

Tibet, China, and the United States:
Self-immolation and the limits of understanding

by
Tenzin Mingyur Paldron

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Committee in Charge:
Professor Trinh T. Minh-ha, Chair
Professor Charles Hirschkind
Professor Keith P. Feldman
Professor Michael Wintroub

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Abstract

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A few years after a lockdown by the Chinese government in response to protests and riots by Tibetans across the Tibetan Plateau in the months leading up to the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, Tibetans began immolating themselves. Between 2011 and 2019 there have been 157 Tibetan nomads, farmers, students, parents, grandparents, monks, and nuns in Tibet and nine outside Tibet who have self-immolated while calling for freedom and the safe return of the 14th Dalai Lama to Tibet. In April 2018, a former LGBT civil rights attorney immolated himself in the United States in order to bring the world's attention to the deterioration of the planet's environment and the destructive impact of fossil fuels. The language of public responses to these acts indicated attempts to understand them as either suicide or protest, or a combination of both. While not denying that these labels may offer partial accuracy to some or many of these self-immolations, this dissertation sets aside the assumption that these acts of self-immolation are immediately interpretable and begins instead with a question: If an act were to exceed the moral and political categories of the day, what might it mean to human action and experience? Taking a 1965 letter written by Thích Nhất Hạnh to the Reverend and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as its departure point, the first part of this dissertation investigates disempowerment and pain by bringing three parables into conversation: The Buddha's encounter with the hungry tigress, the tale of Oedipus, and Kierkegaard's (Johannes de silentio's) reading of Genesis 22. The second and third parts of the dissertation pursue material considerations in Tibet, China, and the United States, from differing techniques within global LGBTIQ movements to issues of speech and silence in U.S. classrooms. This dissertation challenges arguments that frame pain-in-action, and these self-immolations specifically, as either ethical or unethical. It further challenges academic norms of engagement with Tibet and Tibetans as subjects that serve academic careers but otherwise live without a hopeful future. With regard to both self-immolation and Tibet, I argue for a learning approach rather than a knowing one.

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Introduction

It was my second semester at Berkeley, and my curiosity turned in every direction. I was especially keen to understand how disparate social movements came together. One February afternoon in 2011, I went looking for examples in history.

I recalled something I had heard about one of America's most notable social justice icons. Before his assassination the Reverend and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had expanded his focus to the war in Vietnam. What had prompted such a shift? I did not realize it then, but I was searching for a relational element. Then I came across a six-paragraph letter by a Princeton University visiting scholar, addressing King in 1965. It was titled, "In Search of the Enemy of Man."

I read the letter three times. The first few paragraphs were compelling but unrelated to my interest. For all its eloquence, I found the argument lacking and took no pains to examine it further. I focused on the subsequent section; it was here I located the author's appeal to the recipient of the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, his 'persuasive move' so to speak. I was impressed by the writer's skill and moved by his principles. But my own small attempts at fostering integration and alliances were disappointing, and I found other readings to occupy my time. After sharing the letter with some friends and Tibetan colleagues I eventually put it out of mind.

A few weeks later, in the Ngaba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan, China, a young Tibetan monk set himself on fire. Seven months later, eight more Tibetan monks and nuns in the same region set themselves alight. The act was known as self-immolation. It was the first I had heard of such a thing among Tibetans.¹ With emotion unsettled and reason dissatisfied, I went looking for answers. I remembered the letter. How had it begun?

The self-burning of Vietnamese Buddhist monks in 1963 is somehow difficult for the Western Christian conscience to understand. The Press spoke then of suicide, but in the essence, it is not. It is not even a protest.

