

ENCHANTMENT WITH TIBETAN LAMAS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Hardly had I heard the name of Marpa the Translator than I was filled with ineffable happiness. In my joy every hair on my body vibrated. I sobbed in fervent adoration. Locking my whole mind in a single thought, I set out with provisions and a book. Without being distracted by any other thoughts, I ceaselessly repeated to myself, “When? When will I see the lama face to face?” [Then,] at the side of the road, a tall and corpulent monk, with large eyes and awesome look, was plowing a field. I had scarcely seen him when I was filled with unutterable joy and inconceivable bliss (Lhalungpa, 1985: 43, 45).

Introduction

The meeting of the Tibetan saint Milarepa with his Buddhist teacher, Marpa the Translator, marked the beginning of Milarepa’s epic Buddhist journey. Milarepa’s long-term encounter with Marpa, complete with trials and tribulations, remains paradigmatic in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition for its manifestation of the foundational practice of guru devotion. In this, Tibetan Buddhism finds parallels in the Hindu *guru-śisya* relationship, the Islamic Sufi *shaykh-murīd* relationship, and similar relationships found in Taoism and Hasidic Judaism, in which it is the interpersonal relationship of religious seeker and religious master which provides the fulcrum for reaching the experiential religious goal and thus centers all other religious practices.

In the United States the idea of teacher-student relationships’ in themselves being soteriological, that is, leading to an ultimate religious goal such as *nirvāna*, is of quite recent vintage. Practices embodying this idea, however, are growing constantly as Tibetan Buddhism,

Hinduism, Islam, and other alternative traditions expand rapidly in the United States. Unfortunately, perhaps because they are so new, such goal-consummating interpersonal relationships are woefully understudied in terms of the on-the-ground experiences of American practitioners. For example, valuable academic studies of American Buddhism such as those of Coleman (2001), Fields (1992), Prebish (1979, 1999), Prebish and Tanaka (1998), Seager (1999), and Williams and Queen (1999) do not substantially explore American disciples' experiences of the dynamics with their guru, nor do studies of other Asian religions in the United States, with the exception of the studies of Hinduism of Martignetti (1995, 1998), Williams (1986), and Wilson (1985).

This essay contributes to the ethnographic exploration of religious teacher-student interpersonal soteriologies in the United States by examining the Tibetan guru-disciple relationship through accounts from disciples themselves. In so doing this essay also provides some corrective to the almost exclusively negative perceptions of the guru-disciple relationship in United States found in scholarship to this point (see Deutsch, 1975, 1982; Kramer and Alstad, 1993; Kriegman, 1980; Kriegman and Solomon, 1985; and Levine, 1980; for more positive assessments, see Martignetti, 1995; and Wilson, 1985). These studies consider the merger-like dynamic of the guru-disciple relationship inherently unhealthy for supposedly independence-minded Americans.¹ Yet these studies arrive at their conclusions by understanding submission to the guru as the goal of the practice, rather than as a means to a very different and empowering goal. Many studies do not consider an essential goal of Tibetan guru devotion practice, which is becoming a guru oneself. By offering a different understanding of the goal of the practice, this essay offers a different interpretation of the religious dynamics of the guru-disciple relationship as well as a different interpretation of practitioners. In my ethnography, disciples generally do

not consider themselves in the end to be surrendering independence to their teacher, but rather, finding a more transcendental form of independence, following traditional teachings. Rather than escaping from reality through a psychological merger or becoming mindless automatons, disciples in my ethnographic data reflect the American Zen Buddhists in David Preston's ethnography, who are "creative experimenters in an area of culture that still remains largely undeveloped, not the incompetent and inadvertent victims of manipulative religious movements" (Preston, 1988: 15).

Data Collection

Data for this essay derive from a larger project (Capper, 2002) which examines why so many non-Tibetan Americans from Christian and Jewish backgrounds are turning instead to Tibetan Buddhism as a religious option. To investigate the relevant issues I undertook more than two years of ethnographic fieldwork from 1995-1998 at a major residential Tibetan Buddhist center which I fictitiously call 'Siddha Gompa.'² At Siddha Gompa I employed the usual reflexive ethnographic methods of data gathering of interviews, conversations, participation, and tacit observations. Practitioners described in this essay are all convert, ethnically non-Tibetan American Buddhists. It may interest the reader to know that personally I do not possess a close, long-term relationship with a guru like the ones I will describe.

About 25 Americans and 10 Tibetans may reside at Siddha Gompa, which is fluid in population, at any one time. Popular teachings or rituals may attract as many as 150 temporary guest practitioners, many of whom are quite serious and experienced Buddhists. The Tibet-born abbot of Siddha Gompa, Sangye Rinpoche, has served as an abbot for other important Tibetan

*gompas*³ in Sikkim and India. Sherab Tulku, the Tibet-born resident *lama* (Tibetan Buddhist guru or religious teacher), is recognized as a *terton* (*gter ston*), or mystical discoverer of religious artifacts. Other lamas visit frequently. An effort of Tibetans to preserve their religious heritage in the diaspora, Siddha Gompa is as authentic and faithful to Tibetan models of residential Buddhist practice as any found in the United States.

