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Back Again: Space, an Important Factor for
Resilient Response to the Suffering Caused by
Armed Conflict

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From Metaphors to Life in Tibetan Settlements and Back Again: Space, an Important Factor for Resilient Response to the Suffering Caused by Armed Conflict

Diane Denis¹

Abstract

This paper is concerned with the interface between Buddhism and humanitarian principles in the context of the forced displacement of civilians due to armed conflict. It seeks to highlight how humanitarian activities can be informed by a resilience-oriented language and by its landscape of dignity. At issue are not only the repercussions of wartime violence, but also the problems of how we conceive the harm done and its effects, and how we account (or not) for resilient responses. By drawing on the spiritual, philosophical, and psychological insights of Tibetan Buddhist textual traditions, some effects of violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) are addressed. Inspired by Lewis's ethnographic research in Tibetan settlements, this

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paper focuses on the metaphor of space and related life-enhancing “technologies.” In so doing, it also contributes to the discussions over some of the potential problems with the trauma/victim narrative as addressed by sociologist Fassin. The main aim is to contribute to scholarly discussions on forced displacement, and to inform aid agencies and policy-makers who can contribute to lessening the suffering of all those who may be involved or unwillingly caught in armed conflict.

Introduction

In general,² when reading “migrant” literature³ recurrent themes are found beyond the most expected ones of distress, fear, and despair. As listed in literary studies on migrant literature, there are feelings of uprootedness, alienation, strangeness, and absurdity,⁴ combined with the

² Heartful thanks to Ally Catherine Wild for her most profound insight into the harmful dynamic of the “victim” narrative. See her recent book titled *Apprehend Rape*.

³ See for example [Internally displaced people | ICRC](https://www.unhcr.org/be/54691-10-livres-personnes-deplacees.html). Also note that in the literary world the definition of “migrant literature” varies according to scholars. It may refer to writings specifically produced by immigrants or in a more general sense of writings whose central theme is immigration. In this article it refers to both fiction and life testimonies as found in novels, biographies, autobiographies, and documentaries and films. The initial list of themes was first found in Charbonneau (1997) and in Taylor (2002). See a list of relevant novels and autobiographies: <https://www.unhcr.org/be/54691-10-livres-personnes-deplacees.html> and films on this same subject: <https://www.unhcr.org/be/49631-10-films-series-documentaires-personnes-deplacees.html>. See also the film/documentary titled *Human Flow* directed by Ai Weiwei: <https://gem.cbc.ca/media/human-flow/s01e01>

⁴ See amongst others Rawi Hage’s novel *La société du feu de l’enfer* published by Alto in 2018 or *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi with its multiple publications.

strong sense of duty to remember.⁵ For some other people, what comes to the forefront are difficult questions of identity,⁶ culture shock, the need to return to oneself, the different forms of love including solidarity or lack thereof, the necessity for adaptation, and inevitable crisscrossing of influences.⁷ Research done on the subject in the fields of psychology and anthropology, such as that by Young,⁸ Lester,⁹ and Saul,¹⁰ critiques the tendency to center on the notion of trauma. Sociological studies like those of Fassin,¹¹ Kaye, Amuchástegui, George, and Navarro¹² also examine this “trauma/victim” focus within academic research and governing policies. The question here is what a Tibetan Buddhist perspective can contribute

⁵ See amongst others Nina Berberova’s autobiography *The Italics are Mine* published in 1969.

⁶ See amongst others a documentary filmed in 2019 directed by Waad al-Kateab and Edward Watts titled *For Sama*.

⁷ Some of these themes are enumerated by Charbonneau in her MA Thesis titled: *Exil et écriture migrante : les écrivains néo-québécois*, presented at McGill University in 1997: <https://escholarship.mcgill.ca/concern/theses/k930c022f>. See also Taylor’s Thesis titled: *Dystopies et eutopies féminines 2002*: (http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/webclient/StreamGate?folder_id=0&dvs=1489771183431~884&usePid1=true&usePid2=true), consulted March 17 2017 ; as well as Karine Bélair’s MA Thesis, titled *L’écriture migrante au Québec : l’interculturalisme dans le discours littéraire et politique*, presented in 2010 <https://escholarship.mcgill.ca/concern/theses/z603qx86k>, consulted March 17, 2017.

⁸ See Young 1995.

⁹ See Lester 2013.

¹⁰ See Saul 2014.

¹¹ At issue here is the tension between inequality and solidarity, between a relation of domination and a relation of assistance (Fassin *Reason* 3). Fassin’s case study covers Humanitarian work around several refugee crisis, the age of AIDS, the tsunami and earthquake in Haiti and others. Relating to IHL discussions, his chapter nine on armed conflicts is of interest—examining the case of Biafra, Palestine, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Kosovo ...

¹² See Kaye et al. 2021.

to the discussion, especially as it relates to the context of conflict-induced displacement.¹³

Along this line, Lewis writes: “While a large body of research on the topic addresses ‘social suffering,’ less attention is being paid to exploring the ways societal forces and cultural beliefs bolster health, wellbeing, and resilience” (Dissertation 2).¹⁴ Thus, strongly inspired by Lewis’s ethnographic work conducted in Tibetan settlements, this paper focuses on what she names “resilient imagery” within the landscape of hope and dignity,¹⁵ in contrast with a more common focus on the “trauma” and “victim” perspectives. That being said, trauma-oriented research remains a source of valuable information to date—the point being not that trauma is not a valid category of research, but that too much emphasis on trauma and not enough on resilience is lopsided and misleading.

¹³ See also Lewis 2018 and 2013.

