

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

by  
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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.

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, the world's preeminent living spokesperson for non-violence and inner peace, doing in response?<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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'.<sup>4</sup> 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".<sup>5</sup> 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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/>.

<sup>4</sup> 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](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>.

<sup>5</sup> 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*<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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

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<sup>2</sup> 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](http://www.aavw.org/special_features/letters_Thich_abstract02.html).

<sup>3</sup> "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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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

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

<sup>5</sup> "...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,”<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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,

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<sup>6</sup> 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>.

<sup>7</sup> 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](http://www.aavw.org/special_features/letters_Thich_abstract02.html).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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,<sup>11</sup> 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,<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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."<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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

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<sup>10</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>13</sup> "...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](http://www.aavw.org/special_features/letters_Thich_abstract02.html).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> 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.

## Oedipus

Luckless Oedipus, whom of all men  
I envy not at all.<sup>17</sup>

In the Greek play *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles, the title character is separated at birth from his family and grows up in another land. He comes of age not knowing who he is, unaware even of his self-ignorance. Disturbed by an oracle's prediction that he will inflict irrevocable harm upon his parents, he leaves his home. On the road, he meets and quarrels with a stranger who is in fact his father. After killing the stranger in self-defense, Oedipus inherits his kingdom and marries the queen, his mother. In so doing he unwittingly fulfills the very prediction he had sought to avoid. His kingdom is plunged into deep misfortune as a result of these deeds, and Oedipus eventually learns who he is and the meaning of his past actions. In reaction to this traumatic self-discovery Oedipus puts out his eyes, before exiling himself in order to end his people's suffering.

Why meddle with an old story and its sanctioned interpretations? The Oedipus drama and the tale of the Buddha in the forest have impacted thought and culture in their respective spheres, producing conscious and hidden effects on individual and social habits that persist to the present day. The ways in which such stories are understood change the way we understand ourselves, animating subtle ranges of action and meaning. The parable of the Buddha and the tigers is brief and may not seem especially complex, but part of what makes it easy to misinterpret is its arrangement—it is not structured by the usual ethical logics. The young prince has not committed any transgressions, nor is he under any obligation to the family of tigers. He may be saving their lives by ending their suffering, but in giving up his own he is causing a different pain. The claim that he is serving some kind of greater good can be made, but the position is far from unassailable. I am not disputing that he is producing *some* good through his act; the question is whether a greater good is being served. The case for a greater good could begin by arguing that a higher ethical principle is affirmed by the act. Or a more tangible line could be pursued with a claim that saving the tigers' lives would produce a greater good than if the prince preserved his own. But what good could the tigers accomplish that the prince could not multiply with his own life? Perhaps there is more under peril than a loss of life or utility.

And if the prince's act is in service of a higher principle, why is every Buddhist not called upon to follow the Buddha's example? What does this gap in prescription indicate about the ethical limits of such an action? Does it contain a universal moral lesson, or is it contending with something that does not easily lend itself to translation, much less universality? Or is the act only acceptable because it was the Buddha who committed it? In that case there is nothing virtuous about the deed at all and it is merely a story of exceptionalism. To investigate whether there is anything to learn from the tale that is meaningful to human endeavor, a vulnerable attentiveness is required.

Anthropologist Talal Asad expresses doubt over readings by moral and political philosophers that explain *Oedipus the King* as a story of guilt, responsibility, and punishment.

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<sup>17</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans. David Grene, 1375-77, <https://coldreads.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/oedipus-rex.pdf>.

Asad suggests the actions Oedipus takes against himself are borne not of his wrongness or culpability, but from an “ethics of passionate necessity”—a cultivated set of internal conditions that manifest when struck by an unbearable circumstance.<sup>18</sup>

One might say that Oedipus’ actions on discovering what he has done (beginning with ‘self-punishment’) arise from virtues that depend on what Marcel Mauss called *habitus*—an embodied capacity that is more than physical ability in that it also includes cultivated sensibilities and passions, an orchestration of the senses. Oedipus’ self-inflicted pain should not, I think, be regarded as the outcome of a judgment about his responsibility. It is perhaps best not thought of as “punishment” (a notion that has pretensions to being a reasoned and reasonable action), but as itself the passionate performance of an embodied ethical sensibility. Oedipus suffers not because he is guilty but because he is virtuous.

