

THE VIOLENT SUBJUGATION OF A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

The Taming of the Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism. By Jacob P. Dalton. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011. 311 pp. ISBN: 978-0-300-15392-7

Jacob Dalton simultaneously engages three of the most challenging and controversial themes one can take up, the Buddhist ethics of violence, tantric Buddhism, and the history of Tibet in the “dark age.” These are all areas that scholarship is only beginning to clarify. Although it is a short book, the historical scope and range of sources is extraordinarily ambitious. It has been provocative and controversial, both award winning and aggressively challenged in reviews. I will make reference to the previous reviews of Matthew Kapstein, Geoffrey Samuel, and Cathy Cantwell. The current reviewer is not a specialist in Tibetan Studies, but has done extensive research in the Mahāyānist and tantric ethics of killing. In addition to being a general review, this essay addresses the problematic application of the terms “violence” and “nonviolence” to Buddhist thought, whether tantric rituals should be taken seriously as lethal technologies, to what degree tantric traditions diverged from the normal Mahāyāna and mainstream ethics of compassionate killing, and historical issues from the Aśokan edicts to the “Tibetan age of fragmentation.”

Dalton’s award-winning book is brilliantly written and engagingly readable, especially for high scholarship. It is also a beautifully and generously produced volume. The four-page glossary of abbreviated and full transliterations of Tibetan terms is an interesting idea, but not a completely successful substitute for the general inclusion of full transliterations of Tibetan terms. Although the style makes it accessible to a more general readership, much of the content is controversial and difficult to assess for anyone without special training. It is an excellent selection for guided graduate seminars, where discussion of its problematic aspects would be very valuable. It is also a stimulating and provocative read for specialists in South Asian and Tibetan History. Even when I disagreed with it, I found that this book enhanced my ability to visualize the history of Tibet. But, since many of the key issues revolve around Tibetan translation issues and the perception of obscure texts in murky

historical waters, on the whole it is not recommended for undergraduates, amateur Tibet enthusiasts, or academics in other disciplines. However, the chapter “Foundational Violence” is a brilliant and uncontroversial treatment of the use of tantric ritual to subjugate and transform the autochthonous deities of Tibet that should be valuable for syllabi in areas such as Cultural Geography, Tibetan History, and the study of pilgrimage.

The book is structured on seven chapters, plus an introduction, which constitute 157 pages of the text, remarkably short to treat the vast sweep of historical contexts addressed in the book. It also offers fifty-eight pages of notes. Three translation appendices include “The Subjugation of Rudra,” and two “liberation” rites, central to the text. The first, an annotated translation from the *Samājavidyā Sūtra*, is more than an appendix as it presents what Dalton regards as the central myth of tantric Buddhism and is certainly the core myth of his own treatment of Tibetan history.¹

Dalton’s stated aim is to provide “a history of violence in Tibetan Buddhism in Tibetans’ own terms” (7). It might be described as a history of Tibet constructed around the theme of ritual violence, particularly tantric rites of “liberation,” in which enemies of the *dharma* are killed and their streams of consciousness directed to Buddha-fields. I will argue below that the study misses the aim to treat “violence” in Tibetan Buddhists own terms, beginning with its use of the term “violence.” Geoffrey Samuel suggests that the text is not really about “violence” at all, and indeed this is not a book about penal codes and warfare per se, but about rituals. However, as Samuel himself notes, these ritual technologies were taken very seriously as weapons, and therefore carefully guarded as state secrets.²

Various religious groups competed to be the officiants of such rituals, with all the power and endowment that entailed. Good scholars continue to express doubts about whether such rites should be treated with the same ethical seriousness as direct killing, but as Cathy Cantwell put it in her review: “In premodern Tibet, there is no doubt that most people assumed that such rituals enacted with specific targets in mind—such as invading forces—would affect and might even result in the deaths of the enemies.”³ In my experience this

¹Readers should consult Matthew Kapstein’s review for an argument that Dalton had misdated this source. Matthew T. Kapstein. Review of *The Taming of the Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism* by Jacob P. Dalton. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 73(1) (June 2013): 177–184.