Guru Devotion in America

Personal devotion to a guru in Tibetan Buddhism is, in contradistinction to some other forms of Buddhism, essential for traversing the liberative path to *nirvāna*. To greater or lesser degrees all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism teach that liberation may only be gained within the context of devotion to a lama. Meditation, study of sacred texts, offerings of generosity, and other common Buddhist practices are of no avail unless one also practices guru devotion. All Buddhist practices at Siddha Gompa revolve around this devotion. The reason given for this is that devotion must be entertained before one can experience the *chinlab* (*byin brlabs*), or ‘blessing,’ ‘grace,’ or ‘engulfment in splendor’ of the lama. As expressed by lamas at the gompa in an apparently common sense way, we have all been reborn many times over countless years. We have had a great deal of time to liberate ourselves, yet we have not. We should all draw the obvious conclusion that we are not going to become liberated on our own. We need help. And the only source of this help, the piece that we have been missing, is the spontaneous experience of enlightened ‘ordinary mind,’ which can be obtained through the lama’s blessing and nowhere else. Lamas, as already liberated beings, constantly emanate this blessing energy,⁴ yet without devotion one cannot perceive or integrate the blessing energy. And integrating this energy is

what Buddhist practice, from this point of view, is all about. The key to Tibetan Buddhist practice at the gompa, therefore, is the interpersonal mystical practice of guru devotion.

Phonetically rendered, the Tibetan term for this is *mugu* (*mos kus*), which roughly in Tibetan might mean ‘devotion,’ ‘adoration,’ or ‘fervent veneration’ (Das, 1983). American practitioners in my ethnography, most of whom understand little Tibetan, almost always understand it simply as ‘devotion.’ The explanation given by practitioners for this devotion is a deep ‘karmic connection’ with the religious teacher, an intense, overdetermined personal nexus that transcends lifetimes and individual incarnations.

While *mugu* represents a volitional attitude, the overarching religious experience of *mugu*’s results is what I call ‘enchantment’ with the lama.⁵ It is an enduring numinous, mystical experience arising from and contextualized within one’s interpersonal relationship with the lama. The hallmark of this state is numinosity, or experienced religious potency, in a whole-being response to and participation in a relationship with another person. In my ethnography Buddhists describe enchantment as the center, the motive force, of their religious lives, as it represents the most profound of all possible religious experiences.

This experiential, interpersonal state of enchantment is rare as a model for a religious path in the U.S.A., as it is almost entirely lacking from the major faiths of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, outside of some small groups. In general Christian, Jewish, and Muslim practice, such relationships are not cultivated because they cannot provide access on their own to the religious goal as they do in the Tibetan Buddhist context. Even more, it is rare as a model for American interpersonal experience, either religious or secular. One’s local minister, rabbi, imam, political leader, or therapist neither asks for nor accepts the intimate love and devotion

involved in the relationship of enchantment, and in fact such relationships are generally shunned by religious, political, and therapeutic figures. This uniqueness is important for the practitioners in my ethnography.

Enchantment may be favorably compared to secular love. Likewise, enchantment may fruitfully be compared to the psychoanalytic transference. However, in both theory and practice, the experience of enchantment differs from both of these types of interpersonal relationship. This requires some explanation.

The intensity of enchantment greatly resembles filial or especially erotic love in the sense of dominating one's daily emotional and intellectual experience. Enchantment is like love in terms of the cognitive, emotional, and perhaps spiritual tightness of interpersonal bonds. As one disciple, Rebecca, says of her lama, "I couldn't love him more if he were stuck to my forehead." Another disciple, Maria, claims, "I just love Sangye Rinpoche because he's the most perfect human being I've ever met, the most complete." However, enchantment differs from love relationships between partners since Buddhists understand this state as necessarily transcending lifetimes as well as being essentially spiritually educational, nonsexual, and more profound in nature. Practitioners almost universally told me that their powerful current experience could only be a continuation of enchantment in a previous lifetime, and part of the experience seems to involve some speculation about what form enchantment will take in future lifetimes. Likewise, unlike secular love, enchantment is spiritually pedagogical in a broad sense, a relationship whose *raison d'être* is religious advancement.

As described by the abbot of Siddha Gompa, Sangye Rinpoche, enchantment is not ordinary affection, but transcendental, religious affection. The lama-student relationship "is not

the same as an intimate relationship within a family, or between a king and his people, or even a boss and his or her workers.” The lama-student relationship “is the most profound of relationships... [where] there is a willingness to overlook what we might normally regard as inconveniences and discomfort,” in order to facilitate the liberative growth of all sentient beings.

The psychoanalytic transference resembles enchantment in its non-filial, non-sexual, experiential-educational emphasis, yet the transference fails to encompass enchantment. The enchantment relationship is far more intense than the transference due to its ontological pretensions. Enchantment is inherently religious in nature, at least as it is experienced by practitioners in my ethnography, as they relate enchantment experiences that far transcend metaphysical reality as recognized by psychoanalysis. In its fullest form, in enchantment one perceives all of one’s experience as arising from the ministrations of the lama. A psychoanalyst may be held responsible for creating some worldly problems or solutions but can never be held responsible for creating the totality of one’s experience as a lama may be. And while a psychoanalyst may help one to heal, no analyst can, in analytic theory, free one from *samsāra*. Thus, for Buddhists, since the experience of enchantment is essentially religious, it remains far broader and deeper than a psychoanalytic transference. This lends the enchantment relationship a stronger healing power but also a stronger power to psychologically unravel the disciple than psychoanalysis (Kakar, 1991: 50).