¹⁴ Lewis also writes: “Studies investigating the effects of political violence on Tibetan refugees, focus mostly on the prevalence of mood and anxiety disorders, validation of trauma instruments, classification of torture experiences, and the ‘cultural presentation’ of PTSD” (Lewis *Dissertation 2*). She further writes that: “As with treated-patient bias that makes for the ‘clinician’s illusion’, such research tends to concentrate on those who meet the criteria for mental disorders, or who present for treatment. We thus know little about those who manage to thrive in the face of adversity. A smaller subset of studies among Tibetan refugees mention that resilience seems to be drawn from cultural and religious factors. These studies cite testimony from Tibetan refugees who claim their religion allows them to thrive. This working hypothesis that a Buddhist way of life supports resilience responses in the context of resettlement remains poorly documented” (Lewis *Dissertation 2-3*).

¹⁵ Lewis borrows the notion of “geography” and “landscape” from Angela Garcia who noted in her ethnographic research among heroin addicts in New Mexico that the place overall seemed marked by hopelessness and a quality of melancholia. Rather than looking to individual psychology, she considers how the “geography of addiction” has been built, and, subsequently, how such a geography shapes and molds a lived world where extraordinary numbers of people succumb to drug addiction. I sometime prefer using the notion of horizon inspired by Jauss and his reception theory.

Thus, this paper looks at the imagery prompting resilience and dignity as found in Himalayan Buddhist cultures. My premise is that insight into its life-enhancing imagery can help inform the practices of the agencies that provide healthcare, social services, and humanitarian relief, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and others.¹⁶ These insights can also inform the international policy-makers who are in a position to respond to the needs of those who suffer as a result of international humanitarian law (IHL) violations.¹⁷ At issue are not only the repercussions of wartime violence, but also the problems of how we conceive the harm done and its effects, and how we account (or not) for resilient responses—what is called after Varela, “ethical-wisdom in action” or inherent “know-how.”¹⁸ In other words, the insights and wisdom displayed by those undergoing hardship offer key information about the ways to best protect and assist them, as well as preserve their dignity.

Lewis’ findings attributed to Tibetans in settlements is relevant to most Himalayan Buddhist communities, such as those residing in Bhutan, Ladakh, but also in Nepal where Sherpas, Gurungs, Tamangs, Newars, and other Tibeto-Burman groups share a common horizon of meaning in spite of their respective ethnic differences. Considering this situation, my

¹⁶ In particular here, with its mandate to assist displaced persons in times of armed conflict—responding directly to IHL provisions—the ICRC is said to be actively working toward identifying initiatives developed to cope with displacement. See: Internally displaced people | International Committee of the Red Cross (icrc.org); Internally displaced persons and international humanitarian law—Factsheet | International Committee of the Red Cross (icrc.org).

¹⁷ The very formulation of IHL acts as a safeguard for all those dealing with armed conflict, it has a dissuasive or preventive function for people at risk; a protective function during a conflict; and at times (on rare occasions, unfortunately) a repairing or therapeutic function—to heal past experiences through the international judicial/tribunal system with its aim toward accountability.

¹⁸ See amongst others, his book *Ethical Know-how, Action, Wisdom and Cognition*, Stanford University, 1999.

second premise for this paper is that, at its very core, Himalayan Buddhist insights, ideas, and use of metaphors pragmatically prompt resilient responses. They are here considered efficient because the Himalayan Buddhist spiritual path, whose aim goes beyond this fleeting existence, makes constructive use of the inevitable suffering of this life—including, when it occurs, that of political violence and forced resettlement. In many ways, one could say that the variety of Buddhist methods themselves constitute a form of resilience training, if only because they accord with the first noble truth: the reality of suffering. This Buddhist training occurs within a particular conception of the world, and of the mind, where space, open-ended expanses, an absence of beginning and end, an ever-changing flux of causes and conditions, impermanence, and emptiness, promote a dynamic and adaptative relationship with the phenomenal world (whatever form it takes). Yet before we move into a discussion about resilience-inducing imagery, let us look more closely at the research informing this paper.

Literature Review

Every year at the end of June, Red Cross and Red Crescent staff and volunteers from around the world come together at the site of the Battle of Solferino, a small town in northern Italy, where the ideas of modern IHL and the Red Cross and Crescent Movement first arose. They celebrate a common understanding of humanity and the will to alleviate suffering, a humanitarian drive that lives within millions of people.¹⁹ This is but one example of the importance accorded to humanitarian action facilitated by IHL today. In a provoking and insightful social study, Fassin offers a historical perspective on humanitarianism by looking into its roots, case studies of its various manifestations, its successes, and some of its failings,

¹⁹ See: <https://www.icrc.org/en/who-we-are/history/160-years-humanity>.

where compassion can at times be used as an argument to justify wars (Fassin *Reason* 249). In other words, Fassin's book is a constructive criticism of the invention of humanitarianism and its complications.

Words and How They Influence Adequate Responses or Not

Fassin's work is relevant to our discussion on Buddhism and humanitarian action facilitated by IHL since it clearly discusses the shift in language over recent decades within social and anthropological research on humanitarian issues. This shift passed from a language of social criticism to one of moral sentiment: "Inequality is replaced by exclusion, domination is transformed into misfortune, injustice is articulated as suffering, violence is expressed in terms of trauma" (Fassin *Reason* 6). These new formulations tend to emphasize the notion of "victimhood" and influence the general perception of conflicts as well as policy-making. This shift also tends to push the general public and by consequence policy-makers and enablers and, at times, even humanitarian workers, to rely on moral judgement, a move that has some positive compassionate effects, as well as some important lacunae²⁰

Recommendations might ensue from such insights into the power of linguistic formulations, for much-needed research into responses to sexual violence, for example, before, during, and after armed conflicts. As humanitarian action scholar Doris Schopper notes in an article published in 2014: "The review of the published literature shows that we have many

²⁰ An example of the compassionate impact of moral judgement may be the overwhelming response to Ukrainian forced displacement of civilians, in sharp contrast to the ambivalent response to Syrian or Palestinian displacement in past decades—along with the difficulty to have their rights recognized or their legal immigration facilitated. Another example as presented by Fassin is the bombing of Kosovo as part of a military campaign asserted to be purely humanitarian (Fassin *Reason* 2).

gaps in our knowledge. We know a small amount about providing services to female survivors of sexual violence in emergency and conflict situations.”²¹ Identifying such lacunae is still important, so awareness about the language used in research is timely. Similarly, interviews with displaced persons, whether in the context of research or of humanitarian activities, could also benefit from considering a contextualized, resilience-imagery approach rather than a trauma/victim-oriented approach across cultures. The impact of language is also relevant for translation, which often involves the translation and transmission of cultural ideas (including humanitarian principles), beyond the terms in and of themselves.