In the modern sense to be responsible is to be accountable to an authority, to be prepared to give justifications and excuses for one’s actions, to know that one deserves punishment for the failure to do one’s duty...Richard McKeon notes that the first use of the word “responsibility” in English and French was in 1787, in the context of the American and French revolutions, and that since then its primary use has remained political.(ft48) Thus the notion of “responsible government”—meaning constitutionalism, rule of law, and self-determination has come to be the model not only for political behavior that is imbued with a certain moral quality, but for morality itself.

*Habitus*, in contrast to this political model of ethics, is not something one accepts or rejects, it is part of what one essentially is and must do. (The ethics of passionate necessity encompasses tragedy). Oedipus puts out his own eyes not because his conscience or his god considers that he deserves to be punished for failing to be responsible—or because he *thinks* he does—but because (as he says) he cannot bear the thought of having to look his father and his mother in the eyes when he joins them beyond the graves, or to see his children, “begotten as they were begotten.” He acts as he does necessarily, out of the passion that is his *habitus*...<sup>19</sup>

What does it mean to act in the midst of a turmoil that one is not answerable to, yet by which one is deeply implicated? During the second Bush and especially the Obama administration, American cultural trends chased after self-efficacy and short-form ethical models, creating powerful ripple effects across the globe. Terms like altruism, compassion, human rights, happiness, and resilience proliferated, with the rush to immediate fulfillment often resulting in a loss of accuracy and understanding.<sup>20</sup> But it is no simple feat to reach compassion from situations of deep, cyclical violence and subjugation; like all things, compassion and its companions materialize with complex conditions and consequences.

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<sup>18</sup> “...when he discovers what has been done, he knows he must act—not because he admits or claims “responsibility,” but because he cannot live in the knowledge of who he is and what, being who he is, he has done to his father and mother.” Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 93.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-96.

<sup>20</sup> Didier Fassin’s *Humanitarian Reason* (University of California, 2011), a study of the invention of a new moral landscape and its ethical and political complications, offers excellent insights into a phenomenon that combines these interests, among others.

Nor did the Vietnamese or Tibetan self-immolations take place in settings where the immolators could be characterized as disinterested and without profound personal bonds to the persons for whom they acted and the situations in which they committed their deeds. Self-immolation is not altruism; it is no dispassionate, removed thing. The act is painfully present, and I argue full of passion. But what of the iconic image of Thích Quảng Đức? Seated in cross-legged meditation, he remained in a still, upright posture as his flesh burned amidst a busy street in Saigon, Vietnam.<sup>21</sup> A human being on fire is striking enough without signs of such tranquility. The composure of immolators like Thích Quảng Đức, Lama Soepa, and Palden Choetso pushes an act already at the limit past its edge.<sup>22</sup> How to characterize such self-control, and what is its configuration with passion? The next chapter will address matters of action, circumstance, and character in certain self-immolations. For now, let us be guided through these questions by other routes.

i. The act *...is full of passionate virtue. He is caught unaware.*

I turn to Asad's analysis of Oedipus because I believe it provides valuable tools by which to consider actions whose significance might otherwise be impoverished if cast principally under frames of intention and accountability. This is different from saying that Oedipus' intentions annul his action, which is not Asad's claim. Rather, his work demonstrates how arguments organized around these tenets miss a critical anguish stirring in the tragedy of Oedipus. The elements of this anguish intermingle; the account I offer is one of many flows.

