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*The Taming of the Demons: Violence and Liberation in
Tibetan Buddhism*

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A Review of *The Taming of the Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism*

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The Taming of the Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism. By Jacob P. Dalton.
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011, x + 311 pages, ISBN 978-0-300-18796-0 (paper), \$27.50;
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The last several years have seen an increased interest in and publication on the topic of Buddhism and violence. Jacob P. Dalton's *The Taming of the Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism* provides great insight into the topic of ritual and violence in Tibetan Buddhism, largely because it brings to light new materials on violent ritual and its role throughout Tibetan history. Dalton's research is based on manuscripts from the Dunhuang library cave, thus offering details from previously un-translated texts. *The Taming of the Demons* offers the reader a balanced and nuanced examination of an ethically complex topic. As Dalton notes in his acknowledgments, "The subject of violence, and perhaps even more so religious violence, can elicit strong reactions" (ix). In *The Taming of the Demons* Dalton has undertaken a massive project, an investigation of the history of violent ritual and themes of violence in Tibetan

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Buddhism. What results is a comprehensive study that incorporates textual analysis and historical research that spans religious traditions and centuries of religious development.

The Taming of the Demons comprises an introduction, seven chapters, three appendices, and a glossary of Tibetan titles and terms. Chapter One presents the history of compassionate violence in Buddhism beginning with early Buddhist conceptions, particularly interpretations within Abhidharma and Vinaya literature, then moves to a discussion of the range of Mahāyāna perspectives. Dalton offers textual support for the various opinions on violence from a variety of Buddhist literature, including the Jātakas, the *Upāyakauśalya Sūtra*, and the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*. By highlighting the various pre-tantric positions regarding violence, Chapter One recognizes that “. . . the necessary doctrinal pieces were in place” (29). Pre-tantric literature included numerous examples of moral and immoral violence, often focusing upon the intention behind the violent act. The subtle distinction between moral and immoral violence is discussed in relationship to the Rudra myth, the central text for Dalton’s overall argument. Dalton argues, “These two kinds of violence—one wise and compassionate and the other ignorant and demonic—are difficult to distinguish, and yet if the Rudra myth tells us anything, their differentiation is crucial to the tantric Buddhist path” (11).

Chapter Two offers a glimpse into the so-called “dark age” of Tibet. Traditional Tibetan history depicts this period of fragmentation, the period from the mid-ninth to the late tenth century, as an era in which Buddhism was persecuted and no longer thrived in Tibet. Recent scholarship has questioned these traditional accounts and based on new materials from Dunhuang, this period of fragmentation seems to have been one in which there was “a wide range of creative changes and developments” and nonmonastic Buddhism continued to thrive (46). Dalton argues convincingly that, “The forms Buddhism took during these ‘dark’ years may have been distortions in the view of *later* Tibetans,

but these same corruptions were fundamental in shaping Tibetan Buddhism” (46). A major assertion of the book is the importance of ritual violence, sorcery, and demonology in the Tibetan view of history (48). These themes are cemented during the period of fragmentation as the nonmonastic tantric traditions gain traction in Tibet and are evidenced in the Dunhuang texts (59).

Chapter Three introduces the reader to Dunhuang textual material that includes a “liberation rite” (*sgrol ba*). Dalton provides a translation and description of the rite followed by a comparative textual analysis with the *Kālikā Purāṇa*’s “Blood Chapter”. Dalton highlights the pan-Indian development of tantra and the shared characteristics of Hindu and Buddhist practices, concluding that the liberation rite from the Dunhuang manuscript “may represent an example of such intersectorian sharing . . .” (89). The Dunhuang manuscript is vague in its explanation about whether the ritual “liberation” or killing involves the use of an effigy or a living person. Regardless of whether the intended victim is living or represented by an effigy, the fact that these types of rituals existed in Tibetan literature led to the late 10th century pronouncement against such practices by King Yeshe Ö.

Chapter Four focuses upon Yeshe Ö’s pronouncement (c. 990 CE) against live liberation and his attempts to rectify what he saw as abuses of tantric ritual. “The alternative Yeshe Ö offered these misguided *tāntrikas* was normative, exoteric Buddhism—the moral truths of cause and effect, and gradual path of self-improvement, generosity, and laboring for the welfare of others” (105). What he offered these practitioners was a monastic-oriented Buddhism that came to characterize much of the Buddhism that developed in the second period of dissemination.

Dalton revisits the importance of the period of fragmentation in Chapter Five where he discusses the importance of demon subjugation, a theme grown out of the so-called “dark age,” in the construction of temples in 11th and 12th century Tibet. During this period of rebuilding,

the subjugation of demons became an important motif, as evidenced by the *Rākṣasī* legend in which a demoness that lays over Tibet must be tamed. This line of thinking is developed in the 11th and 12th century to represent those Tibetans who required taming. “Here it is significant that not only Tibetans of the age of fragmentation require taming, but those of the later dispensation as well, and perhaps this was more to the point. The self-demonizing rhetoric of the period went hand in hand with a common Tibetan emphasis on India and the purity of all things Indian” (124).

Chapter Six examines the Tibetan encounter with the Mongols in the 13th century and the role that violent rites played in their relationship. The use of ritual violence changed significantly in light of the violent climate of 13th century Tibet. Dalton notes that violent rituals went from the local to the global as the rites were now being performed for the sake of the state, not the individual (126). It is here that Dalton provides important statements regarding the modern Tibetan state. He argues that the modern Tibetan state was founded on ritual violence, practices that are rooted in the period of fragmentation and that the motifs of demonization and symbolic sacrifice are those that have continuously determined the shape of Buddhism in Tibet (142-143).

Dalton concludes with an examination of two contemporaries, L. Austine Waddell and Rigdzin Gargyi Wangchuk. Both men were writing in the late 19th century on similar issues, yet from very different perspectives. Waddell, as an employee of the British Empire, sought to rid Tibetan Buddhism of violence and superstition. Similarly, Garwang’s aim was to encourage Tibetan Buddhists away from practices involving sacrifice. “Both wrote with a specific purpose in mind, to introduce Tibetan Buddhism to new parts of the world, and both expressed horror at the ‘deep-rooted devil-worship and sorcery’ that they found along Tibet’s ‘pitch dark’ borders” (144). Garwang is an example of how the warning against the dangers of the age of fragmentation continued to be cited well into the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Tibet. This final

chapter proves to be a valuable contribution to the book as it highlights how ideas can take root and breed over long periods of time and come to represent history even when their accuracy can be called into question.

The Taming of the Demons concludes with three appendices and a glossary that includes the translation of the Subjugation of Rudra myth, the transliteration from Tibetan of the Dunhuang liberation rite, and transliteration and translation of a second Dunhuang liberation rite. The appendices are particularly useful for the reader possessing knowledge of classical Tibetan, with an interest in reading the original texts.

The Taming of the Demons adds much to scholarship on Tibetan Buddhism, its history, and its practices. It must also be noted that the book contributes greatly to the larger topic of Buddhism and violence. However, the book presupposes the reader has a basic knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism, and is, therefore, directed towards the specialist audience. Yet Dalton has successfully fulfilled the task of dealing with over one thousand years of Tibetan history and its changing views on violent ritual. The translation and use of Dunhuang manuscripts offers insight into the history of Tibetan Buddhism that demands a rethinking of traditional perspectives. Dalton's work contributes to a better understanding of how ideas spread from one religious tradition to another across geographic borders and the book will serve as an important interpretive tool for scholars of religion and history.