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Violence of Non-Violence **Open Access**
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Violently Peaceful: Tibetan Self-Immolation and the Problem of the Non/Violence Binary

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Abstract: The paper investigates the conceptual dichotomy of violence and nonviolence in reference to the self-immolations that have been taking place in Tibet for the last several years. First using the insights of Hannah Arendt to distinguish between the categories of violent, nonviolent and peaceful, I approach the question of violence as the problem of acts that transgress prohibitions against causing harm. Using that heuristic, I examine the ways multiple ethical systems are vying for recognition regarding the self-immolations, and how a certain Buddhist ambivalence around extreme acts of devotion complicate any easy designations of the act as 'violent' or 'nonviolent'. I conclude by suggesting how any such classification inculcates us into questions of power and assertions of appropriate authority.

Keywords: Self-Immolation; Tibetan Buddhism; Violence and Nonviolence; Power; Transgression

Since 1998, over 130 Tibetans have taken their lives by "burning the body in fire" (*ranglü merseg*). These public performances are actions against the policies of the People's Republic of China, and in most cases are linked to demands for that the exiled religious leader the XIV Dalai Lama return to Tibet. The painful acts typically result in the actor's death, but have always been performed by willing agents, never upon others, and for that reason have been heralded as nonviolent. However the violence against Tibetan bodies seems equally clear, as the blistered and charred skin of their corpses attest. We are left with an oxymoronic phenomenon: a violent act of non-violent resistance. This paradox demands we reassess our categories, as "the self-immolations complicate a troubling model of non-violence and violence as immutable and distinct categories: a model prevalent not only in the framing of 'the Tibet issue', but also in secular liberal practices of applauding or delegitimizing various social and political struggles."[1] Taking this as a starting point, in this essay I will examine some aspects of the relationship between the apparently mutually exclusive categories of violent and nonviolent in reference to the Tibetan self-immolations.

It should be clear I am not attempting to determine whether or not the self-immolations should be labeled 'violent'. As will become clear, such labeling serves ideological ends, no matter how obvious such characterizations may appear. My discussion explores the ways ambivalent conceptions of harm are mobilized by these acts: If they are nonviolent, why do they also appear violent against the individual? Are they suicides, and what is at stake in that term? What relationship do they bear to the violence that lay at the heart of the sovereign state? What, ultimately, can we learn about our own binary of violence/nonviolence when we examine these acts? Such questions have import beyond the immediate context of Tibet, and will be useful in illuminating the effects of labelling particular political acts as 'violent' or 'nonviolent'.

Violence has been shown in recent years to be a salient category for the study of religion. Apart from the ever-increasing number of titles including the word 'violence' published by the top religious studies' presses,

1 Paldron, "Virtue", para. 12.

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the word itself maintains a deep connection to religious commitments. The noun 'violence' comes from the Latin *violentia* meaning vehemence, or impetuosity, while its use as an adjective brings a sense of applied, coercive force. Both have a common relationship to *violare*, the verb used to reference violation, transgression, or the breaking of an agreement, the most vital of which for the Romans being that between the individual and the gods. Though originally contextualized in transgressions of sacred obligations imposed on humanity, since the sixteenth century the term's use has become more focused around the sense of improper treatment of bodies. This is the dominant usage in reference to the recent situation in Tibet, but perhaps recapturing the earliest meaning will aid our understanding of the way these acts are perceived.

According to the adept analysis of Hannah Arendt, 'violence' is a descriptor applied to the means employed toward particular ends. Clarifying the distinctions between violence, force, strength, authority, and power, she notes that all "are but words to indicate the means by which man rules over man; they are held to be synonyms because they have the same function."[2] Violence is not an end in itself, but rather a characterization of the ways power is sought and maintained. Surprisingly, discussions of bodily suffering are nearly absent from Arendt's *On Violence*. The instrumental nature of violence always presupposes without engaging with the bodies it injures. While focusing on the body may challenge more rhetorical uses of the term (like 'violent' interpretation, or the description of something shaking 'violently'), for the present study violence will refer to the forceful injury of the body as means to an end. Such is not meant as an essential definition, rather an attempt to demarcate the landscapes of the discussion.

Self-immolations, I contend, challenge the ways we relate violence to harm, complicate our determinations about what prohibitions against harm are operative, and when violations of those prohibitions are permissible. The agony of burning flesh carries the inscription of violence by resonating with the infliction of pain in war and torture, our two hardiest frames for extreme suffering. Pain demands interpretation, and discourses around suffering lead us to see the relaxed and comfortable human body as the protected norm; consequently, any injuries are read as violating the natural rights governing our relationship to our body. In Elaine Scarry's seminal work *The Body in Pain*, she described how the violent infliction of pain was concurrently an attempt to destroy the world of the victim. Agony is placed in direct opposition to one's ability to maintain their cultural and symbolic 'world', as the crushing presence of the body eclipses all other relationships. The torturer, who is Scarry's model of world-destroying violence, seeks to forcefully transgress the victim's ability to be 'who they are'. The greater the body's discomfort, the greater the violation, the greater the perception of violence. However, when the victim is also the *agent* of this violation, a basic underlying axiom of our understanding is disputed: people want to avoid pain. If that is shown to be a faulty assumption, any interpretive structures built upon it become unstable. We are confronted with an act that is simultaneously authorized and prohibited.