The Oedipus drama's enduring impact on Euro-American sensibilities has been guaranteed by Sigmund Freud's 'Oedipal complex' formulation, which interprets the main character's offenses of parricide and incest as meaningful of certain universal, subconscious human desires and the guilt that ensues from harboring such urges. Whether or not a person knows the flawed hero's story, Oedipus' failings are ubiquitous in the Euro-American cultural imaginary; the kernels of his constitutive acts supposedly reside in every human psyche. Consequently, the person who is to any degree convinced by Freud's formula must adjust herself to the implication that a certain degree of moral failure is an unavoidable part of being human. But some investigators are not finished with Oedipus. Asad reapproaches the ruined king.

If we take [responsibility] as containing the elements of imputability and liability to punishment it seems to be that Oedipus is not responsible *to* any authority. He does not have to answer to any court (human or divine) for his actions...

In *Colonus* Oedipus explicitly denies that his transgressions were his own acts, and interrupts the Chorus, who refers to what he has done, by insisting that it was "no doing of mine." What he denies is not that he caused the death of a man at the crossroads (*that* he

<sup>21</sup> Thích Quảng Đức's immolation occurred on June 1, 1963 and was famously documented in the photograph by Malcolm Browne.

<sup>22</sup> "To burn oneself by fire is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance. There is 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." Thích Nhất Hạnh, "In Search of the Enemy of Man (addressed to (the Rev.) Martin Luther King)," [http://www.aavw.org/special\\_features/letters\\_Thích\\_abstract02.html](http://www.aavw.org/special_features/letters_Thích_abstract02.html).

had always known) but that he murdered his father, which is a different act, and one which he had tried specifically to avoid. In what sense was he responsible for *this* act?

By disowning the terrible thing done (parricide) he isn't saying that he didn't intend to kill. In that sense he recognizes himself as the owner of a responsible act (as an agent). But he also claims that the act turned out to be not his own, that he was an unwitting instrument (agent) of the gods, and that as such his own intention was irrelevant.<sup>23</sup>

Following Asad's remarks, Oedipus incapacitates or disempowers himself in two ways—when he pierces his eyes with his mother's brooches after discovering her dead body, and when he abdicates his throne and goes into exile to alleviate his people's suffering.<sup>24</sup> For the moment I will analyze only the first act, which bears at least three distinguishing features. First, it does not move in accord with any external force such as the advice or warnings Oedipus receives from the oracle (whereas the fallen king's choice to go into exile follows the priest's response on how to alleviate his people's suffering). Second, by blinding himself Oedipus is taking up an extreme and concentrated form of bodily pain that results in lasting damage. Third, as a figure who has had so much of his life prescribed for him, Oedipus' physical incapacitation is conspicuous for standing outside the story's script. This is not to imply it is in opposition to the script or who he is, but that it is arguably the first moment Oedipus can be said to be acting agentively, in the sense that he is acting with full awareness of who he is. Until the point of self-discovery, he has been caught in his destiny. Having fulfilled it, there is nothing that can undo or restore his past. What remains is the question of how he will move forward. After being confronted with his mother's corpse, Oedipus shows he will not move forward without committing painful, irreversible wounds upon his person. From what source does such an act issue? Asad argues it is not the response of a reasoned subject but springs rather from an ethics of "passionate necessity." The pairing of passion and necessity suggest a sense of immediacy; the way a person might be expected to react to a sudden crisis or pain that jolts her very being into action.

When Oedipus realizes what has been done, Asad notes, "he knows he must act—not because he admits or claims "responsibility," but because he cannot live in the knowledge of who he is and what, being who he is, he has done to his father and his mother."<sup>25</sup> Whether or not he claims the offences of parricide and incest as his own, the anguish Oedipus experiences clearly derives from horror of the new reality he finds himself in. Under such conditions the spontaneous comes to the fore, and Oedipus reacts to his situation with an urgency and manner that is revelatory not only of his character, but of the level of pain he is experiencing at being confronted by this inescapable reality. Which in turn solicits the question, what is the nature of this reality that ensnares the ill-fated king? How are we to understand the situation that causes Oedipus to demonstrate himself in this painful way? Stories of destiny and fate are unlikely to hold the attention of a rational individual searching for ethical clues to present day dilemmas. In the next section I will argue for the relevance of considering the predetermined.

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<sup>23</sup> Asad, *Formations*, 93.