Suicide and protest. Personal desperation and political demonstration. These were the two frames, occasionally distinguished but frequently overlapping, that I found in every analysis and editorial initially addressing the Tibetan immolations. Were these persons animated by the psychological or political? What strategies might the Chinese government employ if the phenomenon continued unabated? How would the acts impact the future of Tibetans and their

¹ The first self-immolation by a Tibetan inside Tibet took place on February 27, 2009, by a monk named Tapey. Due to arrest and concealment by the Chinese government, his whereabouts and condition are unknown. I became aware of Tapey in 2011. "Self-Immolation Fact Sheet," Self-Immolation Fact Sheet (International Campaign for Tibet), accessed March 9, 2021, <https://savetibet.org/tibetan-self-immolations/>. The first self-immolation by a Tibetan occurred in New Delhi, India on April 27, 1998. A former guerrilla fighter against the Chinese occupation, Thupten Ngodup took spontaneous action when Indian police forcibly ended a 47-day hunger strike by Tibetan demonstrators calling for the United Nations to reopen debate on the status of Tibet. The day of the Indian government's seizure of the demonstrators coincided with a visit by a Chinese delegation to New Delhi, led by General Fu Quanyou of the People's Liberation Army. Chakravarty, Sayantan and Manoj Joshi, "Protest by Tibetans puts Delhi in an awkward position in relation to Beijing," *India Today*, May 11, 1998, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/diplomacy/story/19980511-protest-by-tibetans-puts-delhi-in-an-awkward-position-in-relation-to-beijing-826345-1998-05-11>.

homeland Tibet, the world's highest and largest plateau? And perhaps most insistent among the queries by non-Tibetan commentators: What was the 14th Dalai Lama, the world's preeminent living spokesperson for non-violence and inner peace, doing in response?²

As a child of parents who did not attend college and completed their education in the first generation of a school system created by and for refugees, joining a doctoral program at UC Berkeley took some adjustment.³ I struggled with the first text of my department's introductory course. A German man named Hegel kept saying things about World History and I did not understand why we were reading him. It took some months before I realized he, along with many other western European thinkers, formed the basis of important thought in my new home.

I share this anecdote because I remember what it felt like when the self-immolations were unfolding. Although they did not receive a great deal of attention from the world, it was a moment that was treated as 'hot'.⁴ Commentators mused something urgent building and took turns wondering what might develop. Years passed; attention fell away. Tibetans continued self-immolating.

Regardless of my supposed status as a dispassionate scholar, like other Tibetans I was and continue to be deeply struck by the immolations. Confusion, guilt, and grief as I had never felt—all found their way to me. Like my peers in exile, I spent my formative years hearing accounts of my people's hardships, of "Tibetan lives in Chinese hands".⁵ Growing up in the United States I had also read a great number of English language texts on the subject from a young age. Still, I was caught unaware by this pain.

During the onset of the self-immolations I was enrolled in a course called "Anthropology of Religion" in which matters of the religious and secular were studied, as well as their relationship with one another. With the letter to King on my mind and its author's opening words calling to me, I visited a local bookshop to pick up a course text entitled *Fear and Trembling*. Composed by a nineteenth century Danish writer, the essay was a rumination on an ancient

² For the unaware reader, it is helpful to know that the Dalai Lama is not only a Buddhist monk and Nobel Peace Prize laureate; he is also a Tibetan.

³ The Tibetan Children's Villages (TCV) were formed at the initiative of the 24-year-old Dalai Lama and his sisters Tsering Dolma Takla and Jetsun Pema, a year after Tibetans began crossing the Himalayas as refugees in 1959. Declining the offer of Prime Minister Nehru to freely educate Tibetan children in Indian schools, the Dalai Lama expressed an intention to keep Tibetan language, culture, and identity alive in exile by creating a network of residential schools administered by Tibetans, with assistance from the government of India. The Nursery for Tibetan Refugee Children (Sursok: *temporary shelter* and Bhoso Khang: *hostel house*) was established in 1960, immediately helping nurture Tibetan children with better opportunities than the mountain road construction labor their parents and elder siblings carried out for several years in the southern shadow of the Himalayas. Twelve years later in 1972, the Tibetan Children's Villages were formally established. "Historical Background," Tibetan Children's Village (Tibetan Children's Villages), accessed March 4, 2016, <https://tcv.org.in/historical-background/>.

