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Buddhist Perspectives on Death

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Abstract. The study deals with some of the central issues concerning the notion of death as discussed in Theravāda (Pāli Buddhism) as well as Mahāyāna Buddhism. What is the sense that death is regarded as an instance of *duḥkha* (Sanskrit) or *dukkha* (Pāli)? The research claims that here, firstly, the word *duḥkha/dukkha* is used as an adjective (which means ‘unsatisfactory’) rather than a noun (which means ‘pain’ or ‘suffering’). Secondly, by death, the Buddha did not mean the act of dying but the experience of someone’s death or the idea of death. The Buddha also talked about deathlessness as the goal. Here, deathlessness does not amount to accepting something eternal but developing a proper perspective towards death by meditations such as that on impurity (*asubhabhāvanā*) and contemplation on death (*marañānussati*). If the cessation of the cycle of rebirths and re-deaths (*punarṃṛtyu*) is the ultimate goal that the arhat (Sanskrit), or arahant (Pāli), achieves, then the same should apply to Tathāgata. In that case, the problem suggests itself: how could the question of Tathāgata’s existence after death be accounted for as an unanswerable (*avyākṛta*)? The study opines that the reason behind this is the profound, immeasurable, unfathomable nature attributed to Tathāgata. The research also discusses the basic difference between the attitudes on death in Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna. Lastly, it deals with the question of whether termination of one’s own life is permissible in Buddhism under certain conditions.

Keywords: *duḥkha*, *dukkha*, arhat, arahant, Bodhisattva, Tathāgata, interim existence, Bar-do, suicide

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Буддийские перспективы в отношении смерти

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Аннотация. Рассмотрены некоторые из центральных вопросов, касающихся понятия смерти, обсуждаемых в тхераваде (палийском буддизме), а также в буддизме махаяны. В каком смысле смерть рассматривается как пример *дуккхи* (санскрит) или *дуккхи* (пали)? Утверждается, что, во-первых, слово *дуккха/дуккха* (*dukkha/dukkha*) используется как прилагательное («неудовлетворительный»), а не как существительное («боль» или «страдание»). Во-вторых, под смертью Будда подразумевает не сам акт умирания, а переживание кем-то смерти или саму идею смерти. Будда также говорит о бессмертии как о цели. Для него бессмертие означает не признание чего-то вечным, а развитие правильного отношения к смерти с помощью таких медитаций, как медитация о нечистоте (*aśubhabhāvanā*) и медитация созерцания умирания (*marañānussati*). Если прекращение цикла перерождений и повторных смертей (*punarmṛtyu*) — так часто обозначают сансару) является конечной целью, которую достигает архат, то это должно относиться и к Татхагате. В таком случае возникает проблема: каким образом вопрос о существовании Татхагаты после смерти может считаться неразрешимым (*avyākṛta*)? Автором высказано мнение, что причиной неразрешимости этой проблемы является глубокая, неизмеримая, непостижимая природа, приписываемая Татхагате. Также обсуждено основное различие между отношением к смерти в шравакаяне и махаяне. Наконец, рассмотрен вопрос о том, допустимо ли в буддизме прекращение собственной жизни при определенных условиях.

Ключевые слова: *дуккха*, архат, бодхисаттва, Татхагата, бардо, самоубийство

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It is generally accepted that the doctrine of four noble truths is a core doctrine of Buddhism, at least of Theravāda Buddhism. While elaborating on the first noble truth, namely *dukkha*, in his first sermon, the Buddha gives a list of phenomena that can be described as *dukkha*. They are birth, old age, disease, death, association with what is disliked, dissociation from what is liked, and ultimately, the five aggregates of attachment. Here, the term *dukkha* is used as an adjective (and not a noun, which means “suffering”), which can be interpreted as “painful” or “which can cause pain” or “unsatisfactory.” Something can be *dukkha* in any of the following three ways. Something may be painful in itself (*dukkhadukkhatā*), and something may not be painful itself but may result in pain (*vipariṇāmadukkhatā*). Lastly, something can be *dukkha* in the sense of being unsatisfactory because it is conditioned by its very

nature (*samkhāradukkhatā*). (Here, the possibility that something may be unsatisfactory or painful in more than one way is not ruled out). In this context, what could be the sense in which death can be called *dukkha*? It is a right kind of question. Is death painful in itself? Wittgenstein said death is not an event in life (Tractatus, 6.4311). In India, Cārvākas can agree with him.

