

# Grace and Gasoline:

## Self-Immolations in Modern Tibet and the Ethical Limits of Nonviolent Protest

*How culpable was he  
That last night when he broke  
Our tribe's complicity?  
'Now you're supposed to be  
An educated man,'  
I hear him say. 'Puzzle me  
The right answer to that one.'*

Seamus Heaney, "Casualty" (Ellmann 2003)

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For forty-five minutes, Norman Morrison was a caged tiger outside the Pentagon. He paced back and forth in a daze. A normal man whose moral compass had been demagnetized by an abnormal ethical problem, his mind reeled from the staggering personal and public implications of what he had determined to do. This was Morrison's Gethsemane, but no Pharisee would come to seize him: his cross was of his own making.

It was November 2, 1965. Thousands of miles away, the Vietnam War raged, and the screams of war echoed widely. Day after day American newspapers were filled with news of the hundreds of soldiers and civilians who perished from the indiscriminate violence inflicted by gunpowder and napalm. The human suffering in Vietnam had driven Norman Morrison absolutely distraught, and he had come to Washington, only a few dozen yards from the office window of Robert S. McNamara, the Secretary of Defense, to protest.

Without warning, he suddenly stopped pacing. Slowly, methodically, he doused himself in kerosene, dripping some on his baby daughter, Emily, whom he carried in his arms. Without warning, as bystanders began to realize something was dreadfully wrong, he struck a match and erupted into flames (King 2000).

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Questions flood in. Was Morrison ethically justified in taking his life in this horrifying demonstration? Is it ever right to protest against injustice through self-inflicted violence? Was it morally respectable for him to end his own life in the uncertain hope of saving the lives of people in Vietnam? His daughter was saved from the flames, but should he not have considered the collateral damage of his action to his wife and three young children? Moreover, does this ostensibly violent act even qualify as nonviolent protest?

If it were a singular act, the story of Norman Morrison's self-immolation on the threshold of the Pentagon would be nothing but an exceptional historical anecdote. But suicide by fire has become unnervingly commonplace. Incidents of self-immolation have increased exponentially in the past few years, raising troublesome questions about the ethical limits of nonviolent protest (Hauslohner 2012). In January 2012 the *New York Times* reported that across the Arab world, from Bahrain to Morocco, dozens of acts of self-immolation had occurred since Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian fruit seller, catalyzed the Arab Spring democracy movement in December 2010 after setting himself on fire (Bakri).

And the Middle East is only the tip of the iceberg. This very morning, as I began preparing to draft this paper, the *Hindustan Times* reported that a Tibetan herdsman named Dazheng and a twenty-three year old Tibetan monk, Tadin Kyab, had perished from burn trauma after self-immolating in northwestern China (Patranobis 2012). And they are just the most recent victims. In November 2012 alone eighteen Tibetans have died in fiery protest to Chinese political oppression, and dozens more have perished since the first wave of Tibetan self-immolations began in 2009. Even women and children have become victims in recent months (Fox News Latino 2012; Herald-Sun 2012). "In scale, this is one of the biggest waves of self-immolation in the last six decades," says Oxford University sociologist Michael Biggs (Wong 2012).

Already, some scholars have begun to realize the substantial ethical questions that this form of protest is raising. Dr. Charlene Mackley, a Professor of Anthropology at Reed College, highlighted a few moral complexities in a recent article:

Virtually unprecedented among Tibetans, and lamented by high-ranking lamas as violating the Buddhist emphasis on the sanctity of life, the series of self-immolations (mostly by young monks and nuns) since 2011 has thrown Tibetans and their supporters, and critics in and outside of China, into anguished debates about the moral nature and political meaning of these acts. Some commentators invoke modernist associations of Buddhism with non-violence and universal compassion to ask whether the immolations are sinful, violent "suicides" or altruistic, nonviolent "sacrifices." Accusations and counter-accusations fly... (Mackley 2012)

In general, however, the international community has largely failed to raise the important ethical questions surrounding this new manifestation of protest in China, and the self-immolations in Tibet have been tragically ignored. According to *Time* magazine, the wave of self-immolations in Tibet was the most under-reported story of 2011 (Rawlings 2011). This is somewhat understandable. The Chinese government has barred international media coverage, and "monasteries and towns linked to self-immolations were locked-down" beginning in 2009 (McGranahan and Litzinger 2012). Chinese news sources have also been suspiciously reticent. But the news has, nevertheless, leaked out, and ignoring the moral implications of this horrific phenomenon is no longer excusable.