⁴ The Tibetan self-immolations were Time Magazine's #1 most underreported story of 2011. Nate Rawlings, "Top 10 Underreported Stories: 1. The Self-Immolation of Tibetan Monks," *Time*, December 7, 2011. http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101344_2100858_2100859,00.html. See also Carole McGranahan and Ralph Litzinger, "Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet," *Cultural Anthropology: Hot Spots* 26, no. 5 (2012). <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/93-self-immolation-as-protest-in-tibet>.

⁵ David Patt, *A Strange Liberation: Tibetan lives in Chinese hands* (Snow Lion Publications, 1992). Patt translates the accounts of two Indigenous Tibetans, Ama Adhe and Tenpa Soepa who served a combined sentence of forty-five years in various prisons and forced labor camps for resisting the colonial occupation of their land.

religious parable. Using these two readings as analytical frames I wrote a paper on the self-immolations. Then I tried to set it aside. I did not have the heart or the nerve to ‘use’ the topic as my study. But twelve months later I realized, by running after other questions, I was abandoning something precious and vulnerable.

Part 1
The mountain

Was leuchten soll, muß dulden, daß es brennt.

That which is supposed to illuminate
has to tolerate that it burns.

Anton Wildgans, *Light Dark Hour*¹

At least once a day, I have to discipline myself not to rush to discovery. Perhaps each of us has an area of life where desire overwhelms patience. For example, sometimes a friend is exclaiming their anticipation of an upcoming film or television episode and I find they have already read what happens. Some friends would never think to do this, while others indulge occasionally. A few have developed quite a habit.

What would it be to develop so much excitement for a marathon that you take a taxi to the finish line? Would you tell your friend who is preparing to run the next day, “Oh yes I can tell you what happens at the end; the view isn’t as impressive as you might think.” Knowing the outcome of a thing does not yield its value. And by jumping to the end, the perceptive ability has been polluted. With so many outcomes available for consumption, the reader needs to walk carefully through the story if she does not wish the house to collapse around her. She must cultivate the experience.

Neither suicide nor protest

In his 1965 letter to the Reverend and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Buddhist monk and university scholar Thích Nhất Hạnh makes a number of provocative remarks. Titled, “In Search of the Enemy of Man”, the letter reached the civil rights champion three years before his assassination. In my attempt to cultivate both caution and spontaneity in the reader’s encounter with the text, I will begin with attention to only a few lines drawn from the start of the letter.

The self-burning of Vietnamese Buddhist monks in 1963 is somehow difficult for the Western Christian conscience to understand. The Press spoke then of suicide, but in the essence, it is not. It is not even a protest. What the monks said in the letters they left before burning themselves aimed only at alarming, at moving the hearts of the oppressors and at calling the attention of the world to the suffering endured then by the Vietnamese. To burn oneself by fire is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance. There is

¹ Anton Wildgans, “Helldunkle Stunde,” *Gedichte*, trans. Luise Goerges, accessed April 5, 2015, <http://www.gedichte.eu/71/wildgans/mittag/helldunkle-stunde.php>. The line may sound familiar to readers – it is often misattributed to Victor Frankl, who brought it to the attention of English reading audiences in *The Doctor and the Soul: Psychotherapy to Logotherapy*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston. The Winston translation of the poem by Austrian poet Anton Wildgans reads: “What is to give light must endure burning” (68). I thank Derek Askey at *The Sun* magazine for providing this context, and my colleague Luise Goerges for furnishing this translation.

nothing more painful than burning oneself. To say something while experiencing this kind of pain is to say it with the utmost of courage, frankness, determination and sincerity. During the ceremony of ordination, as practiced in the Mahayana tradition, the monk-candidate is required to burn one, or more, small spots on his body in taking the vow to observe the 250 rules of a bhikshu, to live the life of a monk, to attain enlightenment and to devote his life to the salvation of all beings. One can, of course, say these things while sitting in a comfortable armchair; but when the words are uttered while kneeling before the community of sangha and experiencing this kind of pain, they will express all the seriousness of one's heart and mind, and carry much greater weight.