Nevertheless, other schools that accept continuity after death may not. Does one become unconscious at the time of death? Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas might agree because, for them, consciousness is a contingent quality of *ātman*, and it simply does not arise at the time of death. There are systems for which consciousness is continuous even in the states, like deep sleep and coma, although it is not vivid in those states. For a Buddhist, every occurrence of consciousness is momentary. However, it arises from the immediately preceding consciousness, which is called its *samanantara-paccaya*, and it also gives rise to the immediately succeeding consciousness of which it is *samanantara-paccaya*. Accordingly, at the time of death, there arises a consciousness which is called *cuticitta* (death-consciousness), and it immediately gives rise to the next consciousness called *paṭisandhicitta* (birth-linking consciousness) which determines the rebirth¹. Whether the death consciousness in itself is painful depends on whether the mind of the person at that time is overwhelmed with passions. Generally, the mind at that time is full of passions because the person at that time is being separated from all types of things, persons, and associations with them about which the person has developed attachments throughout his life.

When the Buddha said that death is *dukkha*, that is, painful, he was probably not talking only about the momentary consciousness at the time of death, but also about the perception of somebody's death, the idea of death, the thought about death and also the process which leads to death, in general, the phenomenon of death. Even when one is alive and in good physical and mental condition, the thought that one is going to die sometime is painful. The site of a dead person is painful. Perhaps seeing a dead person accompanies the idea that something like this is likely to happen to me also, and that is why it becomes painful².

All these experiences — the experience of death, and the experiences and thoughts related to death — were essential for the Buddha. They take away our happiness, and therefore, if at all one wants to be happy, he or she has to overcome the phenomenon of death as such.

¹ Later on, some Buddhist sects conceived of an intermediate state between death and rebirth, called *antarābhava*. In the *Milindapañho*, Nāgasena seems to deny such an intermediate state. In *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (ADKB), Vasubandhu refers to those (probably Vaibhāṣikas) who accept it. However, he denies it as a Sautrāntika. (See ADKB, III.9—13). In Mahāyāna, it seems to have been generally accepted. In Tibetan Buddhism, it was called Bardo. However, the main point here is that even in the intermediate state, the series of consciousness does not cease.

² Though birth, old age, and death are all regarded as kinds of painful events, each of the three is painful for its reason. Birth is painful because it leads to old age and death. Old age is itself a painful experience. Death is painful for the complex reasons suggested above.

Now, what is this overcoming death? Does it mean becoming immortal? Can a person become immortal? If one can, how can one become immortal? These were the questions of great concern at the Buddha's time. The Upaniṣadic thinkers were concerned with these questions and came out with the solution regarding the doctrine of *ātman*. The solution was that *Ātman* is immortal by its very nature. And I am *Ātman*. So I am already immortal. Only I have to realize it.

This solution was not acceptable to the Buddha. There was no eternal *ātman* for him. Everything is non-eternal. Hence, even his last words before the *parinirvāṇa* were, “Now Bhikkhus, I declare to you: all conditioned things are of a nature to decay — strive on untiringly” [1. P. 270].

Hence, although overcoming death was an important goal before the Buddha, it could not be achieved by imagining an immortal soul but by developing a right attitude to death. An essential part of it was accepting death as an inevitable aspect of life or an inevitable fact of life. It is not at all easy to accept the phenomenon of death as an aspect of life. Humans tend to avoid the fact of death, to run away from the idea of death. The Buddha developed the practices of familiarizing ourselves with the fact of death. *Asubhabhāvanā* (meditation on impurity) and *maraṇānussati* (contemplation of death) were the critical meditative practices the Buddha introduced. *Asubhabhāvanā* was the practice of concentrating attention on the corpses in various forms of deterioration³. Through this practice, one could familiarize oneself with the different forms in which death manifests itself. Similarly, *maraṇānussati* meant contemplation of the characteristics of death⁴.