This difference from the psychoanalytic transference points to a central theme of the enchantment experience among disciples in my ethnography, the mystical power of the lama. This perceived mystical power is highly valued by these Buddhists, who are commonly and correctly understood as seekers of “intense experiences of immanence” (Stone, 1978: 123). For

one practitioner, this power is manifested by her ongoing experience of the presence of her lama who physically lives thousands of miles away. I was warned against mistaking lamas for their outward, physical forms by another Buddhist, as, for him, both the lama and the enchantment experience belong to the realm of intangible spirit. Another disciple describes ‘synchronistic’ positive events in his life since affiliating with his lama. Of especial interest is a practitioner who describes this mystical power in terms of the lama’s palpable presence and activity even after his death.

The disciple’s perception of the mystical power of the lama sometimes develops only over time. For others, such as for Milarepa quoted above, this mystical power first manifests as an unexpected, cataclysmic, and numinous experience. As Maria describes her first meeting with her lama,

Something happened, and there really aren't words to describe it. It was far and away the most deep and profound and heartfelt thing that has ever happened to me. It was like this very small but perfect nuclear fission. And it keeps on radiating, and there's never been a single moment of that not being there. And there's never been anything that I've done right from it that has not been beneficial.

Another Buddhist, Bob, describes his initial enchantment experience in a similar manner:

He was in this large hall, on the other side of the room, on a large seat. And the first time I laid eyes on him I just lit up. Rigpa Rinpoche told me later it was because we've known each other for several lifetimes. And there was nothing conscious, I just lit up, and subconsciously there was some recognition and some joy.

However, enchantment, as it informs one’s identity, is not a single experience, but a long-term and necessarily changing continuum of experiences. Experiences of enchantment in my ethnography follow, with some deviations, a general life-historical script. Practitioners in my ethnography usually describe their lives before enchantment as dissatisfying in some important

way. Often this dissatisfaction concerns a lack of direction for religious yearnings, as ‘something missing,’ within the context of otherwise healthy and productive lives, yet some describe this dissatisfaction in terms of various life disasters. After meeting their teacher these people describe a shift towards greater satisfaction in their lives which arises from an enchantment experience. Finally, disciples integrate, or fail to integrate, the experience of enchantment, leading often to broad changes in the quality of their lives.⁶

Theory and Practice of Mystical Enchantment

At the American center Siddha Gompa, the traditional contours of the lama-disciple relationship derive from a number of textual resources, although two retain considerable importance. Commonly read and practiced are the teachings on guru yoga, part of the *ngondro* (*sngon 'gro*) cycle of preliminary practices, translated in The Torch of Certainty (Jamgon Kongtrul, 1994). This text is essential to virtually every practitioner’s understanding of the guru-disciple relationship at Siddha Gompa, as its presentation of doctrine and practical advice are studied and discussed to a great extent by gompa denizens. Also foundational for the religio-social ethos of the gompa is Fifty Verses of Guru-Devotion, attributed to Aśvaghosa (Asvaghosa, 1975). Few practitioners know or have read this text but its tenets are shared widely, if anonymously, as part of lamas’ teachings and the gompa’s oral culture.

The Torch of Certainty, an English translation of the Tibetan Nges don sGron me of Jamgön Kongtrül Lodro Thaye, represents at Siddha Gompa the essential resource for understanding and following the common yet arduous practices found in the *ngondro* cycle. The core teachings on the lama-disciple relationship are given in the teachings on the last preliminary

practice, guru yoga, and also are found to some degree throughout The Torch of Certainty. The disciple is taught that successful Buddhist practice arises only from devotion to and dependence upon one's lama, who is portrayed as the source of all liberation. To look elsewhere than one's lama for religious progress is to make a serious mistake. The Torch quotes an eminent lama thus:

Until you attain enlightenment, your entire religious career depends on the guru. The fact that all the great Bodhisattvas have their guru seated on the crown of their heads--for example, Amitabha on Avalokiteshvara's head and so on--shows that even Bodhisattvas still rely on their gurus (Jamgon Kongtrul, 1994: 15).

The lama in this text holds such centrality because the lama is the ultimate source of all Buddhist charisma and power. The lama is the same as the ultimate cosmic Buddha of this lineage, Dorje Chang, and as such the lama is synonymous with ultimate reality. Lamas are docetic, only-apparently-human manifestations of Dorje Chang, so that in manifest reality, “There is no Buddha anywhere who is other than your root guru” (ibid.: 128).

Because the lama embodies the cosmos itself, the lama is the only possible resource for religious advancement. One's Buddhist practice can only progress through the blessings (*chinlab*) of the lama. These blessings contain “all the sources of Refuge combined”⁷ (ibid.: 74). They work to dissolve the root afflictions of attachment, aversion, and ignorance that in Buddhist theory cause suffering and act as shields to the realization of one's innate Buddhahood. The Torch offers the explanatory simile of a magnifying glass to describe this process: “Enlightenment, ‘focused’ through the guru's blessing, can destroy conflicting emotions” (ibid.). Individual lamas retain this power through their embodiment of an enlightened lineage of lamas (ibid.: 125) that traces back to the primordial Buddha, Dorje Chang.

The proper response of the disciple to this state of affairs is devotion to the lama, as only through devotion can one realize and retain the power of the lama's liberative blessings.

Devotion to the lama must be intense and total if any substantial effect is to be realized.

Devotion must be free of any hope or fear, expectation or anxiety, but be devotion for devotion's sake alone. "Moving, walking, sleeping, sitting, happy or miserable, continuously think of nothing but the guru!" (ibid.: 129) Longing for the guru's blessing helps to bring about this intense devotion. The Torch says:

It is not proper to think of the guru once in a while and to recite, 'I take refuge,' or count your occasional prayers to her. Pray to her with your hair standing on end and tears of great yearning streaming down your face. Your mind will become clear, ordinary appearances will cease and meditative experience will arise without effort. This is the force of great yearning...Then you will truly possess devotion and reverence which can bring on sudden realization (ibid.).