With that in mind, I believe another pair of words often seen as interchangeable deserves an Arendtian bit of assessment: nonviolent and peaceful. Following Arendt's designation of violence as instrumental, we can see 'nonviolent' as the negation of 'violent' and therefore relying on the same idea of instrumentality. 'Peaceful', on the other hand, is an adjective denoting a tranquil state of affairs, and though it stands in opposition to a 'violent' state, it is independent in its meaning. "Violence is by nature instrumental; like all means, it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the ends it pursues... The end of war – end in its twofold meaning – is peace or victory; but to the questions And what is the end of peace? there is no answer. Peace is an absolute."[3] For instance, we might say students are sitting 'peacefully' in a classroom, but not necessarily that they are sitting 'nonviolently' in a classroom. 'Nonviolent' presupposes a state of conflict where 'violence' would be an understandable choice, but one that is deliberately denied; peaceful is how we designate the opposite situation, one that is not defined by conflict at all. Therefore, 'nonviolent' would be ab appropriate adjective for students using sitting as a method of obtaining their goals within a conflict, like the occupation of buildings at Columbia University or UC Berkeley in the 1960s. Those actions were nonviolent in not inflicting harm to reach their *telos*; students sitting peacefully in a class with only the motivation to learn may look the same, but in fact is a very different phenomenon.

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2 Arendt, *On Violence*, 43.

3 Ibid., 51.

The contradiction evident in self-immolation has a history in the Western "global repertoire of protest."[4] In the famous photo by Malcolm Browne, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc was captured calmly sitting in the Lotus position while flames engulfed his body. Attempting to explain this act to Western minds, the revered monk Thich Nhat Hanh explained that in order to understand these acts, people must understand the Buddhist mindset from which they spring. Writing to a fellow champion of nonviolence and civil rights, Martin Luther King Jr., he admitted the self-burnings were "somehow difficult for the Western Christian conscience to understand. The Press spoke then of suicide, but in the essence [sic], it is not, it is not even protest."[5] To understand these acts of voluntary suffering, according to Hanh, we need to appreciate how these acts are not violent against a victim, but rather are productive uses of the temporal body oriented by particular metaphysical conceptions. Those conceptions determine the limits and uses of suffering, and it is only through them that we can get a fuller understanding of their character.

For the Tibetan self-immolations, we need to examine them through the related but distinct Buddhism popular on the plateau. I will do so in the remainder of the paper by examining the ways the Tibetan *pawo* (Wylie: *dpa'bo*), the Tibetan term used in reference to these self-immolators and often translated as 'martyr', spoke about their actions in their last statements. I will also look at the ways the spiritual and, until 2011, political leader of the Tibetans His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama framed these actions and the conflict of which they are a part within the wider tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Doing so will illuminate how we determine authority to prohibit and transgress, and how the blend of religion and nationalism at the core of the issue plays a part in troubling our normative distinctions between 'violent' and 'nonviolent'.

The analytical frame I employ blends Arendt's insights with those of Georges Bataille, who argued not only that nonviolence is co-constituted with violence, but that prohibitions entail their own transgressions.[6] The idea of the prohibition is inseparable from the possibility of transgressing that prohibition; the law is inseparable from the exception. In order to better understand how we conceive of violent acts, I will simultaneously try and identify the ways prohibitions of violence while also illuminating their authorized transgressions. It will also be important to identify contexts of conflict, where violence and nonviolence become intelligible, and where perhaps they do not belong.

Tibetan Self-Immolations

Self-immolation is a fairly uncommon phenomenon in Tibet. Prior to 1998, incidents were rare to unknown, and certainly had little resonance in the cultural milieu of Tibetans. While self-immolation has been referenced in regards to Buddhism at least since Duc's act in Vietnam, the Tibetan religious variety has not seen such familiarity. In fact, as several scholars have noted, there does not seem to be much precedent at all for the act in Tibet.[7] Since its inception, however, people around the world have resorted to the act as a means by which to link their voice to their body in spectacular displays of resistance. The greatest concentration of self-immolations to date took place in 2012, but spontaneous outbreaks continue. Surprisingly, the Dalai Lama has refused to speak directly to the acts either in support or condemnation; his statements have been confined to the place of intention to determine ethical propriety. Such statements will be further examined below.

Most Tibetan perspectives about these self-immolations assume their nonviolent character. In his analysis of online discussions of these acts among Tibetans, Dhondup Tashi Rekjong found the assertion of nonviolence by Tibetans was a reaction to claims of violence by China.[8] He suggests that it was either a foregone conclusion, or not a salient concern for the Tibetans who commented. It was only when accusations of their violence were made by officials of the People's Republic of China (PRC) that Tibetan voices affirmed their nonviolence. A frame of violence, then, preceded and prefigured the corresponding claim of nonviolence.

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4 Shakya, "Self-Immolation", 37.
5 Hanh, "Search", para. 1.
6 See Bataille, *Eroticism*.
7 For a good discussion of its novelty, see Buffetrille, "Self-Immolation".
8 Rekjong, "Online Debates."

Tibetan words carrying the sense of 'nonviolence' are defined by not harming others, such as *rnam par mi 'tshe ba*, and *mi 'tshe ba*. The negating particle "*mi*" is attached to the phrase "*'tshe ba*" meaning harm or damage (IW), injury or hostility (RY), or violence itself (JV).[9] Each carries the sense of action against another, while '*tshe med zhi ba'i lam* is known as the path of nonviolence (IW), but is closer to peace (RY) or pacifism (JV). The focus on harm aligns with our general conceptions surrounding violence, and we will see that various doctrines shape the way pain is experienced and what counts as harm, which plays a role in the apparent conflict in applying such categories to the self-immolations.

Tibetans who have left last testaments (*khachem*) prior to self-immolating nearly unanimously portray their actions as nonviolent acts to achieve their goals. A few state it outright, such as *pawo* Lobsang Tsultrim, who prior to his self-immolation on January 10, 2012 expressed his amazement that "in these astonishing times, some people are setting themselves on fire, sacrificing their lives, going empty-handed in nonviolence, and calling out with all the breath in their bodies" for the restoration of their freedoms.[10] The pride in his tone implicitly suggests that other choices, less virtuous ones, were available, but the "altruistic blood" of those that went before him would not allow such destructive acts. Others made it clear that any violence would go against their wishes, like cousins Choephag Kyab and Sonam who before self-immolating together on April 19, 2012 stated outright that their hopes would be dashed if anyone came to harm on their behalf.[11] *Pawo* Rikyo, who self-immolated May 30 of that year, echoed these sentiments, pleading "do not resist by fighting if I get into Chinese hands alive."[12] Violence and causing injury are plainly in opposition to their goals, making it clear that they envisioned their own acts as nonviolent.

