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Christina A. Kilby

James Madison University

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The Global Refugee Crisis and the Gift of Fearlessness

Christina A. Kilby¹

Abstract

This article is a critical-constructive application of the Buddhist ethical concept of the gift of fearlessness (*abhaya-dāna*) to the global refugee crisis and to nativist policy responses. Investigating classical South Asian literary sources on the gift of fearlessness, typically glossed as the offer of refuge or protection to those in danger, I present today's refugee as situated at the nexus of two types of fear: the fear that drives vulnerable people to flee from harm and the fear that drives a potential refuge-offering state to close its borders or build walls. I argue that the gift of fearlessness, if extended beyond its classical scope to include the challenges of xenophobia and terrorism threats, is a capacious framework through which to probe the moral contours of contemporary refugee policy and the security concerns of states.

¹ Department of Philosophy and Religion, James Madison University. Email: kilby-ca@jmu.edu.

Introduction

As of July 2019, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated a population of 70.8 million forcibly displaced people worldwide (“Figures at a Glance”). This number includes internally displaced people as well as people who have fled across state borders; among the latter are 25.9 million refugees, who apply for resettlement from afar, as well as 3.5 million asylum seekers, who plead their cases after arriving at ports of entry. In 2018, only 3.2% percent of refugees worldwide were submitted for resettlement, and far fewer actually departed for their resettlement destinations (UNHCR, “Resettlement at a Glance”). In the twenty minutes that you spend reading this article, roughly 600 more people will be displaced from their homes (“Figures at a Glance”).

Beyond its enormous humanitarian and human geographical consequences, the global refugee crisis has also become a focus of heated political debate as nationalist movements across the globe promote the reduction or elimination of refugee resettlement by questioning the legitimacy of ethnic and religious minorities within their state boundaries. The drive to decrease refugee admissions is often presented as a dictate of national security; a 2016 Pew Research poll, for example, shows that the majority of Europeans believe that “incoming refugees increase the likelihood of terrorism in their country” (Wike, Stokes, and Simmons). Rhetoric linking “refugee” to “terrorist” has indelibly marked the administration of U.S. president Donald Trump, under whose leadership refugee admission levels have fallen to their lowest since 1977, even as the number of forcibly displaced people has climbed to its highest on record (“U.S. Refugee Resettlement”). It is evident that the identity of “refugee” is now a highly contested one: Is a refugee a victim or a villain? A moral obligation or a security risk? Embedded in the very process of defining “refugee” are ethical and political consequences of signifi-

cant import, both for displaced people and for potential resettlement states.

The international refugee regime—the body of laws and policies governing refugee protection—has, over the past six decades, adopted a series of legal definitions of “refugee.” The 1951 UNHCR Refugee Convention articulates what has remained the foundational framework for international refugee protection (Betts et al 2011). Article 1A(2) of the Convention defines as a refugee any person who,

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his [or her] nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him [or her]self of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his [or her] former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

In the tangle of language through which a displaced person is legally defined as a refugee, what concerns us here is the pivotal role of a particular emotion in the construction of this definition: fear. It is not merely flight that makes a refugee: according to the UNHCR, it is fear. A “well-founded fear of being persecuted” both propels a refugee to flee the borders of his or her state and prevents him or her from seeking the protection of that state, opting instead for an uncertain future in an unknown land. Fear is the force behind forced migration. Within the legal framework established in 1951, refugees—who must officially qualify as refugees in order to receive aid and life-saving asylum—are compelled to embody and represent their fear in a concrete way for the international legal community. Media portrayals of refugees, especially those portrayals soliciting support for refugee relief and resettlement, convey images

of fearful faces and embodied desperation rather than images reflecting the resiliency and strength that are equally authentic characterizations of refugees.

International law constitutes the refugee as a living embodiment of fear. In potential resettlement states that are dominated by nativist ideologies, that fear amplifies as the refugee's own terror and trauma meets xenophobia: fear of the stranger.² The irony is that the refugee, a person legally defined as a *victim* of fear, can be simultaneously misidentified as an *agent* of fear ("terrorist"). Sara Ahmed discusses the position of the contemporary refugee by offering a phenomenology of fear's embodiment. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, she writes, "fear works through and on the bodies of those who are transformed into its subjects, as well as its objects," so that "signs of affect seem to pass between bodies" (Ahmed 62, 63). Fear is contagious, she argues, and one body's fearful affect stimulates a neighboring body to shrink, close, withdraw, or tighten its range of motion. The same phenomenology of fear is visible in nativist responses to the refugee crisis. When defining the refugee solely in terms of "fear," a state exhibits the same responses that a fearful body does when it shrinks, closes, withdraws, or tightens its range of motion. The state slows refugee admissions, tightens its borders, and withdraws from the world stage. It is important to note that the intertwining mechanisms of fear centering around the identity of "refugee" are fueled by political rhetoric, public discourse, and media imagery rather than by statistical realities. Indeed, xenophobia is sometimes strongest when actual arrival numbers are low. For example, during the campaign for the 2016 U.S. presidential election, popular outcries against illegal immigration from Mexico rose dramatically, despite the fact that

