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# THE BURNING MONK: A REVIEW OF A BUDDHIST'S SELF-IMMOLATION DURING THE VIETNAM WAR

L u k a B e n e d i ĉ i ĉ

## Introduction

On June 11th, 1963, the Mahayana Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc publicly self-immolated in Saigon in response to the violent anti-Buddhist crackdown and the general suffering of the masses in Vietnam and died at the scene. The self-immolation was captured by the photographic lens of Malcolm W. Brown, who shortly afterwards won the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting in Vietnam. The photograph of the burning monk quickly circulated in the world media, triggering a flood of shocked reactions, interpretations and evaluations of the act. At the crossroads of the different perspectives is an overarching fascination with the role of the body in this event. The suffering and the simultaneous mastery over the body are highlighted, where the sacrifice of its qualities and the resulting death become a symbol of compassion and protest. However, monks close to the deceased pointed out that, according to their understanding of the Buddhist horizon, self-immolation was neither suicide (in the sense of the abolition of individual existence) nor protest, since to endure the pain of the fire is above all a demonstration of steadfast devotion and love for the people one wishes to protect, and since the enemy of the people is not any other human being or authority figure, but intolerance, hatred and discrimination.

Interventions of this kind are not mere word games. Simultaneously, the objection that all events are inherently ambiguous and subject to interpretation is superficial. The argument for addressing the problem of interpretation, gaze, perspective and worlds in this historical example is its liminality. Not only because it ends in death, but also because of the visual power of the scene, the range of attitudes (political, religious and scientific), and emotional responses to it (admiration, dismay, sadness, anger and sympathy), as well as the wide media coverage of the event. The self-immolation was captured by a single journalist's camera, and most media grabbed a single photograph, the same one every time, which was the basis for the world's coverage of the event.

### Two Reports and the Historical Context

Flames were coming from a human being; his body was slowly withering and shrivelling up, his head blackening and charring. In the air was the smell of burning flesh; human beings burn surprisingly quickly. Behind me I could hear the sobbing of the Vietnamese who were now gathering. I was too shocked to cry, too confused to take notes or ask questions, too bewildered even to think.<sup>1</sup>

David Halberstam, then a reporter for *The New York Times* and a future Pulitzer Prize winner for his reporting in Vietnam, poignantly describes his experience of witnessing the self-immolation of the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc in the Vietnamese capital Saigon. The act was a reaction against the regime led by Ngo Dinh Diem, which – alongside all the other tensions and repression in social life – openly favoured Christianity over Buddhism. Buddhists were not allowed to fly their flags to celebrate the Buddha's birthday. Before Duc's death, there were other demonstrations in the streets and the government army violently suppressed a gathering of Buddhists in Hue who were demanding the right to fly the Buddhist flag alongside the national flag. Nine Buddhists died in the conflict and the government has not claimed responsibility for their deaths. Thich Quang Duc, who was an

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<sup>1</sup> David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 128.

elder of the local Mahayana Buddhist community, took matters into his own hands.

The event was reported by another Pulitzer Prize winner from that year, Malcolm W. Browne, then a reporter for the Associated Press, whose recognised photograph Burning Monk was taken that day in Saigon. Browne was supposedly the only Western journalist carrying a camera at the time, so his black-and-white photographs, and one in particular, were distributed heavily throughout the world's media.<sup>2</sup> John F. Kennedy said that no photograph in the history of journalistic reporting had received such an emotional response worldwide as this one. It shows a Buddhist monk sitting on the ground in the middle of an otherwise busy street in the lotus position, his eyes closed, his hands folded, his arms around a large flame and with smoke billowing from it.

Browne describes the regime of Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem and his total control of the media. He says that the Buddhists were determined to override the censorship with which Diem silenced his opposition. They knew that Diem's censorship had the tacit support of the US, which backed him as a new political leader because of his anti-communist statements. The Buddhists, therefore, felt that they would have to fight the publicity battle alone. Despite their inability to fight tanks and the large secret police network, they had to do something to draw the world's attention to the suffering of Buddhists in Vietnam. Thich Quang Duc managed to do this, sitting down in the middle of a busy road in broad daylight, surrounded by 350 monks praying and waving protest signs. One of the monks poured petrol on him, Duc struck a match and was immediately surrounded by flames. The police were too shocked to react, even though they had somehow expected the event. In fact, Buddhist leaders had informed their correspondents around the city in advance that two monks had come forward and would publicly kill themselves if the state did not respond to their demands<sup>3</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> Malcolm W. Browne, "Viet Nam Reporting: Three Years of Crisis," *Columbia Journalism Review*, December 2, 2011, [https://archives.cjr.org/fiftieth\\_anniversary/viet\\_nam\\_reporting\\_three\\_years.php](https://archives.cjr.org/fiftieth_anniversary/viet_nam_reporting_three_years.php).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