<sup>24</sup> The city of Thebes has been plagued by misfortune as a result of their deities' displeasure with their king's misdeeds. Based on the priest's language, Sarah Nooter notes that Oedipus is also likely motivated by the danger of losing his good name as an exemplar among men. Sarah Nooter, *When Heroes Sing: Sophocles and the Shifting Soundscape of Tragedy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012), 82.

<sup>25</sup> Asad, *Formations*, 93.

## ii. The situation

...is unbearable, and there is no way out.

One of the analytical tasks that draws ethicists to Oedipus is the matter of how he responds to his extraordinary predicament, a response many read as an admission of guilt or acceptance of responsibility. Asad calls these readings into question on the basis that Oedipus' situation *is* very much out of his hands, thus casting doubt on his capacity to be culpable. In questioning these familiar moral categories, Asad is not arguing against the relevance of ethics to this portion of the parable. Rather he is making a vital argument for the possibility of an ethics not framed by a logic of "answerability."<sup>26</sup>

In the paradigm case of Oedipus it is not simply that he *unintentionally* offends against moral interdictions and only subsequently makes this terrible discovery. It is that he is, from his very birth, *destined* to do so. Even his parents, Laius and Jocasta, contribute to that destiny by trying to avoid it. And however much Oedipus tries to avoid it; he *unwittingly* acts in the way scripted for him. That plot is part of who he is... It is precisely this retrospective telling of this pre-scripted that serves to define his present status as a moral agent—not because it liberates him from his past but because it traces his agency to his *habitus*, the ability to act sanely—albeit tragically—in accordance with his experience and situation. The authority of the past is *not* necessarily a sign of psychopathology, as Freud the modernist taught.<sup>27</sup>

In a tale that proceeds by fate the self-ignorant hero thinks he understands what threatens him, and acts to evade it. As audience members it is easy to fall into a similar trap and think the drama's meaning is self-evident. We think it is a story about what is out of the individual's control, and to some degree this is accurate and important not to overlook. Oedipus' destiny cannot be severed from an assessment of his ethics; to an extremity degree than most he operates under conditions not of his own choosing.<sup>28</sup> All the more reason to pay attention not only to how Oedipus responds to his situation, but also to the link between Oedipus' response and the inflexibility of the circumstance he finds himself caught in. It is in this relationship between plot and person that Asad detects another flaw in numerous readings of the parable.

Paul Feyerabend once claimed that classical Greek tragedy was at once "a factual account of social conditions with a criticism of these conditions and the suggestion for an alternative."<sup>29</sup> But this statement does not allow for the possibility that tragedy (like pain itself) may be actively lived as a necessary form of life, one that no amount of social reform and individual therapy can eliminate forever. The tragedy of Oedipus does not illustrate "how institutions may paralyze action," as Feyerabend and others have put it. It shows how the past—whether secular or religious—constitutes agency. An "impossible choice" is a choice between two terrible alternatives that have been pre-scripted for one—

<sup>26</sup> "I am urging that acts *can* have an ethical significance without necessarily having to be interpreted in terms of "answerability." Ibid., 94.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>28</sup> "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1972), 437.



but it is still possible to choose, and to act on that choice.<sup>29</sup>

Asad's passage on Oedipus appears at the conclusion of "Thinking About Agency and Pain", the second chapter of his book *Formations of Secular*. In the chapter's opening remarks Asad explains his interest in challenging dominant interpretations of agency in which power and pain operate as external and repressive forces that necessarily "subject" the agent, who in turn has "both the desire to oppose power and the responsibility to become more powerful so that disempowerment—suffering—can be overcome."<sup>30</sup> In his reading of Oedipus, he argues for an approach that considers pain not only as a passive state, but as itself agentive."<sup>31</sup>

By this I do not mean of course that no reform of social arrangements depicted in the play is conceivable (of course it is, although the idea of reform is not equivalent to the secular ideas of history-making or self-empowerment). I mean simply that Oedipus does act, that he does so in a situation that was not his "responsibility," and that he can act creatively (to free his city) without aiming at self-empowerment.<sup>32</sup>