² For further discussion of how the roles of "refugee" and "terrorist" have become entangled in current political imaginaries, see Ahmed 2014 (79 ff.) and Mavelli and Wilson 2016.

undocumented crossings to the U.S. from Mexico had actually declined by two million—almost one-third—between 2007 and 2017 (Gonzalez-Barrera and Krogstad). Regardless of the statistics, in this phenomenology of fear, the international refugee regime fails to function. The dramatic reduction of refugee admissions recently seen in the United States, for example, illustrates the twin movements of fear that leave refugees in increasingly vulnerable positions (and states who have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, in increasingly untenable ones).

The international refugee regime is not the only context in which an ontological link between flight and fear is embedded in the identity of the refugee. The role of fear as a primary determinant for refugee status intersects in a dynamic way with a classical South Asian ethic for refugee protection: *abhayadāna*, the gift of fearlessness. *Abhayadāna* offers an alternative phenomenology of fear to that which is crippling refugee resettlement efforts today. In *abhayadāna*, we meet a dynamic shift in how states and societies can both perceive and respond to the fear of the displaced, transforming the image of “refugee” from an agent of fear to a beacon of domestic security. This article probes the possibilities that the gift of fearlessness offers both to contemporary refugee resettlement efforts and to the security concerns of states.

The Gift of Fearlessness

The gift of fearlessness is described in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist treatises on gift-giving that classify, sometimes in exhaustive detail, the various types of gifts with which one may practice the virtue of *dāna*, generosity. (Here I am greatly indebted to the work of Marie Hibbets 1999 and Maria Heim 2004.) In Hindu digests, *dāna* typically pertains to tangible gifts: food, requisites for religious practitioners or, on a larger scale, community institutions. The gift of fearlessness is usually the only intangible

gift listed in these texts, making for surprising juxtapositions; Hibbets notes that the digest writers often list the “nine types of superior gifts” as “food, curds, honey, protection [=fearlessness], cows, land, gold, horses, and elephants” (441).

The gift of fearlessness is understood in these texts as the gift of “protection or security to those who fear threatened or inflicted violence,” applicable both to individuals and to collective polities (Hibbets 441).³ According to Hindu dharmaśāstra tradition, “The king should offer amnesty to prisoners, grant his subjects protection from fear of mutilation, imprisonment, banishment, beatings, thievery, and dishonor, and should save anyone who comes to him for refuge” (Heim 122). In these texts, the gift of fearlessness is often assigned to the moral capacity of a king. Generosity is the first of the ten classically outlined duties of a Hindu king, whose position of authority imbues him with the power either to offer or to withhold protection, to make judgments about life and death. Hindu sources also extend the practice of *abhayadāna* to yogins, who undertake the discipline of refraining from harm of living creatures, as well as to ordinary lay people who, though perhaps powerless to save refugees, can at the very least protect the lives of certain insects and animals (Hibbets 442). The extension of *abhayadāna* beyond the role of kingship contextualizes the gift of fearlessness within relationships of power. Fearlessness is a gift given by the powerful to the powerless, whether by rulers who hold power over the life and death of their subjects or by ordinary humans who hold power over the fates of the smallest animals.

Importantly, unlike gifts that are ritually exchanged in the context of a well-defined reciprocal relationship between two parties, fear-

³ In many ways, the concept of *abhayadāna* resonates with the “freedom from fear” articulated by Franklin D. Roosevelt. My thanks to Daniel Cozort for this observation.

lessness is a gift for meant strangers. As a form of public benefaction, fearlessness belongs to

a class of gifts in which the recipient is not restricted, and the scrutiny to which the recipients are submitted in a relationship of esteem does not obtain. When one provides water reservoirs, endows temples, dams rivers, plants trees, provides healthcare, and vows to protect others, the recipients of those public benefits are often anonymous. Such gifts are given outside the religious boundaries of the sacrificial altar, are given without the usual procedure of reciting mantras, and to recipients who are not considered on the basis of their eligibility or worth. (Heim 123-124)

