



## Self-possessed and Self-governed: Transcendent Spirituality in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism

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### ABSTRACT

Among Tibetan Buddhist tantric practitioners, including in the U.S., visualisation and incorporation of mandala deities imparts a parallel world against which conventional reality is considered impermanent and afflicted. Tantric adepts aspire through meditation, visualisation, and mind-training to dissolve normal selfhood and simultaneously embrace both 'conventional' and 'ultimate' reality. Ethics of compassion encourage efficient reengagement with conventional world dynamics rather than escaping them: the transcendental 'non-self' is perceived to inform effective and compassionate waking consciousness. Transformation of subjective ontology in tantric self-possession resonates with Foucault's late exploration of ethical self-relationship in alternative technologies of subjectivation and with Luhmann's notion of transcendent spiritual absorption through skilled learning and internalisation. Incorporating recent developments in American Tibetan Buddhism, this paper draws upon information derived from a range of scholarly visits to rural and urban areas of the Himalayas, teachings by and practices with contemporary Tibetan lamas, including in the U.S., and historical and philosophical Buddhist literature and commentaries.

**KEYWORDS** Tibetan Buddhism; tantra; spirituality; selfhood; ontology; spirit possession

This paper considers dynamics of transcendent spirituality in a cultural context that has often remained outside received considerations of spirit possession: Tibetan Buddhist tantras. I am concerned especially the Sarma or 'new translation' generation and completion stage practices associated with highest yoga tantra in Tibetan Buddhist Gelug and Kagyü sects. Drawing on preceding Indian tantras and waves of Buddhism that disseminated into Tibet during the last half of the first millennium CE, Sarma practices of highest yoga vajrayana developed in Tibet for roughly a thousand years, from the mid-11th through the mid-twentieth century CE (Davidson 2002; Wedemeyer 2014; Samuel 1993: chs. 12–14, 2008; Ray 2001; cf. Cozort 1986). By the 1950s, as suggested by Ray (2001: 5; cf. also Samuel 1993: 223),

the very culture of Tibet itself was permeated by the Varjayana. Even the social, political, and religious institutions in Tibet were, to a large extent, expressions of a Vajrayana Buddhist outlook. It is true, then, that one needs to study Tibet in order to find out about the Vajrayana; but it is equally true that, as mentioned, one needs to study the Varjayana to understand the Tibetans and their culture.

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After the mid-twentieth century, however, esoteric tantra along with other Buddhist practices were systematically degraded, suppressed, and to a significant degree eradicated within central Tibet by the virulent persecutions of Chinese conquest and occupation (since then, practices have reemerged to some degree especially in Tibetan areas outside the Tibetan Autonomous Republic [e.g. Yu 2011]). Of special present focus is the contemporary transmission of tantric practices by Tibetan lamas in exile to Western lay practitioners. In selected but significant ways, this process of sociocultural as well as linguistic translation compares with the dissemination of tantras to Tibet a thousand years ago – as they were being extinguished in their Indian homeland.

Consistent with its precursors, contemporary Tibetan Buddhist tantric possession, including in Western contexts, entails sustained altered states of consciousness that are assiduously cultivated through refined and proprietary techniques of visualisation, mantra recitation, mind-training, meditation, and, eventually, deep control over breathing/‘wind’ energies and other bodily processes, including those intended to rehearse the death process itself. In the process, tantric adepts experience regular and in principle permanent identification with and possession by tantric deities, who infuse their lives with the transcendent reality of a divine mandala world. In terms of scholarly categories, this can be considered spirit possession, or, perhaps better, as titled by Samuel (2010), ‘self-possession’. Especially in Western contexts, this process tends to be initiated and pursued more or less self-consciously against normative ideals and expectations of self-hood. This culturally re-contexted psychology casts traditional Tibetan Buddhist antidotes against self-grasping into particularly dramatic relief.