The Vietnamese monk, by burning himself, say with all his strength [sic] and determination that he can endure the greatest of sufferings to protect his people. But why does he have to burn himself to death? The difference between burning oneself and burning oneself to death is only a difference in degree, not in nature. A man who burns himself too much must die. The importance is not to take one's life, but to burn.²

A person voluntarily commits an act in which the end physical result is their own death. Yet at its essence, it is not suicide. What can the writer mean? I do not suggest believing his claim. Neither do I encourage disbelieving it. A measured response to paradox requires that we not dismiss but look closer. If contradictions can transpire in Science and Nature, can they not also exist in matters of life and death? Let us not be afraid to think through the thought.³

But the answer is not available through any straight line, because the author has tied up this claim with another. The act occurs in the midst of political and social upheaval. It is performed in public, in a zone of war. It is clearly meant to engage with anyone who perceives it. But we are told it is not a protest, in spite of it taking place in a setting rife with political conflict. And for whatever reason the writer does not quite pair the two terms on equal footing; the interpretation of self-immolations in Vietnam as suicide is the first denial. It is followed by the second; "It is not even a protest."

Not suicide in essence. Not even a protest. Both terms capture the act in confines the writer is dissatisfied with, but his language seems to indicate that protest, not suicide, is the more difficult category from which to disentangle the Vietnamese self-immolations. This notion will be revisited. Let us move on to considering what problems are posed by the last three lines in the passage just cited. "The difference between burning oneself and burning oneself to death is only a difference in degree, not in nature. A man who burns himself too much must die. The importance is not to take one's life, but to burn."

Here we have matters of movement and measure, questions of being and becoming. Running through these terms is something else, an issue central to the passage as well as the

² Thích Nhất Hạnh, "In Search of the Enemy of Man (addressed to (the Rev.) Martin Luther King)," *African-American Involvement in the Vietnam War*, accessed March 8, 2016, http://www.aavw.org/special_features/letters_Thich_abstract02.html.

³ "As for me, I do not lack the courage to think through a thought whole. So far I have feared none, and should I encounter one like that, then I hope at least to have the honesty to say I am afraid of this thought, it stirs up something strange in me and therefore I will not think it." Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh, trans. Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 64-65.

entire letter. And that is the experience of pain. The author begins his address by speaking of monastics from his community setting themselves on fire. He spends the first half of his message on this subject. He may identify the acts as neither suicide nor protest, but he does not contend they lack pain. In fact, he links his colleagues' acts of immolation with the Mahayana Buddhist ordination practice on the basis of their shared nature of burning. The monastic's willingness to accept pain is a critical condition of that nature—suffering is always in accompaniment of burning.

We must therefore attend to the relevance of pain. By rejecting identification of the Vietnamese self-immolations as either suicide or protest, Thích Nhất Hạnh is marking off particular conceptions of self-suffering at work in his reader's mind. The psychological and political are two categories by which secular sensibilities readily understand pain in action, whether as affliction or strategy. Neither is without controversy, and to deny and navigate past both terms, the author must deal with the moral potentialities of the act.

There is one more thing. It sits quietly, nearly imperceptible. When noticed it has the capacity to overwhelm everything around it, as well as be utterly overwhelmed itself. I found it in the letter almost immediately but did not recognize it. And then I did, but only its most mundane form. Because it is best approached quietly, I will not speak its name yet, except to draw attention back to the words—*it is not even a protest*.

In an old Buddhist tale, three princes encounter a starving tigress in the forest with her young. The youngest prince remains with the family of tigers as his elder brothers leave to search for food. Alone, he witnesses the frailty of the mother and cubs, suffering from intense hunger. He sees the mother beginning to look at her offspring as her only means of sustenance. At the same time, he sees the cubs looking toward their mother with a similar intention of consuming her in order to stay alive. Confronted by the potential for such unthinkable harm, in the scarcity of time and resources he lies down and offers up his body. The mother's senses are dulled and weak and she makes no move toward him, so he cuts his limbs into pieces and feeds them to her until she and the cubs have regained the strength to feed freely upon his body. The lives of the tigers are preserved, and mother and cubs are prevented from killing one another. In a future life, the young prince becomes the Buddha.⁴

This story is one of the tales of Jātaka, short stories of the Buddha's human and non-human lives prior to the lifetime he became the Buddha.⁵ In some versions the Buddha is not a prince but a sage accompanied by a student, or instead of tigers it is a family of lions who are kept from

⁴ The notion of cyclical existence (birth, life, death, rebirth) is a foundational feature of Buddhism.