In Buddhist commentarial texts on the perfection of generosity, gifts are typically classified as belonging to either two or three types.⁴ Most commonly discussed are gifts of material goods (the ultimate of which is a gift of one's own body sacrificed for others) and gifts of dharma;⁵ the gift of fearlessness sometimes appears in addition to these two, undergirding both as the gift of life itself, on the basis of which all mate-

⁴ For a Tibetan example, see Tsong-kha-pa's *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path*, volume 2, p. 122. For a Theravādin example, see the *Cariyāpiṭaka Aṭṭhakathā*, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi in *The Discourse on the All-Embracing Net of Views: The Brahmajāla Sutta and Its Commentaries* (Buddhist Publication Society, 1978), p. 276. Note that the gift of fearlessness is distinct from the four fearlessnesses of a Buddha, which pertain to transcendent realizations rather than to the visceral human experience of fear for one's life. However, in the *Cariyāpiṭaka Aṭṭhakathā*, the two types of fearlessness coincide in the power and virtue of a bodhisattva, who is both "fearless and a giver of fearlessness" (p. 260).

⁵ See Reiko Ohnuma's discussion of the interrelation between these two types of gift in "The Gift of the Body and the Gift of Dharma." *History of Religions*, vol. 37, no. 4, 1998, pp. 323-359.

rial and spiritual well-being is made possible. The giving of material gifts is either implicitly or explicitly assigned to the lay community and the giving of dharmic gifts is assigned to the monastic sangha. These gift-giving capacities reflect the reciprocal roles that lay society and sangha ideally play for one another: the lay community provides material support for religious practitioners, and the sangha propagates the dharma for the benefit of the wider society.⁶

The gift of fearlessness is treated far less often in Buddhist commentarial literature than are the first two gifts. Institutional priorities may explain this paucity because the economy of merit that sustains the relationship between the Buddhist sangha and lay society depends primarily on the reciprocal exchange of material supports and dharmic intangibles. In this context, the king acts more as leading lay patron rather than as *the state*, with all the moral compromises that a state must make in order to function. Indeed, despite rich Hindu elaborations on the gift of fearlessness as a duty of righteous kingship, Buddhist textual references to *abhayadāna* largely ignore kingship as a distinct moral role, instead considering the gift of fearlessness within relationships of unequal power, up and down the social hierarchy. (Institutional priorities may explain this tendency as well; it is less risky for a Buddhist monastic to encourage all people to give the gift of protection to those in danger than to single out the king for a moral exhortation.) Although the relative silence on *abhayadāna* in Buddhist canonical and commentarial lit-

⁶ The lay bodhisattva, as both a lay person and a being who has undertaken a religious vow and disciplined path of practice, sits at the boundary of these two groups. As Reiko Ohnuma has shown, in Mahāyāna narratives the bodhisattva gives the gift of the body as a correlate to the gift of dharma that he or she will give as a fully realized being (1998); the lay bodhisattva thus straddles the boundary between these two types of gifts and the two communities responsible for giving them.

erature is puzzling, the concept promises such relevance for the ethical challenges of our contemporary moment as to invite closer examination.

In a nineteenth-century Tibetan Buddhist commentarial discussion of the perfection of generosity, Patrul Rinpoché glosses the gift of fearlessness (*mi 'jigs pa skyabs kyi sbyin pa*) as

actually doing whatever you can to help others in difficulty. It includes, for instance, providing a refuge for those without any place of safety, giving protection to those without any protector, and being with those who have no other companion. It refers particularly to such actions as forbidding hunting and fishing wherever you have the power to do so, buying back sheep on the way to the slaughter, and saving the lives of dying fish, worms, flies and other creatures. (238)

Patrul's mention of "forbidding hunting and fishing wherever you have the power to do so" refers to the practice, familiar in Tibet, of a political ruler's proclaiming a seal (*rgya*) on a mountain or forest, which serves to protect the designated territory and its non-human inhabitants (including animals, plants, minerals, nagas, and landscape deities) from destructive human activities. The gift of fearlessness is a form of restraint exercised on behalf of a particular class of vulnerable beings and over a particular terrain or landscape, and it is political rulers who render a given landscape either secure or insecure for beings' welfare. As another Tibetan Buddhist commentator of Patrul's day, Sumpa Khenpo, describes the role of the ruler,

