetrille 11; *Storm in the Grasslands* 16ff.

The Tibetan self-immolations are also what sociologist Michael Biggs calls a legitimate part of the global “repertoire of contention,” a form of principled if morally painful action “addressed to distant audiences, gaining their attention and conveying the gravity of the cause” (“How Repertoires” 408). From the more proximal Tibetan side of that wide view, Tsering Shakya claims that,

For co-nationals and the religious, the act is a statement of faith and identity; the former are quick to embrace the self-immolators as martyrs. Their act provides symbolic capital; it speaks of injustice from the perceived perpetrator to those in power . . . For the Tibetans, self-immolation is invested with emotion and is deemed necessary in the absence of other options for expression. It becomes a sign of life and demonstrates one’s existence against the might of the Chinese state. Self-inflicted violence is a symbolic gesture of the will to survive and resist coercive transformation of body and space. (“Transforming”)

The self-immolations are thus also a form of radical self-determination: no earthly authority can take such sacrifice away from the community they represent. They succeed in expressing a cultural sentiment that crosses internal and external borders in the face of otherwise draconian limits on the freedom of Tibetan ethnic expression. Perhaps the *ne plus ultra* of the Lhakar movement in its efforts since 2008 to promote the Tibetan language, economy, and cultural identity within China as a form of non-violent resistance, many scholars suggest the most intended audience for the self-immolations is, first and foremost, other Tibetans. Many of the written testimonies exhort fellow Tibetans to not merely

ethnocentric forms of resistance, but universal moral tenets that reach beyond their Buddhist origins.¹⁴

More generally, Biggs suggests that self-immolation as a political protest came into its own in response to, among other things, the growth of mass media. Since its first notable appearance in 1963 in Saigon with the self-immolation of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức, Biggs argues that, “*Almost all subsequent acts can be traced—directly or indirectly—back to this origin*” (“How Repertoires” 407, his italics). The immolations depend in large part upon global real-time exposure for their influence to be felt; a purely domestic response remains all too vulnerable to internal silencing.

But where the self-immolation of Quảng Đức (who was protesting the suppression of Buddhism under Diệm’s militantly Catholic government, rather than the war itself) helped galvanize a Western anti-war and anti-imperialist sentiment (Biggs “Self-immolation,” 146), it remains entirely uncertain whether a hundred and thirty Tibetan self-immolations will be able to now. Seeing only the false guise of peacetime conditions, many in the West lazily accept the Chinese neo-colonial argument that China is bringing economic benefits to a formerly feudal economy. Few believe China will be able to reverse old injustices in Tibet; it is, popular consensus appears to suggest, simply too late.¹⁵

¹⁴ The written testament of the nomad mother-of-two Rikyo (self-immolated May 30, 2012) is striking for including wide-ranging appeals for global peace, vegetarian culture, compassionate non-violent resistance and bodhisattvic universalism (though these among other moral and culture-specific exhortations are, perhaps karmically, intended to “ensure the return of HH the Dalai Lama to Tibet”). See translation (with others) and commentary by Tibet scholar Carole McGranahan in (indented video) Fisher (2013).

¹⁵ See for example, “Wishful Thinking: Tibet in the Face of Communist China’s War against Autonomy,” *Laogai Research Foundation* (2013).

For many commentators, the self-immolations are not merely symptomatic of the sense of the futility and impossibility for change under the current conditions of the regime, but also, non-cynically, the only possible active response to that paralysis.¹⁶ Negated by the force of the state, and by the passively ignorant Chinese witness to that long-term daily humiliation of obedience to the state's will, the self-immolations assert a self-annihilation that preserves a last vestige of personal, and national, Tibetan autonomy. Pushed so far and so deeply into the imprisonment of a collective psychic corner, the only place left for escape is deeply interior, spectacularly visible yet hidden from the view of its comparatively free, and hence implicated (but not complicit) witness. As Craig suggests, "In such moments, the individual body becomes a reflection of the state of being of the society." Da Col presses that internal symbiosis further:

Self-immolation makes it impossible to punish the protester: the 'terrorist' cannot be reached by the long arms of the dreaded national security forces. Self-immolations strip off the agency of the State, the body can neither be regulated nor possessed, and the monopoly of law and violence is divested from the State: it is national stalemate by way of 'terrorism' upon one-Self.

However, far more than the police-state of the PRC itself, the Tibetan crisis challenges the conscience not merely of the leadership of the CPC and its political stakeholders elsewhere, but also of those developed liberal democracies tied by mutual trade, business, and diplomatic concessions with China. (China's re-election to the U.N. Human Rights

¹⁶ Paldron ("Virtue") invokes Western cultural (and historically temporal) analogs to the notion of self-inflicted pain as virtuous necessity in early Buddhist and ancient Greek mythopoeic tropes alike.

Council in November 2013, despite concerted opposition,¹⁷ is no less a confirmation of this reciprocal dependency.) In November 2012, for the first time in the history of “Western” Buddhism, a non-Tibetan member of one of those liberal democracies and a Tibetan Gelugpa Buddhist monk, self-immolated in the grounds of a Tibetan Buddhist monastery near Toulouse in Southern France.

The self-immolation of Venerable Tunden

The following focuses on the empirical circumstance of Venerable Tunden’s self-immolation insofar as it can highlight those conditions (if not so unambiguously the causes) that we can confidently claim were involved. My assessment of it, however, will entail an argument applicable to the Tibetan Buddhist self-immolations in general, and not Ven. Tunden’s alone, even where important asymmetries between them need to be recognized.

Ven. Tunden (or Tönden) was an Englishman, 38 years old, and resident at the Tibetan Gelug Monastère Nalanda, an institution founded under the umbrella organization of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahāyāna Tradition (FPMT). During the first half of 2010, I joined a study-program there and came to know Ven. Tunden as one of the two dozen or so monks in residence. He told me that he had in the previous year traveled to India to take the vows of full ordination with H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama, who had previously ordained him as a novice. I recall Ven. Tunden as a tolerant, generous-hearted monk, with a mellow character and wry patience that made him one of the most likeable of the monks there. On a Thursday afternoon of mid-November 2012—the same month that saw the highest concentration of self-immolations in Tibet to date—he went into the garden of the French manor-house building and

¹⁷ Kaiman, J. “China granted seat on UN’s human rights council,” *The Guardian* online, Nov. 13, 2013.

its adjoining new *gompa* complex, doused himself in petrol and set himself alight. He died on the scene.