As Kaye et al. indicates, the notion and use of the term “vulnerability” plays a particular role in finding adequate responses to assist those in need of assistance. The discourse on vulnerability also shapes social relations and does not necessarily protect persons in need, so much so that “victims” can suddenly become “villains,” when “refugees” suddenly become “foreign invaders” or dangerous “others,” for example Kaye et al. (71).²² Would it not be best simply to recognize those responsible for the

²¹ See *Responding to the needs of survivors of sexual violence: Do we know what works?* Published in the International Review of the Red Cross (2014), 96 (894), 585-600. Consulted online 23-02-2023 [untitled \(icrc.org\)](#). In this article Dr. Schopper, Director of the Center for Education and Research in Humanitarian Action (CERAH), cites research conducted by noting that: ... recent reviews of interventions to prevent and respond to sexual violence in humanitarian settings have repeatedly pointed to the lack of evidence on which to base interventions. One of the most cited and thorough scientific reviews was published in 2013, examining the impact of initiatives to reduce incidence, risk, and harm from sexual violence in conflict, post-conflict, and other humanitarian crises, in low- and middle-income countries. Only forty studies were identified in a twenty-year period from 1990 to September 2011.

²² According to Kaye et al. “the very meaning of the term ‘vulnerability’ has been altered over recent decades by multiple levels of social change. On the one hand, shifts in the living and working conditions that people confront, and the rise of new forms and distributions of precarity, demand immediate attention and analysis. On the other hand,

violence perpetrated, and the rights of those subject to it? From this perspective, in the context of displaced persons, prisoners or targets of sexual violence during armed conflict, the prevention, protection and caring efforts cannot only be designed, following the analysis of Kaye et al., through the prism of vulnerability. While the notion of vulnerability does take into account the needs rather than the status of people, it can also exacerbate dynamics of domination within governing bodies or local populations and thereby become a tool for containment and exclusion.

This paper also accords with Anders' work on IHL and therapeutic tribunals, where she revisits the notion of "victim" as too often hiding the ingenuity and courage inherent within resilient responses. In her article, Anders examines the therapeutic shift of the war crime tribunals and warns of the potential for an increased risk of traumatic re-entry (Anders 63). Although humanitarian action (the heart of this paper) does not focus on accountability like tribunals, its language can also unfortunately offer a stage upon which stifling gender and ethnic norms can be reenacted and reinforced. Humanitarian-oriented institutions are often seen as *authorities* acting in the name of justice, peace, healing, and universal human rights, which renders them a socio-symbolic force to be reckoned with.

A Tibetan Textual Perspective on Finding Adequate Responses

At the root of these warnings against the focus on "trauma," "victimhood," or "vulnerability" is a concern for what can induce adequate responses. The Tibetan textual traditions offer some guidance in this domain. Three aspects are found among the sources consulted—the benefit

shifts in the ways in which various forms of endangerment are represented, and the changing institutional mechanisms and narrative structures through which vulnerability and suffering are communicated, profoundly alter the terrain in which we think about exposure to harm" (Kaye et al. 71).

of having a sense of connectedness with others, an ability to look at the present with some distance, and the imagery entertained.

Yet, if, in several popular texts such as the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, the central pivot for a genuine human-oriented response necessarily derives from our sense of connectedness to others, for Fassin, after philosophers like Foucault and Kant, the key is located at the crossroads between critical reflection and reflection on history: in other words, the ability to question the present by looking at it with some distance. This type of attitude in Tibetan Buddhist texts and cultures is associated with wisdom (Skt. *prajñā*) and in this context, it is necessarily spiritual by nature. In fact, the ethnographic research conducted by Sara Lewis (2014) shows that mental distress experienced by Tibetans during and after armed conflict tends to be understood as more of a “spiritual problem,” than a psychological or a “medical problem.” (Lewis *Dissertation* 210)

This last statement gives an insight into a cultural landscape animated by a multitude of metaphors and similes from which the ability to thrive or maintain equilibrium in the face of adversity are drawn.²³ Appreciating and using this type of imagery may serve in the effort to protect those in need of assistance as, for example, when interviews are conducted with displaced persons.

For Lewis, further exploration of cultural idioms of distress would reveal diverse generational, regional, and other kinds of responses. For example, several studies investigate Tibetan cultural idioms of mental distress, such as *srog-rlung* or *srog dzin rlung*, a traditional diagnostic category, which literally means “life-wind” imbalance (Lewis *Ethos* 332). For our purpose here, let’s say that in Tibetan cultural environments, the basic elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and space are part of one’s living

²³ See the work of Walsh published in 2006; and that of Walsh and McGoldrick published in 2004.

situation—a conception of life where the impersonal world of phenomena and the personal experience are fundamentally intertwined. For Tibetans, in other words, vulnerability is a natural expression of life, and the notion of “resilience” is more an interactive quasi-impersonal process than a strictly personal attribute.