It is possible that by meditating on death with complete absorption, one is likely to lose interest in life and get attracted to death. This seems to have actually happened with some bhikkhus in the Buddha's Order. Once, the Buddha taught meditation on impurity (*asubhabhāvanā*) to the Bhikkhu order and went for a half-monthly solitary retreat. During this period, many Bhikkhus, having practiced

³ Buddhaghosa, the Theravāda Buddhist thinker, refers to ten types of corpses: Swollen Corpse, Discoloured corpse, Festering corpse, Corpse split in two, Corpse torn here and there, Corpse with scattered parts, Cut and dismembered corpse, Bloody corpse, Corpse full of worms and Skeleton. ([2. P. 205—206]. Glenn Mullin, a modern scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, calls this kind of meditation “the death simulation process” [3. P. 67]. According to Tibetan tradition, it can be done by exoteric and esoteric means. The former consists of observation of different stages of decomposition of the dead body. The esoteric technique consists of identifying the three stages of death (death, interim condition, and rebirth) with the three bodies of the Buddha. [3. P. 69—70].

⁴Buddhaghosa explained the form of this meditation as “Death will take place, the life faculty will be cut off.” He then elaborated on the contemplation of death in eight ways: (1) One is face-to-face with the death dealer (such as a murderer). (2) Attainment results in a loss. (3) One's death can be inferred from the death of others. (4) All bodies are alike in being subject to death. (6) Death is signless (unpredictable). (7) Life is limited in time. (8) Consciousness is momentary ([2. P. 265—275.], Chapter VIII, Section VII). Mullin calls this type of meditation “The three roots, nine reasonings, and three convictions” [3. P. 67]. It includes contemplation on the following facts about death: death is definite, but the time of death is indefinite. At the time of our death, only spiritual achievements are of value. Each root is supposed to be supported by three reasons and to bring one to the conviction to practice Dharma [3. P. 68].

meditation on impurity in many different aspects, got ashamed of their own body and wanted to deprive themselves and each other of their bodies. They took the help of a monk called Migalaṇḍika to get deprived of life. When the Buddha returned from his solitary retreat, he found that the number of Bhikkhus in his Order had considerably reduced. Knowing the reason, he taught the Bhikkhus the mindfulness technique of breathing and made the following rule against depriving oneself of one's life or others of their lives [4. P. 116—123], Defeat (Pārājika) III.

“Whatsoever Bhikkhu shall knowingly ...utter the praises of death, or incite another to self-destruction saying, ‘Oh! My friend! What good do you get from this sinful, wretched life? Death is better to thee than life!’ If so thinking and with such an aim, he by various argument, utter the praises of death or incite another to self-destruction — he too is fallen into defeat, he is no longer in communion [5. P. 4]”.

This dual attitude to death, describing the whole life as unsatisfactory and accepting death as a brute fact of life, on the one hand, and condemnation of voluntary choice of death on the other, is presented as a dilemma in the *Milindapañho*. Milinda formulates the dilemma as follows:

“Venerable Nāgasena, it has been said by the Blessed one: ‘A brother is not, O Bhikkhus, to commit suicide. Whosoever does so will be dealt with according to the law’. And on the other hand, you say: ‘On whatsoever subject the Blessed one was addressing the disciples, he always... preached to them in order to bring about the destruction of birth, of old age, of disease and of death...’. Now, if the Blessed one forbade suicide, that saying of yours must be wrong, but if not, then the prohibition of suicide must be wrong”.

Bhante Nāgasena's solution to the dilemma was that both were the Buddha's statements, and there was no inconsistency between them. The Buddha emphasized proper conduct as a means to purify the mind. However, developing moral conduct and propagating the path of happiness to people was possible only by living a long life. Therefore, he condemned suicide. But it is also a fact that life is a source of all kinds of suffering. Hence, the ultimate human goal is to be free from this cycle of births and deaths.

In other words, the Buddha, according to Nāgasena, was making a distinction between one who puts an end to a particular life and one who puts an end to the whole cycle of life and death. The former type of person does not put an end to *samsāra* but gets fastened to it more because putting an end to anyone's life is, after all, a manifestation of one's craving for destruction (*vibhavataṇhā*). The latter type of person, on the other hand, becomes an Arahant who has destroyed all cravings⁵.

In this way, in Śrāvakayāna, we have to distinguish between the death of ordinary persons or aspirants of different categories (lower than *arahant*) on the one hand and the death of *arahant* on the other. An ordinary person's death is necessarily followed by the next birth or a series of births and deaths. Buddhism recognizes four categories of aspirants in terms of their achievements. They are stream-

⁵ The experience of becoming Arahant is described in Theravāda as: “Destroyed are all cravings, have lived the life, nothing remains to be achieved. There is no next life.”

enterers, once-returners, non-returners, and *arahant*. Among them, the death of a stream-enterer (*śrotāpanna*) is followed by his or her rebirths, at least one, at the most seven. The death of a once-returner (*sakadāgāmī*) is followed by exactly one birth. The death of a non-returner (*anāgāmī*) is not followed by rebirth in this world, though an aspirant of this category may be reborn in another world till the *arahant*-hood. As against the death of all these aspirants, the death of an *arahant* is not followed by a rebirth.