For me, these young Tibetans are not distant apparitions in the Himalayas. During the summers of 2010 and 2011 I studied at a university for minority students in Chengdu, China, and became close friends with many Tibetan students, enjoying their sense of humor, their deep respect for culture and family, and their profound religious faith. Upon returning to America, I also befriended a number of Tibetan students who study at a university near my own, and their

stories of growing up as nomadic farmers on the Tibetan plateaus, herding Yaks and migrating seasonally, still fascinate and inspire me.<sup>1</sup>

When I recently read, “an 18-year-old man burnt himself to death on Thursday outside a monastery in Huangnan prefecture in Qinghai province” (Telegraph 2012), I was deeply disturbed and saddened. This monk could just as well have been my friend Nima, a young Tibetan of about the same age, a former Buddhist monk who became one of my best friends in Chengdu. Or it could have been Yunden, a middle-aged Tibetan tour-guide who regularly challenged me to basketball games in China. Or Dorje, or Palden, or Bryan.

These events are certainly “laced with unspeakable sadness,” as Janet Gyatso, Professor of Buddhist Studies at Harvard University recently wrote (Gyatso 2012), but that only heightens the importance of wrestling with the underlying ethical question: *what are the ethical limits to nonviolent protest, and is self-immolation a moral good or simply the cause of unnecessary human suffering?* This moral problem is like a diamond: it must be considered from many angles before it may be accurately judged. In this essay, I will investigate the question from four distinct but related approaches: self-immolation as nonviolence; the protest in light of political effectiveness; the personal motivations behind the suicides; and the collateral damage to families and communities following a self-immolation. In America, where nonviolent protest is a long-established and deeply cherished political freedom – as the recent Occupy Wall Street movement shows – this moral inquiry is especially relevant. It reminds us that even in a democracy, civil resistance is not beyond the purview of ethical critique.

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<sup>1</sup> In the interest of protecting the identity of my Tibetan friends in China and the United States, for whom exposure could mean prison or worse, I respectfully request that the Elie Wiesel Foundation not publish any part of my essay without redacting the Tibetan names referred to throughout.

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*I have come to this fundamental conclusion, that if you want something really important to be done you must not merely satisfy the reason, you must move the heart also. The appeal to reason is more to the head but the penetration of the heart comes from suffering. It opens up the inner understanding in man.*  
-Mahatma Gandhi (Eknath 1978, 160)

Over the centuries, various forms of political opposition have distilled into the mélange of nonviolent protest. Shostakovich opposed the tyranny of Stalinist Russia through his musical compositions (Teachout 1995). Henry David Thoreau confessed in a well-known essay that he “paid no poll-tax for six years” as an expression of civil disobedience (Thoreau 1849). Indeed, from the campaigns of Mahatma Gandhi in 1930s India to the Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing in 1989, the twentieth-century has been characterized by a distinct prevalence of organized passive opposition to political oppression. Nonviolent or civil resistance often takes years to accomplish its aims, as the anti-apartheid work in South Africa and the civil rights demonstrations in 1960s America evidenced, but it has a profound ethical force. As Martin Luther King Jr. explained succinctly in his indelible “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” during the American Civil Rights Movement in April 1963,

Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. (King Jr. 1863)

When considering self-immolation on the Tibetan plateau as a form of protest, then, the first question that arises is whether or not the act may be categorized as nonviolent. Putting aside political motivations for a moment, it is difficult to argue that suicide by fire is not a violent, gruesome act. The writhing figures of charred bodies in the aftermath of a self-immolation are a sad testament to the inescapable brutality of death by burning. This realization has fostered ethical tension among Tibetans and other observers as to whether the intrinsic violence of self-immolations should affect its moral appraisal (King 2009).