However the statement of *pawo* Gudrub, who self-immolated on October 4, 2012, seems to blur the distinctions between such categories. He begins his "The Sound of a Victorious Drum Beaten by Lives" by acknowledging the Dalai Lama's plea that the Tibetan struggle remain nonviolent.[13] But since China held the course with their infamous 'patriotic re-education' campaigns, outlawing of images of the Dalai Lama and infiltrations in to Tibetan religious institutions, Gudrub describes the self-immolations as a "sharpening [of] our nonviolent movement."[14] Such a metaphor brings to mind cutting blades and the infliction of injury, while retaining its nonviolent character by not inflicting injury on the unwilling. In another military allusion, he declares Tibetans "will win the battle through truth, by shooting the arrows of our lives, by using the bow of our mind."[15] He thereby reaffirms that they are in the midst of a violent conflict, and the means by which they seek victory are their very lives. Gudrub's statement offers a good example of the way 'violent' and 'nonviolent' are being exceeded in the current situation on the Tibetan plateau.

The Stance of the People's Republic of China

Officials of the PRC staunchly criticize the self-immolations as violent, basing their characterization, ironically, in terms of their biopolitical responsibility of care.[16] As the *de facto* caretakers of the Tibetan population, China's role is to protect the lives of those within their borders from injuries they have not

9 The parenthetical initials reference the Tibetan-English dictionary from which the definitions were taken. IW is Ives Waldo's translation, RY from Ranjung Yeshe's, and JV from Jim Valby's.

10 Quoted in International Campaign for Tibet (hereafter ICT), *Storm*, 157.

11 Ibid., 142-3.

12 Ibid., 146.

13 Ibid, 164-5.

14 Ibid., 165.

15 Ibid.

16 A question at a conference where I presented some of this material raised the issue of 'care' v. 'protection' as the purpose of the state in regards to citizen bodies. The former is said to allow for personal growth, say medicine in a wound, while the later defends against unwanted external inflictions, say the bandage over the wound. While I am intrigued by such a division, I am immediately suspicious of claims that determine what qualifies as 'external' vs. 'internal', especially in political contexts. I believe such claims are similar in character to those examined here, and I would assert my conclusions in this paper speak to this dichotomy as well.

sanctioned (e.g. in legal punishment). In that vein, as anthropologist Didier Fassin put it, self-immolation could be seen as the most violent response to violence precisely because it violates the most widely accepted principle of the sanctity of life.[17] Statist institutions exist to protect life, making the deaths befalling Tibetans an affront to Chinese rule.

Put another way, since China is recognized internationally as exercising sovereignty over Tibet (however contested) it is the PRC's duty to uphold regulations around harm imposed on their subjects. This is a necessary correlate to the monopoly of legitimate violence that nation-states claim; violence in that context being the willing infliction of suffering and the accompanying interpretive frame for that suffering.[18] Even were the Dalai Lama's fervent wishes for meaningful autonomy to come to fruition, the state of China would still have a role to play in determining what happens to Tibetan bodies. It claims the ultimate decision on what actions are allowed and prohibited vis-à-vis the infliction of damage, and the concomitant ability to determine what constitutes 'harm'. So the suffering inherent in legal punishment, though playing out on the body, is not read as harmful but curative, corrective.[19] As many Chinese security officials have chosen not to return the corpses of self-immolators to their families for proper Buddhist rituals of burial, choosing instead to cremate the bodies in secret and returning only the ashes, the state's legitimacy on the matter has increasingly been challenged.

During the height of the self-immolations, local police in Gansu province anchored their opposition to the self-immolations in their responsibility to protect the fundamental right to life. Speaking to the *Guardian* after the self-immolation of Dorje Rinchen on October 23, 2012, police of the PRC averred "Self-immolation is an extreme suicidal behavior that goes against humanity, society and the law, and deprives people of their right to life."[20] Triply transgressive, self-immolation is an act against the fundamental arrangement of existence. It is literally out-of-order with an ontological understanding of individual life and productivity. Suicide, then, is a transgressive act of forced harm that results in the death of a victim who is under the state's protection.

Suicide, like its siblings homicide, fratricide or even genocide, denotes criminality. From the Latin suffix –*cida*, indicating a killer or cutter, and related to *caedō*, *caedere*, to slaughter, strike, or cut to pieces (including some connections to sacrifice), it represents an *in*appropriate killing that takes place outside sanctioned channels. Rather than a killing of self, the full weight of suicide may better be understood as a *murder* of oneself. The charge of murder is one that can be administered and prosecuted by the legal authorities, since the act transgresses the prohibitions codified in law; the same biopolitical ends that undergirds the one, sustains all. Classifying the self-immolations as 'suicides', then, implicitly acknowledges that these bodies fall under the jurisdiction of the PRC.

While designating them as suicides brings them under the auspices of internal administration, statements by Chinese officials also frame the harm of self-immolation as actions *against* the state, blaming what state media regularly calls the 'Dalai Lama clique.' Raging against the Dalai Lama's unwillingness to condemn the acts, one security official blasted the self-immolations as "a disguised form of violence and terrorism" that "actively tried to pursue separatism by harming people."[21] By coloring the harm caused by the flames with separatist motivation, the official sought to paint these actions as simply another form of rebellion that any sovereign state has the right to quash. Rhetorically, it linked them to other acts of external violence against the state, which justified violent means to bring about their cessation. Thus the PRC has sought to frame these acts as both internal and external violence, both of which would justify violent action as a response. As the internationally recognized sovereign power over the plateau, they have the right to wage war and punish their subject free from any outside intervention.