With intense devotion, all of one's experience is perceived as a manifestation of the lama's activity. The lama is the motive force behind all objects and occurrences in the world. All of one's experience, therefore, is understood as the teaching of one's lama. Nothing that happens is purposeless, but rather arises in order to bring about the liberation of the disciple. The Torch tells the disciple that all pleasant experiences are expressions of the guru's joyful blessings, and all painful experiences are actually the expression of the guru's compassion (ibid.: 123). Even apparently immoral actions of the lama should be regarded as *upāya*, as skillful teachings by the guru, as faults seen in one's lama are only perceptions deriving from one's own afflicted mind.⁸ With devotion, the disciple clearly perceives this lama activity, which in turn inspires greater devotion on the part of the disciple. Upon this greater devotion depends the entire Buddhist life of the disciple. With this devotion, the disciple can advance through

progressively more subtle states of consciousness without practice or effort, and *nirvāna* eventually will result. Without devotion, spiritual advancement is impossible, no matter what practices one does.

The Fifty Verses of Guru-Devotion prescribes actions of physical devotion which are performed every day at Siddha Gompa. The resident lamas require and receive offerings of service in many ways. These actions commonly include cooking; cleaning; washing; answering letters; paying bills; running errands; caring for the children of the non-monastically-ordained, married resident lama; serving tea; making phone calls; and building houses and furniture for lamas. Aside from these are numerous other tasks that may be performed. For example, I once offered service to one lama by jump-starting his car and offered service to another lama by acquiring Internet software for his computer and tutoring him in how to use it.

These physical acts of devotion occur in more formal, textually-prescribed forms as well. When lamas enter a room, disciples stand. They sit only when the lama has been seated and each disciple has prostrated three times to the lama. Each prostration is a highly ritualized gesture which includes touching folded hands to the head, mouth, and heart body energy centers, and then bowing to place knees, hands, and the forehead to the floor. No disciple ever sits on a seat higher than a lama. White silk scarves called *khata* (*kha ptags*) are offered to lamas during an interview, during teachings and empowerments, and when a lama embarks on or returns from a significant journey. Lamas eat first and are served separately, with finer place settings and china, and ideally their dishes are washed separately from those of disciples. They are frequently offered money or gifts by disciples as a show of affection and gratitude. The head lama of the lineage, who does not reside at Siddha Gompa, is symbolically offered special food, such as the

first slice of a resident's birthday cake.

In addition to physical devotion, the Fifty Verses of Guru-Devotion describes devotion in an experiential sense as well, and this appears at Siddha Gompa. In both formal teachings by lamas and everyday conversation among practitioners, the need to experience the lama as both the Buddha and the tutelary deities frequently is stressed both explicitly and implicitly. Disciples are repeatedly told that *nirvāna* can only arise from 'blazing' devotion to the lama, following the rather straightforward equation that the stronger the experiential state of one's guru devotion, the stronger one's religious practice will be. It is taken for granted that religious experiences arise at the gompa only from the grace of the lamas of the lineage. Responding to the sacredness of the guru, one lama translates the Tibetan term *mugu*, understood by most practitioners simply by the English word 'devotion,' as 'engulfment in splendor' of the guru. This lama thus describes the *sine qua non* of both guru devotion and the Buddhist path as the disciple's being experientially 'engulfed' as much as possible.

In order to 'engulf' the disciple through formal ritual, a main task of the Tibetan lama is the frequent administration of *wong* (*dbang*), or 'empowerments,' 'initiations.'⁹ These empowerments are highly ritualized thaumaturgic ceremonies in which Tantric practices, considered potentially dangerous and thus kept secret, are revealed to disciples by the lama. During a *wong* ceremony the lama, through his or her grace, religio-magical words, and religio-magical actions, opens the inner potentials within disciples for success in these practices, this latter function being indicated by the word 'empowerment.' Gompa folklore is filled with tales of direct 'empowerment,' in which lamas impart Buddhist realization in a classic mind-to-mind transmission, even to entire roomfuls of people.

Enchantment works through the process called ‘mixing one’s mind with the guru’s,’ a process with an unmistakable surface appearance that parallels the process of Kohutian psycho-analytic transference healing (see Kohut, 1977). According to gompa teachings, the practitioner needs a mirror which reflects their natural enlightened mind, experience of which represents Buddhahood. Practitioners need another person to reflect the universally-held enlightened mind back to them so that they can recognize it. As one’s lama is by definition already liberated, the guru represents the ideal mirror. In guru devotion practice one therefore must see the lama as the Buddha. If such a perception must at first be forced or ‘fabricated,’ then so be it, because without projecting Buddhahood onto the lama, practice of necessity falters. Ideally, with time even a forced projection will become ‘unfabricated,’ as what one first pretended becomes revealed as actually true.

Fabricated enchantment becomes unfabricated through the recognition of gratitude and appreciation for what the lama has done for you. Appreciation for the lama increases devotion. This devotion will then grow like a rolling snowball, in that greater appreciation will lead to greater devotion, which in turn will lead to greater appreciation. The most difficult part of the process arises at first, as the hardest thing is to get the snowball rolling.