The days dragged on, and there were many street demonstrations in which nothing significant happened. Press interest lagged. It happened that I was the only Western newsman present during the street procession in which Quang Duc died. (...) As a matter of duty, I photographed the whole horrible sequence of Quang Duc's suicide and relayed the pictures and story as fast as possible into The Associated Press network. It is difficult to conceive of any newsman acting otherwise (...). [H]ad a Western newsman with a camera not been present at Quang Duc's suicide, history might have taken a different turn.<sup>4</sup>

Brown would also probably not have been there if he had not received a phone call from another Buddhist monk informing him to come to the procession, because something important might happen there. Even the path to the publication of the photograph in the US was not a straightforward one: The Philadelphia Inquirer was the only newspaper that wanted to publish Brown's photograph of the burning monk, while other newspapers initially refused to publish it. The New York Times reportedly said the picture was unsuitable for breakfast.<sup>5</sup>

The reaction was swift and global. Buddhist leaders printed enlargements of the photograph, had them coloured, and took them to future demonstrations. People wept and bowed in prayer in front of the photograph. China, too, printed a large number of photographs and distributed them both at home and across its national borders – with the attribution that the self-immolation was the work of the US imperialists and their Diemist subjects. Many reports followed of suicides in a similar fashion to Duc's death. They came from Burma, India, Japan, France and elsewhere. In the US, a group of prominent clerics used a photo of the Burning Monk on the front page of The New York Times and The Washington Post with the caption: "We too protest".<sup>6</sup>

Duc's action made waves in Vietnam and beyond. The monk's self-immolation, which received the most publicity, was followed by the deaths of 36 monks and one young Buddhist woman, also by fire, dur-

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Michelle Murray Yang, "Still Burning: Self-Immolation as Photographic Protest," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 1 (2011): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2010.536565>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

ing the Vietnam War.<sup>7</sup> Protests followed in various parts of Asia, with protesters carrying a picture of Duc at the head of a procession, most often illuminated, depicting him as a saint. Many protesters followed him to death. Self-immolation – especially with a note of protest – is gaining momentum and is still going strong: more than a hundred Tibetans have died in this way in the last ten years.

The debate that Duc's self-immolation started is multifaceted: in his book on self-immolation in Tibet, Whalen-Bridge at one point problematizes the difference between the not-yet-Buddhas in Tibet who ran down the streets screaming, falling on the ground, getting up and collapsing again as they were consumed by flames – on the other hand, Thich Quang Duc was calm and cold-blooded. He also makes the interesting comment that in order to judge Duc's self-immolation in Buddhist terms, it may be necessary to know what Duc's inner state really was – if it was anger and despair, that might disqualify the sanctity of the act for some Buddhists. In short: it is not sufficient to conclude that he was a good meditator.<sup>8</sup> Dionisopoulos and Skow<sup>9</sup> note that, based on newspaper publications, Americans have made a wide variety of judgments about the photograph and Duc's action – that is, from political (including anti-communist), aesthetic, moral-ethical, religious and other perspectives. The act and the way in which it was carried out were judged. The death, eschatological themes, the suicide, and its visual staging, the public character of the act, the political atmosphere, and the role of the American media in Vietnam were problematised. The news sparked a strong anti-war campaign, which was joined by mass self-immolations by Americans protesting against the war in Vietnam. This shocked some people – including Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk who saw in suicide protest “the fetishism of immediate visible results” and, in protest, distanced himself from some anti-war Catholic

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Queen, “Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation,” in *Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, ed. Christopher Queen and Sallie B. King (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>8</sup> John Whalen-Bridge, *Tibet on Fire: Buddhism, Protest, and the Rhetoric of Self-Immolation* (New York, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 119.