The charge of violence then stems from the perceived violation of the PRC's ability to dictate the care of, and prohibit unauthorized injury to, the bodies in their care. The state claims the monopoly on employing

17 Fassin, "Trace".
18 Weber, "Politics".
19 Foucault, *Discipline*.
20 Quoted in Burke, "Tibetan", para. 10.
21 Quoted in Lim, "Protests", para 8.

suffering to normative ends, so harming the body for any unsanctioned ends is determined to be violent. Using the body for religious ends, it should be noted, is on the surface a protected activity according to the PRC's constitution Article 35. However that protection is restricted to five 'approved' religious denominations, and tempered by the demand that religious activities not "disrupt social order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state."[22] Moreover, it states that "Religious organizations and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign dominance."[23] Since Tibetan Buddhism does not conform to the authorized custom and determines its own leadership, it did not fit the requirements even prior to these actions that "impair[ed] the health of citizens." Indeed, the attempts by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to stamp out such deviation through militarization and imprisonment heavily contributed to the state of affairs that engendered the self-immolations.

Tibetan Religio-Nationalism

Acts of self-sacrifice are often read solely within a religious frame. The large proportion of Buddhist clergy who have self-immolated combined with the omnipresent practice of Buddhism in Tibet might lead to a similar tendency in this case, though some scholars have attacked such a stance.[24] The statements left by self-immolators make it clear that their action is not solely a religious one. This is evident in the myriad references to Tibetan unity, and their repeated pleas to uphold Tibetan language and customs point to an imagined community[25] based in a common culture, religion and language. While the Dalai Lama's 'Middle Way Program' aims at meaningful autonomy for Tibetans, those performing and supporting self-immolations see Tibet itself being at risk of extinction. Tibet refers to a nation, a people, a geographic area and a way of life; it is a symbolic and cultural complex that gives meaning to the lives of Tibetans, and is centered both politically and spiritually on the Fourteenth Dalai Lama.

Tibet has been known as *chösi nyindre*, religion and politics together, since the Fifth Dalai Lama consolidated power through the military might of the Mongol Gushri Khan, and only in 2011 did that system officially end. Although the Fourteenth Dalai Lama has said he had sought the transfer of political authority to a democratically elected parliament for many years, he is still at the pinnacle of Tibetan hierarchy.[26] The highest proportion of statements express their desire "that His Holiness the Dalai Lama may live long and return to Tibet as soon as possible," and many who left no statement cried out for the same as they burned.[27] This alternate locus of sovereign authority shifts the right to determine allowable harm, and unsurprisingly the statements from the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile on the self-immolations argue for their cessation on similar grounds as the PRC. But the Buddhist character of the polity seems to significantly complicate the picture, and takes its place among myriad other contexts where Buddhist identity gets linked with nationalist fervor and condones all manners of violence.[28]

It is the Buddhist sacrificial context that shapes many of the Tibetan words used to refer to the self-immolations, such as an offering (*chöpa*), an offering of the body (*lüjin*), and a lamp offering for the Buddha (*chömé*).[29] Other terms used have included offering fire to the body (*lus me mchod*) and to give one's body (*lus sbyin*), all of which carry the similar idea of using the body as a religious object.[30] As many have argued this framework demands we understand the self-immolations, and therefore the question of their violence, from within the ethical boundaries of Buddhist thought.[31] In fact, most arguments employed by Tibetans to establish the nature of these acts were based around whether or not the actions were in line with Buddhist moral doctrine.

22 People's Republic of China, *Constitution*, Article 36.
23 Ibid.
24 See for example Gouin, "Self-Immolation".
25 Anderson, *Imagined*.
26 Dalai Lama, "Salugara".
27 ICT, *Storm*, 149.
28 For a good discussion on the links between Buddhism and nationalism, see Jerryson, "Buddhist".
29 Cabezon, "Ethics", para. 6.
30 Tsering, "Online", 99.
31 See for example Cabezon, "Ethics", Barnett, "Political", Shakya, "Transforming" and Lixiong, "Last Words".

Sanctioned Violence in Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhist history has a long lineage of acceptable moments of injuring and killing. These can be loosely collected into two categories: internal acts of legal punishment authorized against those within the group, and external act of warfare commendable when against those outside the group. As we will see, both anchor their permissiveness in compassionate intent and the ultimate benefit such actions produce for all beings by protecting the dictates of Buddhism.

Many tales of bodhisattvas play on the ambivalence inherent in moments where pain and death spring from compassionate roots. The 'liberation rite' (*sgrol ba*) analyzed by Jacob Dalton provides such an example. In his *Taming the Demons* he used the Vajra myth of the demon Rudra's subjugation and an examination of a tenth century rite of capital punishment to explore the uncertain relationship of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism and violence. Violence is acceptable, Dalton shows, when it can be shown to serve the betterment of all beings. Hence the dispatching of Rudra was positive because the demon was an obstacle to the development of Buddhism. Individuals who threatened Buddhist teachings were also subject to authorized killing in the liberation rite, which took its name from the belief that those who were executed in the proper tantric manner were freed from this life, gaining enlightenment as a result of its performance. Harmful actions which protect the teachings by which all beings can escape *samsara* or that result in the enlightenment of the 'victim' are appropriate transgressions. They still operate in a world bound by the Buddhist demand to harm none, but they are contextualized exceptions to the rule.