Arahant is the one who has achieved the final goal of life and, hence, will not be reborn. Now, ontologically, the Buddha and *arahant* belong to the same category. Both have obliterated their impurities and for that reason, it was sure that the Buddha would not be reborn after his *Parinirvāṇa*. To speak more generally, we should be able to say that just like an *arahant*, Tathāgata the Buddha should not continue to exist after death. But here, a problem starts because this obvious corollary is not whole-heartedly accepted in Śrāvākayāna Buddhism. We find an ambivalent position on this in Theravāda literature. In *Mahāparinibbāṇasutta*, the Buddha is prepared for the situation in which he will be no more. Hence, he advises Bhikkhus to take refuge in themselves (*attadīpā bhavata attasaraṇā*) and to Dhamma (*dhammadīpā bhavata dhammasaraṇā*) because he was convinced that he was not going to be available to them as a person anymore. Naturally, the Theravādins after the Buddha had a problem with worshipping the Buddha because they were aware that since the Buddha was no more, they would not establish any rapport with the Buddha through worshipping. This is clear from a question to that effect and Nāgasena's answer to it in the *Milindapañho*⁶.

If this is the case, then there was perhaps no reason why the Buddha should have refused to answer the question asked by Mālunkyaputta, Potthapāda, and Vacchagotta whether Tathāgata exists after death. The question was asked in all four forms: *exists*, *does not exist*, *both*, and *neither*. The Buddha refused to accept any of the four alternatives. When asked why he did not answer the question, the Buddha gave three different reasons. In *Cūlamālunkyasutta* and *Potthapādasutta*, he gave a pragmatic reason that the question (along with other similar unanswered questions) was not relevant to the main issue with which the Buddha was concerned, namely, the issue of suffering, the cause of suffering and the removal of suffering. However, in *Aggivacchagottasutta*, he gives two other reasons which are more specific to the question of Tathāgata's death.

1) The terms *reappear*, *does not reappear*, etc., do not apply to “Tathāgata after death”. The Buddha compares the questions about Tathāgata's reappearance after death with the question about the fire that has been extinguished, whether it has gone to the East, the West, the North, or the South. Just as this question is meaningless, the Buddha argues, the question about the Tathāgata's reappearance is meaningless. This argument of the Buddha can be called an argument from a wrong

⁶Milinda's question was, if the Buddha has entirely passed away, he cannot accept gifts, and if he accepts gifts, he has not entirely passed away. Nāgasena answered that “The Blessed one is entirely set free. The Blessed one accepts no gifts.” [6. P. 227—230] (Book IV, Chapter I 1st Dilemma).

question. Accordingly, the question about the Tathāgata's existence after death is unanswerable because the question itself is wrong [5. P. 593].

2) Since the Tathāgata has completely uprooted all the five aggregates, he is liberated from reckoning in terms of them. "He is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable like the ocean." [5. P. 593—594]. This can be called the argument from sublimity. The question about the Tathāgata's existence after death is unanswerable because Tathāgata is a sublime being beyond language.

The above two arguments, which the Buddha gives as if they are interconnected, are, in fact, two separate arguments. Out of them, the first argument, the argument from the wrong question, is not convincing. That is because the two questions that the Buddha compares are, in fact, of different types. The question about the extinguished fire and where it has gone is wrong because it is based on the wrong presupposition that an extinguished fire goes somewhere. About the Tathāgata who has died, one is not asking where he goes. One is asking whether he continues to exist; that he does not continue to exist could have been the straight and correct answer. If so, why did the Buddha equate the right question with the wrong one?

Perhaps the real reason that the Buddha had in mind was the second one. And it is that Tathāgata is not an ordinary person. His death is not like an ordinary person's death. Since the Tathāgata is profound, immeasurable, and unfathomable like an ocean, his so-called death is something beyond description. Since his death itself is beyond description, whether he exists after death or not is also inexpressible in language.