## Theoretical Context

In her important work on evangelical Christianity, Tanya Luhrmann foregrounds the process of skilled learning whereby transcendent states of blissful divine connection – in her case, feeling and hearing the actual presence of God – are not just cognitively understood and desired but viscerally experienced and existentially absorbed (Luhrmann 2004, 2005, 2012: ch. 6–7; Luhrmann *et al.* 2010, 2013, Luhrmann & Morgan 2012). In developing what she calls ‘the absorption hypothesis’, Luhrmann clarifies how transcendent religious experience is at once predisposed by prior mental disposition and cultivated by repeated skilful enactments that facilitate adherents to experience the divine directly – in ways that in principle cannot be taught. As such, she bridges the divide between ineffable states of trance or spiritual transcendence that are deeply personal, spontaneously emotional, intuitive, and ecstatic, and normative religious states that are cognitively indoctrinated, liturgically rehearsed, and ritually performed (often collectively) as reinforced through declarative dicta and doxa. In a complementary vein, Robbins (2016) has recently suggested that transcendent religious experience – crossing a range of milder as well as more intense transcendent experiences – is not divorced from but rather informs and generates values and ethics associated with everyday experience.

As Luhrmann notes in passing (2012: 186), her comparative perspective is potentially applicable to Tibetan Buddhist tantras, which are keyed both to strong ethical indoctrination and elaborate means of internalising spiritual experience. Significant training or skilled learning of transcendent states – including how to psychically and social manage them once experienced – is highly evident in the voluminous ethnographic literature on spirit possession, trance, and shamanism (e.g. Eliade 1964;

Lambek 1981; Huskinson & Schmidt 2010). What is often less appreciated, however, including in theoretical terms, is how the motivation, desire, and aspiration to attain greater spiritual realisation can combine and even fuse the internalisation of idealised ethical norms with personally embodied experience (cf. Desjarlais 2016). To this extent, taking seriously the experience and training of an adept questions or compromises the standard anthropological divide between belief and behaviour, throwing into question whether the transcendent values or goals subjectively aspired to can be verified or validated independently, ‘for real’, in social action. Insofar as transcendent states are themselves self-performative and self-illocutionary (cf. Austin 1962; Rappaport 1979), they can be self-referentially true and real. This is particularly and dramatically evident in the case of Tibetan Buddhist tantric experience, which has long-term implications for social life beyond and outside dedicated states of induced meditative ecstasy or transcendence.

Recent studies of spirit possession emphasise how transcendent experience can reflect and recast notions of self-hood and subjectivity beyond simplistic Western notions of dissociative trance. Johnson (2014a; 2014b) suggests that scholarly attributions of spirit possession have improperly contrasted normal selfhood with states of mystical experience in Afro-Atlantic contexts— while neglecting the possessive colonial Western individuality that expropriated objects and people, historically, as slaves, to its own egocentric domination. In classic Vedantic South Asian contexts, the presumed existential unity of the self (*atman*) has been found by Smith (2006) to be countermanded by great openness and permeability of selfhood to possession by a rich variety of spiritual forces, deities, and demons. Though downplayed or bleached of significance in Vedantic scholarship, widespread versions of a ‘possessed self’ are documented to have been pervasive throughout the Vedic, Vedantic, and tantric histories of South Asian civilisations. In Tibet, as Samuel (1993) emphasises, so-called shamanic elements persisted and were further developed in Tibetan Buddhist tantrism – in contrast to more fully institutionalised non-shamanic emphasis in more highly centralised polities of other parts of imperial Asia.

In introducing new perspectives on spirit possession and trance, Huskinson and Schmidt (2010) emphasise the importance of not being shackled by received categorical distinctions that separate our understanding of phenomena that may variously include spirit possession, trance, shamanism, and ecstatic as opposed to malevolent spiritual possession. Harvey (2010) suggests that ‘spirit’, ‘possession’, and ‘shaman’ too often serve as ‘Humpty Dumpty’ words that obscure more than they reveal. Resonating with this idea, Lambek (2014) suggests that the lives of those subject to spirit possession can themselves be taken to be their own acts of interpretive self-making, concluding that ‘Spirit possession is an art of living ... and living is an art of being selectively possessed by what the culture has to offer’ (p. 500).

