



AN INQUIRY INTO SELF-IMMOLATION AS SOCIAL PROTEST

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Abstract: This poetic inquiry paper is a reflection on the phenomenon of self-immolation committed as compassionate protest. Whether the self-directed social protest of Vietnamese monk, Thích Quảng Đức, and Tibetan monastics and lay people, expresses selfless, altruistic action, dedicated to the greater good, merits investigation. Individuals seeking social justice in today's troubled times may be interested in cultivating *ahimsa*, or non-violence, within themselves before attempting to actualize it within their communities. In brief, they should transform themselves before they try to change the world. With self-compassion that broadens to loving kindness and compassion for all, they may attempt to understand those from whom they seek justice before they commit to action. This inquiry concludes with ekphrastic poetry, "interpreting, troubling and addressing" (poets.org) the Tibetan painting, "Wheel of Life," a depiction of the Buddhist concept of the "three poisons," ignorance, desire, and anger, and contemplates their antidotes.

Keywords: poetic inquiry, ahimsa; non-violence; compassion; social protest; self-immolation

The Bodhisattva meditated twelve
hundred years, mind tucked in a garden
of flowers and scented plants –
mandarava, sandalwood,
frankincense, cempaka, clove.
He awoke, breathing medicinal oils,
daubed them on his silky skin,
nestled himself in a blanket
of flames for twelve
hundred more years.

His body, a temple, this ring
of fire a lamp offering
to all beings. When he rose
from the ashes, he praised
the Buddha, who lay dying,
lit him aflame on a funeral pyre,
wrapped his own arms with a garland
of his Lord's relics, ignited himself
for seventy-two thousand years.

Alight one hundred twenty thousand years,
this bodhissatva, a healing torch, wished
to offer compassion – Great Compassion¹

In 1963, American journalist Malcom Browne's photograph of the self-immolation of veteran Vietnamese monk, Thích Quảng Đức, on a Saigon street sent a shocking image around the world of a new and profound means of social protest (Browne, 1993). Đức committed the fiery act to convey his disapproval of the cruel and callous treatment of Buddhists by Catholic Prime Minister Ngô Đình Diệm's South Vietnamese government (Browne, 1993). Surrounded by a ring of saffron-clad monks held back by security officers, Đức sat motionless while another monk poured fuel over him then ignited it. Đức's self-immolation was followed by that of five other Vietnamese monastics. However, the photograph of Đức sitting in the flames struck the deepest chord domestically and internationally, even shocking President John F. Kennedy (Biggs, 2005). The crucial issue became that Đức, a senior monk, who had exhibited no outward aggression, voluntarily gave his life in keeping with his vow to work for the benefit of others. His pacifism reflected

Bigg's (2005) point that self-immolation is committed "on behalf of a collective cause ... [and] is *not* intended to cause physical harm to anyone else or to inflict material damage" (p. 173).

As sun rises and spectators gather
 round, birds cry laments while men
 dare not. All watch. Mute. Their war
 with words lost while battles rage
 in the jungle. Freedom a feeling
 to live or die for.

Đức's death mirrored the context of his socio-cultural surroundings: the persecution of Buddhists and the Vietnam War as well as his own determination to make a statement. In his 1965 letter to Dr. Martin Luther King, Thich Nhat Hanh wrote that to "*burn oneself by fire is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance*" (International Campaign for Tibet, 2012). As I look at the still shot of Đức kneeling in the crowded square, I appreciate contemplate Barthes' (1981/2010) element of "*studium*" (p. 27), reflected in the photograph's illustration of his preparation for self-immolation. What pierces me, the "*punctum ... sting, speck, cut, little hole – and, also, a cast of the dice ... which pricks me*" (p. 27), is the urgency expressed by the image of another monk behind him holding a large can, presumably full of fuel. Apparently, he shared Đức's deep convictions for an equitable society to the point of willingness to assist him. The disturbing nature of this self-immolation reflects Browne's (1993) perspective as a photo journalist who witnessed this turbulent era in Vietnam's history. Unfortunately, it planted a seed for Browne's subsequent punctum-like realization of "having profited from" Đức's death in winning the 1963 World Press Photo Award (p. 16).

I, white, Western,
 female – would/
 could/ I? commit
 this fiery act, while
 my children
 waited for dinner?

As I struggle to find a justification for self-immolation, I ponder the limits to the vow to act for the benefit of others through this poetic reflection. The media coverage of this public spectacle at a specific place and point in time during my early childhood compels me to dwell within myself, to search within for even a fraction of the drive exhibited by Đức.

