Jacob P. Dalton’s *Taming of the Demons* has already created a stir in and beyond Buddhist studies, and it is not hard to see why: the combination of violence and Buddhism has a ready appeal. If the specifically Tibetan form of Buddhism has a key theme, it is the importance of Buddhist Tantric power, as represented in the central figure of Padmasambhava, who tamed the gods and spirits of Tibet and bound them forcefully to the service of Buddhism. But how and when did Buddhist practitioners develop the ritual resources and techniques to undertake this “taming,” and how did they make sense of the violence implicit in the process? Why is that power often expressed in images of such extreme and transgressive violence? In his introduction, Dalton tells us that violence has played “a crucial role in Tibetan Buddhism” (p. 2).

References to obscure manuscripts describing possible rituals of human sacrifice (a.k.a. “liberation rites”) raise the temperature further. At a time when images of peaceful Tibet crushed by the brutality of the Chinese state dominate popular consciousness, Dalton’s theme has enough shock value to guarantee a widespread hearing. As for Tibetanists, they are more habituated to imagery of fierce Tantric deities adorned with skulls, bone ornaments, and flayed human skins, and less tempted to take them at face value. Dalton’s opening suggestion, however, that the writings of the notorious British scholar L. A. Waddell (1854–1938) — widely reviled among Tibetanists for his dismissive colonialist attitude to Tibetan religion and his later flirtations with Aryan supremacy theories — have much in common with those of his Tibetan contemporary Rigdzin Garwang, may stimulate a little excitement as well.

This is nevertheless a significant book on an important topic within Tibetan religion. Dalton sees the key to his “history of violence in Tibetan Buddhism” (p. 2) as located in the mysterious *bsil ba’i dus*, the “Dark Age” or (more literally) “period of fragmentation” between the collapse of the Tibetan empire in the 840s and the renewal of contact with Indian Buddhism at the end of the tenth century. He also sees a group of Tibetan texts from Dunhuang, an important Central Asian site which has yielded a large body of Tibetan and Chinese texts from the tenth century, as a window into this period. The Tibetan component of the Dunhuang material, most of which is now in London and Paris, has long been regarded as providing unique access to early Tibetan religion, and Dalton is a significant member of the small group of scholars who have been working productively on this material in recent years.
While much of the Dunhuang research has appeared in relatively obscure locations, Dalton’s book is aimed at a wider readership, implying that Tibetan attempts to use religion for destructive purposes and their ambivalence about such uses have something to say outside the confines of Tibetan studies. Certainly, it is an important addition to the rather small corpus of works examining the problematic relationship between Buddhism and violence.

In Dalton’s view, the Tibetan material at Dunhuang demonstrates a remarkable efflorescence of new Tibetan Tantric techniques, many of them aimed specifically at the destruction of hostile powers. Dalton sees the well-known Indian Buddhist myth of the “subjugation of Rudra” as the classic text for the destructive exercise of Tantric power. This narrative tells how a horrendous and massively destructive demon named Rudra, not coincidentally an epithet of the Hindu deity Śiva, is destroyed by Buddhist deities who acquire similarly scary attributes to carry out the job. The story exists in a number of Indian and Tibetan versions, and an appendix to the book provides an extended translation of the most elaborate version, from an important early Tibetan text known as the Dgongs ’dus (“Compendium of the Intentions of the Buddhas”), the subject of Dalton’s 2002 Ph.D., and probably originating in the late ninth century. Further appendices provide texts of two “liberation rites” from Dunhuang (PT42/ITJ419, previously studied and in part translated by Carmen Meinert, and PT840/1), along with a full translation of the second. Relevant sections of the first, which plays a key part in Dalton’s argument, are included in the text proper (pp. 82–86).

Dalton undoubtedly has a close familiarity with the Dunhuang material. In this book, as in his earlier writings, he provides informative, stimulating, and often provocative interpretations of his material. His emphasis on Tibetan creativity in the ninth and tenth centuries, and on the crucial role that this creativity played in the development of Tibetan Buddhism as we know it from later periods, is also very welcome, and in tune with other recent Tibetan research, such as the writings of David Germano, Rob Mayer, Cathy Cantwell, and Henk Blezer. Dalton tells a persuasive and largely convincing story, with some important new suggestions (for example regarding the “localization” of Tantric ritual, pp. 66–75, and the well-known “supine demoness” story, pp. 113–125). There are nevertheless some questions that might be asked about Dalton’s “history of violence in Tibetan Buddhism” (p. 2).

For one thing, Dalton underplays the social and political context of Buddhism, both in India and in Tibet. Dalton notes in passing that the violent and transgressive language of Tantric Buddhist writings in the seventh century might have created an “air of danger, secrecy and power” that encouraged “villagers and kings” to hire them as ritual practitioners (p. 34). That is