As one’s projection onto the lama intensifies, one comes to perceive that there is an element of one’s experience that was not projected. It slowly dawns on the practitioner that the recognition of positive qualities contains a self-referential aspect, as one realizes that one could only see Buddhahood in the lama if one already possessed Buddhahood oneself. Without enlightened qualities in oneself, one cannot perceive enlightenment in another. The fact that one recognizes Buddhahood in the other therefore highlights one’s own innate Buddhahood. Further familiarity with one’s own innate Buddhahood brings greater Buddhist realization, and the

endpoint of this process of self-discovery through the use of the mirror is full recognition of one's innate Buddhahood. This achieved, one is liberated. An implicit logic is that whatever one projects onto the lama, one will realize that. If one sees the guru as evil, one will realize evil. If one sees goodness in the lama, one will realize just this goodness. If one sees ultimate Buddhahood in the lama, one will realize ultimate Buddhahood.

According to Sangye Rinpoche, the ideal teacher is one who is certified by a lama in an authentic human teaching lineage dating back to *Shakyamuni* Buddha and ultimately to the *Mahâsattva* Dorje Chang. Without the notion of the lama's embodying an unbroken lineage, the teachings can and will be corrupted. This lineage is in a sense more important than the lama herself. As one lama expressed, "What do I have to offer you personally? Nothing, only my opinions. What I offer is an authentic lineage." Further, the lama should have practiced and succeeded in anything that he teaches. Mere book learning is not enough and can delude others; the teacher must have religious experience. Without personal realization in meditation the lama cannot radiate blessings, thus stalling the progress of the student.

Concerning the ideal student, Sangye Rinpoche, the abbot of Siddha Gompa, taught, "To become an authentic student requires that you practice with extreme diligence. You must be prepared to practice with complete trust in your teacher and with the patience to allow enlightened energy to grow within you." Following a Tibetan proverb, the student should be "like a mute," because for the mute, "there are no doubts in his mind about the master or the teaching." The teacher leads the student with a rain of blessings, following a traditional Tibetan metaphor, and the student should remain passive to most take advantage of this cloudburst of mystical energy. A perhaps apt analogy would be a robin with babies, where the adult bird actively distributes food to offspring that wait passively with open mouths.

Yet for Sangye Rinpoche ideal students are not merely passive. They must be open to the ‘rain of blessings,’ but then they must respond with practical effort on their own to integrate these blessings into themselves. Resembling a school teacher prodding students to do their homework, Sangye Rinpoche repeatedly encourages disciples in a number of ways to increase their enthusiasm and ‘extreme diligence’ for Buddhist practice for their own benefit. Both Sangye Rinpoche and Sherab Tulku constantly reiterate in their teachings that guru devotion involves becoming a lama in your own right, not worshiping lamas as an end in itself, and diligence in practice is necessary to reach this end.

Physical proximity is not necessary or even always desirable. As Sangye Rinpoche describes it, if the student sees the teacher too much, he will inevitably project his own shortcomings onto her and take her for granted. The relationship should be like a bee and a flower, where the bee only goes to the flower when it needs honey. Sangye Rinpoche therefore recommends that teacher and student meet once a year but not necessarily more. The only exception would be for “an extremely good or intelligent student,” who is better off being with the teacher as much as possible, so that he might see that, “every movement and every action of the teacher is a manifestation of wisdom and sanity that will constantly inspire the student.”

Practitioners’ understandings of the dynamics of the relationship that develops with enchantment sometimes vary widely. The most commonly described dynamic for this relationship is one of reciprocity. All practitioners in my ethnography express some notion that enchantment is bidirectional and that they need to respond in kind in some way to the boons that the enchantment experience appears to offer them. Canonical teachings claim that the best response to enchantment, the best form of devotion, is the intensification of one’s own Buddhist

practice. Siddha Gompa Buddhists all appear to reflect these canonical teachings but in different ways. Rare practitioners seem to understand reciprocity solely in terms of their own intensive ritual regimen of *ngondro*, meditation, and *puja* practice. For many Buddhists, their sense of devotion-inspired intensified practice leads them, as a form of *karma yoga*, to work for this-worldly goals that are important to their lamas such as the construction of new retreat centers or the administration of centers that already exist, and they pursue formal Buddhist practice with less intensity. Quite a few other practitioners mix these strategies of formal Buddhist practice and social action.

Subjective images of social relationship likewise differ among practitioners. A lion's share of Buddhists express their deep relation with their lama in terms of family imagery, in which the lama is experienced as a close, life-long family member. A minority of these people stretch this imagery even further in a conscious way, openly describing their lama as a kind of parental figure for them.¹⁰ Other practitioners, however, stray from the family metaphor, describing their relationship with their lama as having a more peer-like, friendly quality, even if that friend is considered spiritually superior. For one Buddhist, in fact, it was the peer-like way that his lama relates to him that sponsored his deep enchantment in the first place.

An obvious question concerns the realism of these perceptions of and relationships with lamas. Blind or misguided idealizations do not satisfy psychological needs at a deep level and lead to rigidity and dysfunction rather than personal transformation. It is of course impossible for me to appraise, in an fully objective way, the realism of perceptions of the caring nature of lamas or their purported mystical capacities. However, I can and have paid attention to the willingness of people to criticize their lamas to gain realism and the nature of their resulting critiques. A

number of practitioners offered many plausible and intelligent critiques of lamas and lamas' behavior and appear to be unwilling to relinquish their critical faculties. This does not mean they are not devoted. At the gompa strongly devoted Tibetans appear to be less sanguine and more cautious about attributing grandiose qualities to lamas, and these Americans simply appear to follow suit. These American disciples reflect the finding of J. Gordon Melton (Melton, 1993: 108) that, "Fieldwork on contemporary nonconventional religions corroborates the many accounts by ex-members that reveal patterns of doubt in individual members and ongoing critical review of leaders by the members of supposedly totalistic groups." At least in part, it is this critical capacity which allows disciples to introject the admired qualities of lamas and become lamas themselves, so that such criticism is actually a central aspect of enchantment, properly pursued.