Beyond functionalist or Manichean ways of comparatively configuring the relation between subjective alteration or possession – either as self-pursued or as externally incited – is hence greater awareness concerning how both of these interact to potentiate new potentials for self-possession and self-transformation. The larger implication is not merely that modern notions of sovereign projection easily continue to smuggle in restrictive Western notions of autonomous selfhood (Bialecki and Daswani 2015; Knauff and Mago 2002:1). Moreover, in Foucauldian perspective, spirit possession in flexible guises reflects alternative technologies of subjectification that enable creatively diverse modalities of ethical self-relationship. Dimensions of spirit possession

and of what might more generally be called ‘possessive spirituality’ have been employed to illuminate experiences as diverse as those associated with pre-Socratic philosophers (Addey 2010); Western spiritualism and neo-shamanism (Wilson 2010); the religious training of Eastern Christian monastics (Naumescu 2012); Western analytic psychology (Huskinson 2010); new Brazilian religion ayahuasca practices (Dawson 2010); demonic possession in mainstream African Christianity (Groop 2010); and the performative self-possession of Western actors by the persona they are enacting (Goldingay 2010). Huskinson and Schmidt (2010: 10) go so far as to suggest that,

We might think of the anthropologist’s task itself as a process of possession and “depossession”: of letting go of the familiar, prejudicial orientation – or familiar personality – in order to allow an empathic merger of the self with the unfamiliar other ...

Notwithstanding differences among the above perspectives, the present paper draws upon their groundswell to illuminate and refine our understanding of self-possessed spirituality in contemporary Tibetan tantric Buddhism, particularly as it is disseminated in exile in countries such as the U.S. Of particular import is how devotional training combines with experiential learning to minimise and efface in self-perception the galactic divide in cultural and social experience between Tibetan Buddhist tantric practice in pre-1950s Tibet and its dissemination and practice in the U.S. and other developed countries in the late twentieth and twenty-first century. In the process, collapse or fusion between aspirational norm and transcendent reality is maintained rather than undercut. As will be discussed, this process takes place via what Foucault (1988) would call a distinctive ‘technology of the self’ that changes the ethical relationship of subjects to their own subjectivity. As such, a consideration of Tibetan Buddhist tantric practice reveals how transcendent states are not just learned but made a perceived permanent part of transformed identity and reality, including across highly diverse cultural and social contexts.

## **Distinguishing Tantra in Context**

Tibetan Buddhist tantras have been informed by a variety of shamanic practices, including the continuing legacy of pre-Buddhist so-called Bön practices in addition to varieties of Himalayan shamanism that sometimes continue to interact or if hybridise with Buddhism (e.g. Balikci 2008; cf. Hitchcock & Jones 1976; Ortner 1995; Rosing 2006; Nicoletti 2006; see Pedersen 2011; see in Knauft & Taupier 2012). Tibetan Buddhism has been inflected as well by oracles based on spirit possession – the Nechung Tibetan State oracle, consulted by the current Dalai Lama, being perhaps the most well-known – as well as a range of other possessive demons and nature spirits (e.g. David-Neel 1971; Beyer 1973; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993; see Gyatso 1990:212, 214–15; cf. Gyatso 1962). To these are added the material incarnation of possessed or possessive spiritual power in amulets, charms, the use of Tibetan ritual items for divination, and the veneration of relics (Zivkovic 2014; Germano & Trainor 2006; Douglas 1978; David-Neel 1971).

Despite their overlap, tantric practices are associated with the internalised pursuit of Enlightenment in ways that are different from materialised spiritual powers, divinations, and shamanic practices. Samuel (1993: 31) suggests that these latter should be distinguished as ‘pragmatic’ and ‘karma-oriented’ aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, in contrast to spiritual self-deification that is cultivated by concentrated training in

highest yoga tantras. Beyond this heuristic distinction, the spread of tantric Tibetan Buddhist practices to Western contexts emphasises internalised subjective states of compassion, loving kindness, and lack of self-attachment while minimising Tibetan-associated divinatory, supplicatory, oracular, or relic-associated powers and forces. From within the perspective of tantras themselves, shamanic and demonic forces have been subordinated and domesticated by previous luminary tantric adepts, such as Padmasambava in the eighth century CE, and transformed into *dharmapalas* – protectors and defenders of the dharma itself (see Dalton 2011).