That Oedipus' past irrevocably forms his present is indisputable; the fallen king cannot make himself anew. The fact that this past is shaped by religious rather than secular forces does not abolish the drama's ethical significance. The state of being afflicted by a network of arrangements outside one's control and impervious to influence is not exclusive to the realm of fantasy; such pressure is familiar in current realities, constraining some individuals and communities more than others. The inclination to read certain stories as ethically formative and others as merely culturally peculiar is not only a diminishment of another's capacity, but a loss to self-edification (not to mention a discredit to the general pursuit of knowledge). Yet we cannot simply pull ambiguous accounts or situations through the same comfortable intellectual schemas. To do so would be an exercise in negligence and self-reassurance, rather than a diligent work of interpretation and learning. If we are to avoid draining a thing of its potential, there must be a willingness to revitalize one's logics.

Asad selects the Oedipus tale for the ways in which it tests accepted notions of agency, pain, and ethics. There are many ways to understand the story, one being that it is an account of a person who takes meaningful action in face of an unbearable reality from which there is no escape. Whether fictional or historical, if such acts are not interpreted with patience and precision, it is doubtful whether they can be accurately assessed when they occur in our midst.

*In Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, philosopher Jonathan Lear

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<sup>29</sup> Asad, *Formations*, 98.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 71: "There is a secular viewpoint held by many (including anthropologists) that would have one accept that in the final analysis there are only two mutually exclusive options available: either an agent (representing and asserting himself or herself) or a victim (the passive object of chance or cruelty)."

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 79: "When we say that someone is suffering, we commonly suppose that he or she is not an agent. To suffer (physical or mental pain, humiliation, deprivation) is, so we usually think, to be in a passive state—to be an object, not a subject. One readily allows that pain may be a cause for action (seeking to end the suffering, say), but one does not normally think of it as action itself. Pain is something that happens to the body or that afflicts the mind. Or so, at any rate, we tend to think. Yet one can think of pain not merely as a passive state (although it can be just that) but as itself agentive."

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 98.

evaluates the ethical and ontological underpinnings of a statement left by Chief Plenty Coups of Crow Nation.<sup>33</sup> Lear's study revolves around the matter of conceptual collapse, or the question of what it might mean when a people's way of understanding the world breaks down. Lear emphasizes that the object of his study is not the ending of lives but the ending of a way of life, "the real loss of a point of view."<sup>34</sup> What conditions give rise to such an event, and what are the consequences of such a loss? The project is an inquiry into a particular human vulnerability, one Lear claims as a risk every cultural community lives with, though some more than others.<sup>35</sup> In the words and deeds of Plenty Coups and the Crow nation, Lear perceives a powerful mode of action and resilience that offers insight into how a person or community might proceed in a situation that devastates both one's reason and one's being. While it is difficult to deliver such an intellectual and existential engagement in a brief text, to the extent that Lear is successful, he builds a rare and notable analysis.

An individual is not the same as a culture or community, but Oedipus too possesses a point of view that is unique and under threat, one that finally collapses (although in his case, that perspective turns out to be a convoluted deception). In a plot built around the protagonist's utter inability to avoid an impending disaster, it is useful to note the hero's first act when he loses his sense of the world (and himself), and gains another. With both self-understanding and worldview shattered, Oedipus does not resist his impositions or seek self-strengthening, but instead further disempowers himself. His actions and those of Plenty Coups under investigation by Lear indicate there are different ways to meet the constraints of one's reality than itineraries found in standard narratives of agency, power, and resistance.<sup>36</sup> The manner in which one chooses to proceed in the face of disaster results in something meaningful, even if the disaster remains. Part of Asad's aim in exploring the Oedipus drama is to illustrate how pain that is a consequence of unyielding forces may be integral to the way an agent moves forward, rather than something she must resist or overcome in order to preserve her agency.