***“As I struggle to find
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 others through this
 poetic reflection.”***

From my position, after more than twenty years as a Western, North American student of Tibetan Buddhism, I admit that my own interpretation of socially engaged protest could never extend as far as self-immolation. My moderate view reflects the relative peace of my life in the West, where I can generally find a satisfactory solution, or compromise, to problems that arise. Perhaps if my country plunged into a relentless war, like Vietnam, I might seek more drastic solutions to alleviate the pressure of unsolvable social situations, but I do not believe that I would ever have the courage or conviction to take the extreme measure of Đức and others like him. Because I do not live under conditions that might motivate me to take such action, I question whether they would have any constructive effect at all or simply reflect personal defeat.

self-immolation,

self-sacrifice –

Latin derivative “molare” –

“a sacrifice of grain” (International Campaign for Tibet, 2012, p. 16) –

kernel of compassion

seed/ or/ loss

of/ hope?

Since I know that the taking of one’s own life is not a tenet of Buddhism, I understand self-immolation is not intended to be an act of suicide, but an expression of a greater motivation. However, I wonder what other peaceful measures could be taken, or whether actions, such as Đức’s, in fact, reflect those of a pacifist. Perhaps a gentler means of protest could send repressive governments a strong enough message invoking change. Perhaps, as Đức believed, the strength of a non-violent statement does, indeed, lie in committing self-immolation, the ultimate act of violence upon oneself, with an altruistic view of benefiting others. But how can anyone really know the thoughts and motivations of self-immolators as they die?

I can hear your mother’s cries
 across the ages, her blood-filled
 throat screaming. STOP! Son! Look
 for another way. I, your mother,
 just let me hug you
 one more
 time.

In the five decades since Đức’s fatal social protest, the frequency of self-immolations of monks, nuns, and lay Tibetan people in locations and conditions external to Vietnam, inside Tibet and Nepal, has increased. Grief-stricken friends, families, and fellow citizens

seem powerless to eradicate this phenomenon. In keeping with Buddhist tenets and their own convictions, they pray for the safe passage of loved ones who have opted for a violent departure from life.

Look at the men and women
gathered in the monastery. How
they rotate their rosary beads –
click, click, click –
prayers murmured from lips
drowning in a teary sea. Ashes
of monk/son smolder on a pyre.
His mother whispers, prays
for an auspicious rebirth.
Child/sister laments, throat
rasping – sounds, no words –
her brother no more. In the prayer hall,
monks chant, beat drums, blow
conches, release his spirit
to the gods.

How could a monk walk out of his monastery and set himself ablaze in a call for religious freedom and “for the happiness of Tibetans” (International Campaign for Tibet, 2012, p. 110)? What could prompt a young mother to leave her children and die, demanding “freedom in Tibet” (p. 81)?

Did they die
with the grace
of Đức?
Did their pain
create compassion, or
their compassion
pain?

The International Campaign for Tibet asserts that “151 Tibetans have self-immolated in Tibet and China since February 27, 2009” (Self-Immolations by Tibetans, 2017). These individuals, men and women who range in age from teenagers to the elderly, including a high-ranking *lama*, or Buddhist teacher, are ordinary civilians, such as “thirty-nine ordinary monks and eight nuns, ... nomads or peasants, ... high school students, workers ... a writer, a *tangka* painter, a taxi driver” (Woesser, 2016, Loc. 98). Their reasons for committing such self-inflicted acts of violence vary from protesting Chinese occupation of Tibet in a call for independence, forced relocation of monks and nuns from their monasteries, as well as of

nomads from sacred land whose pristine ecosystem has been polluted by mines and dams, eradication of Tibetan in favor of Chinese-language education, calling for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet, and decrying the marked reduction in human rights (Woeser, 2016).

The nomads dance on the plain
tucked between towering snowy
peaks. They whirl round and round,
inhale thin air, a premium at altitude,
exhale between rotations, elongated
sleeves twirling, sing protection
prayers while the forbidden flag
flaps in the mountain breeze,
and yaks lap water from
pristine streams.

Tsering Woeser (2016), a Tibetan activist and writer living in Beijing, asserts that “self-immolation is not suicide, and it is not a gesture of despair ... [but]... is sacrifice for a greater cause, and an attempt to press for change ... [that] can only be judged by its political results” (Loc. 330). She cites a monk’s claim that it does not violate “Buddhist teachings,” as it is committed on behalf of “the Tibetan people’s rights to freedom and democracy” (Loc. 344). Woeser (2016) herself, poetically defines self-immolators as “bodhisattvas sacrificing the self for others, phoenixes reincarnated from the flames of death” (Loc. 344). Like a teenager who claimed he was sacrificing his life “for the dignity of [himself], and for the Tibetan people” (Woeser, Loc. 468), they willingly undergo excruciating suffering within a “dehumanizing political environment” (Loc. 468) over which the populace has no control. Woeser (2016) further cites a high ranking Tibetan lama’s claim that he was offering his “body and his life to ... all of the beings of this world” (Loc. 468).