## Background to Tantric Experience

The word ‘tantra’ literally means ‘continuum’, in particular, the continuum that links ‘like a stream’ the ground or base of conventional reality, the path of increasing realisation, and the fruition of transcendent Enlightenment (e.g. T. Gyatso 1987: 54). Buddhist tantras emerged in recognisably distinctive form especially from the latter half of the seventh century in India (e.g. Samuel 2008; Ray 2001: ch. 1; cf. Ray 1999). Esoteric in nature, they emerged from the obscurity of renunciates living isolated in the forest at a time when the more institutionalised and monastic forms of Indian Buddhism were diminishing. Historically, this evolution of tantra links to the so-called third turning of the wheel of dharma as traced to Shakyamuni Buddha. In developmental sequence, the ‘first turning’ pertains especially to Buddha’s teachings that investigate the nature of human suffering and generate resolve to give up this-worldly craving (see Rahula 1974). The ‘second turning’ pertains especially to the deeper investigation of the nature of reality – culminating in the compassionate wisdom that understands all phenomena, including the self, to exist only relationally, imputed through conventional causes and conditions (e.g. Nargajuna 1995; Tsongkhapa 1977, 2002; cf. Newland 2008). In modern cultural anthropology, this perspective resonates with the notion that ontology is itself a deeply constructed psycho-cultural phenomenon (Kelly 2014, Descola 2013).

The ‘third turning’, most associated with tantras, applied these insights experientially to realise the ultimate nature of mind itself. Existence is recast to enable a transcendent fruition of all-encompassing unity, infinity, and oneness. This state is beyond thought or concept but can be concretely experienced and is believed to be enabled by potentials of consciousness that exist in all human beings even as they are typically obscured and undeveloped.

The brilliant essence of the sun  
Is not obscured by the darkness of a thousand eons  
Likewise, the clear light essence of one’s mind  
Cannot be obscured by eons of samsara.  
-Tilopa (988–1069), quoted in Dharmabhadra and Gyaltzen (2014:5)

Grounded in the dissolution of the everyday self, the potentials of transcendent experience are developed through specific technologies of meditation, visualisation, mantra recitation, and tantric possession (see Beyer 1973). The primary initial referent for this possession is the adept’s own teacher or guru, who is taken (typically after long personal association and experience) as a human model that embodies for the disciple the essential aspects of Buddha’s understanding and compassionate awareness. The essences embodied and symbolised by the guru are intensely meditated on and

internalised – and then extended through projective association to traits and features associated with a powerful tantric deity or *vidam*. These divine features and capacities are likewise internalised by the adept until he or she internalises the deity and begins to actually experience life in divine form (e.g. Dhargyey 2006). As such, the guru, the tantric deity, and the erstwhile self are all understood and experienced to be manifestations or emanations of unified transcendent nature.

The outer world is seen as a sacred mandala circle, and all living beings seen as playful gods and goddesses / All experiences become transformed into blissful primordial awareness/ And all of one's actions become spiritual, regardless of how they conventionally appear.

-The 2<sup>nd</sup> Dalai Lama, Gendun Gyatso Palzangpo (1475–1542); adapted from Mullin 2005b: 273; concerning guru devotion in American Tibetan Buddhism, see Khyentse 2016a

Within this experience, the images and references of the conventional world are understood to be manifestations or 'effulgences' of a transcendent plane of reality. This is underscored by the highly *this*-worldly activities of tantric adepts, who are perceived when not in retreat to engage the unhappiness and sufferings of other sentient beings with extraordinary compassion, skill, and energy. From their own perspective, and often as perceived by others, these labours are easy if not happily effortless insofar as they are undertaken from a subject position that comprehends the transcendent nature of reality beyond and outside human suffering.

A view of emptiness that fathoms to its depths the final nature of all that exists ... / And action perfectly balancing method and wisdom / To delight the Buddhas and bodhisattvas in this way / Is this not a joyful fate?