In all religious groups some members are more critical and some are more credulous, and the same is true at Siddha Gompa, where a few disciples more closely fit the negative stereotype that unfortunately has been extended to all Americans who follow gurus. One practitioner, Shannon, offered trenchant critiques of some lamas but never seemed open to subjecting her own lama to similar criticisms. She became very angry, without regard to the content that I expressed, when I once intimated that some of her lama's actions may have been problematic. Another disciple, Lucy, seemed to lack critical understandings of any lamas, instead feeling that anyone who has finished the certifying three-year retreat is by definition liberated and at least largely infallible. Many times I measured my words about lamas to her for fear of offending her, and once when I failed to mask my implicit criticisms of a lama, she told me that seeing lamas in terms of faults was one of my great failings.¹¹

Becoming a Lama Oneself

The lama-disciple Buddhist relationship is inherently hierarchical, as enchantment can only manifest when the lama is considered to be more advanced or enlightened than the disciple. However, at least in Tibetan Buddhist theory, enchantment exploits hierarchical relationships as a means, not an end, a point commonly missed by previous academic commentators on the guru-disciple relationship. That is, enchantment and its goal includes the integration of the liberation of the lama into one's own mind, understood Buddhistically. Lamas at Siddha Gompa frequently teach that devotion to the lama is only pursued correctly when one makes the mystical nature of the lama one's own, when one introjects the lama's admired qualities. Lamas tirelessly reiterate that the goal of the practice is to become a lama oneself. Gareth Sparham (Tsongkhapa 1999, 20) explains the teachings of Tsongkhapa, a preeminent theoretician of Tibetan Buddhism, on this point:

He [Tsongkhapa] does not emphasize that simple devotion (*bhakti*), as a conduit for power lodged in the guru, is a sufficient practice. Faith is for Tsongkhapa always the handmaiden of knowledge; devotion always a means to gain from the teacher an understanding of the liberating doctrine.

Parasitically exploiting the religious experiences and powers of the lama, although it occurs unrecognized by some practitioners, actually misses the point of enchantment and is to be avoided, both in terms of formal Buddhist theory and the offhand comments of the more advanced guru devotion practitioners.

Embodying this theory at my field site is the practice of reciting the lineage prayer, which accompanies virtually every practice at the gompa and hence may be recited repeatedly every day by Buddhists. After paying homage to the historical leaders of the school and describing the values of such things as devotion to the lama, meditation, and asceticism, the prayer closes with

these two lines:

May I completely accomplish the qualities of the path and stages
And quickly attain the state of Dorje Chang.

The last two lines of the lineage prayer should not be forgotten. In “accomplishing the qualities of the path and stages,” one becomes liberated. One manifests “the state of Dorje Chang,” meaning one realizes one’s essential nature as *Dharmakāya* ultimate reality. These last lines reinforce the idea that devotion to the lama so extolled in the prayer has a point, which is the Buddhahood of the disciple. The disciple is to become a lama herself. Surrender to the lama remains a means to becoming a lama oneself, not an end of its own.

In Tibetan Buddhist practice, becoming a lama oneself involves growth within the hierarchical relationship with one’s own lama. Many, but not all, of the disciples in my study actually found that the hierarchical relationship with the lama aided, not stifled, their development of a sense of personal empowerment (Capper, 2002: 227), reflecting the findings of Bogart (1992). This personal empowerment that practitioners in my ethnography strive for and claim to have experienced thematically involve increased compassionate social action. This orientation reflects the dimension of social action so pervasive in many forms of non-immigrant Buddhism in the U.S.A. (Tanaka, 1998: 292), such as Thich Nhat Hanh’s (1998) “engaged Buddhism.” The theme of engaged social action has long been important for American Buddhism, according to Thomas Tweed (1992: 133-156), as a perceived lack of a social action dimension resulted in the rejection of Buddhism by many Victorian Americans.

Perceived compassion on the part of lamas as a basis for this social action exists at the core of these Americans’ enchantment experiences. Disciples universally describe the founda-

tion for their enchantment in terms of the perceived compassionate natures of these Buddhist teachers. Adjectives for describing their lamas such as “kind,” “compassionate,” “loving,” “caring,” and “peaceful” appear in every interview, usually without any sort of prompting. One practitioner, Bob, says, “You can see the embodiment of the Buddhist teachings alive in these individuals. And you can see that there is a place for kindness, there is a place for compassion, there is a place for wisdom.”

Exhibiting this notion of the perceived compassion of lamas, a number of Buddhists in my ethnography claim that their devotional feelings arise from the fact that their lamas see them as they are, ‘without projections,’ and find this an uncommon experience in their lives, ‘like coming home.’ As Bob puts it, “You know that this other person is different than any other person you've met in your life.” These Buddhists feel their lamas love them in ways that they had always hoped for but had previously found rarely at best. And lamas are, as one Buddhist describes, unavoidably in consonance with the bodhisattva aspiration for the compassionate benefit of all beings. Hence, for these Buddhists, lamas can and will act fully for one's benefit unlike any other person one knows. As one disciple, Maria, states, “I've never met anybody who understands me so entirely, completely. Just wordlessly. And I've never met anybody who accepts me so completely. Love and confidence, but, you know, not without discrimination. He definitely lets me know if I'm going down the wrong path.”¹²

Several Buddhists explicitly relate this function of a role model of compassionate action to issues related to the nature and function of idealized authority, finding idealizable compassionate authority figures conspicuously lacking in the broader society of the United States.¹³ For example, Maria's statements seem to embody an only thinly veiled understanding that Sangye

Rinpoche is for her a compassionate parent unlike those that she experienced growing up.