Many simply refrain from judgment. In response to a self-immolation in 1998, the Dalai Lama neither condoned nor condemned the act, choosing instead to convey his sympathy: “I am deeply saddened by this,” he wrote (King 2000, 146). And the Dalai Lama is not the only one who is caught in this dilemma, explains one Tibetan scholar:

...it is clear that the Dalai Lama finds himself in a dilemma in relation to the particular ethics of nonviolence he has used in the past to justify intervening in earlier Tibetan actions. Yet it is not just the Dalai Lama who cannot find ethical disclosure when confronted by these acts. 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. ... Part of the significance of self-immolation lies in its interruption of the terms we use to make sense of fractious situations. (Paldron 2012)

But I do not think that the question is unanswerable. Protest by definition is a phenomenon that exists only in relation to the thing, person, institution, or idea that is being protested against. Nonviolent protest, by extension, is the sort of protest in which the protestor does not *by his act of protest* harm the person or thing protested against. Violence done to the *protestor*, on the other hand, whether inflicted by police dogs, the fists of an angry bystander, or the lighting of a match, does not make the protest itself violent. Self-immolation, then, because it does not harm the person or thing protested against, ought to be considered nonviolent. Put another way, there is a profound difference between *self-immolation as protest* and *self-immolation as mere act*. As a mere act, self-immolation is violent; as protest, it is nonviolent.

In terms of civil resistance, then, self-immolation cannot be considered morally wrong on the grounds of violence. On the contrary, I believe the violence of the act as an expression of fervency actually should heighten its moral respectability as protest. Nonviolent civil resistance usually involves sacrifice on the part of the protestor, often in the form of physical beatings, verbal abuse, or prison sentences, but the devotion of Tibetans to the cause of political freedom is a self-chosen sacrifice of the most precious human gift: life itself. It may be debated whether or

not the *mere act* of suicide is morally acceptable, but *suicide as protest* cannot be otherwise than a sad but beautiful virtue.

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When news of Norman Morrison's self-immolation at the Pentagon plastered the headlines of major American newspapers on November 3, 1963, many assumed he was mentally unstable. How else could a person rationalize such a futile and extreme protest? The course and outcome of the Vietnam War would not be affected in the least by Morrison's death, critics decried. But in 1995, decades after the war, perspectives changed with the publication of former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's memoir on Vietnam (Schoenfeld 1995), where he noted that he was profoundly moved by Morrison's act.

Indeed, journalist Paul Hendrickson, who spent much of his life studying McNamara, argues that Morrison's self-immolation played an integral role in spurring McNamara's doubts about the war and influenced his decision to "cease prosecuting the war" (King 2000, 138). Although the protest seemed to be in vain at the time, this later evidence shows that it was, in fact, an effective and perhaps pivotal catalyst for peace.

Without entering into the furious debates of the often specious "ends justify the means" argument, an inquiry which would require serious consideration of Bentham and Mill's utilitarian metric, it is nevertheless important to consider whether Tibetan self-immolations as acts of protest are an exercise in pure futility. Indeed, unless they have some political effect, the acts could be unethical on the grounds of being an unnecessary waste of human life. Likewise, if the protests were not public acts done within the context of a larger struggle for political change, a "horror intended to induce empathy," they would also be morally suspect (Shakya 2012).

Many Tibetans, like my friend Palden Gyal, have deep sympathy for those who choose self-immolations but still call for an end to what they see as futile acts:

It is high time for Tibetans to stop self-immolations as a form of protest, though it might have successfully induced empathy for many people, no leaders of the world truly stand for their words. This disillusionment is real and we cannot afford losing more brave souls. (Gyal 2012)

While it is undoubtedly true that “self-immolation is an extraordinarily effective psychological tactic,” as John Horgan of Pennsylvania State University argues, in the case of Tibet it may be that the protest is no longer ethical in light of the Chinese government’s prolonged intransigence (Wong 2012). Tsering Shakya, a Tibetan expert at the University of British Columbia noted recently, “No matter how many Tibetans might protest, how many immolations might happen, the new Chinese leadership will not make any concession to the protesters” (Telegraph 2012). In general, the present government views self-immolations as “frivolous displays of extremism,” an attitude which hinders substantive policy reform in the area of Tibeto-Chinese affairs (Zi 2012).