-The 2<sup>nd</sup> Dalai Lama, Gendun Gyatso Palzangpo (1475–1542); quoted in Mullin 2005b: 214

As such, tantric practice does not privilege an escape from worldly activity; it is not an other-worldly religion, ala Weber (1958). Tantric adepts, including following spiritual retreats, are typically perceived or attributed to engage in highly active and effective this-worldly practices, accomplishing great or even seemingly super-human travels and teachings, building projects, and staggeringly comprehensive scholarly writings and commentaries, often completely from memory or from dreams. In effect, tantric adepts are taken and/or take themselves to inhabit both an ultimate or divine plane of existence *and* a conventional 'normal' reality within which they skilfully spread the dharma.

The main emphasis in Buddhist tantras is the natural purity or intrinsic perfection of all being. The method for realizing this is to cultivate pure vision, or sacred outlook, at all times. The lifestyle tends to emphasize the unconventional in order to break through ordinary barriers and personal inhibitions to a nonconceptual understanding of true nature. (Kongtrul 2002: 5)

Given their strong and potentially disruptive power, dissemination of Buddhist tantras were highly restricted, first in India, and then in Tibet. Core practices were transmitted privately and secretly to extremely few closest disciples, after years or, more typically, decades of close association with the revered adept. And the unconventional lifestyle, practices, and beyond-convention orientation of tantric adepts could put them at odds with the highly controlled structures, hundreds of vows, and practical organisation of Tibetan monasteries. Many of those seeking higher tantric realisation left the monastery to seek individual spiritual training and reclusive meditation outside of it.

During almost a millennium and a half of Tibetan Buddhist tantric practice, an ongoing dialectic – at turns reinforcing and oppositional – has emerged between dissemination of Vajrayana practices, on the one hand, and their restriction and limitation, on the other. A similar pattern is evident for the current XIVth Dalai Lama, whose teachings, writings, and broad emphasis on compassion and loving kindness, as emphasised in the Mahayana ‘second turning’, have been pervasive and widely influential (e.g. Gyatso 1992, 1999, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2007, 2011). Less widely known is his profound scholarship and teaching concerning Tibetan Buddhist tantras (e.g. 1985, 1997, 2000, 2006). As he himself puts it (Gyatso 1987:47):

The Secret Mantra Vehicle is hidden because it is not appropriate for the minds of many persons ... [and] because those with impure motivation would harm both themselves and others. ... If one’s mental continuum has not been ripened by the practices common to both Sutra and Tantra Mahayana – realization of suffering, impermanence, refuge, love, compassion, altruistic mind generation, and emptiness of inherent existence – practice of the Mantra Vehicle can be ruinous ...

With the Chinese conquest of Tibet and the exodus of many high lamas along with the Dalai Lama, both the spread of tantric practices and their cautionary delimitation have taken on new forms. These include the development of Western tantric sanghas (congregations) and virtual communities that are anchored in faithfully translated Tibetan texts by a resident high lama, a series of visiting Tibetan teachers, and/or webcasts of teachings for by Tibetan lamas in other parts of the world. Overall, the access to Tibetan tantras has become more open for Western practitioners even as their specifics remain proprietary and their practice in monastic contexts is generally waning.

### Studying Tibetan Tantras

In ethnographic terms, how can we penetrate the experience of tantric self-possession and transformation? Against the restricted nature of contemporary self-reporting, Tibetan tantras have for centuries been massively explicated in published commentaries and technical compendiums for practitioners (e.g. Tsongkhapa 2010; Pabongkha 2011; Trijang 2013; Loden 1999) – as well as experientially commemorated in ‘inner’ and ‘secret’ autobiographies by revered adepts and lamas (e.g. Gyatso 1998; Lingpa 2012; cf. Lingpa 2015; Mullin 2006a). These provide rich sources of information about tantric training and its self-perceived experience.

Unfortunately, such sources are seldom used in the scholarly study of Tibetan tantras – given the schism between works written for practitioners and those focusing on academic textual analysis (e.g. Wedemeyer 2014; Gray 2007). Actual ethnographic accounts of tantric experience are rare, most being based on secondary or historical sources (e.g. Beyer 1973; Samuel 1993; cf. Snellgrove & Richardson 1995). Against these divides, current work can now triangulate increasingly between academic analysis; original texts, sadhanas, and commentaries; and accounts and experiences of informed and committed tantric practitioners. The present contribution can only be an initial foray in these respects.