²Geoffrey Samuel. Review of *The Taming of the Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism* by Jacob P. Dalton. *Numen* 60 (2013): 693–696.

³Cathy Cantwell, Review of *The Taming of the Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism* by Jacob P. Dalton. *History of Religions* 54(1) (2014): 106–112.

is also true in modern Tibet and the refugee diaspora, just as similar kinds of “magic” continue to be taken seriously around the world. One only has to think of the Shuk-den [*Shugs ldan*] affair or the folkloric accounts of harm done to Chinese invaders by protector deities. The Great Fifth Dalai Lama’s apparent moral reluctance to participate in such rites shows that he either took them very seriously or responded to the fact that others did. If we want to study “violence” on Tibetans’ own terms, then these rites have to be taken seriously as lethal technologies.

“LIBERATION” AND HUMAN SACRIFICE

Tantric rituals for killing the enemies of Buddhism are framed as “liberations,” since the victim’s stream of consciousness is compassionately conducted to a buddha-field, a heavenly realm of the most fortunate rebirth. The killer saves them from enduring long suffering in the horrific Buddhist hell realms for their crimes, and instead offers them a new life usually reserved for the saintly. Dalton devotes much attention to discerning whether his textual sources from Dunhuang direct the officiant to kill a person in the immediate ritual context, which he frames as “human sacrifice,” or whether the ritual indicates an effigy, which is common in tantric ritual. Furthermore, he sees this question as a key concern in the famous edict of King Ye-shes-’od decrying tantric excesses. In Dalton’s view, Ye-shes-’od’s concern is not with liberation rites per se, but with whether they are practiced with an effigy. The focus on whether there was “human sacrifice,” i.e., the immediate killing of a person in some murky and obscure ritual context, as if this would be more ethically shocking to a moralizing king than killing them from a distance through ritual means, distracts us from the real ethical issue. If these are deadly technologies in any case, which would be true for King Ye-shes-’od, why is the use of effigies supposed to make such an enormous ethical difference? Are we to think he would be fine with ritual killing as long as it employed an effigy in the process? What would have been the real ethical concern for the Great Fifth Dalai Lama, whom I suspect would not kill a live person in the ritual, but ritually unleashed forces that might kill thousands? Whether or not anyone is killed in the context of the ritual, someone is still being killed by the ritual. Killing through ritual use of an effigy was also killing—evidenced through the concern for the ethics of compassionate killing, which includes definitions of appropriate targets, states of mind, intentions, the qualifications of the killer, the danger of backfiring black magic and the great karmic dangers to the officiant. Such rituals are often found in tantric texts among catalogues of other practical *sādhana*s for finding lost things, bringing rain and so on. Since rites for killing are generally available in the *tantras*, one

wonders why Tibetans took it upon themselves to compose them. Dalton focuses on whether the killing only happens indirectly through the ritual, and is therefore perceived as merely imaginary or symbolic, or if instead there is the direct killing of persons in the immediate context of the ritual. This does not seem to take “violence” in Tibetan terms, but rather in our own, where these distinctions are far more important.