<sup>9</sup> George N. Dionisopoulos and Lisa M. Skow, “A struggle to contextualize photographic images: American print media and the ‘Burning Monk’,” *Communication Quarterly* 45 (1997): 393–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463379709370073>.

groups.<sup>10</sup> When asked whether suicide was a sin, a Buddhist psychiatrist explained to another researcher in conversation that in his view there were no sins in Buddhism, only transgressions.<sup>11</sup> So this too was the location of a possible schism – a difference between two ontological positions.

But there was universal amazement at Duc's mental and physical capacity to endure so much pain without succumbing to it in screams and spasms of the body. This is how the psychologist Manno described Duc's self-immolation in his article:

Duc's act was the epitome of a profound behavior, able to be elicited with careful practice, volition, and experience. The state of mind cultivated allowing the self-immolation behavior is what draws onlookers to Duc. We respectfully wonder, we are held captive, and our memory is entranced by his image. How is it possible for Duc to willingly undergo such an act? Neuroscientists are beginning to understand it's the brain's structure and function altered due to numerous hours of meditation that enabled Duc to become the Monk on Fire.<sup>12</sup>

### Buddhism and Social Activism

There is a strong connection between Buddhist practices of (self-) violence and times of tense social circumstances. Despite the doctrine of non-violence (ahimsa), violence – towards oneself and others – is often a matter of debate in Buddhism. Although Buddhism is instinctively associated with pacifism, there are several historical instances when a particular branch of Buddhism has been politically engaged, and sometimes militarised, in a particular setting. Sociologists of religion often link the rise of nationalisms to the religious atmosphere in a particular

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<sup>10</sup> Cheyney Ryan, "The One Who Burns Herself For Peace," *Hypatia* 9, no. 2 (1994): 21–39, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1994.tb00431.x>.

<sup>11</sup> Marjorie Hope, "The Reluctant Way: Self-Immolation in Vietnam," *The Antioch Review* 27, no. 2 (1967): 161, <https://doi.org/10.17813/maiq.18.4.njnu779530x55082>.

<sup>12</sup> Francis A. M. Manno, "Monk on Fire: The Meditative Mind of a Burning Monk," *Cogent Psychology* 6, no. 1 (2019): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2019.1678556>.

setting; Buddhism is no exception, according to recent discussions on Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka.<sup>13</sup>

In historical Buddhist texts, one finds discussions (albeit rare) that polemicise the prohibition of killing and encourage the participation of monks in violent events. One concept they use to advocate this is compassionate killing. Thus, monks should be allowed to use arms to defend their homes and their people. The author of one of the texts in which this idea appears – young monks in China are said to have looked for such texts and read them carefully when they were looking for reasons to militarise – argued that killing is not the opposite of not killing, but that it is necessary to consider first of all whether it can be carried out from a position of compassion and whether it can do good. Compassionate monks could kill out of an awareness that they were sacrificing their own karma – they would kill the enemy in order to save the enemy from killing someone and producing bad karma for them. Other authors have also invoked the doctrine of non-discrimination and non-duality when arguing that monks are allowed to kill.<sup>14</sup> Critics of these interpretations have argued that contemplating such ideas requires great spiritual maturity, not just the logical flip-flopping of concepts and doctrines.<sup>15</sup>

Not all socially activist Buddhism is militant. On the contrary: sometimes its practice is radical non-violence (ahimsa). Many anecdotes from the Vietnam War inform about soldiers storming into a temple and coming across meditating monks; they were instructed to kill them, but it sometimes happened that they laid down their arms for a while, joined them in meditation, then left without any harm done. The promoters of so-called Engaged Buddhism wanted to bring a similar impression to the streets and to political dialogue, hoping to show that coexistence is possible if we are conscious of the spiritual

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<sup>13</sup> See Tessa J. Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma: Just-war ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka* (London, New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002); Michael Jerryson, *If You Meet the Buddha on The Road: Buddhism, Politics, and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Peter Lehr, *Militant Buddhism: The Rise of Religious Violence in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Xue Yu, *Buddhism, War, and Nationalism: Chinese Monks in the Struggle Against Japanese Aggressions, 1931–1945* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 50.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

side of our lives. The 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to peacefully resolve the conflict between Tibet and China. A similar advocate during the Vietnam War was Thich Nhat Hanh, who was banned from entering his homeland by the authorities until 2005.<sup>16</sup>