Tibetan tantras have always been – and continue to be – proprietary and secret; their details are not easily or appropriately divulged. Though practised semi-publicly in Tibetan monasteries by sizable bodies of monks for a variety of purposes, tantric rituals have traditionally been predicated on long-term private and ultimately secret training by a teacher or root lama, whose deeper experience and understanding are

opaque to all but initiates (e.g. Samuel 1993: chs. 12–14). Even explicitly admitting one's specific tantric practice or practices is considered inadvisable or inappropriate under most circumstances. The greatest development of tantric practice was in Tibet itself, which was effectively closed to anthropologists both prior to the 1950s (contrast David-Neel 1967, 2005 [1927]), and since then due to the depredations and strictures of Chinese occupation. Samuel noted in 1993 (p. 112) that, 'practically all significant anthropological research on Tibetan populations has been on communities in Nepal and Ladkha [far northwestern India]'. While there is a valuable and growing corpus of historical work on the Indian origin and development of Buddhist tantrism, including through textual analysis of old manuscripts (e.g. Wedemeyer 2014; Samuel 2008; Davidson 2002), there are few good ethnographic accounts of tantric experience, training, or practice within Tibet itself (cf. Beyer 1973). In areas of northern India, northern Nepal, and elsewhere on the margins of Tibet, where ethnography has been pursued more actively, open access to high tantric adepts has typically been minimal and/or not part of quotidian experience in villages – and even in many monasteries. Esoteric and individualist, tantric practices have typically been pursued by reclusive adepts in remote retreat hideaways or by lamas during long-term retreats.

The situation is different in the U.S. and other non-Himalayan countries. Tibetan Buddhist dharma centres of one kind or another have developed in many or most major American cities – sometimes hosting resident or, more often, travelling Tibetan lamas and other high teachers who provide teachings and, occasionally, highest yoga tantra empowerments. A number of studies of Tibetan and other varieties of Buddhism in a range of Western countries are now available (e.g. Mitchell & Quli 2015; Lopes 2015; Matthews 2006; Rocha & Barker 2010; Hershock 2006; Spuler 2003; Queen 2000). However, few of these discuss in a meaningful way the content of teachings or empowerments associated with tantric practices.

My present information derives from 13 scholarly visits to rural and urban areas of Tibet, northern India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Mongolia during the past decade, including observation at many Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and pilgrimage sites, and discussion with a range of high lamas; a range of historical literature; Buddhist philosophical treatises, and religious texts, sadhanas, and commentaries; teachings by and several empowerments in the U.S. from Tibetan lamas; and experience in connection with Tibetan Buddhist dharma centres in Georgia, New York, Connecticut, Vermont, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Michigan, and California. I have had special connection with and training at the Drepung Loseling Monastery in Atlanta (the north American seat of Drepung Loseling in Tibet and India) and in relation to the Emory-Tibet partnership, both of which are associated with a range of high Tibetan lamas, including the current Dalai Lama, who also holds a distinguished professorship at Emory. The attempt is made here to triangulate between historical and more contemporary accounts and sources while also addressing changes and transformations in Tibetan Buddhist tantric practices.

### **Contrastive Sociologies of Experience**

For men living in pre-1950s Tibet, there were several ways that the world of Buddhist tantra could be engaged – following years or decades of preparatory exposure. Though circumstances varied, some trends broadly pertained. If one was from an elite or spiritually accomplished Tibetan family, exposure to advanced Buddhist teachings typically



began at an early age and were part of the general childhood environment – even apart from the 10–25% of boys who became monks, beginning when they were 7–10 years old (Samuel 1993: 578–582; Schaik 2011: 109). In the rarer and more prestigious circumstance that the boy was considered a *tulku* – the reincarnation of a recently deceased lama – intense and rigorous spiritual and scholarly training from a young age was a matter of course, with great attention to – and collective reverence for – the young boy himself by adults. Regardless of beliefs in reincarnation, the *tulku* system had a powerful sociological effect: boys who were chosen on the basis of their apparent natural understanding and identification of things associated with spiritual power were strongly reinforced – demanded really – to develop these capacities, including through years of intense cloistered tutelage by accomplished adepts.