The murder of Langdharma provides another well-known instance of sanctioned killing. Langdharma, the last Tibetan emperor in the ninth century, was seen to pose a threat to the Buddhist teachings, and to prevent his rule from completely annihilating the dharma the monk Lhalung Pelgyo Dorje killed him. Dorje believed that a demon had taken form in the emperor, effectively removing his humanity and making him a 'field for liberation'. Since it was an act done out of compassion, the killing was thought to earn great merit for the monk, and though he was stripped of his monkhood following the act he has since been remembered as a bodhisattva who was responsible for the revitalization of Buddhism.[32]

A similar example of compassionate violence can be found in the Buddha's incarnation as the Compassionate Ship's Captain from the *Upāyakauśalya Sūtra*. There, the Buddha murders a robber in order to save the lives of 500 bodhisattvas. He reasons that although his act is a violent one, in that it violates the rules surrounding harm and would certainly result in negative karma, it is justified as it averts a greater loss for mankind. Murder is justified by the beneficial ends that resulted from it; in fact, because the Captain recognized he would lose karma for the act and did it anyways, the compassion of his act overwhelmed its negative aspect and resulted in a net karmic gain. This economic model of balances appears in several other places as well, where the action is in itself violent, but unavoidable and ultimately for the greater good. The ends in this case justify the violent means, but the means are still violent. Some Tibetans have referenced the murder of Langdharma as the precedence for the violent resistance against the Chinese in 1959 that ended with the exile of the Dalai Lama,[33] which is reinforced by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's assertion that Mao Zedong too was a "destroyer of the Dharma."[34] Acts of harm carried out on behalf of Buddhist interests have a tradition of not only approval but celebration within Tibetan memory.

In his attempt to understand this paradoxical relationship to violence in Buddhist thought, Stephen Jenkins struggled with solving the apparent contradiction of harm concurrently forbidden and endorsed.[35] He found Buddhist texts agree on the meritorious and auspicious (*kuśala*) nature of violence sponsored by compassion.[36] 'Violence' and 'nonviolence' as categories only seemed to cloud the waters, he thinks

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32 A good discussion of the murder of Langdharma is Schlieter, "Compassionate Killing".

33 Ardley, "Violent"

34 Dalai Lama and Carriere, *Violence*, 161.

35 Jenkins, "Auspiciousness".

36 Ibid., 300.

due to the Dalai Lama's great hero of nonviolent action, Gandhi. Jenkins discusses the "awkwardness" in translating scenes "in which there is no violence even when there is violence."[37] The problem

> is eased somewhat if we substitute 'non-harm' for 'nonviolence', which is a misleading translation of *ahiṃsā* in Buddhist, Hindu or Jain thought. Henk Bodewitz points out that the term 'non-violence', which was never taken before modern Indian times to forbid war or capital punishment, is absent in older English dictionaries and is strongly associated with Gandhi. With the use of this term, the Gandhian conception, inspired by Tolstoy, is projected onto the past... it is important to recognize that being harmless may actually require violent action and that restraint from violent action may be harmful.[38]

When faced with such apparent contradictions as 'compassionate violence', we are in fact facing "a complex matrix of multiple interrelated and competing concerns, including proportionality, intention, virtue, situation, and consequences conceived from a multiple-life perspective."[39] To properly judge harmful actions as violent or nonviolent from the perspective of actor requires understanding the ways such a complex is seen to define and consent to harm.

Self-Immolation as Nonviolent

Into this ambivalent history of 'compassionate violence' come the self-immolations. Chung Tsering's 2012 survey of online debates between Tibetans on characterizing the self-immolations as violent or nonviolent showed that both sides of the issue generally looked to Buddhist texts in defense of their positions. Those who argued for the act as coherent with the dharma routinely interpreted them in light of jātaka stories, which recount the previous lives of the Buddha, as well as the *Lotus Sūtra*. Those who averred their divergence from Buddhist teachings concentrated especially on the Vinaya, the Buddhist code of moral discipline, relying on the harm done to the micro-organisms of the body during the self-cremation. Therefore, they conclude, these actions violate Buddhist morality, as they are violent by causing harm to other beings.

However the majority of Tibetans justify these acts through the tigress parable, a jātaka where the Buddha comes across a starving tigress whose hunger has driven her to the verge of eating her cubs. As such an act would bring vast negative karma upon the mother, the Buddha elects to give his own body as sustenance in order to save the family and assist the tigress in her spiritual progression. His self-sacrifice is recognized as a supreme act of compassion and therefore worthy of great merit, a theme that will recur.

This text was directly referenced by one of the few Lamas of Tibet who have self-immolated. Lama Soepa self-immolated on January 8, 2012, leaving behind a recorded message explaining his mindset and saying prayers for the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people. In his message he said he was "sacrificing [his] body with the firm conviction and a pure heart just as the Buddha bravely gave his body to a hungry tigress."[40] This narrative was also referenced by Thich Nhat Hanh in his letter to Martin Luther King Jr., to demonstrate how "the monk believes he is practicing the doctrine of highest compassion by sacrificing himself."[41] Through compassion, the agony experienced is given a positive charge, and the rhetoric of sacrifice in relation to the jātakas reframes the act not as political protest, but as a freely given gift of the body.

37 Ibid., 311.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 326.
40 ICT, *Storm*, 111.
41 Hanh, "Search", para. 2.

A gift cannot be violent. The concept of gift-giving does not allow it.[42] In Reiko Ohnuma's examination of such "gift-of-the-body" jātaka stories, she argues that they are examples of *dāna-pāramita*, the 'perfection' of generosity, providing "a concrete manifestation of an abstract Buddhist ideal, locating this ideal within a dramatic character and allowing it to unfold within a recognizable human context replete with personal and social consequences."[43] Narratives like these celebrate a giving that rejects reciprocity through its excess. Mere generosity is separated from 'perfect' generosity by this aspect, Ohnuma elaborates, and gifts of the body "*must never be reciprocated*."[44] This lack of reciprocation is essential, as the altruistic nature of the giving in not seeking a return, "result[s] in an 'unseen' and transcendent reward in the form of karmic merit (*punya*)."[45] They are gifts meant to accrue merit through bodhisattva ethics, rather than achieve a *quid pro quo*.