One of his monastic colleagues, Ven. Choden, reported on Facebook that the morning of the same day, Ven. Tunden, “in a good mood,” had offered him help with chores; later that afternoon he saw him sitting (he says uncharacteristically) playing with the monastery cats. To that friend, Ven. Tunden appeared pensive; he also offered him a firm leave-taking. The same Facebook thread contains a comment from Lama Tenzin Rahula that as a monk, Ven. Tunden was an excellent student with a highly compassionate nature.¹⁸ Some weeks after his act, sources inside the monastery informed me that Ven. Tunden carried a Tibetan flag with him when he went to his death—his shroud of pride.

This last crucial detail has been suppressed by the monastery in all releases to the public, and therefore has not appeared in any of the formal global coverage of the immolations.¹⁹ Subsequently, Ven. Tunden’s monastic authority declined to identify his self-immolation as an act of political protest and thereby to that minimal degree publicly frame it as congruent with the Tibetan self-immolations.²⁰ I will not speculate

¹⁸ See

http://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=385809408164681&id=283839321696212&_ft_=fbid.385809408164681 (accessed 25.09.2013).

¹⁹ See for example the article on the popular Tibetan new site *Phayul*: <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=32455&t=1>. Neither the UK Daily Mail nor the Tibetan Buddhist publications *Shambhala Sun* and *Tricycle* which reported Ven. Tunden’s death online, and which all speculated as to its political cause, made mention of this detail. My own subsequent suggestion to *Tricycle* to amend this omission was, after some correspondence, rejected.

²⁰ See the “FPMT Mandala webpage” for its formal statement (in References). While omitting the crucial details, it should be noted that this statement fails to pass particular judgment on Ven. Tunden’s act. A later (June, 2013) commemorative statement also

here on the many possible reasons for this suppression (which would require a separate study, as well as data not currently available); my concern is simply to draw ethical conclusions from the bare fact, which since November 2012 has not been publicly acknowledged and appears to have been put to rest by all concerned.

A default response to this kind of misfortune is to medicalize or pathologize it, to render it explicable as a dysfunction in one way or another. Was Ven. Tunden suicidally depressed? Perhaps Ven. Tunden had been planning his own demise for months; perhaps his self-immolation was a spontaneous response to the Buddhist recognition of the truly limitless pain of human suffering. It is easy to assume that Ven. Tunden had been suffering a critical depressive episode and that *self-immolation*, rather than another form of suicide, justified itself in Tibetan Buddhist-affiliated terms as a high sacrifice rather than a personal act of suicide.²¹ But it may have been both personal and altruistic, without these motivations being mutually exclusive. If so, there is a way of understanding his act such that it is potentially redeemed, by speaking to the living in critically important ways.

From the perspective of the truth of conventional reality (*saṃvṛtisatya*), an event such as Ven. Tunden's suicide can be understood

fails to address its political nature: <http://www.nalanda-monastery.eu/events-calendar/articles/156-commemoration-of-tonden-dave>.

²¹ It should be noted of the Tibetan self-immolations, however, that there is no clear conceptual or linguistic translation of the English "sacrifice" in Tibetan, in Tibetan Buddhist observance, or in the context of especially their political dimension. Shakya writes ("Transforming") that "The closest term used recently for self-immolation in the sense of an act of sacrifice is '*rang srog blos btang*' (giving up one's life), but this does not have a sense of offering oneself for a greater cause. Nor does the Tibetan term *lus shyin*, meaning 'offering of the body,' which is used for the Buddha's offering of his body as alms. The offering of the self as religious gift holds no connotation of protest or disavowal."

and interpreted as a liminal phenomenon that in any ultimate analysis remains an empty, yet open, signifier: it is such as we come to conventionally impute it as being. Given that Mahāyāna view, it is an event that is most profitably understood within the context of Mahāyānist universal altruism—well-founded in East Asian Buddhism, decisive in its mid-20th century Vietnamese manifestations, and now again demonstrative of a radical contemporary contestation in Tibet.²² It is to the degree that we fail the most ethically generous interpretation in response that we fail to heed the call self-immolations send out to a largely uncomprehending global public.

Yet, that public could reasonably ask, firstly: why should the self-immolation of Ven. Tunden, and those of the Tibetan monks, nuns, and lay-people in Tibet, be seen as demonstrating value? Secondly, why should they claim the attention of non-Tibetans and that larger society unaffiliated with Tibetan nationalist claims? The following three sections will address these in turn.

²² Invoking the context of Mahāyānist universal altruism is not necessarily to commit to claims for bodhisattvahood on the part of the self-immolators; that ethical topos is still central to the *aspiring* bodhisattva (see Part One of this essay). Cabezon, in an article on *Religion Dispatches* online (June 18, 2013), writes: “Hence, in certain instances, Mahāyāna Buddhism permits acts that would otherwise be considered acts of violence when these have a higher purpose, when it brings about the welfare of others . . . the idea of sacrificing one’s body for the sake of others is found in many classical Buddhist texts. Especially in Mahāyāna Buddhism, there is explicit acknowledgement that, on rare occasions, giving up one’s life for the welfare of others is not only permissible but actually necessary.”

II. Altruistic Suicide and Inherent Value in Mahāyāna²³ Metaethics

For Buddhist metaphysics there are manifold properties that can be seen as conventionally true of conventionally real phenomena: that of water that it is wet, of fire that it burns, of life that it dies, and so on. In the Madhyamaka context, Nāgārjuna's claim for the conventionally true nature of such properties is unequivocal: "Just as sweetness is the nature of sugar and hotness the nature of fire, so we assert that the nature of things is emptiness,"²⁴ i.e., where conventional and ultimate properties are equivalently (but differently) true in their respective conventional/ultimate epistemes.