⁵ "...while Buddhist story literature has been analyzed sociologically, often with great sensitivity and insight, rarely has any serious attention been given to the ethical significance of either the form or the content of the stories themselves." "The origins of the Jātakas are often unclear, and modern scholars frequently dismiss them as Indian folk-tales with a thin veneer of Buddhist doctrine. However, this dismissal seems inconsistent with their ubiquity historically throughout the Buddhist world, and some of the earliest evidence we have for Buddhist literature is found in sculptured representations of scenes from particular Jataka stories. As is well known, many of the Jātakas have animals as their protagonists. We suspect that this particular aspect of Buddhist story literature has been a crucial catalyst in the modern tendency to dismiss the Jātakas as mere folktales." Charles Hallisey and Ann Hansen, "Narrative, Sub-Ethics, and the Moral Life," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 24, no. 2 (1996): 309, 312, accessed January 26, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40015212>.

perishing. But certain elements remain in common: The event takes place in the wild, in a forest or among cliffs, during a walk or excursion with companions; the Buddha acts alone, without any other human witnesses until after his body has been devoured; and it is implied that his action is rare. The decision is generated by a specific disposition and requires enormous willpower to carry out, traits few humans of his time possess (or at least have yet to cultivate). What does not appear to accompany the parable is an expectation or encouragement that others ought to follow suit and mimic the action. The story is shared and studied as a teaching and paradigm of Buddhist virtue, but the lesson is not a direct one.

In Golog Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Qinghai, China, in an audio message recording addressing “all the six million Tibetans, including those living in exile,”⁶ a Tibetan monk and Buddhist scholar compares his decision to self-immolate with the events of this parable. Nearly fifty years earlier, the same story was cited by Thích Nhất Hạnh in his letter to King regarding self-immolations in his homeland.⁷ The story appears at the letter’s middle point, just before a shift in the author’s direction.

The monk who burns himself has lost neither courage nor hope; nor does he desire non-existence. On the contrary, he is very courageous and hopeful and aspires for something good in the future. He does not think that he is destroying himself; he believes in the good fruition of his act of self-sacrifice for the sake of others. Like the Buddha in one of his former lives — as told in a story of Jataka — who gave himself to a hungry lion which was about to devour her own cubs, the monk believes he is practicing the doctrine of highest compassion by sacrificing himself in order to call the attention of, and to seek help from, the people of the world.⁸

Among Thích Nhất Hạnh’s tasks as a writer was to build a different point of view, one with multiple entry points for a Western Christian reader. He accomplishes this in a number of different ways, not least of which is evident in the letter’s second half when he turns from discussing the self-immolations to a broader picture of injustice, suffering, and the roots of violence. But he had to first move through the obstacles of understanding between him and King. The self-immolations had to be addressed, if King was to become an ally in Thích Nhất Hạnh’s efforts to build the conditions for peace in Vietnam.⁹ On the other hand, broaching the subject required risking King’s discomfort and judgment by acknowledging the act and its deep controversy. Heeding the constraints of his reader’s time, the author’s language reflects a swift precision in its elimination of misconceptions shrouding the Vietnamese self-immolations,

⁶ Lama Soepa was the twentieth Tibetan self-immolator (date of death: January 8, 2012) and remains the highest-ranking Tibetan clergy person to commit the act. “Tibetan Lama Urges Unity, Nationhood Before Self-Immolating,” *The Tibetan Political Review*, Feb 2, 2012, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://sites.google.com/site/tibetanpoliticalreview/articles/tibetanlamaurgesunitynationhoodbeforeself-immolating>.