In 2018, Lewis again writes that the Tibetan concepts of health and healing are shaped by Buddhist ideas to such a degree that it is impossible to divorce Tibetan medicine from religion, citing Adams’ work published in 2001²⁴ (Lewis Dissertation 22) as well as that of both Ozawa and de-Silva published in 2011²⁵ (Lewis Ethos 329). Lewis adds that this false distinction between medicine and religion mirrors the foundational understandings of how religious values permeate societies in ways that feel more like common sense than like religious beliefs (Lewis Dissertation 22). One could even go as far as to say that for these communities, Buddhist and indigenous spiritual teachings are considered like medicine. Along these lines, a study on trauma conducted by Keller within the Tibetan community in 2009²⁶ shows that a majority of Tibetans considered religious persecution as the most troubling effect of the armed conflict, even, sometimes, above torture or imprisonment. This research says that the overwhelming majority of participants reported using religious coping

²⁴ Adams, V. “The Sacred in The Scientific: Ambiguous Practices of Science in Tibetan Medicine.” *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (4), 2001, 542-575. doi:[10.1525/can.2001.16.issue-4](https://doi.org/10.1525/can.2001.16.issue-4).

²⁵ Ozawa-De Silva, C., and B. R. Ozawa-De Silva. “Mind/Body Theory and Practice in Tibetan Medicine and Buddhism.” *Body & Society* 17 (1), 2011, 95-119. doi:[10.1177/1357034X10383883](https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X10383883). See also Schröder, N.-A. 2011. *Discussing Psychotrauma with Tibetan Healing Experts—A Cultural Translation*. Berlin: Weissensee Verlag.

²⁶ See also the research conducted by Emily Sachs and Barry Rosenfeld of the Department of Psychology, Fordham University, in NY as well as that of Dechen Lhewa, Andrew Rasmussen, and Allen Keller of the Division of Internal Medicine, Department of Medicine, NYU School of Medicine. To evaluate the perceived severity of potentially traumatic events, participants were asked to list their three most upsetting experiences in descending order of severity.

strategies (Sachs et al. 2006). Lhewa's research on distress and coping published in 2010 shows that, amongst Tibetans, acceptance, religious coping, and perceived social support are the key adaptive coping strategies (210).

Although some scholars remain skeptical about the validity of religiously oriented studies, the fact remains that for the Tibetan community in exile, the spiritual aspect of their experience is central. And the tendency not to dwell on distress is considered an appropriate response, a resilient response. The studies conducted by Ruwanpura et al. in 2006, Sachs et al. in 2008, and Terheggen et al. in 2001 within Tibetan communities in exile all argue that levels of psychological distress are found to be extremely low, suggesting that coping activities (primarily religious or culturally inspired) appear to mediate the effects of trauma exposure.

On that front, Lewis' research does not show that Tibetans are any more or less resilient than other cultural groups; in fact, as she asserts, there is a lot of distress in the community. Rather, her research brings to light some processes of coping and resilience. From that perspective, Lewis underlines the fact that the way members of the Tibetan exile community view human suffering is much more "humanistic." She explains this last term by writing that, for this community, all beings are suffering. Political violence and the suffering that ensues are considered in this context as emblematic of universal experiences of suffering in *samsara*. In this context, the duality of sentiment versus reason within moral judgment as described by Fassin is not dualistic—the suffering of oneself and others calls for compassion and wisdom, as they are the two faces of the same reality. Compassionate action without wisdom is considered idiotic, and wisdom without compassion, not considered wise at all.

According to Lewis, what is observed amongst Tibetan refugees then is the capacity of "holding space" within the mind, a capacity particularly linked to the metaphor of the sky as well as the notion of equanimity. The metaphors of space and sky, and the resilient responses induced,

come to be embodied in the face of hardship. To come to this conclusion during her research, Lewis focused on the Lojong Buddhist practices, also called “mind training.” In the next section of this paper, I look at some fundamental concepts and commonly known texts underlying many Tibetan spiritual practices to see what these sources can contribute to such a life-enhancing space within the mind.

Textual and Philosophical Study on Resilient-response Imagery

Although this paper has a social, anthropological, and psychological bent due to being informed by such studies, the discussion that follows is rooted in textual studies and in philosophy. It is the result of an ongoing reflection on the interface between Buddhism and IHL. It examines some of the basic principles that may be responsible for resilient responses in times of armed conflict.

Philosophically speaking, the idea of displacement in Buddhist thought and Himalayan culture in general is pragmatic and deconstructive. It implies causality and justifies itself through the observation of nature in and of itself. A few famous metaphors include those of the seed and sprout to discuss causality and inter-dependence; the sky and cloud to discuss the relationship between mind and thoughts; the ocean and waves to discuss the relationship between mind and disturbing emotions; and, specifically within the Tibetan traditions, the interchangeable notion of “womb” and “embryo” (Skt. *garbha*) to discuss Buddha-nature or the capacity for all beings to become a Buddha. There is in fact a plethora of such natural metaphors throughout the canons of various Buddhist traditions. Many of these imply a movement from a state to another, while emphasizing the need to retain a big picture or bird’s-eye perspective similar perhaps to what Fassin referred to as the ability to question the present by looking at it with some distance, thereby retaining a capacity to be

surprised, or a space to see things as they are. Within the Tibetan tradition, these metaphors inevitably imply a process of transformation leading to either conducive or unconducive future conditions, regardless of external circumstances. The model for the vastest possible perspective and the utmost transformation-conducive state, the Buddha, is said to be endowed with immeasurable and inexpressible qualities, a state of mind without limits, neither the same nor different from ordinary beings.

The use of natural metaphors or similes implying a movement from one state to another informs the understanding of the perceptual process and its functions. Such metaphors are also used to map out the influence of perception on living experience, so much so that the very conception of life is defined in terms of movement and migration. The Tibetan term for living being is *dro wa* (Tib. *'gro ba*) a goer, a migrant—this Tibetan word is itself translated from the Sanskrit term *gati*²⁷ derived from the root *gam* which means to move or go; with its Buddhist usage, this term ends up meaning “destination”²⁸ or “errancy.” This concurs with the concept of beginningless time associated with conditioned existence. This life is considered but a fleeting moment, likened to a dew drop in the morning sun or the imprint of a bird in the sky.