Engaged Buddhism is an example of a new 20th-century social movement. It is a contemporary form of Buddhism that actively and non-violently intervenes in the socio-economic, political and ecological problems of a society. The movement grew slowly in Buddhist Asia throughout the twentieth century, but towards the end of the century, it became particularly influential among Buddhists who travelled to the West.<sup>17</sup> Engaged Buddhism is not centralised and has no founders, only individual initiators. It draws heavily on Buddhism, but it is not an outgrowth of any one branch of Buddhism – Theravada, Mahayana and other Buddhists can all be initiators of the movement. It is defined by a desire to bring Buddhist knowledge into politics and public debate, in order to bear on peaceful and compassionate solutions to social problems. Engaged Buddhism has been shaped by different political manifestations across Asia, which means that the movement is not unified; it is defined primarily by a shared philosophy and a common aspiration. At the same time, it is a modern phenomenon, strongly influenced by the West and its social, economic and psychological circumstances – but also by its direct interventions in Asian societies, for example during the Second World War, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War. Buddhist Asia in the middle of the last century was also subjected to strong processes of modernisation, globalisation and westernisation. In addition, the genocide in Cambodia and Tibet, poverty in Sri Lanka, the repressive government in Burma, and deforestation in Thailand (etc.) have created local traumas – and desires for deep healing.<sup>18</sup>

Socially Engaged Buddhism has been criticised in Asia and in the West: conservative Buddhists in Asia have said that monks should live exemplary lives of purity in the temple, while the West has often argued

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<sup>16</sup> Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



that the movement is merely a product of Westernisation, hence it is a Westernised and therefore inauthentic form of Buddhism. Nhat Hanh replies that Gautama did not become a Buddha when he attained enlightenment, but only after he decided to use this insight to become a teacher and help others. Ariyaratne points out, however, that Buddhism had always been socially engaged before colonial expansion, but with the advent of Western knowledge, medicine, etc., it lost its position as an authority to which people could turn for help.<sup>19</sup>

It is undoubtedly true that the West has had a strong influence on the movement. Many of the initiators, including Nhat Hanh, spent some years in the West and were educated there. Many Western concepts appear in their arguments, such as structural violence and human rights. The greatest spiritual influence came from non-Buddhists like Gandhi (he too was educated in the West) – the exception was Ambedkar, a close collaborator of Gandhi for some time. Christian charity and activism also took over from the West. Similarly, the insights of social science and economic and political theory. But this does not mean that Engaged Buddhism is a direct product of Western influence. In fact, the movement is always faithful to the Buddhist worldview and is based on ideas from Buddhist philosophy and spirituality. The movement accepted Western ideas that were useful to it but rejected many that it considered incompatible with the Buddhist tradition, such as the idea of political justice.<sup>20</sup>

### Protest and Suicide

What most of the responses to Brown's photo have in common is that they describe Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation as a suicide protest. I want to problematise this claim. Firstly, it is worth pointing out that the monk's physical self-immolation using fire was not an improvisation. Not only was the self-immolation planned, but to a lesser extent, it is part of important monastic rituals. When taking vows, for example, monks are required to burn several small areas of their bodies

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

with fire and endure the pain; that way, they confirm their commitment to a ritual or ceremony.

Thich Quang Duc's action involves the self-immolation of the whole body. In Buddhist literature, there exist enigmatic passages that seem to give instructions on how to perform self-immolation.<sup>21</sup> In Buddhism, the true way of life is linked to mental exercises such as meditation and study. Self-immolation – according to some interpreters – offers a physical path to enlightenment, which makes it attractive in a particular way. This is reflected in the increasing number of self-immolations in medieval Chinese Buddhism (from the fifth century onwards, to be precise), where it was seen as a legitimate way of attaining salvation.<sup>22</sup> Buddhism speaks of many types of “leaving the body” that are as extreme as self-immolation, such as cutting off one's fingers or hand, skinning oneself, feeding one's body to insects or wild animals, self-mummification, starving oneself, throwing oneself off a cliff, and so on. Benn points out that self-immolation should be understood as only one of these ways.<sup>23</sup>

There are also many ways of self-immolation. The most common is self-cremation – a form that originates and was popularised in China to the extent that it is depicted in many hagiographies.<sup>24</sup> Self-immolation can have different meanings. In eschatological terms, it may have been interpreted as an immediate attainment of enlightenment, at other times as a guarantee of rebirth in heaven. Historically, however, the practice of self-immolation has been more common in the midst of social conflict and in times of crisis – especially when Buddhism and Buddhists have been the specific target, notably of secular pressures and political discrimination.<sup>25</sup>

Scholars of Buddhism are very careful in talking about self-immolation. On the other hand, lay commentators have often labelled it as

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<sup>21</sup> Paul F. Copp, *The Body incantatory: spells and the ritual imagination in medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2014), 147.