Shadow of a man, wise son,
brother, cousin, etches
a peace
petition in flames.

Can you feel his pain –
take it on – exchange
your tranquil life
with his inferno?

Woeser (2016) effectively asserts that since self-immolation is carried out without inflicting physical harm on other people, it constitutes an act of compassion. While such a view might be held by individuals living in Tibet, an outsider from a democratic society, such

as me, may have difficulty comprehending it. The occurrence of self-immolations by Tibetans, and other people, claiming to do so out of compassion, rather than anger or retribution, merits reflection on whether such self-directed social protest can, indeed, be construed as a selfless, altruistic act dedicated to the greater good. Self-immolation only affects a single individual, whereas outwardly aggressive forms of civil disobedience cause harm to more people, but does it really benefit the community?

People, like me, who have never endured life under a repressive regime may view these self-immolations as enactments of internally-directed anger rather than of compassionate advocacy for the plight of others. Since only a fraction of people facing very extreme personal circumstances might consider inflicting such drastic measures upon themselves, the question remains as to whether self-immolation committed by a mother of five children (Self-Immolations by Tibetans, 2017) could justifiably reflect her personal compassionate critique of her social conditions, or simply be inwardly violent social protest.

Mother of five,
 sister, daughter,
 niece, woman of no
 malintent, your children
 cry themselves to sleep,
 your mother scalds her hands
 in boiling water, burns away her grief.
 I wish we could all go back to a time when
 we could walk freely. Chat in candlelight. Sleep.

In attempting to comprehend how terrifying acts committed by Thích Quảng Đức, other Vietnamese, and Tibetans, could be construed as peaceful protest within their own national context, average citizens seeking social justice in today's tumultuous times may question the applicability of *ahimsa*, or non-violence, to the drastic measures taken by Đức and others. In his lifetime as a Buddhist monk, Đức had cultivated a vast reservoir of meditative stability that enabled him to sit relatively still as he made his fiery social statement. While his act reflects an extreme example, it does illustrate his view of it as non-violent.

As I ponder the extent to which individuals who wish to endeavour for social change should go, I turn to Mahatma Gandhi's (1958/2013) remarks on cultivating a non-violent heart of compassion:

One who hooks his fortunes to *ahimsa*, the law of love, daily lessens the circle of destruction, and to that extent promotes life and love; he who swears by *himsa*, the

law of hate, daily widens the circle of destruction, and to that extent promotes death and hate. (p. 105)

In brief, we should change ourselves first before trying to change the world then, with self-compassion that broadens to loving kindness and compassion for all, we may attempt to penetrate and understand the thoughts and motivations of those from whom we seek justice. I identify with this quest for inner change and appreciate the difficulty of achieving the immense personal transformation necessary to creating conditions for significant social change. If I feel sufficiently at ease with myself, I might be able to subjugate my own attachment to self and personal gain in my endeavor to benefit others.

I will commit no harm
to myself or others. I
will cherish
life.

I rejoice. Hold my daughter's
hand, smile, kiss her cheek.
I/mother love daughter,
my mother.

In my attempt to situate myself in this inquiry, I cite Thich Nhat Hanh's (2016) story about a time during the French Indochina War when a French soldier told him about his encounter with a group of monks meditating in an enemy Viet Minh temple (p. 4). After the sitting session, they resumed their daily work and asked him to come in. When he should have been following orders to eliminate them, he was overcome by compassion, realizing that they were simply ordinary people, who, like himself, endeavored to build and sustain their war-torn community. He began to question his role in the conflict. Nhat Hanh (2016) replied with a tale of a Vietnamese friend coming upon French soldiers that he could not bear to harm when he realized they were sons whose mothers loved them just as his own had cherished his deceased brother.

Nhat Hanh's story inspires me, for it offers a uniquely personal experience of the laying down of arms and the re-direction of intended violence toward others into a wellspring of love. It reflects a compassionate embrace of the enemy that would eradicate the urgent need to inflict violence upon others or to commit self-immolation to make a socio-political statement. Inspired by Nhat Hanh's writing on quelling anger (2001), I offer my own pact of peace, a prayer for the wellness of all beings on the planet.