Wang Lixiong saw something similar in his analysis of the *pawo*s statements. Arguing against the dominant use of protest as a heuristic, Lixiong showed that few self-immolators referenced a desire to publicize their situation; instead, they spoke of their self-sacrifices as actions aimed at solving the situation directly.[46] Lixiong echoes Thich Nhat Hanh in his recognition that people outside Buddhist settings may have difficulty understanding "setting one's own body on fire as an offering for nothing else but merit."[47] This insight aligns with Ohnuma's regarding the operations of a gift that exceeds its reciprocation earning merit for the giver. In the Buddhist mind, our current state is a result of past accrued karma, so the development of merit could be a way of rectifying the political situation through a karmic dynamic.

Several statements of *pawo* support this interpretation. Expressly linking his action to Buddhist ethics, Lama Soepa asked that all Tibetans "genuinely practice Buddhist principles in order to benefit the Tibetan cause and also to lead all sentient beings towards the path to enlightenment."[48] Nangdrol, the 18 year old who self-immolated on February 19, 2012, said in his statement that he hoped people would continue to live according to Tibetan traditions, and "be compassionate to animals" and "restrain from taking the lives of living being."[49] Rikyo, quoted above, added her hopes that people would not fight or steal or "indulge in slaughtering and trading of animals."[50] Mentioning the care of animals in a political conflict seems out of place, unless understood as a reference to central Buddhist ethical guidelines that could somehow positively affect the political situation through a karmic dynamic.[51] As 'gifts' meant to accrue merit, these self-burnings are placed outside the political arena. Offering the body as a gift in order to earn merit legitimates suffering without denoting violence. However, as acts aimed at using karma to change the political situation, and are thereby political acts, they may best be categorized as nonviolent, as they are engaged in questions of who rules who. While the body is injured, and in spectacular ways, such pain does not contradict the precepts against harming that is foundational for Buddhist ethics.

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42 It is true, as a reviewer of this essay pointed out, that anthropologists as far back as Marcel Mauss have highlighted aspects of gift-giving that repudiate the complete absence of ill intent (see his *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* [1950]). Work by sociologists including Pierre Bourdieu have likewise identified the workings of power in the cultural processes of exchange (see, for example, his *Distinction* [1979]). My assertion does not oppose those conclusions, rather points to the inability to describe a gift as violent using the definition of violence I outlined above. Any gift that is described as violent could only operate in the metaphorical realm, same as a punch described as a 'knuckle sandwich'. Gift-giving necessitates some conception of benevolence, even when forced. Any violence, I contend, negates the ability to classify an offering as a gift. (Such would apply to descriptions of sacrifice too, which I will endeavor to explain throughout the remainder of this work.)

43 Ohnuma, *Bodily*, 92.

44 Ibid., 143. Italics in original.

45 Ibid.

46 Lixiong, "Last Words".

47 Hanh, "Search", para. 21.

48 ICT, *Storm*, 110.

49 Ibid., 125.

50 Ibid., 146.

51 Tibetan Buddhist scholar Dan Hirschberg first suggested this perspective to me, and my research has only supported his assertions.

Self-Immolation as Religious Practice

Both internal and external forms of approved violence from Tibet's sacred history have formed Tibetans' modern resistance against the PRC. Such frames allow for pain to be experienced as "passionate engagement" by casting acts of forceful harm as "moral action that articulates this-world-in-the-next."[52] However references to compassionate and therefore meritorious giving of the body in sacrifice complicate matters, making available a third mode of approved suffering to interpret the self-immolating Buddhist body. It finds its primary model not only in the tigress jātaka, but also in the Medicine King of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the other Buddhist text widely used to frame self-immolation. In the tale, the eponymous character learns that offering his body through fire is the highest devotional offering he could make. In terms that closely resemble the process of the Tibetan self-immolators, the Medicine King "doused himself in fragrance and oil, drank scented oil, and wrapped himself in an oil-soaked cloth. He made a vow and then burned himself."[53] Witnesses to Tibetans who self-immolated routinely reference the drenching with and ingestion of kerosene, along with shouted slogans that often include cries for the Dalai Lama's return before ignition. With such closely aligned phenomena, the Medicine King has been referenced by Tibetans and scholars to be a direct precursor for the Tibetan protests.[54]

The Medicine King's self-cremation was aimed at progressing along the road to enlightenment. It was not aimed at the changing of a political situation, or even the kind of compassionate action of the Prince who offered himself to the tigress. This in no ways removes the conceptual link between the act and those of twenty-first century Tibetans; it is but a warning about reading too direct a coincidence. Indeed, the most significant analysis of the Buddhist context of self-immolation to date has been provided by James Benn in his monograph *Burning for the Buddha* which is centered explicitly on Chinese Buddhism. While denying any contact between Tibetan and Chinese forms would be imprudent, there are significant variations between the Theravāda traditions of China and the Mahāyāna (and Vajrayāna) varieties practiced on the plateau. Still, the tale does offer one more frame available by which to judge whether acts that injure are violations of the prohibition of harm.

With the focus on individual spiritual gain, we are again presented with an apolitical form of sanctioned violence against the self. It aligns in that with the acts of gift-giving that Ohnuma focuses on (though Benn notes that the Medicine King's act was a practice of the perfection of vigor [*vīryapāramitā*] rather than perfection of charity[55]). Both are removed from the political sphere, and rebuff attempts to designate them as violent. Where they are seen as part of a conflict over power they may be nonviolent, but if they are excluded from contests between groups, aimed only at dharmic advancement, these acts should be considered 'peaceful' activities.

Acts of self-harm in service to religious goals are deemed exceptional. In these stories the sense is that these beings are excused from the moral guidelines that govern those lower on the spiritual ladder because their acts are the epitome of compassion. Every example used thus far features bodhisattvas, whose spiritual mettle has been proven, justifying their transgressions on the basis of their enlightened state. David Gray examines this idea in the work of the eighth century Buddhist philosopher Śāntarakṣita, who argued that "bodhisattvas transcend conventional rules of morality," and quoted the *Guhyendutilaka* in that "for the mind endowed with wisdom and expedience, there is nothing which should not be done."[56] Gray further notes that many such texts that justified acting out of accordance with conventional ethics were not intended for wide audiences, designed as they were for advanced eyes.