There is a sense throughout the book that it is an exciting revelation that ritual violence played an important part in Tibetan history. The negative space for this is the longstanding exaggeration of Buddhist pacifism.⁴ It would have made an excellent additional chapter for Dalton to give the kind of attention he does to early Orientalists, who spectacularly exaggerated the violence of Tibetan Buddhism, to the more current tendency of war weary Westerners to fantasize Buddhists, and particularly Tibetans, as the perfect pacifist other. The sensational aspect of Buddhist ritual violence is much more dependent on our own false consciousness than that of Tibetans. Much recent work has focused on exposing Buddhist violence, but it would be more valuable for ourselves, and modern Buddhists, to expose the highly nuanced and valuable ethics of compassionate “violence” that has been eclipsed by the modern West’s powerful conception of Buddhist pacifism. This should be done in conjunction with an examination of the Euro-American tendency to generate dehumanizing fantasies, both positive and negative, about Tibetan Buddhists. In Dalton’s defense, it is hard to avoid sounding sensational and provocative in addressing Buddhist violence in the current context.⁵ However, to my ear, Dalton never really offers a sympathetic understanding of the constructive soteriological function of macabre and violent imagery to evoke, subdue, and transform the worst in us. Such an understanding is necessary for a balanced view of the application of technologies normally used to suppress negative psychological factors when they are applied instead against other persons. In this worldview, a tantric adept could have saved Hitler from the razor trees of hell, purified his heart and secured him a place in heaven, while at the same time preventing the holocaust, relieving those unprepared for the violence of killing, and making abundant karmic merit in the process.

Generally speaking, the exaggeration of mainstream and Mahāyāna pacifism has also provided the negative space for interpretations of tantric ethics, which have therefore suffered from a compounded distortion. Examining tantric *sādhana*s for killing across a broad variety of texts, the striking thing

⁴By “negative space,” I make an analogy to the negative space in a painting that gives it contrast, definition and perspective.

⁵Samuel’s review accuses Dalton of using shock and sensationalism for commercial reasons.

is not a radical shift in ethics, but how consistently the *tantras* hold to the same standards for compassionate killing, as found across the board among the great Mādhyamika and Yogācāra ethical thinkers.⁶ There are significant differences, but most basically the *tantras* offer ritual technologies to actually perform what were already valorized as compassionate acts. Sympathetic understanding also requires that we discern between killing when it is symbolic, concretely practical, hyperbolic [kill the buddhas?], or allegorical.

Many of the places where the *tantras* promise, through their power to liberate in this very lifetime, to overcome the negative karma of the “immediates,” actions that generally lead directly to hell, are often mistaken for encouragements or allowances to do such actions. As an example of how tantric literature had “inverted” and “confounded” exoteric Mahāyāna values, Dalton notes that the *Confessions of the Root and Branch Downfalls of the Vajrayāna* makes it a downfall to fail to lovingly annihilate the enemies of the *dharma* (33–34). But this should be read in light of the fact that Mahāyānists like Asaṅga and Candragomin had far earlier made it a downfall to fail to engage in transgressions, even killing, when compassion requires it.⁷ Dalton had noted this only a few pages earlier (28). What should be observed here is not an inversion, but that, for all their shocking language, ethically the *tantras* are remarkably consistent with normative Buddhism.

It is also important to recognize that dangerous protector deities were a normal presence at Buddhist sacred sites and their invocation to bring down mountains on enemy armies and so on was a normative part of even mainstream *abhidharmic* Buddhism. Even in the *Nikāyas*, we find Vajrapāṇi, as the Buddha’s armed bodyguard, threatening to smash the heads of enemies of the *dharma* with his blazing *vajra*.⁸ The *tantras* did not take violence to a whole new level by directing demonic forces to kill actual humans. When the great Fifth Dalai Lama directed the forces of protector deities against enemies of the *dharma*, he was invoking them to perform their normal Buddhist duties. *Tantrikas* did not invent these deities or make them violent, rather they sacralized violent Buddhist deities that were already extant and drew them into the control of their *maṇḍalas*. Here again, the *tantras* are remarkably

⁶See Stephen Jenkins. “On the Auspiciousness of Compassionate Violence,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 33(1–2) (2011): 299–331.

⁷Ibid. As noted in his bibliography, I shared this article with Dalton before its publication.