Nāgārjuna is not claiming that sugar is sweet in any *absolute* analysis, because both sugar and its taste (for human epistemic agents at any rate) are in every case dependent-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), determined by causes and conditions non-inherent to their epistemic objects (*prameya*) and therefore empty of self-nature (*svabhāva*). Nevertheless, to claim sugar as sour (or fire as cold, or water as dry) would be an invalid cognition by operation of conventional epistemic instruments (*pramāṇa*) such as, in these cases, healthy human sense-faculties. Hence, Priest's, Siderits's, and Tillemans's claim for the Madhyamaka epistemic object:

²³ A Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika philosophical context is relevant here for two basic reasons: via Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa it is the framing discourse for Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhism, with which many if not most Tibetan Buddhist self-immolators have identified, including Ven. Tunden, ordained and educated in the same tradition. Secondly, while my discussion in Part One of this essay has focused on Theravāda sources for the discussion of suicide in Buddhism generally, that tradition and its texts have few if any resources relevant to ritual or transcendental sacrifice, which as we have seen is historically backgrounded by Mahāyāna values and their philosophical justification (especially by the Mādhyamika Śāntideva).

²⁴ *Bodhicittavivaraṇa* v. 57, cited in The Cowherds 11.

The component parts to which the object is reduced may be provisionally admitted to have intrinsic properties in a certain way. Madhyamaka, too, could harmlessly endorse intrinsic natures in specific contexts . . . Instead of a final Madhyamaka position based on master argument . . . we have a Madhyamaka program of acceptances of intrinsic natures that are [potentially] subsequently annulled in an unending dialectical series. (The Cowherds 146)

Ethical value-claims are not as verifiable as epistemic claims of perceptual cases are, but we can in a like empirical manner claim, for example, that it is conventionally intrinsic to justice that it resolves dispute, to compassion that it heals anger, to humiliation that it attacks pride, and so on. These are various empirical (ethical, psychological) truth-claims that generate validity in their respective spheres of judgment. Discussing the nature of conventional Buddhist truth-claims, Newland and Tillemans broadly suggest,

. . . we could begin with the widely-held intuition, East and West, that a statement, a mental state or any other truth-bearer presents a certain picture of how things are. Tibetan Madhyamaka commentaries regularly emphasise that if there is some particular sense (conventional or ultimate) in which this picture (*snang tshul*, literally “mode of appearance”) accords (*mthun pa*) with how things are (*gnas tshul*, literally “mode of existence”) then we may be disposed to consider that the statement or mental state is true in that particular sense (conventional/ultimate).²⁵

²⁵ The Cowherds (10). In a note (17) Newland and Tillemans stress that the Tibetan (Prāsaṅgika) framework “can best be seen as a weak sense of ‘accord’/ ‘correspondence,’ one that should not be thought to require the full-blown correspondence theory

The relevant statements for our purposes are that (A) it is conventionally true of Buddhist altruistic suicide, motivated by selfless compassion, that it be a noble effort to redress the injustices incumbent on (political, ethical, and even soteriological) ignorance; that (B) such sacrifices constitute an open ethical appeal to relevant bystander public communities; and that (C) for the Mahāyāna, both claim (A) and appeal (B) have universal pervasion. To the degree that such an appeal is ignored or repudiated is (D) the degree to which the consensual public community (by universal-ethical and economic implication here a global one) admits to ethical failure and the perpetuation of human-imposed, gratuitous suffering.

Inherent value as a *dependent-arising* means that in *this* case, under *these* conditions,²⁶ the object or act it qualifies is revisable in axiological terms only outside a median range, or “golden mean,” that in the Buddhist (and especially Madhyamaka) context is an ethical apprehension of its epistemically global “Middle Way.” Explicit in its (pre-) Aristotelian origins, the same mean is already implicit in much of secular ethics: heroism in battle is valued, but not thoughtless foolhardiness; selfless love, but not a masochistic will to abuse; patient tolerance but not passivity under injustice, and so on. Conceived as a non-absolute and context-dependent heuristic, a “golden mean” is that calibrated space of reasons that informs the provenance of, in a Buddhist theorization of action, willed moral acts as well.

of truth,” a view which is supported by the global non-essentialism of Madhyamaka metaphysics with regard to the truth (*satya*) of perceptual and ethical claims alike.

²⁶ Recall here the indented quote (above) on “specific contexts . . .” from Priest, Siderits, and Tillemans (146). Cf. also B. Finnigan’s response-account of Buddhist-virtuous conduct in this particularist sense: “what counts as an instantiation of a virtue will only be vaguely demarcated insofar as some action types will instantiate some virtues in some circumstances, but not in others, or at certain times, but not others, or in certain ways, but not others” (285-286).

Yet surely self-immolation, as a terminal or (for some) even solipsistic act,²⁷ lies *prima facie* at an extreme, and thus outside of any golden mean, Buddhist or otherwise? After all, H.H. the Dalai Lama has also pointedly said of the self-immolations that, “The same energy that can cause someone to do this to himself is very close to the energy that enables someone to kill others in fury and outrage” (Bartholet). Its value, however, lies not in the extremity of the act *per se*, which qualifies only its means, but in the generative effect/s of its motivation and potential ends, given the absolute nature of those means. The means, if taken as the whole, truncates the *telos* of its ends, ends that retroactively qualify (without necessarily *justifying*) the particular form the means takes. More simply, critical conditions call for critical measures, but that does not render those measures intrinsically extreme: they are made so by the larger dynamic that determines them, and context judges their inherent proportionateness. (Of course, in any ultimate Prāsaṅgika analysis, the same act is empty of *any* intrinsic ethical status, of means *and* ends. But this truth is not relevant, as I have suggested, to the conventional case.²⁸ Nor should self-immolation be seen as a purely instrumental means, as we shall see below.)

²⁷ See da Col for a discussion of the opacity of Tibetan personhood with respect to the theorization of self-immolation. While, “It is unwarranted to explain the opacity of interiority” it is also the case that “Face (*ngo*), honor (*go ‘phang*) and reputation (*gtam*) are critical components of Tibetan personhood and marks of *humanity*.” Where these are denied (for example by the Chinese state) the otherwise obscure “true face” of the self is, in self-immolation, vindicated in the public gaze not merely in its own defense but trans-personally, as da Col explains of the synecdochic substitution (*glud*), whereby “a single self-immolator could protect and benefit the whole Tibetan nation.”

²⁸ Garfield and others (among The Cowherds) claim of the Madhyamaka, “the distinction between the conventionally true and the conventionally false has nothing to do with ultimate truth” (35).