Another Buddhist, Shannon, as a child, idealized her apparently kind and spiritual grandmother, but not her parents, in ways parallel to her understanding of her lama as the only possible authority because of his perceived caring and spiritual qualities. Rebecca, another disciple, understands her lama as a positive compassionate religious authority unlike the Christian authority figures she feels she has experienced. Widening this spiritual authority theme while being the most outspoken about compassionate role models, Bob feels that what American society most lacks is caring political role models. From this he is willing to conflate as ideals the extreme caring of lamas in his experience with the compassionate social action he experienced participating in Cesar Chavez's fight for social justice for the United Farm Workers in the 1960s.

Because of these experiences of the uncommonly caring lama, for these Buddhists it is clear from my ethnographic data that their lamas function as role models for the embodiment of compassion and for the expression of this compassion in social action of some type. All of these practitioners feel that the boundless compassion of the lama paradigmatically provides direction for their own implementation of compassionate social action. How one responds to the role model, of course, differs among individuals. Nonetheless, despite differences, for them the lama is an important role model to emulate and with whom to 'mix one's mind.' As Bob puts it, with Tibetan lamas, "You see the people who will inspire you, and people who can enhance you as a person, and make you live up to the potential you have as a human being. That's what Buddha-nature is about and that's what realizing your Buddha-nature is. You realize that if you do these practices and work on yourself, you can be, perhaps, like them some day." Maria says,

The whole point is, we're not separate from those who already embody the truth of

Buddhahood...when Sangye Rinpoche speaks, he speaks about what he knows, just like Jigme Lama, and Gyalwa Tulku, and Khampa Rinpoche, and Drolma Rinpoche. The great ones, they speak from transforming experience. And instead of telling me that I'm imbued with original sin, they tell me that I'm that, too. And it's not a matter of getting better, it's a matter of breaking out the spiritual Windex.

Whether these disciples actually introject these qualities or not is beyond the ken of this essay. An extended psychological analysis of the personal growth and stagnation of these Buddhists appears in my larger work (Capper, 2002). My point here is that the ideal of this practice is the effort to introject these compassionate social action qualities, to make them one's own, and submission to the lama is merely a means to this goal.

Conclusion

For many American practitioners in my ethnography, enchantment arises because the relationship with the lama is experienced as both personally fulfilling and satisfyingly unique. The intensity of the long-term relationship with the Tibetan lama, experienced as a mystically powerful role model for compassionate action, creates for many Buddhists an opportunity for personal transformation through interpersonal mystical experience. Rather than being automatons for a charismatic leader, many of these Buddhists critically employ submission to their lama to attempt their own personal and religious empowerment. Through mystically mixing their minds with those of Tibetan lamas, practitioners hope to introject and develop idealized qualities of compassionate social action. Seeking to become like lamas themselves, and thus liberate themselves from *samsāra*, they seek deep, mystical experiences of religious transformation in new, culturally innovative, ways. Through their Buddhist practice of guru devotion they attempt to transform and re-enchant simultaneously both their own lives and their social worlds in ways

they find enriching and positive.

In the light of these findings, perhaps the broader understanding of Western teacher-student relationships' in themselves leading to the religious goals of *nirvāna*, *mokṣa*, etc., may be more clearly understood. Such practices are commonly found in Asian religions that have expanded into the United States, most notably the Hindu *guru-sīṣya* relationship and, to a lesser but increasing extent, the Islamic Sufi *shaykh-murīd* relationship. In many of these practices, as with Tibetan Buddhism, submission to the spiritual teacher is not a goal in itself. The interpersonal relationship of religious seeker and religious master in fact provides the path to a different experiential religious goal. Previous scholarship has often mistaken the path for the goal itself, considered submission to the spiritual teacher to be the endpoint of the practice, and thus falsely found devotees to gurus to be intrinsically pathological and misguided. While some disciples, as indicated above, can fall into a dangerous downside of the practice of guru devotion, many do not. While some gurus may teach submission as an end in itself, rather than a path to a different goal, many do not. If the teachings of such religious technologies are properly followed, no disciple or teacher should fall into this trap. When this point is recognized, we may see more correctly that devotion to religious teachers across traditions in the United States may be leading disciples to re-enchant their psychological and social worlds in wholesome ways.

This essay has delineated the practice of Tibetan Buddhist guru devotion in the United States in ethnographic perspective. Helpful future work might explore the interpersonal-religious dynamics of other, similar practices found in Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, and Judaism in the United States. Perhaps then we will possess a better understanding of the rapidly-expanding realm of goal-consummating interpersonal religion as it exists in the United States, providing us

with a valuable new window into innovative, embodied religious practices in the West.