In other words, a being by its very nature comes and goes, moves, travels, adapts, passing from one place to the next, one life to the next, one perception to the next, one emotion to the next, and one sense of identity to the next. Indeed, life itself is an ever-changing series of momentary events, a constant interaction with each and every situation and environment, linked to a specific time and space but not completely

²⁷ Voir Burnouf 1973 (traduction originale : 1852) ; Suzuki 1972 (traduction originale : 1932).

²⁸ See the Princeton Encyclopedic Dictionary 2014.

disconnected from beginningless previous and endless future times and places.

From this idea, through deduction, comes an understanding of impermanence, of connectedness, of kinship among all living beings, and perhaps, despite appearances, a sense of fundamental equality among all beings, as well as a sense of space. We could even go as far as to say that the ideal of the *śrāmaṇa*, or wandering ascetic, adopted by the Buddha, or that of the wandering yogi for Tibetans, are linked to the inevitably mobile and dynamic state of existence. At its root, this may have led in Buddhist cultural environments to the embrace of the ideal of a Bodhisattva and its ten levels of spiritual development. Within such a context, a focus on trauma is problematic since it does not usually account for constant change and motion, nor for the Bodhisattva ideal and its training in non-grasping of *saṃsāric* emotions.

In her work on trauma, Lester argues that a situation is generally said to be “traumatic precisely because it sheers us off from our expected connections with others, from our perceived social supports, from our basic sense of safety” (754)²⁹. A related argument made by Saul suggests that studies of disasters, political violence, and other forms of collective adversity overemphasize trauma, rather than loss, as the source of distress (in Lewis *Dissertation* 11). Along those lines, within commonly studied texts, the language of “trauma” is difficult to situate. This is reflected by the fact that within the Tibetan settlements according to Lewis, people do not necessarily see themselves as victims, even as victims of forced displacement. They also do not necessarily see themselves as damaged

²⁹ See also Lester, R. J. *Jesus in Our Wombs: Embodying Modernity in a Mexican Convent*. University of California Press, 2005.

persons needing restoration.³⁰ Kaye et al., in their research on justice, invite us to rethink the notion of trauma with its implicit tripartite structure featuring a division between three characters, that of victim, villain, and hero. Yet within the context of the Bodhisattva path, one could be said to embody these three within oneself, in other words, one is the present “victim” of one’s past ignorance, the “villain” caught with past disturbed emotions responsible (at least in part) for the actual situation, and, depending on one’s present state of mind, the hero oriented toward liberation from suffering.

On this path, rather than a division between these three characters, what seems most essential for these Himalayan Buddhist communities, and their favored texts is the sense of connectedness with, and concern for others, beyond measure—including enemies—no matter where anyone stands in the scheme of things. To exemplify this, let’s cite stanza 46 of The King of Aspiration Prayers, a well-known text amongst most Himalayan Buddhists:

The number of living beings
Is proportionate to the limits of space.
Just so may my aspiration prayers reach
The extent of their *karma* and *kleśas*.³¹

³⁰ According to Fassin (*Reason* 2012), from an anthropological or historical point of view, mental health specialists do more than just identify clinical pictures and establish diagnostic frameworks that make it possible to discover and testify to a hitherto neglected reality—that of the suffering of victims of violence. Through their categories and via their testimonies, they also formulate a new reading of contemporary conflicts: they tell of violence in the language of subjectivity which also leads to a political depiction of a state of the world. In other words, it produces a new vocabulary of war. In this sense, trauma produces the traumatized person just as humanitarianism produces the victim.

³¹ Tib. *nam mkha'i mthar thug gyur pa ji tsam par/ sems can ma lus mtha' yang de bzhin te/ ji tsam les dang nyon mongs mthar gyur pa/ bdag gi smon lam mtha' yang de tsam mo*. The

This stanza calls for a feeling of connectedness that reaches to the extent of space. Space being infinite and immeasurable, one's sense of connection is pervasive and acts, to follow Lester's thesis, as a technology for resilience training. The term "technology" here is understood as the understanding and application of a particular knowledge to address one's suffering. Obeyesekere argues that it is typical of many Buddhist laypeople across traditions to automatically "generalize their despair from the self to the world at large" (140). In this context, all beings in *samsara* have accumulated immeasurable karma. Present experience is considered as a consequence of past actions, and the future as consequence of present actions. From this, enemies and perpetrators of violence are the "victims" of their own ignorance; unknowingly preparing their own future suffering. Such ignorance calls for a mind of loving kindness, skill in means, and wisdom—implying clarity and sharpness. In many ways, in this melodrama, one is always the victim, the villain and, perhaps sometimes when proper insight informs one's action, the Bodhisattva hero of one's own journey. This inverted way of analyzing a situation changes one's perception of the relations at work in armed conflict. By creating this opening, training in resilient response is encouraged. An example of this is found in stanza 18 of another well-known text amongst Himalayan Buddhists, the Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva:

Though gripped by poverty and always scorned,
 Though stricken by disease and tormented by evil spirits,
 To take upon myself the negativity and suffering of all wan-
 dering beings,

colophon of this Tibetan version of the text indicates that it was translated from Sanskrit by Dzina Mitra, Surendra Bodhi and Bande Yeshe.