In other words, as a dependent-arising, altruistic self-immolation has the conventionally inherent value (crucially given the aforesaid contextual conditions and intentions) that engenders a causal-ethical *agency*, which is where its value becomes functionally dynamic, hence real or “true” (*satya*), in the unenlightened economy of *saṃsāra*. A “golden mean” dialectically informing the (subjective) intention, (objective) agency, and (intersubjective) reception of such acts is what efficaciously “speaks truth to power,” construed metaphysically as well as politically: what might in other terms also be construed as the deep structure of, paradigmatically, Gandhian *satyagraha* (i.e., “force of truth”).

Garfield summarizes the existential symbiosis between Buddhist epistemology and morality as causally conjoined to the Buddhist path itself:

Epistemology is located at the foundation of morality and gets its point just from that location. The mechanism of the extirpation of ignorance is the competent use of our authoritative epistemic instruments. What that use delivers is hence . . . always of soteriological significance—always instrumental to liberation. Inasmuch as that is the central moral virtue, and inasmuch as epistemology is so tightly bound to the soteriological project, it is also the central epistemic virtue, and what we call the goal of epistemic activity is *truth*. (The Cowherds 37)

To claim the specific self-immolations referred to here have inherent ethical value is to make an antirealist claim (more accurately *non-realist*; see note 29, below). Ethical claims clearly present a more opaque context for epistemic warrant than the perceptual-ontological claims Garfield affirms (drawing also from Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa, and as they do before them, Nyāya epistemology) for the conventionally true warrantability of *saṃvṛtisatya*. However, both the conventional epistemic instru-

ments for *ethical* judgment, and its objects, are revisable in terms congruent with judgments of objective phenomena by virtue of their perceptual cognitions (*pratyakṣa*). How can such ethical revisability best be characterized?

Buddhist-conventional coherentism

Thakchöe claims of Candrakīrtian epistemology that “being an epistemic instrument is a status that is conditioned and acquired and therefore lacks real foundations” (The Cowherds 41). Therefore, identifying conventionally-inherent value as a dependent-arising means to not foundationally deny other value-schemas that can be brought to the case. To deny the *value* of such other claims is not to deny their conventional reality, and even validity for whoever holds them, on conceptual-relativist grounds. (That is, it is to deny an alethic ethical relativism.) The Buddhist concern, however, is that there may be still better, and more consistent, options left on the consensual table, even while these are by nature conventional, and necessarily contested in conventional existence, as in the cases of self-immolation before us here.

Such an approach is broadly coherentist. *Both* realist and antirealist strategies collapse as polarized ends²⁹ of the same intrinsically real/true field of objects or truths that Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka analyses subject to *reductio* argument. However, Priest, Siderits, and Tillemans suggest, “There are ways to significantly critique an accepted worldview

²⁹ This does not correlate to (though it echoes) the essentialist ↔ nihilist dichotomy Buddhist thought (in analyses of self especially) generally critiques. The Prāsaṅgika clearly rejects any kind of metaphysical (and thus ethical) realism, but neither does it endorse an *antirealism*, as that would be the other side of the same reified coin. The problem for it is not one or another version of possible compromise, but the tendency to seek (and endorse) ultimates *tout court*.

while staying within it. First, considerations of coherence go a long way,” and they go on to claim that “Candrakīrti does indeed appeal to coherence with respect to people’s normative beliefs, arguing that inconsistency with basic principles demands that people change many of their ethical views” (145). Similarly, Garfield echoes Thakchöe’s claim for the nature of Madhyamaka epistemic warrant generally, such that “any judgment about truth is in principle revisable but that, *to be true* is to endure through revision” (37).

Whereas for Madhyamaka non-dual ontology, willed values are as equally factual as materially objective facts, each being vulnerable to truth-revision, in the ethical case different hermeneutic or epistemic schemas *themselves* instantiate different degrees of ethical value. The Buddhist-ethical path (*itself* contentious vis-à-vis contemporary secular rationalism) is in this sense also dialectical, and local epistemic schemas revise to newly-contextualized ones given an incremental access to Buddhist insight, as indeed the “84,000 teachings of the Buddha,” *upāya* or skillful means teachings, and the many vehicles of the *buddhadharma* make explicit, and as Garfield suggests above (and as I also have, in Part One, with regard to the normativity of suicide in the Buddhist-textual record).³⁰

Finally, there is a danger in applying abstract theoretical analysis to empirical cases when that analysis fails to take into consideration the specific conditions that are always crucial to a particular case (see again note 26, above). Self-immolation should not be reductively “justified” by

³⁰ Similarly, Mark Siderits appeals to a Madhyamaka epistemological contextualism that on the conventional level signifies “the view that a procedure counts as an epistemic instrument only relative to a context of inquiry . . . in order for this to work and not amount to an ‘anything goes’ relativism, these contexts must be seen as falling into a hierarchy, so that each is seen as an improvement on its predecessor” (The Cowherds 178-179).

virtue of a purely theoretical framework; different cases will instantiate different degrees of ethical emphasis and have relative value. A “sub-contextual” sacrifice,³¹ for example—one characterized by randomness or unthinking impulsivity, by drunkenness, psychosis, or by plain insincerity—compromises the intentional agency that is crucial to Buddhist-psychological ethics. Such a suicide would render less value to its respective acts and effects; it may even have, very sadly, entirely negligible value.³²

Where self-immolation is undertaken, however, it can be understood as interdependently potent *within a relevant contextual causal background*. In the case of Venerable Tunden, three critical factors were (1) that he was a fully ordained Tibetan Buddhist monk, with considerable formal inculcation in altruistic action and motivation; (2) that he specifically self-immolated by fire, as his Tibetan cohorts did, in conscious solidarity with them, and (3) that on his person he carried a Tibetan flag, alone of all worldly objects, to his death. An ultimately empty signifier, but in the realm of conventional signifieds (*lokasaṃvṛtisatya*) these three bare facts tell enough of a story to warrant the ethical interpretation I offer here. It should also be noted, as a subsidiary fourth objective condition of his self-immolation, that (4) Ven. Tunden acted the very same day (15 November 2012) that saw the well-publicized transition of CPC lead-

³¹ H.H. the Dalai Lama implies this kind of non-relevant category of self-immolation, or political suicide generally, in his March 2013 statement (quoted in Part One of this essay).