In any and every world system, the good and evil that befall people, both collectively and individually, is indeed the fruition of their karma that is shared or unshared; but, conventionally speaking, in any place, the waxing and

waning of the Buddha's teachings, and the respective happiness or misery of beings, all follow as a consequence of the words and actions of the kings and ministers of that land. [. . .] Therefore, [. . .] merit and non-merit and happiness and misery, whatever befalls [the inhabitants], follows as a consequence of the powerful rulers of that place—and there is no place where that isn't the case. (471)

Although governance plays an integral role in Patrul's understanding of *abhaya-dāna*, Patrul follows Hindu yogic tradition by extending of the gift of fearlessness beyond the duties of just rulership to the layperson's practice of showing mercy to animals and insects. (This move reflects Patrul's larger agenda of ethical reform and the promotion of vegetarianism in Tibet.⁷) One important insight the contemporary humanitarian sector can gain from yogic-oriented discourse on *abhaya-dāna* is that humanitarian challenges are always rooted in political ecologies that include non-human beings as well as vulnerable natural environments. In these South Asian textual traditions, refugee protection cannot ultimately be separated from environmental protection, from animal welfare, or from policies of economic restraint.

Fearlessness and Humanity

As Hindu and Buddhist texts deliberately broaden the scope of *abhaya-dāna* to include non-human beings, a quiet argument also emerges about what it means to be human and the extent to which fearlessness is con-

⁷ See Barstow, Geoff. *Food of Sinful Demons: Meat, Vegetarianism, and the Limits of Buddhism in Tibet*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

stitutive of humanity. In drawing an analogy between the relationship of king to asylum-seeker and the relationship of human to animal, the texts assert a correlation of vulnerability between the two recipients of fearlessness—*asylum-seeker* and *animal*—that unsettles the given cosmological hierarchies and blurs boundaries of identity. In paralleling *asylum-seeker* with *animal*, the texts compel the reader to see in “dying fish, worms, flies and other creatures” a human-like capacity to fear violence and to desire protection, and likewise, to see in humans who are “without any place of safety” the desperation and vulnerability of an animal-like existence. Just as Buddhist teachings on rebirth group humans, animals, and other sentient beings into a common web of relatedness, where every insect should be recognized as one’s mother from a previous life, discourse on the gift of fearlessness highlights the lack of essence or solidness, the transiency or ephemerality, of human identity itself.

Martha Nussbaum points out that,

unlike compassion, which requires perspectival thinking and is thus available only to a few species of animal, and even unlike anger, which requires causal thinking about who is to blame for causing harm, fear really does not require very elaborate mental apparatus. All it requires is some rudimentary orientation toward survival and well-being, and an ability to become aroused by what threatens them. Not surprisingly, then, recent research has associated fear with the amygdala, a part of the brain that is shared among all vertebrates and is not associated with higher cognition. (25)

In other words, when humans operate on the level of fear, we are just like other animals. Refugees have been frequently portrayed and treated

as animals by nativist political authorities: one need only recall the recent media images of asylum-seeking children from central America locked in cages in Texas, or the comments of Donald Trump about undocumented immigrants, that “these aren’t people. These are animals” (Korte and Gomez). In June of 2018, Trump portrayed undocumented people as fish by criticizing law enforcement for what he called a “catch and release” policy (Korte and Gomez). Trump has also referred to undocumented people as an “infestation,” which seems to indicate a view that such people should be exterminated, as infestations of insect pests might be (Simon). Whereas nativist political rhetoric uses the experience of fear shared by humans and non-humans as a justification for oppression, the *abhaya*dāna tradition recognizes an imperative for ethical reflection and compassionate action.

If discourse on the gift of fearlessness illuminates the experience of fear shared by humans and other animals alike, then, in a Buddhist context, the gift of fearlessness is not merely the gift of refuge—it is the gift of humanity itself. The gift of refuge enables humans in an animal-like state of vulnerability to violence to regain their humanity, to move from fear into the fuller experience of life, with the possibility of certain freedoms and advantages that in classical Buddhist thought characterize a precious human birth. The consequences of realizing one’s humanity are immeasurable: in Buddhist doctrine, only as a fully human being can one attain *nirvāṇa*, the ultimate refuge from suffering.