And never to be discouraged, is the practice of a Bodhisattva.³²

If this attitude seems unrealistic, that is exactly the point! Training means striving against one's limitations. Aspiring to the highest possible goal with stark honesty about one's actual state favors resilient response. In this situation, one does not deny one's experience of suffering, but puts it in the largest possible perspective. Also emphasized here is a sense of connectedness with beings who are in number as vast as space, including both friends and enemies. This same sense of connectedness is embraced by enlightened beings, to such an extent that it blows away all limiting views of oneself, of the expanse of the world, and of time. Stanza 28 of the King of Aspiration Prayers reads:

Each atom holds an infinite number of realms as numerous
as all atoms.

Within each of these realms, resides an inconceivable number
of Buddhas.

Surrounded by a myriad of Bodhisattvas,

With all of them in mind, may I practice the excellent conduct.³³

Beyond the reach of imagination, the aspiration of these Buddhist practitioners defies ordinary ways of thinking. These ideas are not mere figments of the imagination but are ways of stretching one's view beyond its reductive habits, a humanistic parallel to the "Thinking Big" of economic strategy. Within this training, relations with other practitioners

³² Tib. 'tcho bas phongs shing rtag tu mi yis brnyas/ tchabs chen nad dang gdon gyis btab kyang slar/ 'gro kun sdig sdug bdag la len byed cing/ zhum pa med pa rgyal sras lag len yin.

³³ Tib. rdul gcig steng na rdul snyed zhing rnams te/ zhing der bsam gyis mi khyab sang rgye rnams/ sang rgyes sras kyi dbus na bzhugs pa la/ byang chub pa spyod cing blta bar bgyi. Translation inspired by Elizabeth Callahan.

and models of practice seems to be key. Some studies like Young's³⁴ argue that traumatic disorders relate to time, while others, like Lester³⁵, suggest that it is better understood as a relational problem, what she calls "relational injury." Others prefer to regard this as moral injury. From the perspective of a Bodhisattva training, both time and relations are valued, and morality is situated in the realm of wisdom, the strategy being to blow the perspective out of all possible limiting views as expressed in stanza 29 of the King of Aspiration Prayers:

Thus, in all directions in the space of a single hair
Resides an ocean of Buddhas and of realms
As numerous throughout the three times [past, present,
and future].
May I engage with them during an ocean of *kalpa*.³⁶

So, from this vast perspective, and in a discussion over resilience-oriented language and its landscape of dignity, two things are retained. The natural world is used as a source of imagery to illustrate perfect wisdom. This is an integral part of the cultural make-up of Himalayan Buddhists—in particular, the sky and its open expanse. A wide all-inclusive view offers some guidance for how one apprehends one's transient condition. The strategy is to propose a bird's-eye view, or even a multi-universe view, emulating the vision of a Bodhisattva,³⁷ with its capacity to adapt

³⁴ See Young 1995.

³⁵ See Lester 2013.

³⁶ Tib. *de ltar ma lus thams cad phyogs su yang/ skra tsam khyon la dus gsum tchad rnyed kyi/ sangs rgyes rgya mtcho zhing rnams rgya mtcho dang/ bskal pa rgya mtchor spyod cim grab tu jug*. Translation inspired by Elizabeth Callahan.

³⁷ The most common recited refuge prayer in the Himalayan Buddhist communities includes a Bodhisattva vow: "In the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, until I reach enlightenment, I go for refuge. Through all the virtues, generosity and so forth, may I attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all beings (Tib. *sangs rgyas chos dang tchogs kyi mchog nam la/*

while remaining firmly rooted in personal dignity within both unbearable *saṃsāric*-suffering and nirvanic beneficial activity.

The experience of Himalayan Buddhists encountering forced displacement and war-imposed situations are probably the same as any other individuals: distress, fear, a sense of uprootedness, and so on, but their particular response is guided by a very specific cultural and textually-based training. Lewis notes to that effect that many Tibetan refugees argue that even with catastrophic events such as territorial displacement, torture, and imprisonment, ultimately it is the way one interprets negative events that causes one to suffer (*Ethos* 314). To this end, most texts are quite explicit in their goal: to work with one's suffering, one needs to reframe one's relationship to adversity and negative emotions. The result of this reframing is a greater sense of space and flexibility within the mind. Although humanitarian activities do not necessarily aim to work with how people view their own suffering, humanitarian actors can at least lean away from the trauma/victim framework across cultures and explore how resilient imagery could be of benefit. Frameworks do influence perception.

The Bodhisattva Way of Life, a Training in Resilience

In general, the term “resilience” is defined as one's ability to thrive or maintain equilibrium in the face of adversity.³⁸ Although “resilience” is not a Tibetan concept per se, we could say that the development of one's ability to face adversity has to do with embracing the limitlessness and inconceivability of the phenomenal world. From this perspective,

byang chub bar du bdag ni skyab su mchi/ bdag gis sphyhin sogs bgyis pa'i bsod nams kyis/ 'dro la phen phyir sangs gyas 'grub par shog).

³⁸ For a definition of resilience, see the work of Walsh (2006) and that of Walsh and McGoldrick (2004).

equilibrium and dignity are developed in one's mind despite all external circumstances. A person is encouraged to relate to the reality of suffering by developing the qualities of spaciousness, openness, and a willingness to embrace an immeasurable view of reality (Lewis *Contemporary* 6). One cannot discuss such training without mentioning another famous text, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra—A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*,³⁹ put into writing by Indian scholar Śāntideva⁴⁰ between the Seventh–Eighth Centuries.

In this text, the Bodhisattva's training addresses experiences that would also amount to the sort of violations of IHL that often cause civilians to flee armed conflicts including theft/pillage, torture, murder, and rape. Instructions are given to move beyond commonsensical reactions and to connect with the humanity of others, even torturers. Shocking as it may seem, the strategy of Śāntideva is to bring to mind the possibility of being confronted with utter suffering, for example in the moment of displacement, while preserving one's human dignity above and beyond the injustices and violations one faces. In this training, detachment and renunciation are explored to their utmost limits. Consequently, as Lewis writes, rather than making refugees feel even more despondent and hopeless, such attitudes help to generate compassion and a sense of interconnectedness with “the human condition” (*Dissertation* 211).⁴¹

The human condition is our common ground. No one is immune or exempt from suffering. Although social agreements and laws such as IHL are safeguards, there is no guarantee of full protection in this world.