52 Asad, *Formations*, 121, 91.

53 Benn, *Burning*, 59.

54 I use the term protest here not because I think the act of speaking publicly against is at the core of these actions; in fact, I agree with Lixiong (2012) who finds that the publicizing of suffering to gain help from others is mostly absent from those self-immolating in the traditional lands of Tibet. However as this performance is certainly an act of opposition, I will occasionally use the term 'protest' which is present in so many discussions of these tragic acts.

55 Ibid., 60.

56 Gray, "Compassionate", 243.

Bodhisattvas are portrayed as agents of the same dynamic that founds the laws against harm in general. Their position as enlightened beings gives them the ability to determine ethical alignment on their own, since they have so perfected compassion towards others. The decision of whether or not an act violates an established ethical principle is within their purview; they act like judges who determine the application of legal norms. In that sense, they are sovereign agents themselves, able to mobilize their understanding of compassion to justify certain acts that would otherwise be outside Buddhist morality. It would appear then, that whether or not an action is violent is dependent upon the ends it serves, a distinction that can only be made in reference to established religious doctrine or by determination of those who are qualified to fully appreciate what those established systems are meant to uphold. They who can fully understand the *telos* are those who are able to decide on their own actions.

Motivation

In each claim, pain is set within permissible boundaries. But in order to determine which category to place any given act of self-harm, we need to know how the victim (who for these purposes is the same as the agent) experiences their suffering – as an act of forceful injury or a passionate engagement.[57] Whether or not an act is a violation, then, depends on the motivation of the actor. After all, we do not judge an act that results in accidental injury in the same way that we do a premeditated act of harm.

Throughout the self-immolation program, the fourteenth Dalai Lama has said little either supporting or condemning the actions of Tibetan self-immolators. His stated reasoning is based in his retirement from political office in 2011, and in his concerns about Chinese propaganda twisting his words. When pressed, he has maintained that the motivation behind the actions determines their positive or negative character. In an interview with New Delhi Television, the Dalai Lama said “Basically, violence and non-violence ultimately depend on a kind of motivation and purpose. So it’s difficult to sort of judge these individuals, their motivation. If the motivation is anger, hatred, like that, then negative. If the motivation [is] some different thing, more positive motivation, then [it is] more difficult to judge.”[58]

As this sentiment is the only one we have from the revered Tibetan leader, it is worth unpacking. If the act springs from a ground of hatred or anger against China, the act does not carry any positive connotation. It is “plainly wrong.”[59] Such emotions should not drive action, as they neglect the truth of reality, and are clearly out of keeping with Buddhist ethics. Therefore they are transgressive in their violent infliction of harm; in this, the Dalai Lama would be on the same side as the PRC or the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile.

However if they are not based in anger and hate, if they spring from more positive sources, they may be positive acts. In an interview with Ann Curry, the Dalai Lama elaborated on the conditions of seeing these acts as advantageous. “I am quite certain that those who sacrificed their lives with sincere motivation, for Buddhadharma and for the well-being of the people, from the Buddhist or religious viewpoints, is positive.”[60] So actions undertaken in an attempt to benefit the dharma (like the liberation rite or the murderer of Langdharma) are auspicious, merit-making actions, as are those done on behalf of the Tibetan people or indeed all people (like those ascetic acts leading to progression along the bodhisattva path or those aimed at helping all beings toward enlightenment). In other words, if they are done with altruistic intent, they do not transgress prohibitions against harm; rather, they are beneficial acts that would engender good karmic returns.

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57 Asad, *Formations*, chapter 2.
58 Dalai Lama, “Buck”.
59 Dalai Lama, quoted in “Interview with Ann Curry”.
60 Ibid.

This latter category resonates with the many examples from of bodhisattvas and narratives like those discussed above.[61] They also link to the statements of self-immolators who speak to their intent to benefit the people of Tibet and all sentient beings, perhaps through the workings of karma. This understanding is essential to understanding the full significance of statements from Tibetan leaders like Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the seventeenth Karmapa Lama,[62] praising the "pure motivation" of the *pawo,*[63] or Geshe Kalsang Damdul of the Institute for Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala celebrating the self-immolations as stemming from "pure motivation for the well-being of six million Tibetans."[64] Authoritative designations like these firmly establish the actions as acceptable due to their alignment with Buddhist precepts. While they appear harmful, they are ultimately beneficial, as they are undertaken out of compassion. They are not transgressive, and therefore should not be understood as 'violent'. In this way the self-immolators themselves are able to determine the mode by which their act is judged as approved or transgressive.

The intent of the self-immolators then is placed at the center of determinations of violence or nonviolence. Lama Soepa's concern about those who may have self-immolated out of anger echoes here again, especially considering the importance placed upon the final thoughts of a person's life in the Buddhist tradition. Rituals around the dying are aimed at fostering a peaceful mindset in those leaving this life, as the dying thought (*marancitta*) can have substantial effects on the next rebirth. Motivation becomes even more important, since what is at issue is an activity that results in death. The proper mindset is important both in the possible merit gained by such actions, but also in the reflection in the final moments of their lives.

Conclusion

Our challenge confronting these spectacular acts of self-injuring stems from the inherent need to identify the standard by which to judge them. Attempts to classify them as violent thereby assert that they violate prohibitions against harm, and such an interpretation necessarily connects to an institutional claim to determine those prohibitions. In ascertaining if they are transgressive, we simultaneously affirm the base of authority that determines the injunction being transgressed. At its core is the relationship between justice and coercive force,[65] and the ability to determine which inflictions of harm are acceptable, and which are excluded as excessive. Any designation is concurrently an acknowledgement of sovereignty over bodies, of who can justify violence.