³² A similar claim might be made of the conventional, but erroneous, value popularly attributed to major political assassinations (such as those recent ones, for example, of Muammar Gaddafi or Osama bin Laden). Insofar as their murders are expressive of a purely retributivist motivation, where the talion law of “an eye for an eye” causality fails to bestow deeper knowledge of their respective motivation, and provokes a repetition of the same, it can be asked to what their ethical value amounts.

ership to Xi Jinping and a global focus on pressures informing China's domestic political process.³³

In the cases of Ven. Tunden and his more than one hundred Tibetan cohorts, existence precedes essence, especially where for a Buddhist analysis essence (here of value) is ultimately unfindable. Because that is ultimately the case, this does not entail that we are then required to derive *conventionally* true cases from the absolute one; rather, conventional truth-bearers are (especially for Mahāyāna) Buddhism ethically as much as epistemologically subvenient on ultimate one/s.³⁴ Ethical discussion remains meaningfully this side, i.e., the conventional side, of existence (*saṃvṛtisatya*), the side we *can* talk about—even where, as in the case of absolute sacrifice, it travels the furthest distance from that discourse toward instantiating transcendental values of religious freedom.

III. The Real, Symbolic, Religious, and Political Ontologies of Buddhist Altruistic Suicide

In Buddhist canonical doctrine, all human action (apart from reflex) is to varying degrees intentionally constituted, and intention (*cetanā*) is itself crucially mental action (*manaskarman*): “Monks, I say that action is inten-

³³ Branigan, “Xi Jinping takes reins of Communist party and Chinese military,” *The Guardian* online, 15th November, 2012. This fourth condition is subsidiary to the others simply because it is not certain Ven. Tunden was aware of the Chinese circumstance of that same day. However, given the clear nature of conscious will evident in the first three, the fourth appears probable as well.

³⁴ Newland and Tillemans further emphasize, “a strong theme (especially in Mahāyāna philosophies) is that the conventional is not just pedagogically necessary but is the *only actual basis* for the ultimate” (The Cowherds 10, their italics). Newland also claims, “Tsongkhapa holds that the profound emptiness must be understood as complementing and fulfilling, rather than cancelling, principles of moral action” (60).

tion; subsequent to intention, one accomplishes action by means of body, speech and mind.”³⁵ That is, all action, or acts of body, speech, or mind subsequent to intention (*cetayitvā karman*), cannot be conceived as lacking willed agency, varying widely depending on its psychophysical causes, conditions, and motivation. The same class of act, such as self-immolation, may and does have, as an effect of these varying factors, radically differing intentional agency as the cause of particular instantiations.³⁶

Concretely, self-immolation intentionally surrenders just that object that living beings by definition hold most highly: embodied sentient existence. This is the 1) (absolutely³⁷) *real* ontological property of the act, that can in itself be ignored only in bad faith. Only potentially transcendental, it relies ontologically on the living body of the person (this reliance holds also for all subsequent potential symbolic, religious, and political properties of self-immolation). The altruism in the sacrifice is that it appeals to those highest values at stake *for the living*, not merely for those who, in their surrender, renounce life. Similarly, outside of a religious context but for ethically equivalent reasons, parents will sacrifice

³⁵ *Āṅguttaranikāya*, iii. 415

³⁶ The following analysis goes in part beyond the familiar terms of Buddhist-philosophical discourse. Nevertheless, given the centrality of *intention* to Buddhist psychology, and the recognition of its differing psychological and karmic forms of affect/effect, it can be broadly theorized that a phenomenological intentionality can be applied to the varying forms of both killing, more generally, and self-immolation, specifically, in the Buddhist context. Indeed, for Buddhist ethics, such intentionality (form of willed consciousness) is finally what constitutes the value and (in part) meaning and effects of all willed acts.

³⁷ The use of the term “absolute” is with reference to the (known) limit-point of death, such that any human act intended in its terminal purview is necessarily made “absolutely” in a sense in which no others are, or can be (excepting potentially the unconditioned of *nirvāṇa* itself). Someone can die in an accident, lacking an absolute intentionality even where it is otherwise absolutely constituted.

their own bodies to save that of their child (even where the survival of both is theoretically possible) because they recognize the intrinsic value in preserving the hope of the best kind of survival for those who newly embody it.

Thus, conventional value is recognized in empirical ethical existence, and I would suggest that Tibetan Buddhist self-immolation is phenomenologically of the same order of aspiration. By making such an absolute sacrifice, the self-immolator makes an unconditional commitment that transcends the needs and desires of an egoic self and demonstrates the possibility of a wholly committed (non-dual) freedom. This is the 2) (absolutely) *symbolic* property of the act: an essentially aspirational claim, but again of a wholly absolute nature, where the immolator's body *stands in for*, or signifies, an instantiated value. (By contrast, a suicide-bomber's sacrificed body may signify a very different value: fundamentalist supremacy, for example.)

Again potentially transcendental, it is not the less "real" *qua* symbol, because it is *underwritten with the highest cost any living being can pay*, by ontologically relying on the initial, real status of the act. Lacking an ethical acumen, many non-Buddhist, but also Buddhist, observers dismiss or deny such a symbolic property (let alone religious potential) as fanciful wishful-thinking. (One does not need to look far to find extended online empirical confirmation of this.) This is ironic given that a deeper analysis betrays *the same symbolic value-exchange of sacrifice to a higher value via consensual killing (equivalent to mutual suicide) that is conventionally accepted in the heroism of warfare*. Arcane perhaps, but it is hardly wishful or fanciful when the same symbolic transfer thus underwrites conventionally justified, and politically sanctioned, killing. The major difference in the case of self-immolation is that only the agent himself is killed, instead of innumerable (and often innocent) others, for an ostensible good cause. Yet that difference is also critical to what makes homi-

cide and suicide *ethically* incommensurable (as I have argued in Part One).

In the larger Mahāyāna Buddhist context, however, such sacrifice is also undertaken with the aspiration to *bodhicitta*: the truth of the indivisibility of absolute compassion and wisdom. Such a commitment is liminal because it lies on the ontological-ethical boundary between conventional truisms and norms and completely unconditioned (*nirvāṇic*) ones, i.e., ultimate freedom itself. Where authentic, this is the properly 3) *religious* property of the act. By definition transcendental, it relies ontologically on the real, but not symbolic, property. In its purest form, it is in ultimately valorizing life precisely *in* its sacrifice, that altruistic suicide does not transgress the inalienability of its value, even where it wills its own surrender.