³⁹ *Bodhisattva-caryā-avatāra*; Tib. *byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la jug pa*. Many translations and research have been conducted on this text, amongst which, Batchelor, Brassard, Williams, and Garfield. See also Padmakara Translation Group as well as Lotsawa House.

⁴⁰ Tib. *zhi ba'i lha*.

⁴¹ See also Obeyesekere's article titled “Depression, Buddhism, and the Work of Culture in Sri Lanka.” In *Culture and Depression*, edited by A. Kleinman and B. Good, University of California Press, 134–52.

Although the process of perception is our common ground, the content of perception is subject to mental afflictions. Knowing this is the first step to genuine wisdom and compassion—for oneself and for others. With this in mind, let's look at stanza 47 from the fourth chapter of the *Guide to a Bodhisattva's Way of Life*—on Conscientiousness.

Mental afflictions do not abide in sense objects, or
 In sense faculties, or in the space between, nor
 Anywhere else. Then where do they abide and agitate
 The whole world? This is but an illusion. Liberate
 Your fearing heart and cultivate perseverance for the
 Sake of wisdom. Why would you torture yourself in
 Hells for no reason?⁴²

The rhetorical strategy here is not to deny suffering, nor to deny the difficulty brought about by outer circumstances, but rather to bring into focus one's own relationship to one's experience of suffering, since from a Bodhisattva training point of view that is where one's power lies. In this context, mental afflictions—although vivid and overwhelming—are said to be insubstantial, evanescent. Everything always shifts and moves. Moreover, there is no inherent meaning to life or to situations. Meaning is created in the mind.

Scholars invested in social or legal research or social justice may regard this perspective as potentially undermining IHL or even downplaying

⁴² Tib. *nyon mongs rnams ni yul na mi gnas dbang tshogs la min bar na'ng min/ de las gzhan na'ng min na de dag gar gnas 'gro ba kun gnod byed/ 'di ni sgyu 'dra de phyir snying la 'jigs spongs shes phyir brtson pa bsten / don med nyid du bdag la dmyal sogs rnams su ci ste gnod pa byed.* Inspired by Stephen Batchelor's translation—first published in 1979, then in 81 and again in 85. p. 36. Studies on the texts have been conducted by Garfield, Brassard and Williams. See also <https://www.lotsawahouse.org/topics/bodhicharyavatara/> Accessed November 2022.

violations. However, this is not my purpose. On the contrary, this resilience-oriented approach opens up possibilities, for example, to understand trauma as a process dependent on causes and conditions relevant for the individual and society, therefore encompassing several roles and responsibilities by which the individual might also be empowered. This may lead us to examine a broader range of reactions to violence in general. Access to a broader range of reactions could also lead to better outcomes for displaced people and help to break tit-for-tat patterns of violations including during armed conflicts. Moreover, the insights into resilience training that emerge from contemplative traditions can actively contribute to education on resilience across many fora, as the work of Arawana Ayashi and colleagues on social presencing in schools, companies, and with the UN⁴³ has shown.

For this to apply specifically to our discussion of conflict-induced displacement and its consequences, let's reiterate that for most Himalayan communities influenced by their texts, the power over one's fate also lies in one's ability to work with one's mind with perseverance no matter what one may face.⁴⁴ In other words, one's inner reality is not solely dependent on external circumstances. That is why on the Bodhisattva path one trains to hold space within the mind, and my point with this reiteration is that humanitarian action can be more efficient when supporting existing coping strategies.

⁴³ See amongst others, the following talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NA1BvdYFRYo>.

⁴⁴ All experiences of suffering are classified into the three types: the suffering of suffering (issued from one's own inner discourse), the suffering of change (no situation is guaranteed to last), and the suffering of what is conditioned (this is most subtle and difficult to fathom). Although IHL aims to create the external conditions to prevent violation during times of war, this typology may have some interest in the context of humanitarian action.

The innumerable teachings on emptiness within the Tibetan canon certainly seem to have the effect of creating space in the mind according to Lewis’s study. In her study, she argues that the flexible and spacious minds that Tibetans describe as “resilient,” are made possible through cultural understandings of “emptiness” and “impermanence”—qualities of space and time respectively (*Dissertation* 20). To this, I would add the notion of illusion and the dream-like nature of situations in general. Lewis indicates that most lay Tibetans, if asked directly, will insist they do not understand core concepts such as emptiness and they also say that they do not have great compassion. And yet, such teachings seem to permeate cultural sensibilities to such an extent that Tibetans readily draw upon them in times of crisis (Lewis *Dissertation* 87). Along the same lines of Lojong practices⁴⁵ examined by Lewis, another text famous amongst Himalayan communities, *The 37 Practices of a Bodhisattva* written by Gyalse Thogme Zangpo reads:

Without overcoming one’s own anger—one’s actual enemy,
Conflicts with outer enemies will only increase

⁴⁵ See Thupten Jinpa’s book and translation *Mind Training, the Great Collection* published by the Library of Tibetan Classics, available online.