What we are faced with when we try to apprehend the self-immolations is a nexus of multiple normative relationships, each with its own manner and rationale prohibiting and sanctioning harm (as well as determining what counts as harmful). These are dependent on the motivation of the actor and the context within which the actions takes place. Moreover, they are not mutually exclusive, and are difficult to separate when faced with such spectacular actions as the self-burnings occurring in Tibet. The vying political systems laying claim to these bodies are both based in concepts that seek to enlist pain toward their productive ends. In conclusion, I want to briefly revisit the three relationships that seem to dictate our assessment of self-harming activities.

61 There is a complication, however, in the textual references. These actions are considered to be *kusala*, skilled, on account of their being performed by those of advanced spiritual training which has given them correct perception of themselves and reality. The Medicine King, the high-ranking Lama Soepa and of course the Buddha can correctly perceive the perspective outcome of their actions and the situation they encounter, along with their own true intentions, and employ skillful means, actions that enlightened beings use to lead others to enlightenment. Due to this developed ability, the violent action is one that is still skillful, and excused on those grounds from the prohibition against violence. However what about those who self-immolated who have not attained this level of understanding? Can they be assured to have acted with *bodhicitta*, the enlightened mind? Lama Soepa himself shared this concern, recognizing that while the other pawo "have sacrificed their lives with similar principles... in practical terms, their lives seemingly ended with some sort of anger." Being motivated by anger forestalls the skillful means, and therefore would seem to mark their acts as violent.

62 Following the death of the 16th Karmapa in 1981, both Chinese and Tibetan monks declared the right to designate his next incarnation. That has led to the current state where there are two 17th Karmapas. The Lama quoted here is the one chosen by Tibetan agents, who has enjoyed more legitimacy in the plateau for obvious reasons.

63 Quoted in Liu, "Leaders", para. 2.

64 Quoted in Yee, "Tibetans", para. 8.

65 For more on this concept see Benjamin, "Critique".

If, as spokespersons for the PRC claim, they are acts of desperation or melancholy they do seem to contravene normative prohibitions around the sanctity of life. Suicide is generally seen to be a transgression, an unnecessary, unapproved infliction of harm upon one's own body. Such a perspective begins with the centrality of bodily health and wholeness as the goal, seeing harm only acceptable as a means towards that end, such as in a medical procedure.[66] Indeed, medical practices, though possibly involving the same forceful acts of cutting that appear violent in other contexts, do not understand the infliction of such pain as harm at all. It is a necessary step toward a further goal. All other harm is prohibited, as it goes against this fundamental ground of the individual's relationship to his or her own body. The violence of suicide exceeds that deemed productively appropriate.

When a person is first determined by his relations with others, as part of a society that stands against other groups, harm is only allowable as far as it is necessary for the perpetuation of the group. That perpetuation takes two main forms: threats from outside the group that require vulnerability to suffering while employing harm on others, and threats from inside the group that engender corrective suffering in punishment. The group is valued as an end worthy of harmful means, but only the minimum required for the success of the group's goals. Any excess beyond that impinges on the relationship of man with his body; he must suffer, but that suffering is regrettable, and must be in proportion to the effectiveness of the painful action. Where the suffering outweighs its perceived usefulness, it is read as violent excess. For the current study, this begs the question how effective the self-immolations are as a strategy to achieve the Tibetan ends. As an act of nonviolent protest, they seem to be falling on deaf ears, so some may judge their suffering excessive proportional to their potential. However as symbolic action, the acts may outweigh the strategic and yet prove to create an outcome that retroactively determines the suffering was appropriate. And it is clear from their statements that the self-immolators believe their cause to be worth their very lives.

The idea of devotional offering and the tradition of self-immolation itself in Buddhism brings in a third category for interpreting this suffering. Pain is not harm where it leads the victim along the path of spiritual advancement, the path of the bodhisattva, which will ultimately result in enlightenment for all sentient beings. Acts of asceticism like those in the Lotus Sūtra or acts of compassion like that related in the tigress jātaka are aimed at gaining merit which authorizes the suffering that accompanies the auspicious actions. These actions are discursively shaped as apolitical, aimed as they are at benefiting all sentient beings, which contrasts with the political contexts within which the self-cremations are occurring.

At the same time, the self-immolating body fundamentally challenges our ideas about institutional justice. Although we have grown comfortable with political dominion over bodies, to what extent are we truly comfortable with the complete administration of our bodies by another? Should any institution dictate what we can do with our bodies? Do we allow it to prohibit actions we ourselves choose? Can it restrict our right to control our flesh, or is this a final space where we retain sovereignty over ourselves? Is it possible to transgress our own body?

The self-immolators inflict their own suffering voluntarily and spectacularly, using their deaths to inhabit a liminal space between the sovereignty of the state and the control of the individual over his own body. They are violent in that they result in pain, nonviolent in that they do not transgress prohibitions against the infliction of harm, and peaceful in that they resonate with spiritual practices unconnected to political conflict. By clouding these categories, Tibetan self-immolators challenge the ways we make sense of violence and nonviolence, harm and suffering. They trouble our attempts to determine what prohibitions around harm are operative, which transgressions of that prohibition should be considered violations, and who has the ability to make that distinction. The institutions in conflict demand we interpret the marks on the body in accordance with their injunctions, making the determination of violence not only an act of classification, but an affirmation of power.

66 There are contexts besides those examined here where does harm to oneself find justification. Just a few examples include spheres of expression (e.g. body modification), contest (e.g. rugby or iron man races), or even pleasure (e.g. Sado-Masochism). In all these interpretive frames, self-harm is acceptable, even if it strikes some onlookers as 'bizarre'. They have been excluded from the present study for expediency, but including such acts would I believe reaffirm the conclusion drawn here.

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