Take a walk
on the battlefield –

Vimy, Omaha Beach,
Khe Sanh.²

Stamp out the fire
of anger. Lay down
your weapons. Cross
the front line. Hug
the enemy. The time
for talk is now
in the temple
of earth.



Figure 1: Tibetan Thangka Painting © [Mathers Museum of World Cultures \(CC BY-NC 2.0\)](#)

In my aspiration for myself and other socially responsible individuals to begin their process of inner transformation by cleansing their inner demons, I, a student of Tibetan Buddhism, turn to an ancient pictorial social justice *tangka* painting titled the Buddhist *Wheel of Life*. Its core images depict the “three poisons,” ignorance, anger, and desire, represented

by the pig, bird, and snake. The slothful pig reflects ignorance, the frightening snake anger, and the bird desire and attachment (Wheel of Life, 2017). The method of purifying these negative qualities lies in reflecting upon their antidotes. Wisdom can release ignorance, or delusion, with a contemplation of the interdependence of all beings and the impermanence of phenomenon (Three Poisons, 2014). Patience, compassion, and loving kindness can curb anger, or hatred, while generosity can reduce desire, or attachment. On my journey to inner peace, I find inspiration in all three animals rotating on this life wheel.

The pig graces
my life, its glands
the medicine soothing my throat,
while blood courses
through my veins.

The caged bird aspires
to fly away. The man
desires to cage the
bird.

An eagle soars over
treetops, looks down
on wingless men
toiling below.

I walk through the grass,
nearly step on a garden
snake, a blessed
creature.
In my heart,
a coiling snake
hisses.

The question as to whether self-immolation is, indeed, an act of compassionate protest does not have a simple answer. One Tibetan man made a commitment, deemed religious, “not to harm others in personal disputes – a vow he took in honor of all those who have sacrificed themselves in self-immolation protests for the cause of Tibetan freedom” (Self-Immolations by Tibetans, 2017). Then he performed the act upon himself, perhaps in solidarity with other self-immolating protestors; perhaps he saw no other

alternative. An outsider might recommend that he accept his living conditions with patience and equanimity toward the people who constrain him and his country fellows. If he could overcome the internal enemy, he may be able to endure suffering caused by the malintent of others with a view of compassion toward sentient beings and of his oppressors as their own worst enemy. Thus, he could cherish them with loving kindness so that they may know love and happiness and treat others with peaceful, compassionate grace and respect.

Today, from my remote, comfortable position as a reader and Internet spectator, I can neither envision life within current Tibetan society, nor the pain the people must endure. When I look at Malcom Browne's photographs, I try to imagine the shock that he felt when he watched Đứrc 's self-immolation. A foreign correspondent in Saigon, he had no power to stop it, nor did he have to endure the conditions that provoked Đứrc's protest. He admitted his regret for having photographed the event, as he noted in his memoir, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks* (Browne, 1993, p. 17): "I have sorrowed these many years for Thich Quang Duc, as well as others for whose deaths I may bear some responsibility." In identifying with Browne's reflections and the images that went through his mind as he wrote about his experiences, I offer this poem that I imagine I have written on my family's old Remington typewriter, as a dream memoir of an event, or others like it, that I have never witnessed.



Figure 2: Remington Typewriter, photo by author.

Remington Reportage

New York, 1993

I gaze out the window
of the West, the East
a mirage
across the the ocean.

A mother, child
on her back, walks
across a mountain plain,
bathes in a holy lake,
too far away for me,
at my Remington,
to see.

I, reporter,
chronicle my march
through jungle
battlefields,
mountain passes,
so long
ago.

Saigon 1963

I stand in the square,
pink-skinned UPI reporter
eyes stinging red with
smoke. The monk inside
the ball of flames
sits
in full lotus,
stares straight ahead,
lips sealed,
a nod to his countrymen,
as fellow Buddhists chant
a prayer for peace,
reconciliation.
The burning a pact,

message to the world:
stop the violence,
free the people,
end the war.
Now.

While I, man from the land
of the free, find peace
in words composed
on my Remington,
thoughts of my wife's rosy
cheeks, daughter's chuckle,
the Catskills in winter,
swimming the Hudson,
frying halibut in Cape Cod.

I can leave,
trembling, yes,
the faces of the dead,
spirit refugees, whirling
around me, orphaned
children, war widows,
wounded soldiers
with nowhere to go.
Lest the world forget,
my Remington reportage
implants the fiery image
of protest in the dreams
of the free.

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Notes

¹ This poem was, in part, inspired by Kumārajiva, Chapter XXIII.

² See: The bloody battle of Khe Sanh, 2014