<sup>22</sup> James A. Benn, *Burning for the Buddha: self-immolation in Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: Kuroda Institute, 2007), 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–10.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 200–201.

suicide (in the existential sense) – and from the perspective of social criticism, as protest. Browne, too, often speaks of Duc’s self-immolation as suicide. Social science interpretations of Duc’s self-immolation take a similar route, thematizing the body and its effects, as well as the historical context. Sindhi and Shah<sup>26</sup> attempt to understand self-immolations as protest using historical examples from Tibet. Andriolo<sup>27</sup> analyses the body as a site of performance and analyses the effects of self-immolation as a suicide protest. Dionisopoulos and Skow<sup>28</sup> write a reflection on the American media response to suicide by fire. Filippelli<sup>29</sup> thematises Duc’s self-immolation as compassionate suicide, and Murray Yang<sup>30</sup> as photographic protest.

It can be said that self-immolation has become culturally marked as a political act and an act of protest. Recalling Jan Palach in 1968 in Czechoslovakia – who was offered a skin transplant by Jasa Zlobec, but Palach died too soon and the transplant was not possible. There exist similarities between cases of self-immolation in different historical contexts, where many of them had a publicly emphasised note of politics and protest. There is also the intuitive approach of social scientists to thematise the body – with or without fire – as a potential site and means of protest. The Falun Gong students in Tiananmen Square, 2009, and the recent reading of the Constitution in Ljubljana’s Republic Square, 2020, are also examples of protesting with the body. Increasingly so, we live in an age of the performative. Performance itself often uses the body to convey a socially critical message – thinking of Marina Abramović’s *Rhythm 0* in Naples, 1974.

It is natural to assume that religious and other culturally marked events can also be seen as political protests. Despite the comfort of such a notion, the present essay problematises this intuition and proves it to be an inadequate analytical framework.

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<sup>26</sup> Swaleha A. Sindhi and Adfer Rashid Shah, “Life in Flames: Understanding Tibetan Self Immolations as Protest,” *The Tibet Journal* 37, no. 4 (2012): 34–53.

<sup>27</sup> Karin Andriolo, “The Twice-Killed: Imagining Protest Suicide,” *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 1 (2006): 100–113, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2006.108.1.100>.

<sup>28</sup> George N. Dionisopoulos and Lisa M. Skow, “A struggle.”

<sup>29</sup> Sandra Filippelli, “An Inquiry into Self-Immolation as Social Protest,” *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal* 3, no. 1 (2018): 53–68, <https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29258>.

<sup>30</sup> Murray Yang, “Still Burning.”

## Letter to Martin Luther King: An Ontological Problem

Zen Buddhist monk and advocate of the Engaged Buddhism movement Thich Nhat Hanh was the most prominent promoter of peace in the West during the Vietnam War. Among other things, he travelled to the USA where he gave public speeches to provoke reflection and a change of heart among the people sending their men to Vietnam. He met Martin Luther King Jr. who later nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize. In his letter *In Search of the Enemy of Man*, addressed to King Jr. on June 1st 1965 (they first met a year later), Hanh comments on Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation and criticises the view that the self-immolation is an act of suicide and protest. Owing to the context of his letter, he directly addresses the "Western Christian" perspective, though his critique can also be applied to non-Western and non-Christian settings. Hanh was a close friend of Duc, so his understanding of the event is particularly informative. I offer an excerpt from this 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 nothing more painful than burning oneself. To say something while experiencing this kind of pain is to say it with the utmost courage, frankness, determination and sincerity.

The Vietnamese monk, by burning himself, says with all his strength 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. What he really aims at is the expression of his will and determination, not death. 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. This is not suicide. Suicide is an act of self-destruction (...).

This self-destruction is considered by Buddhism as one of the most serious crimes. 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.