The idea that a sentient being’s potential for full humanity, and thus for liberation, might be constrained by the whims of political rulers who fail to offer their people a basic human existence is troubling. From a macro-cosmological Buddhist perspective, the gift of a human birth cannot be “given” by any human political leader but rather is conceived of as the karmic fruit of many lifetimes of virtue. When situated within the complex workings of karma, the gift of fearlessness appears less as a

gift to be bestowed at the whims of those arbitrarily invested with power than as a moral responsibility that accompanies any investiture of power, no matter how small. This realization of the cosmic injustice of political rulers constraining the karmic possibilities available to their human subjects may constitute one of the best premodern Buddhist arguments for a paradigm of human rights in general and for refugee protection in particular. In fact, *abhayadāna*—by situating the protection of refugees within the larger cosmic possibilities of actualizing one’s own precious human birth—may provide an even more urgent justification for refugee protection than the secular humanitarian sector does. Temporal and transcendent refuge may be one and the same when the question of basic human dignity hangs in the balance.

Even the arbitrary power that political rulers wield over their subjects is relativized in the Buddhist language of refuge. The term for fearlessness (*abhaya*) in Tibetan translation, *mi ‘jigs pa*, is glossed with the same term invoked when a Buddhist takes refuge (*skyabs*) in the three jewels. Refuge is the foundational metaphor of the Buddhist path; in this tradition, all beings—even kings—are refugees, cast on the stormy seas of samsara, in search of safety. The ultimate gift of fearlessness is that given by the Buddha, who in his role as cosmic wheel-turning monarch and displaying the *abhayamudrā*, performs the generosity of enlightened kingship by offering the only lasting refuge in this world of impermanence.

Fearlessness and Security

Thus far, our investigation of *abhayadāna* has expanded the scope of humanitarian concern for refugee protection, but what of the security concerns that are raised in contemporary refugee policy debates? *Abhayadāna* does offer a logic that links the question of refugee protection to

domestic security concerns, but it is not the logic of xenophobia and exclusion; instead, it is a more capacious understanding of what security truly entails.

The gift of fearlessness is not only classically explained as the offer of protection to outsiders who otherwise have no protection: fearlessness is also explained as “the gift that kings give when they ensure that *their subjects live in security*” (Hibbets 441, emphasis mine). *Abhayadāna* thoroughly undermines the false dichotomy between providing asylum to foreigners on the one hand, and providing security domestically on the other hand, which is one of the key logics of nativist policy movements. In *abhayadāna* discourse, asylum and security are expressions of a single type of political power: the capacity to offer fearlessness and protection.

If each state offered its population real security, there would be no refugees in the first place. In particular, “a king should protect his subjects from fear of imprisonment, exile, beatings, robbery, and dishonor,” the arbitrary use of which may cause fear-based flight (Hibbets 441-442). This dimension of *abhayadāna* validates the moral prerogative of a king or state to ensure security—to protect domestic subjects, to defend the nation, to uphold the rule of law, and to wield violence in moderation and when appropriate—but the gift of fearlessness also compels the righteous king to refrain from the capricious or abusive use of force that instills fear in those under his care. Indeed, when the *Upāsakaśīlasūtra* enumerates the many dangers that sentient beings may fear, from tigers and wolves to floods and fires, kings are first on the list (107).

This reading of *abhayadāna* upholds the good of domestic security while challenging any security agenda that relies on fear. Fear tactics undermine the very nature of security as this discourse defines it. Such protection, in the context of the contemporary refugee crisis, extends to minority groups as well as to the majority group, to immigrants and

asylees as well as to the native population. Here we should question whether xenophobic rhetoric and inaccurate portrayals of the dangers posed by refugees serve to alleviate domestic fears or, rather, to magnify them. Nativist fear mongering is not compatible with the comprehensive vision of security entailed by the gift of fearlessness.

Fearlessness and Sovereignty

Discussion of *abhayadāna* from the *Laws of Manu* (4.232) goes further than security, however; in Hibbets' translation, "a bestower of fearlessness receives [in turn] *sovereignty*" (442, emphasis mine). In this tradition, a ruler's very power and authority to govern follow from his or her capacity to grant fearlessness to a population. Fearlessness is a gift to refugees but, directed toward one's own populace, it is a prerequisite for rulership. As Hibbets writes, "Whoever can ensure the protection of the people is entitled to rule . . .; since one of the primary functions of the king is protection of his subjects, he is, in fact, empowered by his 'gift' of security" (442). According to this logic, the greater the number of refugees that are welcomed, the more authority, power, and legitimacy accrue to the leader or state offering refuge. When the first Muslim migrants from Mecca sought refuge with the Christian king of Aksum, tradition holds that the king exulted in the honor of their choosing his protection above that of any other king; granting fearlessness to the migrants enhanced his power and prestige.