I mean further that reform cannot do away with pain—not merely because pain is always part of the vicissitudes of life, but because it is intrinsic to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions of obligation, and to the secular tradition of attributing individual responsibility that has been formed out of the latter. The nature of this pain (punishment, repentance, discipline) is different from the one endured by Oedipus because it is rooted in the idea of responsibility, the idea that someone can be held accountable and blamable for a particular

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<sup>33</sup> "...when the buffalo went away, the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened." Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>34</sup> "We do not grasp the devastation the Crow endured as long as we think that the issue is who gets to tell the story. For the problem goes deeper than competing narratives. The issue is that the Crow lost the concepts with which they could construct a narrative...It is the *real loss of a point of view*." Ibid., 32. Emphasis author's.

<sup>35</sup> Lear refers to "societies," "civilizations," and "our culture" when discussing the relevance of Plenty Coups' statement to readers in the present day. He also occasionally uses term "community" to describe the Crow nation. In light of the book's title, "cultural community" may be a more useful term by which to consider who is 'at risk' from the particular form of devastation in which Lear is interested, carrying a sense of both specificity and inclusivity.

<sup>36</sup> Asad, *Formations*, 70-71. "I am worried less by what has been called the "romance of resistance" than by the more inclusive category of "agency" presupposed by it. Of course in commonsense terms "resistance" occurs in everyday life, and it is often important to outcomes when it does so. My concern, however, is that our fascination with "resistance" itself comes from larger, supporting ideas. The tendency to romanticize resistance comes from a metaphysical question to which this notion of "agency" is a response: Given the essential freedom, or the natural sovereignty, of the human subject, and given, too, its own desires and interests, what should human beings do to realize their freedom, empower themselves, and choose pleasure?"

outcome. It implies that the acceptance of guilt and painful expiation opens the way back to a kind of just restoration.<sup>(55)</sup> For Oedipus such a return does not exist. The accumulation of events is not reversible. The future is not made, but encountered and suffered.<sup>37</sup>

There are others caught in “impossible” situations where the full weight of the inexorable is brought to bear on them. Must their choices be understood in terms of resistance or self-empowerment, acquiescence or defeat? To grasp the configuration of this particular anguish in Oedipus, it is not only the act and situation that require consideration, but also the subject.

iii. The person *...does not know himself.*

Regardless the scale of expression and familiarity of manner, assessing a person is no simple task. Certain attributes remain subtle, certain movements internal. An abrupt and deeply painful discovery triggers Oedipus’ actions at the climax of the drama. These acts are not wholly caused by his circumstance; they also arise from his person.<sup>38</sup> If the concept of *habitus* is an appropriate frame by which to interpret Oedipus’ passionate performance of his ethical and suffering self, then his self-blinding can be read as the embodied extension of a sensibility that has been cultivated over time, spontaneously expressed after the agent suffers a sudden, unexpected destruction.<sup>39</sup> All pressure falls on the moment of discovery as the situation exerts itself upon Oedipus, striking an internal arrangement that is simultaneously produced by its subject’s field of action and generative of its own practices.

Asad cautions against interpreting Oedipus through the lens of “a familiar ‘human’ individual...whose moral status is independent of any *plot*.”<sup>40</sup> But Oedipus is ethically formed by more than circumstance and religious intervention. After hearing an oracle’s prediction that he would murder his father and lie with his mother, the prince flees to avoid committing such horror. The immoral nature of such acts may have provoked his flight, but acts gain much of their character by virtue of their relational bonds. In this case, the relevant bonds are familial. If Oedipus flees to preserve his own good nature, he also flees because he cherishes the well-being of the people whom he considers his parents. When he discovers he is not the offspring of Merope and Polybus but instead the child of Jocasta and Laius, Oedipus becomes the murderer of his father, the husband of his mother, and the sibling of his children. The network of arrangements that traps and afflicts him does not derive its power exclusively from a divine source. The weight of discovery is deeply reinforced by the love of others—those whom Oedipus is loved by, and those whom he loves.<sup>41</sup> His pain and his predicament are formed by this love.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 98-99.

<sup>38</sup> In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972, first English translation 1977), philosopher Pierre Bourdieu explains *habitus* as both the result of practices and the mode of practice itself.

