

## **Mahāyāna Buddhist self-immolation: normative, metaethical and phenomenological dimensions**

The question of suicide in Buddhism is complex and contested. Drawing on recently published essays, this lecture will not focus specifically on the status of suicide in Pāli Buddhism, or anthropological dimensions of suicide in Buddhist histories or cultures, as those essays do, but rather directly addresses the normative question: how can and should the recent (as of late-September 2014) 132 self-immolations of Tibetan Buddhists inside and outside Tibet, be understood and evaluated?

In answering this question, I defend a thesis grounded in Buddhist philosophy, which claims that the act of self-immolation sustains inherent ethical value in the context of certain sets of intentional causes and conditions, and not others. This conclusion is supported by a hermeneutic framework which identifies such an act for Buddhist purposes as a “dependent-arising” constituted by at least four dialectical aspects: those of the suicidal agent, the act itself, its ethical witness, and the social polity that subsequently engages (or fails to engage) this ethical witness.

The first part of this lecture will detail the metaethical argument that supports such a qualified normative reading of the acts. The second half of the lecture is more descriptive, and offers a largely phenomenological analysis of the real, religious, symbolic and political ontologies of these acts as constituted by particular ethical intentionalities, including their asymmetric relation to the greater intersubjective world that is the global witness to them.

### **About the lecturer**

With a background in Buddhist practice and literary studies, **Martin Kovan** completed an M.A. in English with the U.S. Buddhist poet Gary Snyder. Since then he has also completed an MPhil. in Buddhist Studies, and now conducts research and original writing in human rights ethics, Buddhist ethics, political-prisoner advocacy, Burmese and South Asian politics, European philosophy and hermeneutics. Currently completing a PhD. degree in philosophy via Melbourne University, he has in recent years published academic research papers, essays, journalism, reportage, interviews, poetry, short fiction and magazine articles, in the U.S., Australia, France, the U.K., India, Thailand and the Czech Republic, and has lived for different periods in Australia, the U.S., Paris, India, and SE Asia.