Outside the Mahāyāna context, self-immolation could also be said to evoke the kind of species-universal emphasis that signifies a difference between such intellectual argument, a “thinking from the head” (an arguably culture-specific, conceptual reduction), and a “thinking from the soul”³⁸ (an arguably universal thinking in values). For this reason, the self-immolator’s claim is a-normative because of the transcendence of conceptual argument that can never be made the object of universal legitimation even where it sustains inherent value. Where deontological

³⁸ All Buddhist schools deny the existence of a permanent and substantive “soul.” Nevertheless, the Abhidhammic mental factors (*cetasikas*) and consciousnesses (*cittas*) associated with the eight (especially the first five so-called “spiritual”) faculties (*indriya*), could be seen as the comparatively less egoic (reified) constructions of “self” that meet some of the characteristics of Western conceptions of an agentic soul (or subtle selfhood). The Abhidhammic qualification would remain that such factors are themselves always reducible to the *dharmas* that are not themselves placeholders for a real self (*atta*). Physical analogues are also relevant in the subtle bodies and winds of highest yoga tantra (see for example, H.H. the Dalai Lama in Coleman and Jinpa xvi).

ethics (central for example to human rights discourse) is grounded in a universally-binding justification for individual action-guidance, transacted in a world of similarly guided others, the only transaction suicide recognizes is that which is originally founded in a reflexive selfhood, bound not to a world of contractual others, but only to itself.

Altruistic suicide, however, radically revises that reflexive relation (just as the Mahāyāna does historically in *its* altruistic sense) as an ultimate gesture not merely in terms of a would-be deontological, symmetrical obligation to the universal, abstract Other. Rather, it addresses an asymmetrically real and symbolic gift of appeal to concrete others in their respective states of duress—here, obviously the Tibetan oppressed, but as Mahāyānist action, their Chinese oppressors as well.³⁹ This is the 4) (absolutely) *political* property of the act; potentially transcendental, it relies ontologically on the real and symbolic (but not the religious) properties.

Lama Sobha, for example, in his recorded testament, clarifies self-immolation as an act of giving that is at the same time a reflexive purification of the self: “I am sacrificing my body both to stand in solidarity with them [fellow self-immolators] in flesh and blood, and to seek repentance [*gyo-shak*] through this highest tantric honor [*tham-tsik*] of offering one’s body.”⁴⁰ The Tibetan *gyoshak* connotes the purification of regret in terms of resolute confidence rather than as a response to fear

³⁹ The immolation survivor Sherab Tsedor, for example, makes this explicit; see his video testimony in Burke (2012). Paldron also writes that “A practice of offering does not make the same move as resistance; it nevertheless establishes and inhabits particular bonds and relations... Sobha’s direct and indirect objects of offering—not only other immolators and sentient beings in general, but Tibetans and Chinese as well—are notable for being referred to in a context of their suffering and ignorance.”

⁴⁰ “Tibetan Lama Urges Unity, Nationhood Before Self-Immolating” *Tibetan Political Review* online, Feb. 2, 2012.

or guilt. Such confidence is formalized in the disciplinary ethics (*śīla*) of the Tantric vow (*samaya*) that sustains and ensures high practice, and justified Lama Sobha in a similarly high, if rare, tradition of Buddhist soteriology.

In Mahāyāna-theoretic terms, the equivalence of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is, in these contemporary Tibetan Buddhist cases, enacted in a total surrender to an act of absolute faith, if not necessarily (so far as we can surmise) wisdom-realization (*prajñā*). This does not, however, diminish its relative value as a dependent-arising in conventional existence. The *Lotus Sutra*, by contrast, offers a narrative of the same act not least as a demonstration of faith, but of actual gnosis. (However, that soteriological question is one that necessarily belongs, as it does in many religious discourses, “between God—or enlightenment—and oneself.” The same point, more prosaically, might also be made with regard to the claim that hopes of karmic merit-accumulation, for the benefit of future lives, is causally explanatory.⁴¹) Although absolute sacrifice is not necessarily reducible to *śūnyatā* discourse, for the Mahāyāna that is its explicit justification: self-immolation is noble because it burns as its fuel the defilements of erroneous, dualistic view.

In what sense then is such primordial detachment properly political? While its extremity provokes both identification and alienation and reconfigures conventional frames of political reference, its sufficient cause is to register defiance of the contingent human causes of that specific suffering: lacking evident object, it would not (need to) occur, and recur (recall again Quảng Đức in 1963: the power of his act was as much that it spoke not in a vacuum but to an immediate political circumstance). Invoking a species-empathy that subverts a Foucauldian biopolitics of state control in the empowered solidarity and politicization of

⁴¹ See *The Economist*, “The Theology of Self-Destruction” March 22, 2013.

that same human body (indeed collective Body), self-immolation as a gift of appeal is thus also a total proof against primordial “grasping” (*upādāna*). Far beyond reproach, it in fact demands *nothing* in exchange. It is in just that radical, and collective, detachment that it can eloquently point to a gratuitous condition of the suffering of sentient beings contingent on delusion, ill-will, and aversion, and leave the political imperative of its mitigation to the will of the collective conscience.

At the same time, for such sacrifice, the “mundanely political” implicates the transcendental; that latter implication in turn renders the political significantly soteriological (despite contingent non-dependence on transcendent gnosis, or *prajñā*): one description, for the Mahāyāna, of aspirationally compassionate bodhisattva activity. Where *bodhicitta* is constitutive of the political, it becomes salvific.

It is also, then, ethico-politically *unique*: the self-immolator cannot reason a deontological justification for his action because the absolute nature of its statement renders it objectifiable not as Kant would have it in any rational-universal norm, but precisely as transcendent to the ostensibly *objective, other-centered* structure of a conventional ethical-political norm. As intrinsically subjective, and despite whatever transitive agency it engenders in its causal-ethical objective world, self-immolation is ethically supererogatory, and religiously antinomian—and hence, non-endorsable.

Perhaps for this reason, Tibetan religious-political altruistic self-immolation has gone either uncomprehended, or misunderstood: it does not exemplify a conventional political norm unless (like Bouazizi’s 2011 self-immolation in Tunisia, apparently not *altruistically* motivated) it ap-

pears to generate immediate and unambiguous political effects.⁴² The foregoing has attempted in part to address the question of why Buddhist self-immolation fails, if and when it does, to generate such effects.