<https://books.google.ca/books?id=ry4qAwAAQBAJ&lpg=PT13&ots=4xOaA-Vzd0m&dq=lojong%20and%20its%20sources&lr&hl=fr&pg=PT14#v=onepage&q=lojong%20and%20its%20sources&f=false>

In this book, Jinpa cites Chekawa, author of the *Seven Points of Mind Training*, for whom the main sources for Lojong (mind training) is the *Ākāśagarbha Sūtra*, the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, the *Flower Ornament Scripture*, the *Akṣayamati Sūtra*, the *Collection of Aphorisms*, Nagarjuna’s *precious Garland*, his *Discourse on the Wish-Fulfilling Dream*, Āryaśura’s *Garland of Birth Stories*, Maitreya’s *Ornament of Mahāyāna Sūtras*, Asanga’s *Bodhisattvabhūmis*, and Śāntideva’s *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life and Compendium Training*. Atiśa Dīpaṅkara is an important figure and his work titled *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* has had a profound influence in Tibet. His students and teachers (Dharmarakṣita, Kusalī follower of Maitreya, and Serlingpa Dharmakīrti) have also contributed to this genre of literature.

Therefore, with an army of loving kindness and compassion,

To discipline one's own mind-stream is the practice of a Bodhisattva.⁴⁶

Rather than presuming that these instructions are destined for extraordinary people, these texts argue that such capacities can be learned by anyone, so much so that a great number of people simply learn them by heart through repeated exposure. This type of resilience training is intentional and necessitates perseverance. In many ways, these stanzas help reshape one's sense of identity and invite a transformation of the phenomenological experience into that of a Bodhisattva.

Suffering created by one's own anger is considered endless, so when one uses radical kindness and compassion openness is observed and hope and dignity made possible. It is as though victimization from outside forces is deconstructed and disarmed or disabled. Thinking of others is another mental technology that helps in this regard, leading to beneficial consequences rather than destructive moralizing over the dysfunctional polarity of good and bad. Himalayan Buddhists are pragmatic. Although adversity is unavoidable in this life and feels so real and unbearable, one can use connectedness, the expanse of space, the analytical tool of emptiness, the dreamlike example, the bird's eye view, and so on to alleviate suffering. Instead of a rejection of adversity, it is converted to fuel for the path. Although not all Tibetans are particularly religious, Buddhist

⁴⁶ Original translation of stanza 20: Tib. *rang gi sdang dgra bo ma thul na/ phyi rol dgra bo btul zhing 'phel bar 'gyur/ de phyir byams dang snying rje'i dmag dpung gis/ rang rgyud 'dul ba rgyal sras lag len yin*. Or again Stanza 24: All suffering is like the death of a child in a dream, to take such deluded appearances as real is exhausting. Therefore, when confronted with adverse and uncondusive circumstances. To see them as deluded is the practice of a Bodhisattva. Tib. *sdug bsngal sna tshogs rmi lam bus shi ltar/ 'khrul snang bden par bzung bas a thang chad/ de phir mi mthun rkyen dang 'phrad pa'i tshe/ 'khrul par lta ba rgyal sras lag len yin*.

worldviews are a central force in Himalayan cultural life and these technologies pervade everyday sensibilities. Viewing situations as workable, one is helped by the teachings in transforming one's own suffering (Lewis *Contemporary* 8). This insight can be helpful when conducting interviews with displaced persons.

At this point one could look into the discussion on the nature of the mind within this tradition, but for now let's just cite an excerpt from the *One Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*⁴⁷ as a summary of what we have looked at. In the chapter called the "Challenge from a Wise Demoness," Milarepa sings:

. . . The very root of all confused suffering
 Also comes out of the mind.
 One who realizes the nature of mind,
 Sees the great enlightenment without coming and going.
 Observing the nature of all outer forms,
 One realizes that they are but illusory visions of the mind.
 . . . From the ultimate viewpoint, there is no view whatsoever.
 This is the nature of mind.
 The teaching on seeing suchness (*dharmatā*)
 Is illustrated through the simile of space . . .

There is much more to be said about this kind of training in resilience, yet let's just say that in the texts used by Himalayan Buddhists, space within the mind is seen as an invaluable response to adverse conditions.

⁴⁷ Adapted from the translation of Garma C.C. Chang p. 51 with the help of the Tibetan from Kalsang Lhundup Collection edition.

It favors adaptability and resilience. Space is created by a conception of the world so vast that it even defies the imagination. Metaphors are powerful creators of space, as we saw with the metaphor of the sky, the ocean, the dreamlike quality of conditioned existence, the illusion as created by a magician, and so on. A spacious mind can also be favored through analytical reasoning focusing on impermanence and emptiness. In these cases, a short-sighted vision induces grasping at things, situations, and sentiments as if they were real and enduring. Analysis puts things in perspective. From what creates suffering comes understanding. This accords with Fassin's description of critical thinking.

One could suppose here that with such emphasis on space, these Buddhists become aloof and only quell the intensity of emotions, but far from it, they are not easily duped, they are grounded and practical. One of the most powerful skills some of these Buddhists tend to develop is to stay connected with the extent of humanity while also staying connected with their own reality—all within the landscape of dignity. The practical aspect of Think Big here is that it helps individuals face suffering and preserve their dignity and equilibrium. Also used in the Bodhisattva training of the Himalayan region is a version of compassion and loving kindness that again seems to go beyond measure—the efficacy here is to dismember sentiments of complacency, victimization, and powerlessness and retain a sense of agency.⁴⁸ This is why Lewis writes that Tibetans skillfully and purposefully sidestep taking on an identity as “survivors.”

Within his own discipline, Fassin invites us to rethink habitual ways of understanding humanitarian work through his strikingly powerful analysis of many case-studies, saying that, when lopsided, a focus on trauma produces the concept of a traumatized person just as

⁴⁸ The notion of agency can be associated with one's ability to respond to situations—but here prior to the response is the ability to be in touch with one's experience and life enhancing space.

humanitarianism produces the concept of a victim (*Reason* 203). This is also Anders' point when looking at "healing" tribunals, to the point where women facing the suffering of having been raped during armed conflicts can end up experiencing a reenactment of the abuse from the very structure that was set up to heal them. So, my question and challenge to us here is, how are we to resituate research and humanitarian action in the perspective of a landscape of dignity and resilient imagery?

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