Beyond this, while each additional self-immolation is shocking, it is apparent that the accumulation of deaths is ironically curbing the effectiveness of the protests as a whole. The media and outside governments are gradually becoming desensitized to the human fires in Tibet. As “more and more people outside Tibet are expressing doubts about the effectiveness of such protests” (Besuchet November 2012), I too wonder whether these acts are accomplishing their aims as political demonstrations. While it could be the case that self-immolators in Tibet are eliciting private sympathy among government officials in China, as Morrison’s protest did in McNamara, the proliferation of suicides seems at this point to exceed the bounds of moral action. Whatever sympathy such a form of protest could produce has likely been evoked already, and further suffering is difficult to justify on political grounds.



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In Buddhist ethics, it is widely accepted that the motivation prompting an action helps determine its moral legitimacy (King 2000, 140). This consideration is not limited to Buddhist ethics, though. In the Kantian and Judeo-Christian tradition as well, the hidden disposition of the heart is always considered in weighing the moral righteousness of an outward deed:

When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed stands here before the Lord.” But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:6-7, New International Version)

The difficulty with this aspect of ethical judgment is that humans cannot, like God, see the hidden states of mind that precede any given action. Most of the self-immolating protestors do not leave behind notes explaining the reasons for their actions, and because of the horrifying nature of the act they are unlikely to discuss it with friends or family beforehand. Even the Dalai Lama, Tibet’s exiled spiritual leader, eschews any easy categorizations:

“I am quite certain that those who sacrificed their lives with sincere motivation, for Buddha dharma and for the well-being of the people, from the Buddhist or religious view points, is positive,” [the Dalai Lama] told NBC in a recent interview. “But if these acts are carried out with full anger and hatred, then it is wrong,” he said. “So it is difficult to judge.” (Tatlow 2012)

It could be the case that self-immolations are purely the outcome of a growing rage “induced by daily humiliation and intolerable demands for conformity and obedience” (Shakya 2012). Certainly the extreme nature of the protest suggests that it is prompted by unbearable mental, physical, and emotional oppression. But there is evidence to suggest that not all these acts are merely desperate. Sopa Tulku, a high-ranking lama in the Tibetan Buddhist religious community who died after setting himself on fire in January 2012, was one of a few self-immolators who left behind a written explanation for his protest. “I am not self-immolating for

my personal interests or problems, but for the six million Tibetans who have no freedom and for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet,” he wrote (Besuchet April 2012).

In the end, this aspect of ethical inquiry fails to provide any firm foothold for moral determinations. It would be presumptuous to assume that every Tibetan who self-immolates does so out of blind hatred, a state of mind which could only be condoned through the equivalent of ethical gymnastics. But it is also unlikely that every Tibetan protest of this nature is motivated, as Lama Sopa’s apparently was, by selfless considerations for the good of the Tibetan people. Regardless, it is apparent that civil resistance, whether self-immolation or otherwise, should not be critiqued simply on the basis of the action itself. Many nonviolent protestors throughout the twentieth century have believed that the outward action of nonviolent protest itself ethically justified their protest as a whole. But if such protest was done in a spirit of hatred and selfishness, I am firmly convinced that the protestor is no better than the oppressor. Both perpetrate the same moral dispositions; both fan the flames of residual evil and suffering. A balanced ethical judgment of this matter requires us to always consider both outward action and inward motivation, however difficult it may be to reach consensus on the latter.