⁷ Thích Nhất Hạnh, “In Search of the Enemy of Man (addressed to (the Rev.) Martin Luther King),” http://www.aavw.org/special_features/letters_Thich_abstract02.html.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ King did become that ally; which included publicly recommending Thích Nhất Hạnh for the Nobel Peace Prize. The Nobel committee chose to cancel the prize that year.

suicide being the first of these.¹⁰ He indicates these particular self-immolations did not generate from a wish for non-existence, something he claims as an essential feature of suicide. Furthermore, according to the letter as well as other accounts by friends and colleagues,¹¹ the monks and nuns who self-immolated were motivated by a shared desire to end not their own pain, but the suffering of others.

Thích Nhất Hạnh's choice of this particular story of the Buddha for his letter should also be noted. It happens to be a story about a religious figure's *former* life. The concept of cyclical existence is foreign to the Abrahamic faiths,¹² but it helps form a ground by which to begin understanding self-immolation not as an act of destruction, but a constructive move that displays the Vietnamese monastic's will and determination to suffer and die for the sake of their people.¹³ At the same time, it is important to remember Thích Nhất Hạnh matches this Buddhist view of life's universality and persistence beyond a single physical body with a statement that suicide is not to be found among the Buddhist virtues. This life, in this body, is still precious. Like the Buddha's giving away of his body, self-immolation remains something rare. What kind of situation gives rise to such an act? What kind of person commits it? And we still have not understood the act.

In the letter's opening lines, "The self-burning of Vietnamese Buddhist monks in 1963 is somehow difficult for the Western Christian conscience to understand. The Press spoke then of suicide but, in the essence, it is not. It is not even a protest."¹⁴ the reader is witnessing an establishment of terms—not only of an ethical debate but of the letter's very nature. By staking the letter's power on this act, Thích Nhất Hạnh makes self-immolation the paradigmatic way of understanding Vietnamese pain, as well as Vietnamese courage.¹⁵ He also clears a subtle path to a study of virtue and constancy under extreme duress. For these reasons and many others, I believe the letter offers something of relevance to a multitude of communities and projects.¹⁶ It is my position that, among other conceptual moves, the letter prepares its reader to reconsider the Vietnamese self-immolations in relation to a different model of action, one that is uniquely communicated by the parable and is neither an expression of hopelessness nor a form of political opposition. As someone concerned with the devastation and future of my own people, I look to

¹⁰ The language Thích Nhất Hạnh uses regarding suicide (just prior to the earlier quote) may strike some readers as unnecessarily harsh. I choose to read him as passionately articulating a difficult act to a Western Christian mind than exercising powerful judgment over suicide itself.

¹¹ Chân Không, *Learning True Love: Practicing Buddhism in a Time of War*, (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2007), 93-105.

¹² Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are sometimes referred to as the Abrahamic faiths, having a common origin in the biblical figure of Abraham.

¹³ "...In the Buddhist belief, life is not confined to a period of 60 or 80 or 100 years: life is eternal. Life is not confined to this body: life is universal. To express will by burning oneself, therefore, is not to commit an act of destruction but to perform an act of construction, i.e., to suffer and to die for the sake of one's people." Thích Nhất Hạnh, "In Search of the Enemy of Man (addressed to (the Rev.) Martin Luther King)," http://www.aavw.org/special_features/letters_Thich_abstract02.html.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ At least to an outsider. How Thích Nhất Hạnh might speak to another Vietnamese person is another matter. To clarify my use of 'paradigmatic', please note I am not suggesting self-immolation is or ought to be the paradigmatic representation of Vietnamese pain or courage (or that any such symbol should be sought out). I am saying I believe its position in the letter indicates the author's decision to make it, momentarily, the principal route by which his non-Vietnamese reader can come to an understanding of Vietnamese pain and courage.

¹⁶ I thank Thích Nhất Hạnh for writing the letter, and Dr. King for responding to it.

this letter as a human and a scholar. It is this model of action that preoccupies my study and consideration of I intend to partially study and partially connect to social challenges of the present era, as well as locate (at least fractionally) in the Tibetan self-immolations. This inquiry of course requires further consideration of the parable of the tigers. But to guard against assumption and oversight it is useful to bring in other tales of self-suffering and ethical disorientation—stories that likely hit closer to home with English-literate audiences.