When Tibetan Buddhists buy animals from the butcher or save the lives of endangered creatures, as described in Patrul's commentary quoted above, they display this same logic: that the protection of the vulnerable enhances the power or sovereignty of the protector. In the Tibetan practice of *tshé thar* or life-release, animals are saved from slaughter and released into the wild as an expression of *abhayadāna*. Of-

ten, the merit from these ceremonies is dedicated to the long life of a Buddhist master. The act of saving vulnerable lives in a leader's name expands his or her life-force rather than diminishing it (Mindrolling). As in the English idiom, to perform an act of mercy or liberality makes one "the bigger person."

In *abhayadāna*, then, we find a productive divergence from the framework in which contemporary nativist discourses tend to operate. Rather than absorb and amplify the fear inscribed in the identity of "refugee," in the logic of *abhayadāna*, the state bolsters both its security and its sovereignty when it grants refugees fearlessness. If national security were re-envisioned as fearlessness, extended to domestic subjects and to refugees alike, then the international refugee regime would function once again. Furthermore, refugees would enjoy greater security in their resettlement sites rather than facing the violence and intimidation that accompany xenophobia.⁸

Fearlessness: Gift or Rightful Due?

Transposing the ethics of a gift economy onto a modern context of legal rights and responsibilities is not seamless. In contemporary states, the gift of fearlessness must sometimes be demanded and even seized when it has been unjustly withheld from the governed.

Since August of 2017, the exodus of over 742,000 Rohingya people from Myanmar has unfolded before our eyes. Rather than offering fearlessness to the Rohingya, whose plight now constitutes the "fastest-

⁸ For interviews with survivors of xenophobic violence in the contemporary United States, see Arjun Singh Sethi (editor), *American Hate: Survivors Speak Out*. New York: The New Press, 2018.

growing refugee emergency in the world” (UNHCR, “Rohingya Emergency”), Aung San Suu Kyi and other government officials of Myanmar justify state violence against the Rohingya by invoking the rhetoric of security, i.e. “peace, stability, and rule of law” (“Aung San Suu Kyi”). Their apparent assumption is that offering fearlessness to the (primarily Muslim) Rohingya minority would compromise the fearlessness of the (primarily Buddhist) majority, echoing the false binary between domestic security and protection of the vulnerable that we hear repeated in other nativist contexts.

In a more promising moment in Myanmar’s history, however, Suu Kyi invoked *abhayadāna* in her famous 1990 essay “Freedom from Fear,” published as she battled against the abusive military government in her homeland. Drawing upon traditional Buddhist ethical categories to describe the failure of the administration, she writes:

Within a system which denies the existence of basic human rights, fear tends to be the order of the day. Fear of imprisonment, fear of torture, fear of death, fear of losing friends, family, property or means of livelihood, fear of poverty, fear of isolation, fear of failure. (184)

When a state fails its basic function of providing fearlessness or security for its populace, Suu Kyi calls her compatriots to seize the gift of fearlessness for themselves. She writes, “Fearlessness may be a gift but perhaps more precious is the courage acquired through endeavor, courage that comes from cultivating the habit of refusing to let fear dictate one’s actions . . .” (184).

Here, Suu Kyi’s understanding of *abhayadāna* challenges the modern construction of “refugee” as defined in terms of fear rather than courage, of victimization rather than agency (the “habit of refusing to let fear dictate one’s actions”). She holds onto a hope that oppressed sub-

jects can seize the gift of fearlessness for themselves, disrupting the politics of fear when the king fails to do his duty. Her conviction here, ironically, points to the current failings of her own administration.

Conclusion

In applying the gift of fearlessness as a critical lens to the contemporary refugee crisis, my argument is that, as an ethical concept, *abhayadāna* is both capacious and expedient. It is capacious because it allows room for exploring more than one dimension of a moral problem, both upholding the moral good of refugee protection and recognizing the rightful duty of the state to provide security for its citizens. In this capacity, *abhayadāna* opens common avenues for authentic conversation across a political spectrum that may seem to be intractably polarized. Furthermore, the concept of the gift of fearlessness is expedient for our contemporary context because it shifts our critical focus from refugees to states. *Abhayadāna* charges governments to take moral responsibility for the ways in which they use refugee policy to instill and ignite fear in their own populations—through fear-mongering rhetoric, intimidating policies that threaten violence or seizure, and generalized instability or capricious action—thereby undermining security, both domestically and internationally. *Abhayadāna*'s more expansive vision of security demands ethical action not only at the border, but at the center of political power.

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