<sup>39</sup> The unraveling of Oedipus’ world begins when he receives word of Polybus’ death (the king he believes is his father). His unusually joyous reception of this news sparks a series of exchanges that leads to his final discovery.

<sup>40</sup> Asad, *Formations*, 97. Emphasis author’s.

<sup>41</sup> “*Habitus*...is not something one accepts or rejects, it is part of what one essentially is and must do...Oedipus puts out his own eyes not because...(as he says) he cannot bear the thought of having to look his father and his mother in the eyes when he joins them beyond the graves, or to see his children, “begotten as they were begotten.” He acts as he does necessarily, out of the passion that is his *habitus*...” Ibid., 95-96.

Yet the parable can also be read as a story about the consequences of not being loved. The oracle's prediction fills Oedipus with an anxiety that carries him through the plot to his foretold doom. Its fulfillment hinges on the deep care and commitment Oedipus feels toward Merope and Polybus, signaled in his decision to exile himself rather than risk ever harming them or himself in such a way. But what of the care directed toward Oedipus? Rescued by shepherds and raised by the neighboring kingdom's rulers as their own, the first harm that befalls Oedipus is committed by his birth father Laius who orders his child abandoned on a hillside, ankles pierced and tethered, exposed to the wilderness to perish. The king's command is motivated by self-preservation; an oracle has informed Laius that he will meet death by his own son's hand. Knowing neither himself nor his world, Oedipus loves others as he ought and takes action accordingly. But he suffers a peculiar fate because, unbeknownst to him, one who is supposed to love him has acted against him. In this sense, the parable of Oedipus is a warning on the dangers of following a universal ethical model without accurate discernment of the situation in which one seeks to act. But this ignorance is not particular to him, it is a state of unknowing we have all experienced, to varying degrees.

As memorable and provocative as the opening lines of "In Search of the Enemy of Man" might be, from many points of view its author's assertion of the Vietnamese self-immolations as neither suicide nor protest is simply absurd. In my first encounter with the letter I dismissed its passages on self-immolation as well-intentioned but flawed rhetoric, and bypassed this section for the subsequent one.<sup>42</sup> But after self-immolations broke out from the edges of eastern Tibet to as far west as the Tibetan capital city of Lhasa, I felt compelled to reconsider my assumptions.<sup>43</sup> In an enigmatic remark by an aged man responsible for leading his people through their own devastation, Jonathan Lear perceived the makings of an insight into a vulnerability at the very heart of the human condition.<sup>44</sup> Here I had a historical document composed by a leader working for his people, addressing another leader working for his. Perhaps defending an intellectual position was not its aim. Perhaps the intellectual failure was mine.

A letter is not an academic essay; a message sent across oceans requires a lightness that eschews footnotes. As someone training in the humanities and the art of interpretation, I realized the problem of taking the letter to its critical edge was not the writer's task, but mine. This kind of undertaking can be found throughout the humanities; the skill with which scholars carry out such interpretative work is one of the gifts that keeps the humanities very much alive and relevant, both within and outside the academy. I am still slowly developing such skills; further years of practice may result in improvement. But what I lack in expertise I have tried to make up

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<sup>42</sup> My interest at the time was in understanding how disparate social movements came together. I focused on the second half of the letter for indications of what persuaded King to build a relationship with Thích Nhất Hạnh and learn more about the war in southeast Asia.

<sup>43</sup> The Tibetan Autonomous Region is a political zone engineered by the Chinese Communist Party, and not an indication of the actual borders of Tibet or where Tibetans consider "home". The boundaries of Tibet are intelligible from a variety of standpoints. One particularly simple method is to view Tibet as a geological structure defined as the world's highest and largest plateau, resting at an average elevation of 14,800 feet or 4,500 meters. Consisting of an area equivalent in size to Western Europe, the Tibetan regions of U-Tsang, Kham, Amdo, and Gyalrong stretch from the Himalayas in the southwest through much of the provinces of Qinghai and Sichuan in the east.