IV. Buddhist Self-immolation as Global Contention

I used earlier the word *redeemed*, which might seem overly religious for the secular-rational global audience of the self-immolations, but perhaps also for the impartial scholastic intentions of the Buddhist Studies discipline. For the *buddhadharma*, the redemptive act of the realized or even just aspiring Buddhist re-sets the hermeneutic frame (no less than reality itself) to a potential apprehension of wisdom critically related to the pragmatist sense of Buddhist soteriology mentioned earlier. If sentient beings are suffering direly enough to produce *this*, it warrants the utmost practical attention *now*. Similarly, ethical exigency does not justify suffering as a rehearsal for possible redress in an always-deferred future.

Redemptive events and their effects are often a radical defiance of the precedented, in this case carried out even against the wishes of H.H. the Dalai Lama himself. Yet, in its extremity, the redemptive sacrifice of self-immolation opens the door to a potential freedom, inviting an ethical watershed that reconfigures the nature of power in definitive and irrevocable terms. It has happened before: famously in Gandhi's India and in Truth and Reconciliation South Africa, among other contexts. Critically, it has not yet happened in Tibet, an historical circumstance

⁴² Of course, the at least 107 Tunisians who within six months followed Bouazizi's example were surely no small part, among multiple factors, of that political agency as well.

that in itself warrants much deeper attention if not pre-emptive conclusions.

That kind of mutually-founded freedom would also require a deeper attention from a spiritually diminished secularity that cannot conceive the meaning of such sacrifices anymore, but only pities them. Ven. Tunden's act of sacrifice—not to the Tibetan cause alone but to ethical amnesia generally—poses the question whether even burning oneself alive can pierce a collective slumber. Many might question that the apparent sacrifice-in-solidarity of a sole English Buddhist monk in the comparative privilege and irrelevance of Southern France cannot be understood as can the Tibetan cases: "He is not Tibetan; he does not have the same justification." This objection merely provokes the question: if he doesn't, why doesn't he?

It might be the case that Ven. Tunden intended precisely to pre-empt such qualifications; from his side, his act may have been the ultimate appeal to his own socio-cultural polity to question its apparent resignation, and complicity, in the suffering in Tibet. The cultural-economic ethos of Northern capitalist entitlement understands his suicide as somehow an unreasonable and needless suffering;⁴³ no one, it thinks, should have to come to a point of such suffering that they are driven to such straits. Its unspoken conclusion is that such an act could only have been driven by purely psychological, personal reasons, not that it might have been a response to unjust and intolerable social, political, econom-

⁴³ The public expressions of mourning for Ven. Tunden (on Facebook and other online sources, such as <https://www.facebook.com/lamazoparinpoche/posts/203074516494625>) express deep dismay and regret for his action. The idea that it may be an intrinsically profound gesture of universal ethical solidarity, and worthy of honor, is not represented. For such mourning, suicide is self-defeating, it appears, in every case.

ic, and ethical conditions. But what of those who *have* been authentically driven by those same conditions?

Ven. Tunden might well have visualized, in his Gelug-orthodox meditations on universal compassion, those thousands of anonymous bodies in Tibet and elsewhere that are ignored in all the white noise of the mediatized world. They are bodies, usually, that are black or brown or another shade of not-white. The millions of Tibetans persecuted for more than sixty years have never received much airtime given the irrelevance to that world of their difference, their apparent passivity, and their hopelessly unworldly, naïve, and apolitical religion. If those one hundred and thirty self-immolators were, all other conditions being equal, Catalan or Basque, Flemish or Walloon or Quebecois, First World democratic-liberal governments would very possibly be sending diplomatic missions to their respective representatives, and perhaps peace-keepers on the ground, within twenty-four hours. It may be that (even in a depressed condition) Ven. Tunden perceived that geopolitical predicament and wondered what it might mean to redress the disparity.

The solidarity of Ven. Tunden's act is not only that he chose to do what a hundred Tibetans have done; it was that, from the comfort of an obscure Buddhist monastery in France, he was willing to self-immolate as an obscure, unimportant white man with no political leverage beyond the extremity of the act. He might have believed, at the very least, that *any* effect was inevitable, and that if his Buddhist motivation was without hatred, was selfless and compassionately grounded, that effect could only be a positive one, just as H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama and Buddhist-ethical psychology claims. He almost certainly felt that his violence against himself might make others consider *why* he would harm himself, make them question their own existential security and embolden them to prevent such suffering elsewhere—including, very reasonably, the suf-

fering so many now are increasingly laying down their lives as witness to in Tibet.

No one, I believe, wants the self-immolations to continue, but even the Chinese leadership probably knows that they will stop only when there is no possible reason for them to continue. The Tibetans who burn to death thereby contest an absolute truth-claim on global attention it is not easy to dismiss. We might even make a new secular moral (or indeed Buddhist-causal) norm out of that observance of cause and effect. All of this is part of how the ambiguity of the immolations potentially redeems the collective suffering, and perhaps even the hubris of the CPC that has provoked them—a result that would be a miracle of a kind, but not an impossible one.

It is known that Tibetan history, including Buddhist history in Tibet, has before 1998 a precedent for sacrificial suicide, if not self-immolation (Buffetrille 8ff.). It is also clear that while exoteric Tibetan Buddhist orthopraxy proscribes self-harm of any form, the suffering it causes and the example it leaves others, it also recognizes in the Mahāyāna canon the possibility of transcendental compassion (*bodhicitta*) allowing for acts of self-sacrifice that, where they are devoid of hatred and informed by the insight into emptiness, accrue positive karma and even great progress on the path to Buddhahood. The very unconditionality of sacrifice is what guarantees its great virtue: the Mahāyāna canon and Jātaka tales are replete with anecdotal reports of the same. Self-sacrifice becomes the guiding ethical norm in the entire discourse, precisely because the ontological status of the self is what is radically undermined in it.