Apart from *tulku* designation or other elite status, almost any Tibetan boy who aspired to spiritual and scholarly life – as opposed to being a yak herder, farmer, or artisan – had the opportunity to do so by joining a monastery. Stories abound in which the young adept-to-be insisted on becoming a monk until his family relented. Monastic life was harsh (e.g. Lempert 2012) but was meritocratic insofar as those who excelled in reading, writing, and, especially, memorisation of texts and debate could become high adepts over time regardless of family origin. Some of the highest lamas, including some of the Dalai Lamas, came from families of humble origin.

After perhaps two decades or so of monastic training, including debating and use of logic in relation to memorised texts, the most astute and accomplished monks could proceed, within the central Gelug order, to become a ‘Geshe’ – roughly equivalent to a doctorate in theology. It was commonly said that it took a hundred or more monks to produce one Geshe (and that it took a hundred or more Geshe to produce one lama). By this time, the monk would have consistently kept hundreds of ordination precepts or vows and be fully trained and highly obedient to monastic rules of ethics. Emphasis on forbearance, compassion, and employing antidotes to combat negative mental states such as anger, desire, pride, and jealousy were deeply instilled. On the positive side, repeated mandala offerings, mantra recitations, and/or body prostrations were undertaken to gain merit. The aspiring Geshe had one or more root teachers or gurus, who were taken to be a human incarnation of the highest principles of Buddhism. Guru devotion was – and is – taken extremely seriously, with great personal reverence and dedication. In ways orthogonal to Western notions of equality, hierarchy in the religious sphere was extremely strong. At the same time, it was emphasised, the careful and wise choice of one’s guru was ultimately up to the student (Khyentse 2016a: chs. 2–3). The guru is not the Buddha or a diety but an exemplar of essential features of Buddhahood, a bodily actualisation for the adept – what Luhrmann (2004: 519) more generally calls a metakinetic presence – that exemplifies Buddhahood through the guru’s own unique expression.

It was normally only after being conferred on final public examination to be a Geshe, when the monk was often already in his thirties, that he might enter in tantric college or otherwise be trained individually in higher level teachings of intense meditation and tantric familiarisation. For many, even tantric college was only preparatory insofar as the two major tantric colleges at Lhasa tended to focus on intricate ritual complexities and logistics for enacting tantric ritual practices – rather than cultivating the experience of actually becoming a tantric adept. For other monks, including some very highly accomplished, the life of the monastery was too constraining, and they left to affiliate with individual teachers and develop their own spiritual experiences, including in

solitary retreat, often in the process becoming itinerant monks or yogis. In other cases, rarer but by no means unprecedented, highly astute young men with little formal monastic training might by personal predilection and circumstance become associated with a high lama or wandering yogi and become a tantric adept through this means. Before this point, however, the ‘absorption’ of transcendent experience was not spontaneously experiential but primarily a cognitive and declarative ‘system two’ process – ‘thoughtful, reflective, and deliberative’ (Luhmann *et al* 2010: 67).

Beyond this, the conferral of actual tantric experience through ‘pith’ or ‘pointing out’ instructions (*upadesa*) or, more properly, the ‘empowerment’ (*abhisheka*) of a tantric initiation, was and is both highly important and diverse in circumstance (cf. Khyentse 2016a: 177–180). Some lamas have given general tantric empowerments to relatively large groups of people, sometime anyone who chances to attend – on the assumption that it is only a preliminary empowerment and that its more esoteric aspects are beyond the comprehension of those who are not already qualified to understand them. Otherwise, conferral of tantric empowerments is typically a rigorous process. The earliest Tibetan masters, following the tradition of the Indian mahasiddhas (Downman 1986), are said to have transmitted tantric empowerments to only a very few of their closest acolytes, typically after many years or decades of discipleship.