I believe with all my heart that the monks who burned themselves did not aim at the death of the oppressors but only at a change in their policy. Their enemies are not man. They are intolerance, fanaticism, dictatorship, cupidity, hatred and discrimination which lie within the heart of man.<sup>31</sup>

Hanh's letter is an emotional but also an intellectual surprise. His argument for the universality of life invalidates the label that Duc's self-immolation was a suicide. He also rejects that it was a protest, but instead claims that it aims "at moving the hearts of the oppressors and at calling the attention of the world to the suffering endured at the time by the Vietnamese". If we transpose the current "Western" and "Christian" terminology into another, case-specific "Buddhist" ontology, then suicide becomes part of the ritual, and protest loses its destructive connotation – it is preserved as communication with the public. In despair, we find compassion; in violence, we find determination and commitment. Sin becomes excellence, and transgression is translated into mastery. Hanh conceptualises Duc's self-immolation as a compassionate transition – a ritual with a communicative function.

Without Hanh's letter, which provides the key to these semantic transformations, one might question whether such an attempt at translation is permissible and meaningful. Much has been said about the critique of translation between worlds by some whom I do not draw from in this essay<sup>32</sup>, as well as by some to whom I will refer. Any advocate

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<sup>31</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 106–107.

<sup>32</sup> See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Cohen & West Publisher, 1966); Marilyn Strathern, *Partial Connection*. Updated edition (Wal-

of taking interlocutors seriously can be justifiably suspicious of any attempt at such translation. Even if we accept our translation, we may be tempted to wonder whether it is really reasonable to argue that something is not suicide just because the self-immolator believes that their life will continue when their body turns to ashes. If not, shouldn't the self-immolation of someone who was not a Buddhist also be considered a suicide – or is it only the perspective of the one who kills himself that is crucial? Similar questions can be asked about self-immolations that were self-declared protests. However, such questioning can become problematic, because it is problematic to frame this challenge as a matter of perspective.

This article is designed as an invitation to reflect on the frames within which we ourselves interpret and judge social phenomena, with particular reference to the invisible. We capture the aspect of the invisible by including in our discussions of ethnographies in which people's beliefs are not only subjected to serious analysis, but are taken seriously enough in thinking about their world to allow not only for the existence and legitimacy of alternative explanatory models of the world (and of events in it), but also to allow for the possibility that these explanatory models are at least equivalent to our own when discussing what is real. We are asked to further loosen the idea that political, materialist and economist language is the most appropriate and natural analytical tool when considering the otherness of the other. Not only at the level of admitting the existence of other and different worlds, but in seriously allowing for them.

Mario Blaser<sup>33</sup> comes to a similar conclusion in his article "Is Another Cosmopolitics Possible?" The debate starts with the government of Newfoundland and Labrador, which in January 2013, announced a 5-year ban on hunting reindeer because their population in the area had declined drastically in the last twenty years. The reasons are uncertain, but it was clear that they had to stop the hunting, which was also banned for the indigenous Innu and Inuit communities of the area. The

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nut Creek, California: Altamira Press, 1988).

<sup>33</sup> Mario Blaser, "Is another cosmopolitics possible?" *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no. 4 (2016): 545–570, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca31.4.05>.

Innu elders immediately announced that their community would not comply with the ban because they considered it a threat to their way of life. The elders insisted that ending hunting – including the bone-handling and meat-sharing practices that follow the harvest – would disrupt the Innu’s relationship with Kanipinikassikueu, the spiritual lord of the atiku (as they refer to reindeer), who would then no longer be devoted to their animals and to general well-being.<sup>34</sup>

The disagreement over this political decision – also political because it is made from a position of power and its associated authority – appears at first glance to be a clash of two perspectives on the same reality, which is why Blaser turns to theorists of cosmopolitanism, but above all to its critics. Latour<sup>35</sup> says that people do not enter into conflicts with different perspectives on things, but with different things themselves: this would mean that reindeer and atiku are not the same thing spoken of from two perspectives, but are two different things. Such an approach has already sparked debates about the pluriverse<sup>36</sup> as the conceptual successor of the universe, which – as a pre-existing unified and shared cosmos – is presupposed by classical cosmopolitics.<sup>37</sup> Blaser mentions Isabelle Stengers,<sup>38</sup> who says that she turned to the notion of cosmopolitics out of a need to forge a new political ecology, after she felt that the category of politics and the political was rooted in a historical tradition in which modern science had more of a say in judging the ultimate political question: “Who can talk of what, be the spokesperson of what, represent what?”<sup>39</sup> For Stengers, “cosmos refers to the

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 545-546.