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Finally, no moral examination of this question would be complete without examining the often pitiful after-effects of self-immolation, the post-protest collateral human damage that accompanies such an act. Why must such a challenging topic be examined? As philosophers have recognized for thousands of years since the early ethical formulations of men like Confucius, Plato, and Aristotle, morality is intrinsically relational. As a system of binding duties it is bound up inextricably with the *other*, whether that is God, a political community, or a family.

Ethics has never existed in a vacuum. As such, the effect of our actions on *others* is always relevant to determining their morality.

Long after Norman Morrison's death, his older daughter, Christina, still suffered from her father's decision to protest the war by self-immolation:

I have often felt that, in a sense, my father sacrificed all five of us in hopes of saving the people of another country. As a child, I wondered if they were more important to him than we were. I still wonder if he had any idea how much his action would hurt us and would he have done it if he had known. (King 2000, 139)

On the Tibetan plateau, each one of the dozens of men and women who have perished in self-immolations has a Christina, someone who suffers in the aftermath of sacrifice. For Tsering Kyi, a 20-year-old student from a village in Gansu province, perhaps these sufferers are boyhood friends. For Jamyang Palden, a 34-year-old monk who was described by friends and relatives as bright and funny, perhaps it is those he left behind at his monastery in Tongren county. For Sonam Dhargyal, a 44-year-old farmer from Tongren county, a deeply religious man according to those who knew him, the mourners after his self-immolation are likely his disabled teenage son and "seriously ill" wife (Burke 2012).

Is the political statement of self-immolation worth the persistent, unseen suffering that occurs after the reporters leave, the seasons change, and the exigencies of everyday life return? Perhaps some of those who choose self-immolation have weighed this question in the balance before making a decision for or against the act. But it is hard to believe that all have. Instead, it is more likely that self-immolation is an act often carried out in consideration primarily of larger metaphysical imperatives, principles such as freedom or justice, as opposed to the particular sufferings of those who grieve after the burial service is completed.

The picture is further complicated by the fact that unlike other forms of nonviolent protest, self-immolation is a final act. As a catalyst for long-term moral rectitude, it may warrant

moral applause, but inasmuch as self-immolation violently disrupts established networks of community, friends, and family, such an action seem ethically problematic and perhaps even selfish. This conclusion may be overly harsh as a general statement, but it reminds us of the inescapable connection between ethics in the public and private sphere.

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*He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man's lovely,  
peculiar power to choose life and die—*

-Robert Lowell, "For the Union Dead" (Ellmann 2003)

I will never forget the look on my friend Yunden's face when I asked him about his opinion of the Tibeto-Chinese controversy in a small Chengdu café. He nervously glanced around the room at the other chattering customers blithely ignorant of our conversation and turned slowly back to me with uncanny fear and profound sorrow mixed in his complexion. "We shouldn't talk of this," he said slowly, "it is too dangerous."

Yunden's fear is but one brief expression of the stifling of dissent which Tibetans experience daily under Chinese authority. In an environment where the smallest rumor of unrest can lead to indefinite imprisonment or worse, Tibetans have learned to remain silent. But some refuse. These few have made themselves burning images of protest, undeniable spectacles of resistance in the Land of Snows.

Still, it is uncertain whether self-immolation ought to be morally condoned. When I began writing this essay, I had hoped for some tidy conclusion to this disconcerting ethical question. Unfortunately, there is none: both grace *and* gasoline emerge when the smoke clears. But while most outside observers are content to remain confused and refrain from engaging in the relevant ethical questions (Tan 2012), this essay endeavors to show that moral judgment on

complicated public ethical dilemmas is possible and desirable, even if many tensions remain unresolved.

There should be ethical limits to nonviolent protest, and in many ways self-immolation seems to violate these bounds, especially in light of its present political futility and relational collateral damage. But there is room for debate. Regardless, self-immolation certainly reminds us that political protest is not an amoral sphere. Even the ethical dilemmas of the Tibetan people can prepare *us* for the moments of paradox when right action in the public or private sphere is not easily discernible. And in a world of increasing globalization, unparalleled technological advances, continued political unrest, and the concomitant ethical debates which are surfacing from such a maelstrom, *that* is a lesson we must not forget.

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