⁸For an extended discussion see Stephen Jenkins, “Making Merit through Warfare According to the Ārya-Bodhisattva-gocara-upāyaviṣaya-vikurvaṇa-nirdeśa Sūtra,” in *Buddhist Warfare*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer and Michael Jerryson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 59–75.

close to normative Buddhism. Even beyond Buddhism, “Liberation” is a rather routine Indian idea. The idea of sending one’s sacrificial victim to a pure land resonates with the Hindu homologization of Vedic sacrifice and warfare, where just as killing the sacrificial victim is *ahimsā*, without harm, because the victim attains heaven, the warrior that one kills in battle is one’s *paśu*, sacrificial victim, and also subsequently attains heaven.

This also tells us that Buddhists in general had a far more flexible and practical ideology of violence at the disposal of kings than is generally thought. Dalton repeats the guiding assumption that somehow Buddhism is inherently unsuited or duplicitous in its relation to political realities. This is belied by the fact that Buddhism functioned with great adaptability in an incredible variety of political contexts from *rājas* to *khans* to *daimyo* over vast sweeps of time and topography. The ethics of compassionate violence were argued to be effective for political security, state prosperity, and social order.⁹ They give great scope for the application of military and punitive violence and abundant opportunities for kings to counterbalance any negative effects through merit-making. Often the very same texts that argue for extreme restraint also argue for compassionate killing. Buddhists knew this when they went to war with relics in their spears and Buddha images on palanquins. Much of this was argued in a 2010 publication, *Buddhist Warfare*, missing in Dalton’s bibliography, which also included important contributions from Vesna Wallace and Derek Maher directly related to the Tibetan context.¹⁰

PROBLEMATIZING THE TERM “VIOLENCE”

Dalton translates a variety of Sanskrit and Tibetan terms as “violence” throughout the text, for instance *marāṇa*, which simply means “killing” without considering how this fits his intention to consider violence “in their own terms.” Would any Tibetan translate *sgrol*, to “free” or “save,” as “violence?” This is very misleading to readers who do not know the languages. To be fair, this is normal in the study of Buddhist ethics and I have made similar mistakes. After I gave a 2008 IABS talk showing that merit-making compassionate killing was a broadly held Mahāyāna ideal, not just a tantric extreme or a Yogācāra anomaly, Geshe Ngawang Samten, then Director of the CIHTS in Sarnath, approached me and said: “This is not violence.” At first I was puzzled. This would mean that compassionate warfare, torture, and killing should not be classified as “violence.” I am normally not a fan of the precious tweaking of key terms, but when you look at dictionary definitions of violence, they

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰*Buddhist Warfare*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer and Michael Jerryson (New York: Oxford University, 2010).

generally define action that is both unwarranted and/or harmful.¹¹ Compassionate killing, on the other hand, is considered both warranted and beneficial to the victim and the killer. Tantric killing often contains extreme benefit for the one killed, such as transfer to a buddha-field, that is not always found in other Buddhist contexts.

The word “violence” has had a misleading history in the study of Buddhist ethics, especially in relation to its antonym “nonviolence,” which has a contrasting sanctity. This pairing has been foisted on India, especially as a mistranslation of *ahiṃsā*, non-harm, and is loaded with Gandhian associations rooted in the thought of Tolstoy. In Mahāyāna ethics, no act, not even killing, can be judged as essentially “inauspicious,” *akuśala*, a Buddhist “term” that I suspect Geshe Samten would rightly associate with our word “violence.” To use an example of Śākyamuni, Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, and the Jains, a medical procedure like amputating a poisoned limb may involve the same acts performed by someone like the serial killer Aṅgulimāla, Finger Garland. If surgery is not violence, because it is well intended and beneficial, then “liberation” is not “violence.” The implicit inauspiciousness of the term “violence” makes it unsuitable for understanding compassionate killing in Tibetans’ own terms. I am not aware of a satisfying Sanskrit translation for the word “violence” and, taking Samten’s criticism of my own work to heart, I find it better to be concrete and speak of specific actions such as killing, warfare, torture etc. in order to preserve their moral ambiguity. Buddhist ethics, with its *abhidharmic* particularism, is not well appreciated through the lens of such seemingly universal terms.