<sup>35</sup> Bruno Latour, “Whose Cosmos, Which Cosmopolitics? Comments on the Peace Terms of Ulrich Beck,” *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004): 450-62, <https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754X-10-3-450>.

<sup>36</sup> See Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2002); Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2018).

<sup>37</sup> Mario Blaser, “Is another cosmopolitics possible?,” 546.

<sup>38</sup> Isabelle Stengers, “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), 994-1003.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 995.

unknown constituted by these multiple, divergent worlds, and to the articulations of which they could eventually be capable”.<sup>40</sup>

Blaser highlights some anthropological responses to the problem of cosmopolitanism, such as multispecies ethnography,<sup>41</sup> new materialism,<sup>42</sup> and the ontological turn.<sup>43</sup> He summarises that all approaches have their critics, who argue that they either take too much account of human informants and not enough of non-human informants (for example, the reindeer), or that they define non-human informants politically almost exclusively through the prism of scientific naturalism.<sup>44</sup> It turns out that the disagreement between authorities and indigenous communities is not only more profound than the difference between the two perspectives – it is totally different from the conflict that classical cosmopolitan theory seeks to resolve.

At one point in his paper, Blaser distances himself from the academic debate and starts to think about the current state of political dissonance between worlds. He defines this as the problem of reasonable politics, i.e., the never-explicit but ever-present assumption that the analyst – however they read their terrain; epistemologically, ontologically and (cosmo) politically – is ultimately right. This is most evident, Blaser argues, in situations where life and death are at stake: then counterfactual explanations of what is one and what is the other, and what modes of life and afterlife are possible, are quickly dismissed as too uncertain, exotic and metaphysical: “Conflicts surrounding entities that states and corporations treat as resources and that others take as nonhuman or suprahuman persons with whom they sustain

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> See Stefan Helmreich and Eben Kirksey, “The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography,” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2010): 545–76, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01069.x>.

<sup>42</sup> See Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> See Martin Holbraad, Morten Axel Pedersen and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “The Politics of Ontology: Anthropological Positions,” in *The Politics of Ontology, Theorizing the Contemporary series*, ed. Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen (Cultural Anthropology website, January 13, 2014), <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/the-politics-of-ontology>; Eduardo Kohn, “Anthropology of Ontologies,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44 (2015): 311–27, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102214-014127>.

<sup>44</sup> Mario Blaser, “Is another cosmopolitics possible?” 547.



various social relations – as is the case of the Innu with atiku and its spirit master – are thus exceedingly apt to make evident the problem of reasonable politics”.<sup>45</sup>

Non-human persons – like other ontological relations and cosmic laws, we might add – are not culture, because it is not a matter of choosing between perspectives; where one sees this, the other sees that.<sup>46</sup> Wagner aptly described his discipline (anthropology) as “the study of man ‘as if’ there were culture”.<sup>47</sup> He explains: “Since anthropology exists through the idea of culture, this has become its overall idiom, a way of talking about, understanding and dealing with things, and it is incidental to ask whether cultures exist. They exist through the fact of their being invented, and through the effectiveness of this invention”.<sup>48</sup>

The monk’s self-immolation is likewise a question of life and death. Except that the external disagreement in interpretation – which is already problematic as a concept – does not affect the course of the event, which is ongoing or has already passed. In this respect, the reality of the ontological conflict between the monk and the audience, which sees his act as a suicide protest, is more subtle. So subtle that the conflict, at first sight, only seems real to a social scientist. At the same time, the way Brown’s photograph divides the audience is not based on a conflict between a political and an apolitical position – or between an objectivist and a non-objectivist view of things. Duc’s self-immolation has sparked controversy on many levels: in politics, public morality, religious dogmatics, science and so on. “Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.”<sup>49</sup> Above all, these narratives are mixed. People critique each other’s position using first one, then another explanatory model.