NOTES

1. Another reproach from the West against the guru-disciple relationship concerns the abuse, often sexual, of disciples by Hindu or Buddhist gurus. One recent case resulted in a highly publicized lawsuit filed by a former disciple of the Tibetan teacher Sogyal Rinpoche that was settled out of court. Dimensions of exploitation from a disciple's point of view have been ably and intelligently portrayed by Katy Butler (Butler, 1990), Stephen Butterfield (Butterfield, 1994), and June Campbell (Campbell, 1996), who survived what they experienced as exploitative treatment by their Buddhist teachers. In my presentation I in no way intend to minimize the existence of or the potentially shattering nature of such relationships. However, in my years at my field site I neither witnessed nor overheard anything that would lead me to suspect any kind of exploitation of disciples, as instead I was repeatedly impressed by the unimpeachable moral behavior exhibited by resident lamas.
2. All proper names found in the ethnographic portions of this essay are fictitious.
3. *Gompa* (*dgon pa*) is commonly glossed as 'monastery.' This translation is inadequate, as a gompa may contain both ordained and lay of both genders, even in positions of power, unlike Christian monasteries. I retain the Tibetan word in recognition of this social and religious institutional arrangement that is unique to Tibet.
4. Ekvall (1964: 156) translates *chinlab* or "blessing" as an "active, emanating bestowal on a sublimated level."
5. By the term 'enchantment' I mean the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of "enraptured condition." But I also mean more than this. By this term I counter Max Weber's concept of *Entzauberung* or "disenchantment" (Weber, 1958: 155), which for Weber describes the social historical situation of Western religion in terms of lacking "trust in the effects of magical and sacramental forces on salvation" (Weber, 1985: 105). For Weber, disenchantment serves as both cause and effect of the secularization of Western culture since the Reformation. However, the recent vitality of religion in the West, noted by scholars such as Berger (1992), Casanova (1994), Stark (1999), and Bruce (2002), questions Weberian disenchantment at least in terms of appropriate nuance and perhaps completely. By the use of 'enchantment' I question disenchantment by pointing precisely to the "trust in the effects of magical and sacramental forces on salvation" found in my ethnographic data.
6. Naturally these Buddhists reconstruct stories of their previous lives from the standpoint of their lives after beginning enchantment with their lamas. This reconstruction process is instructive on its own. Buddhists who, reflecting Kohut (1977), reconstructed their lives diachronically in a holistic continuum between earlier life events and later ones, tended to be the most realistic in terms of their criticisms of lamas (see below). However, a few Buddhists appeared to reflect themes found among apocalyptic evangelical Christians in New York City by Charles Strozier (1994). Some of Strozier's Christians claimed to have been reborn into completely new self-concepts of their own personhood after being saved than they entertained previously. This of course leads to partial life understandings and a reduced ability to master psychological issues arising from early life events. Buddhists who fit this latter pattern seemed not to offer critiques of lamas that were realistic, or offer critiques at all.
7. "All the sources of Refuge" refers to the *Triratna*, the Triple Gem of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The *Triratna* represents the ultimate charismatic source in Buddhism.

8. The Torch does not claim here that all who present themselves as gurus are infallible. It contains a rather lengthy description of qualities to be avoided when one is seeking a Buddhist teacher and admonishes Buddhists to be very careful in their selection of the teacher. However, once a selection is made and one has received teachings and empowerments from a guru, one's devotion and obedience must be total (Jamgon Kongtrul, 1994: 124). Otherwise one could move from guru to guru on the basis of the superficial personal whims that Buddhist practice seeks to eradicate.

9. According to Gareth Sparham, "In Tibetan Buddhism...the bestowal of initiation is the defining spiritual act, the ritual affirmation of a guru's kindness and possession of the highest spiritual attainment" (Tsongkhapa, 1999: 9).

10. Lise McKean (1996: 3) also notes the frequency of parent-child images in the Hindu guru-disciple relationship in contemporary India, although McKean attributes the development of this imagery to Indian cultural processes. In India, the parent-child imagery is an overt and intentional aspect of guru devotion practice. However, guru devotion teachings at Siddha Gompa are devoid of overt parent-child imagery, unlike in India. This curious cross-cultural relationship requires more probing. Those seeking cultural universals might see this as an example of the "guru fantasy" proposed by Sudhir Kakar, which is a "universal" fantasy in which humans seek someone "who will heal the wounds suffered in the original parent-child relationship" (Kakar, 1991: 43).

11. Perhaps this disciple represents an unfortunate type of Buddhist in the U.S.A. described by Eve Mullen. Mullen notes that there "is a notable zeal among the non-Tibetan Americans toward their American geshes. This zeal often amounts to a devotion that Tibetan lay people, very much aware of their lack of Tibetan teachers in America, find both offensive and damaging to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition as a whole. While Tibetan reverence for monks or nuns is ever-present, the Tibetan lay attitudes toward Tibetan sangha members generally are characterized by a restraint which keeps esteem for the sangha from reaching blindly devotional levels" (Mullen, 2001: 55).

12. In this these Buddhists might be participating in larger trends of American culture. For example, American psychotherapy has moved somewhat from a model of the therapist as Freud's uninvolved "blank slate" to a model in which therapists are emotionally responsive to clients in terms of more openly providing caring and nurturing actions. The attraction of an openly caring lama who ideally facilitates personal growth seems to reflect this trend. As an example of this shift in psychotherapy, see Schamess (1999).

13. This situation may reflect a common one in American society. For example, Pelletier (1977) indicates that dominant American role models may actually increase tension and pathogenic influence through their stress on ambition, drive, and financial success. Siddha Gompa Buddhists support Wilson's (1985) assertion that gurus, as role models, may counteract this influence by offering empathic support and guidance and the introjecting of acceptance.

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