Why are the Buddha and his death extraordinary? Though they are not extraordinary from an ontological point of view, they are so from a religious point of view. The religious importance of the Buddha lies in his role as the founder of Dhamma. Dhamma, which stands for the Buddha's teachings, gives all beings the path to cessation of suffering. The Buddha believed and expected that after his demise, his Dhamma would remain through the practice of his followers, which would continue to guide humanity. Hence, when Ānanda asked what his followers should follow after his demise, the Buddha's answer was that they should take refuge in themselves and Dhamma. That is, they have to follow Dhamma, but they should follow it by verifying it in terms of their own experience and power of discrimination and analysis. They were not supposed to follow Dhamma blindly.

Śrāvakayāna Buddhism, in this way, brings forth a complex and paradoxical situation. The arahant ideal, on the one hand, implies that the complete cessation of the cycle of births and deaths is possible, which is why arahant's death is a death without any residual personality. Ontologically, the Buddha is a kind of arahant; hence, the Buddha, like any other arahant, would not exist after death. But on the other hand, the Buddha cannot cease to exist because he has to continue through his extra-ordinarily contribution, namely Dhamma.

Then, there was the question of Buddhism being on par with other religions. Mahāyānists seemed to be concerned with this problem. If Dhamma has to continue after the Buddha, it must be given a permanent ontological status. Similarly, if the

Buddha himself was a sublime being, he also had to exist as a permanent being. At the same time, it cannot be permanent like the *ātman* of the eternalist religious systems. Finding a constructive answer, a religiously satisfying answer to the problem of the Buddha's death, might have been one of the major driving forces for the development of Mahāyāna.

One does not know how exactly this must have happened. The transition from Śrāvakayāna to Mahāyāna certainly marks a paradigm shift. The concepts of Buddha and Dhamma, which were human-centric in Śrāvakayāna, assume the status of metaphysical reality in Mahāyāna. The Buddha, that is, the Śākyamuni Buddha and his teachings are accommodated in the new framework but given secondary status. They are magical (and illusory) creations of the Buddha principle, which is ultimately real. This is systematized in terms of the doctrine of *Trikāya*, three bodies of the Buddha. The Buddha, which is the ultimate nature of all things, becomes manifest with the three bodies: *Dharmakāya*, which is its eternal body⁷, *Nirmāṇakāya* (Transformation body, also called form-body, that is, *rūpakāya*) [7. P. 182—183], which is the created body, through which the ultimate Buddhahood assumes human form for the benefit of all beings, like that of Śākyamuni-Buddha, and between the two, the third body called *Sambhoga-kāya* (Enjoyment body⁸), which occupies a Pure Land and teaches Mahāyāna to advanced bodhisattvas [7. P. 182—183].

Bodhisattva doctrine is another part of this paradigm shift. Accordingly, the Arahant ideal of the Śrāvakayāna gets replaced by the Bodhisattva ideal. Arahant has put an end to the cycle of births and deaths in his case. His forthcoming death will be the last, which is a mark of his fulfillment. On the other hand, bodhisattva does not want to end the cycle in his case. On the contrary, he wants to be reborn to strive for the well-being of all beings. Bodhisattva ideal also reduces the conceptual distance between the Buddha and ordinary persons. According to Śrāvakayāna, everybody cannot become a bodhisattva. An exceptional one can have the capacity to become a Buddha. According to Mahāyāna, anybody can take a Bodhisattva vow, and in principle, everybody has the potential to become the Buddha. Moreover, Mahāyānists claim that, ultimately, Buddha's nature is the true nature of everything. According to the Madhyamika philosopher Nāgārjuna, it is not only the question of whether Tathāgata exists after death that is unanswerable, but even the question of whether Tathāgata exists during his lifetime is unanswerable⁹. Nāgārjuna then

⁷ “There is no question of *Dharmakāya* attaining *parinirvāna*, for the *Dharmakāya* does not attain anything at all. It is permanent, remaining forever in its own nature. Things are always empty of inherent existence; the continuum of pure radiant consciousness never ceases” [6. P. 183]. It can be seen that in this description of *Dharmakāya*, Madhyamaka and Yogācāra conceptions are fused.

⁸ It may be legitimate to ask why the Mahāyāna Buddhists accepted this third body. The answer could be that an intermediate body was required for a kind of religious governance in higher worlds (for guiding bodhisattvas belonging to them). *Dharmakāya*, being eternal, was not involved in religious governance at the day-to-day level. *Nirmāṇa-kāya* could be engaged with giving guidance in the *kāma*-world. The Buddhas in higher worlds need bodies that are superior to *Nirmāṇa-kāya*, but because of their functionality, are inferior to *Dharmakāya*.