Both killing [therefore “violence”?] and death have unique and distinct meanings for Buddhists. It is not the ultimate annihilation of a life, but has to be taken as part of a continuity of lives. To give an example from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, the Buddha, in a past life as a king, killed a Brāhmaṇa for disrespecting the *dharma*. Once the Brāhmaṇa realized that he had been reborn in Avīci hell as a result of slandering the *sūtra*, he gained respect for the Mahāyāna. This subsequently resulted in his rebirth in the buddha-field of the Tathāgata Amṛta Drum, where he lived for ten *kalpas*. So in this way, the *sūtra* explains, the King did not actually take the Brāhmaṇa’s life, but gave him life.¹² Further, death is also a moment of potentially liberating transformation, a fact that is crucial to Tibetan Buddhist soteriologies. In the course

¹¹In one of the few places that he discusses what he means by the term, Dalton himself states “violence is excessive by definition” (4).

¹²*Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, Karin Buddhological Series V, three volumes, trans. Kosho Yamamoto (Ube, Japan: The Karinbunko, 1973, [Southern Tradition version]) volume 2, 393.

of his subjugation, Rudra is transformed, beautified, purified and illuminated much as any Tibetan Buddhist practitioner might hope to be through the process of death. Subjects of “liberation” find themselves in pure lands, as do the victims in the *Upāyakaśālya* and *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtras*. Obviously Dalton realizes these things, but they do not function in the book as factors that moderate our responses and support a sympathetic understanding.

SOME COMMENTS ON USE OF SOURCES

Dalton makes the common error of conflating the Aśokan edicts with the *Aśokāvadāna*, when he refers to Aśoka’s horrific actions in the *Avadāna* even after his “heartfelt expression of regret for the bloodthirsty days of his youth” (98). In the *avadāna*, Aśoka does no more than incidentally apologize for attempting to boil alive the monk who “converted” him, just before Aśoka burns his torturer to death. His famous expression of regret is from the edicts, which play no recognizable role in Buddhist memory. This is not an important mistake for this text, but one that is very important for the history of Buddhism and Buddhist ethics and shows how difficult it is to be this expansive in such a short book.

Cathy Cantwell has raised serious concerns about Dalton’s translations and use of sources and should be read by anyone interested in this book. Dalton spends a lot of effort trying to show that the rituals he describes may involve directly killing a victim, and a key here is his reading that a human head is thrown into the *maṇḍala*. Regarding this claim, Cantwell writes:

An even more serious objection to Dalton’s claim that the head described is quite likely to be human is that no head is specified anywhere in the text. Dalton (84) adds the word “head” in square brackets. This is a reasonable guess (assuming that it applies to the effigy) of what might be intended here. Yet when he discusses the passage elsewhere, the cautious suggestion in square brackets has become a definite identification to be used as evidence that the rite concerns human sacrifice, and this identification is repeated without qualification at least twelve times in the book.¹³

However, Cantwell appears to be mistaken that the word “head” appears nowhere in the text; Dalton actually uses the word “head” three times without brackets to translate the word *spyi bo* (84). He clearly has a solid basis in the text for taking it as a beheading. In order to take the head as the object thrown into the *maṇḍala*, he supplies the term in brackets four times. In contrast, consciousness is the explicitly identified object in the key paragraph and, in his other examples, it is consciousness that is typically treated as an offering object.

¹³Cantwell, 108.

Dalton's passage also refers to the way this object [explicitly the consciousness] faces and looks, so it is not unreasonable to speculate that it refers to a head. He himself notes from the very beginning of the book that the head of an effigy may be what is indicated here (4). However, he does not just suggest that a head is really indicated when consciousness is tossed into the *maṇḍala*, he inserts "and the head" in brackets. Somehow both are thrown in and the head then replaces consciousness as the agent of all the subsequent verbs for which consciousness was the subject. His reading of this touchstone passage as suggesting an actual human body, and so "human sacrifice," depends, as Cantwell notes, on repeatedly supplying the term "head" in the key sentences and there is a shift between this moment of reasonable speculation to a level of certainty elsewhere in the text. Kapstein notes similarly that Dalton "occasionally prefers to accept a plausible but uncertain solution without making clear the degree of uncertainty."¹⁴