Blaser’s research points to the inherent problem that the creation of a shared world interferes with and destroys other worlds. Concern for the reindeer can threaten the existence of atiku. In this respect, he sees a common-world-oriented cosmopolitics as akin to a (reworked) ra-

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 549.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1981), 17.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: RosettaBooks, 2005), 17.

tional politics.<sup>50</sup> He evokes Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and his take on “translation as a process of controlled equivocation”: de Castro thinks of translation as a process that must search for and preserve differences rather than similarities.<sup>51</sup> Without looking for a common denominator that links two related terms in a pre-existing world, Blaser is interested in how to link the two terms by homonymous acts that address different things at the same time, but in such a way that concern for one party (e.g. reindeer) increases concern for the other party (atíku).<sup>52</sup>

Blaser’s essay is a reflection on the invisible (more precisely, on other ontologies; the invisible is just a broader label for everything that might be, but does not appear to us through our own worldview and methodological apparatus) as well as on the effects of the invisible and how to deal with them when they take the form of conflict and become a “public thing.” The difficulty of thinking about the invisible is the tendency to simplify; speaking of a “Buddhist ontology” is likewise misleading, since ontological uniformity cannot be expected across all Buddhist schools and the social milieus from which they emerged. Some Buddhists have expressed doubts about self-immolation not being a sin (since one chooses to die) and some claimed that the act has brought about more agitation and violence than compassionate attention and healing (problematizing the many self-immolations that followed then and after, all over the world, among Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike in imitation of Thich Quang Duc).

### Final Thoughts

This paper has offered a parallel reading of Blaser’s study as a call to reflect on the ethnographic object in the analysis of religious social movements and their protest manifestations. This study has highlighted some of the complexities in the thinking of self-immolation in Buddhism and has problematised its ontological objectification and politi-

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<sup>50</sup> Mario Blaser, “Is another cosmopolitics possible?” 564.

<sup>51</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation,” *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 2, no. 1 (2004): 5, <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol2/iss1/1>.

<sup>52</sup> Mario Blaser, “Is another cosmopolitics possible?” 565.

cisation. It hints at some of the philosophical and theological postulates of Engaged Buddhism, which are implicitly revealed by Thich Nhat Hanh in his letter explaining Duc's self-immolation. It also provides the grounds for an exploration of how the visual points to a (sometimes narrow) definition and interpretation of the invisible; it is not possible to draw more concrete conclusions, but it can be added that the strong media attention that Thich Quang Duc's case received has contributed to the representation of self-immolation as a protest and suicide. This was not only due to the political but also the cultural clash between the West and the East, which was accompanied by the emigration of many teachers of Asian philosophies to Europe and especially to the US, which lasted throughout the twentieth century. Engaged Buddhism took shape in response to a pre-existing interest in Buddhist spiritual teachings.

In addition to the Vietnam war that drew the increased attention of the West towards the East, Engaged Buddhism was a social movement that developed ways of communicating its message that were approachable and fascinating to the non-Buddhist mind. This was, in part, because its advocates knew that they wanted a large, global audience. In a way, Engaged Buddhism is a direct response to globalisation. As a result, Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation spread quickly and globally. The resonance of the Burning Monk as a photographic image and the strength of its message is confirmed by a study<sup>53</sup> that counted and examined all the references to "self-incineration" in *The New York Times* and *The London Times* between 1790 and 1972. They took specific note if it was a political protest. The study found that 71% of the reports of self-incineration occurred between 1963 and 1972. Almost all the incidents involving political protest occurred during this ten-year period. The graphic representation shows very clearly that 1963 (the year of Duc's self-immolation) was a watershed year for the reporting of such events as the frequency of reporting increased dramatically from then on – for the first time, historically.<sup>54</sup> While this analysis does not

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<sup>53</sup> Kevin Crosby, Joong-Oh Rhee and Jimmie Holland, "Suicide By Fire: A Contemporary Method of Political Protest," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 23, no. 1 (1977): 60–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002076407702300111>.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 67–68.

cover recent history, it clearly demonstrates the wide reception of Thich Quang Duc's self-burning in the West.

This paper argued that the connection between Engaged Buddhism and protest as an act within this movement is not unambiguous – to some extent, it suggests that the context of a social movement determines when and in what ways something is or is not to be considered a straightforward protest. A certain caution is therefore needed in a priori labelling and thinking about the political engagement of social movements as a protest. Quick conclusions can lead down the wrong path in understanding both the agents and their actions. Finally, despite my insinuation that a political reading of Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation can be seen as "Western-centric", I would like to stress that it is quite possible that the same argument also applies to some non-Western and non-Christian spaces and people that reacted to the self-immolation.

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