It is also clear that in their sacrifice the majority of the Tibetan self-immolators have in their last words confirmed the Mahāyānist-altruistic intention of their aims: the wish that the Tibetan people be freed from oppression, their religious leader and nation restored to free-

dom, and the Chinese oppressor relieved of its ignorant wrong-doing (Lixiong; McGranahan). There is no defensible reason why any sympathizers, including non-Tibetans, especially those following the same Tibetan Mahāyāna path, should not share in the same ethical goals.

Yet Ven. Tunden's sacrifice raises at least three general sets of questions:

1. How "engaged" is Engaged Buddhism assumed ultimately to be? Are there presumed boundaries beyond which Engaged Buddhism should not trespass?
2. What is the point at which the Mahāyāna religious conscience is understood as also being a political one, and what objective markers define that point? Given the unprecedented Tibetan Buddhist and now "Western" sacrifices, what would be required to engender a political response from its Western Buddhist-monastic cohort? Should it hold a political position, and if not, why not?
3. To what degree does the socio-cultural and economic status of "Westernness" disguise a racial, and racist, self-exoneration insofar as identities aligned to "Westernness" imply a socio-cultural, and thence ethical, rupture with the fate of the racial other? What in fundamental ethical (rather than anthropological or sociological) terms does the distinction of "Western" Buddhism identify, if any? If none, then to what degree does it observe the universal ethical code of the Mahāyāna?

Again, what then does it take to be heard, and seen, if burning oneself to death cannot achieve it? Ven. Tunden's act offers up this single, silent question. The same question could of course be asked of the Tibetan immolations, except that while they have not resulted in any

obvious political or other redress, they have been acknowledged. Here, I am merely relaying Ven. Tunden's question, which might otherwise perish with him. It always depends on the living what kind of Phoenix rises from the ashes.

Conclusion

With regard to these questions it is instructive to recall a quote from the Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, Thích Quảng Độ, currently under house arrest in Ho Chi Minh City, writing in solidarity to H.H. the Dalai Lama:

Self-immolation is indeed a tragic and extreme act, one that should be avoided at all costs. But there are moments when this ultimate gesture, that of offering one's body as a torch of compassion to dissipate darkness and ignorance, is the only possible recourse. (Buffetrille 2)

Tragic and extreme without question; a sole possible resolve at the end of a long, painful, and direly neglected appeal for recognition, still more so. As Quảng Độ suggests, there is a major distinction to be drawn between ostensibly endorsing such suicides as "permissible" Buddhist acts (a gratuitous notion, for both parties, in any case) and seeking to understand and respond most deeply to their ethical call when they do, fatefully, occur. I can in all cases refuse to "endorse" someone's choosing to live on air, but cannot ignore the impressive fact when (and why and how) it has actually transpired. The analogy only goes so far; in altruistic suicide the critical Buddhist question is always what does *this* act signify given *these* particular causes and conditions?

To frame altruistic suicide as a last recourse to a form of morally dubious blackmail is to detract from its position in a larger causal struc-

ture. In every case of self-immolation, including Ven. Tunden's solitary one, a focus should fall on the full nexus of social and political conditions that determine and make it probable at all, including globally-relevant ones, rather than the normative status of the act per se, which risks mis-contextualizing the general discussion. For example, it is certain that if Ven. Tunden had been a Tibetan monk, even one in France, his sacrifice would be acknowledged as such. But the *Englishman* Ven. Tunden's *has not* been. Perhaps his immolation is dismissed if framed in the abstract, which appears to find little immediate contextual support for it.

This is not however to grant Biggs' assumption that suicide protest "is less effective and less legitimate in democratic systems, because most people will view it as too extreme, given the plentiful opportunities for political voice" ("How Repertoires" 421). It is doubtless (seen as) extreme, but that is its potentially radical impact, both in itself and given a widely-perceived impotence or apathy of domestic democratic contention vis-à-vis international causes (not least with regard to the Tibetan crisis but generally, and especially since the popularly opposed second Gulf War of 2003). Western self-immolation on behalf of Tibetan human rights recognition invokes a much larger zone of global contention, where Ven. Tunden's act is not merely supererogatory but proactively responsive (and responsible) to an implicated Western political and economic culpability in Tibet.

This returns to a claim made in Part One: that value-judgments around sacrificial phenomena are intrinsic neither 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 dimensions can be seen as a sole locus for understanding. Of course, the Tibetan self-immolations (and all of the foregoing) can be willfully ignored in

bad faith, which simply guarantees the continued maintenance of the relevant status quo. For the hegemonic dynamics of capitalist power—dynamics that tacitly sustain Chinese control of Tibetan territory—that is the most likely, and perhaps desired, outcome.

The focus of this discussion has been on essaying some of the possible modes and preferences for understanding the phenomena of recent Tibetan, and Western, religio-political self-immolation. To that end it has not addressed the issue of how to theorize normative *action* given that understanding. How a sympathetic global audience to the immolations should ideally respond to their call would require a subsequent enquiry. If Ven. Tunden's act goes unhonored, however, what does that omission suggest both of his status as a Western, white person, and secondly, as a so-called "Western Buddhist"? Does his "Western" status render him exceptional to Mahāyānist universality, so that his act can be taken less seriously, or as seems to be the case, not even conceived as symbolically-charged and motivated at all, despite the evident facts of affiliation, listed above, that unequivocally characterize it?

If so, the omission evinces not merely disrespect to the Tibetan cases (by virtue of an apparent Western entitlement); it simultaneously dismisses the potentially liberative and revolutionary force of the white man's act precisely as a so-called Western Buddhist. This force would consist just in his immanent identification with the racial other beyond the political, religious, and racial forms of identification framing each. This would be a subtle but major shift in self-representation for Western Buddhism, despite the decades-long rhetoric of support for the Tibetan cause. To have a comparatively privileged white man demonstrate it in an act of ultimate sacrifice, and have that wholly honored as such, invokes an inclusive transcendence of those identities that the very existence of a categorical "Western" Buddhism already appears to deny.

It might be hoped that the coming decades see a revitalized recognition of the Buddha's code of dissolving reified boundaries between suffering sentient beings, whatever their socio-political, racial, and cultural identities. Whether those men and women also choose to offer their bodies in sacrifice for any human- (or even sentience-) rights cause is something on which those former distinctions supervene, where compassionate sentience is its decisive qualifier.

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, Pāli Text Society, 1964.
- S. *Samyuttanikāya* (tr. F.L. Woodward), *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, Part III, London, Pāli 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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