⁹ See 12.12–14 in [7] and Candrakīrti's commentary on that.

generalizes this position further and applies it to all phenomena¹⁰. Hence, the question about the existence of anything whatsoever is unanswerable. Bodhisattva is the one who tries to realize this truth in himself. That is, he tries to realize his identity with the Buddha. Hence, bodhisattva's death, according to the Mahāyāna perspective, becomes very different from that of ordinary persons or even from that of *arahant* of Śrāvakayāna.

Unlike the death of an *arahant*, bodhisattva's death is not his final death. Although, like the death of an ordinary person, a bodhisattva's death is followed by rebirth, unlike the former, it is not to be considered evil. It is just a transfer from one altruistic form of life full of love and compassion to another form, which can be taken with a positive spirit.

Hence, although the Vinaya rule of Śrāvakayāna, which regards praising death, glorifying death, and inducing someone to die as offenses, is equally applicable to Mahāyāna. Mahāyānins, because of their metaphysical belief in universal and non-dual Buddhahood and Bodhisattva ideal of altruistic practice, at times seem to look at death with a more welcoming or celebrating mood. Therefore, we find in Tantrayāna, which is a part of Mahāyāna, that a Yogin (that is, a Tāntric Buddhist practitioner), is not only supposed to prepare for a good death by the meditative practices on death, but he is the one who is well prepared for death and is supposed to transform his consciousness at the time of death into the *Dharmakāya* of the Buddha, Bar-do (that is, the interim existence) into *Sambhogakāya* and rebirth into *Nirmāṇakāya* [3. P. 73].

Of course, welcoming or celebrating death, which is already due, is one thing, and inviting death through a suicidal act is quite another. In Mahāyāna literature and actual practice, there are also rare instances of that kind. Such acts are either the altruistic expressions of Bodhicitta or Acts of Devotion. Notably, a devotional act of this kind becomes possible because, unlike in Theravāda, the Buddha, according to Mahāyāna, is ever present, so worshipping and devotion can be offered to him.

Paul Williams records that in Mahāyāna literature, “the perfection of *giving* was often illustrated with popular but gory tales of the Bodhisattva giving his limbs or body, for example, or burning himself out of devotion and selflessness. Chinese pilgrims to India in classical times describe curious cases of what amounts to religious suicide.”¹¹.

Mahāyānists often find support for such acts in *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*, that is, *Lotus Sūtra*. “Chapter 23 of the Lotus Sūtra recounts how the Bodhisattva Bhaiṣajyarāja in a previous life wished to make the most perfect offering to the Buddha. He accordingly offered his body by setting fire to it. The body burnt for a very long time, and he was eventually reborn in a Pure Land.” (9: 154).

Committing suicide for a noble cause is also a current phenomenon, though rare, in some Mahāyāna-dominated societies. Two such instances are worth noting.

¹⁰ “*tathāgato yatsvabhāvas tatsvabhāvam idaṃ jagat/ tathāgato niḥsvabhāvo niḥsvabhāvam idaṃ jagat/*” 12.16 in [7].

¹¹ Williams [8. P. 51]. Williams owes these observations to Lalmani Joshi's work [9].

(1) During the Vietnam War, the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc publicly burnt himself to death to protest the government's repression of Buddhism. Other Vietnamese Buddhists did the same, including Nhat Chi Mai, a member of Nhat Hanh's Order of Inter-being. (2) In recent years, several Tibetans have also burnt themselves to death in protest against China's occupation of Tibet [10. P. 273—274].

These acts have received mixed reactions from the Buddhist spiritual leaders. Thich Nhat Hanh defended the self-immolation of the Tibetan monks. For him, they are not really acts of suicide but expressions of unconditional willingness to suffer for the awakening of others. HH the Dalai Lama, on the contrary, has not encouraged the suicidal acts of the Tibetans [10. P. 273—274].

These acts of self-immolation are, however, markedly different from the acts praised in Mahāyāna sūtras, which are done from purely altruistic or devotional motives. The former are acts of protest and hence are not purely religious but political. Though they presuppose a religious framework of life after death, they are not justifiable by religious grounds rooted in *ahimsā* or altruism. Hence, between Thich Nhat Hanh and HH the Dalai Lama, the latter's approach appears to be more consistent.

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