<sup>44</sup> "I cannot pretend to say with confidence what Plenty Coups really meant. His remark is enigmatic in part because it is compatible with so many different interpretations. Some of them are superficial; others delve to the heart of the human condition...If there is a genuine possibility of happenings breaking down, it is one with which we all live." Lear, *Radical Hope*, 5-6.

for in caution, and commitment.

Can self-immolation be a form of protest or suicide? Of course. Is it possible some if not most of the Tibetan self-immolations might match one or both these terms, whether partly or wholly? Certainly. But Thích Nhất Hạnh is dedicated to preserving a space to read the self-immolations by monastics in Vietnam as neither. In so doing I believe he is building a refuge to shield something fragile and significant. He does not furnish this thing directly to his reader; it is not available for convenient consumption. Its survival is always unsure, contingent on reliable conveyors and wholehearted companions. Approaching the self-immolations of Vietnam and Tibet is only one route—there are other paths by which one may reach this refuge. These paths share necessary points of convergence. Much like the relational bonds that confer meaning to our actions, stories and events gain new dynamisms through new arrangements.

Among the aims of Asad's project is to show how prevailing secular conceptions of agency shape assumptions of what kind of action an agent may take. In his interpretation of Oedipus we learn agentive action need not necessarily aim at self-strengthening—in other words, an agent need not always seek her own empowerment.<sup>45</sup> In his study of Chief Plenty Coups and the Crow nation Lear emphasizes the notion of “cultural devastation”—the destruction of concepts a people use to understand themselves and the world, or “the loss of a real point of view.”<sup>46</sup> Both examples concern the question of how a person or people choose to proceed in an impossible situation, and the matter of conceptual collapse.<sup>47</sup> Both also touch upon the problem of when an act that seems to plainly indicate one thing might mean something else entirely. I am intrigued by such instances of contradiction, scenes which may render certain routes of understanding inaccessible.

In Oedipus we have the fall of the beloved king, the story of a hero battling his fate and failing spectacularly. Praised as a peerless leader, after his ruinous self-discovery Oedipus continues to be addressed as the “best of men” but is no longer a figure of aspiration.<sup>48</sup> To modern audiences willing to consider the tale as more than superstitious oddity it fuses the rules of skepticism and the pull of paranoia, imparting an uneasy sense that one cannot trust one's own experience of the world. In contrast, the figure in our next tale is venerated as the “father of faith”—the progenitor of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Abraham trusts utterly and is rewarded for that trust.<sup>49</sup> Oedipus knows not his reality and lives discordant to it; as his

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<sup>45</sup> Asad also provides a number of other, non-literary examples of this kind of action in the chapter “Thinking About Agency and Pain”.

<sup>46</sup> Lear, *Radical Hope*, 44.

<sup>47</sup> “An ‘impossible choice’ is a choice between terrible alternatives that have been pre-scripted for one—but it is still possible to choose, and to act on that choice.” Asad, *Formations*, 98.

“The inability to conceive of its own devastation will tend to be the blind spot of any culture. By and large a culture will not teach its young: “These are ways in which you can succeed, and these are ways in which you will fail; these are dangers you might face, and here are opportunities; these acts are shameful, and these are worthy of honor—and, oh yes, one more thing, this entire structure of evaluating the world might cease to make sense.” This is not an impossible thought to teach, but it is a relatively new idea in the history of cultures, and one can see why a robust culture would avoid it. A culture tends to propagate itself, and it will do that by instilling its own sense of possibility in the young...” Lear, *Radical Hope*, 83-84.

<sup>48</sup> Sarah Nooter, *When Heroes Sing: Sophocles and the Shifting Soundscape of Tragedy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012), 82.

<sup>49</sup> Together, these three faiths are referred to as the Abrahamic religions.

observers, we know what he does not. In Abraham we have the opposite movements. He acts in accordance with his reality, a reality that is not apparent to any observer. Moving in accordance with that reality at its subtlest level, he emerges with something truly precious and rare. At least, such is the story according to one of its messengers.