Leaving aside Cantwell's argument that he misreads the source, King Ye-shes-'od's edict is a very singular piece of evidence that carries enormous weight in Dalton's argument. In the rhetoric of law and order and restored ethical purity, one expects to find grand self-validating exaggerations of the debauchery of the times. From early Indian times, Kings were highly sophisticated and often cynical about the manipulation of public opinion, which was considered a key to maintaining power. Edicts were considered political tools. We would never take the ethical complaints of a Christian Evangelical presidential candidate as concrete historical evidence of the ethical realities of the times.

It is also problematic that singular sources, from distinct areas of the far west, east, and northeast are given enormous weight as bases for generalizations for all Tibet. There seems to be little attention to the vastness and diversity of Tibet. How do we evaluate the degree to which these were local or regional concerns? In regard to a much later source from eastern Tibet, he writes that: "In fact, if Garwang's text tells us anything, it is that blood sacrifice was practiced throughout Tibet from the age of fragmentation all the way through to the Twentieth Century" (149). His conclusion would not be surprising, but even if Garwang's concerns are being read correctly, which Cantwell debates, all that has been evidenced here is an isolated instance of localized concern, not that blood sacrifice was practiced "throughout Tibet."

CONCLUSION

Dalton makes an important contribution to the developing view that the so-called Tibetan "dark age" was really an age of creative ferment. However, I

¹⁴Kapstein, 181. Kapstein also points out several problems with Dalton's uses of his research.

require further convincing that in a few lifetimes, 140 years or so, Tibetan Buddhism could make the transformation from an elite monastic and aristocratic/courtly phenomenon to a deeply rooted popular religion with a burgeoning literature. This seems questionable considering Tibet's high geographic and linguistic barriers, general illiteracy, vast territories and cultural diversity. Could Dalton's evidence instead suggest that, to be so developed at the end of the age of fragmentation, the popularization of Buddhism must have started much earlier in the imperial period and that the highly developed activity of the age of fragmentation cannot be explained just by the collapse of imperial authority?

Vegetarianism and violence against animals, which were core cultural issues that were often controversial in Tibet, are unaddressed in this history of violence. This is not just a question of being comprehensive, which is not the real intention of the book, but relates in general to the issues of blood sacrifice, use of meat in rituals, and the aesthetics of tantric imagery and their psychological impact. For carnivorous Tibetans, killing and dismemberment of animals, which they herded or housed on their first floors, and the consumption of their flesh were normal parts of life. Animals are also sentient beings and their killing raises the same ethical issues. These issues had to be dealt with on a daily basis through rationalization and ritual that would be directly related to the central issues of the book.

The major organizing theme of the book is the myth of the forceful subjugation of Rudra that Dalton understands as the "central myth of tantric Buddhism." Some reviewers found the centrality of the Rudra myth overstated and overextended. It certainly functions beautifully as the central narrative focus of the book. It is almost as if Dalton is offering a modern exercise in mythological thinking as he sees this myth everywhere. He swallowed the dark unruly demon of Tibetan history and attempted to subjugate and transform it by bending it to the power of his conception and, like Rudra transformed, it is very much his own construction. This, more than the fact that all histories are constructions, is I suspect at the heart of Dalton's admission that his history is "in places probably an arbitrary" one (19). He might have distinguished more clearly between when the Rudra myth serves a creative frame for the book and when it concretely informs Tibetan history, but the thematic use of the myth is also what makes the book so elegantly constructed. The myth itself is such a remarkably fitting and self-conscious conception of the violence of cultural subjugation, transformation and reappropriation that it is no wonder that it serves Dalton as well as it served Tibetans. I found the effect brilliant, particularly in the chapter "Foundational Violence."

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