Given the potential danger and harm of transmitting tantras, which propound the constructedness and ultimate emptiness of all norms and rules, their conferral is usually carefully restricted. The Dalai Lama in 2011 conferred a very basic level Kalachakra tantric empowerment to tens of thousands of people at the Washington, DC Verizon Center – but then held a high level Yamantaka empowerment for a small number of selected long-term practitioners shortly afterwards in Long Beach, CA. For the latter, rigorous prerequisites (preliminaries) were required along with a life-long commitment to daily mantra recitations and guru devotion practices. In pre-1960s Tibet, ‘preliminary practices’ might easily entail the completion of 100,000 mantra recitations of various kinds, 100,000 mandala offerings, 100,000 or more prostrations, and so on.

In all cases, Tibetan tantric empowerments must be transmitted via a ‘living lineage’: they *must* be conferred in a line of previous personal connection that extends back to the original founder of the tantric lineage – typically an Indian mahasiddha or Tibetan adept from centuries ago. Recitation of at least parts of this line of genealogical conferral are typically recited at the outset of the tantric sadhana, that is, in the daily practice liturgy for meditating on and internalising the tantric deity. If the last holder of a tantric lineage dies without conferring its empowerment fully on another person, the lineage is dead and cannot be revived, no matter how many scholarly texts, sadhanas, or erudite commentaries may still be accessible concerning it.

## American Buddhist Tantric Exposure

Apart from early idiosyncratic and colonial contacts (e.g. David-Neel 2005 [1927]; Harris & Shakya 2003), Westerners first meaningfully encountered Tibetan lamas in large numbers during the 1960s and 1970s amid the groundswell exodus of Tibetans from Chinese-conquered Tibet. Settling in peri-Himalayan locations such as Dharamsala, Sikkim, and Kathmandu, lamas and other accomplished teachers were met by young Western spiritual seekers and hippies who were drawn to eastern and specifically

Tibetan religion and esotericism. Among these, a few – such as Robert Thurman, Jeffrey Hopkins, B. Alan Wallace, Glenn Mullin, and Alexander Berzin – stayed on to learn Tibetan fluently and become the first to translate key Tibetan esoteric as well as exoteric texts into English (e.g. Lopez 1998: ch. 6). More broadly, the exodus of insulated and dispossessed Tibetan lamas into India and Nepal – many of them dying from disease and hardship along the way – brought them in contact with young spirit-seekers from the West who were drawn to Tibetan Buddhism amid the 1960s and 1970s search for liberation, altered states of consciousness, and transcendental mysticism. From this distinct mix emerged that what has since become, following Lopez's (2002: xxxix) conceptualisation, the modern twentieth and twenty-first century development of Tibetan Buddhism; as he states, '[M]uch of what we regard as Buddhism today is, in fact, modern Buddhism.' Indeed, as Batchelor (2015: 17) notes, the very word 'Buddhism' was 'coined by Western scholars in the nineteenth century' and 'has no equivalent in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, or Tibetan.'

Subsequent years and decades have seen increasing numbers of lamas, often accompanied by a Western translator and one or more attendants, establish Tibetan Buddhist teaching centres in areas of the U.S., Europe, and Australia – as well as selected parts of Latin America and East Asia outside Tibet. Some of these included a proper Buddhist temple and teaching centre, where the lama gave teachings while in residence for Western practitioners. In others, a benefactor or core group of Western practitioners rented a facility or used their own residence as a periodic dharma meeting place where teachings by visiting lamas or Geshes could be hosted. Reciprocally, many Tibetan masters developed an international circuit of teaching dissemination – a bit like a wandering Tibetan lama or yogi, but on a continental or global scale. At present, most major American cities have one if not several Tibetan Buddhist dharma centres. To these is added the important increasing trend for lamas to permit their teachings – apart from actual tantric empowerments – to be broadcast or posted on the web for viewing by practitioners across countries and continents.

Today, most Americans drawn to practice Tibetan Buddhism at its higher levels appear to be middle-aged or older, with strong and sometimes majority participation by women. As those associated with hippie-era lifestyles have aged or moved on to other interests, many American Buddhists are now relatively highly educated and middle-upper class, though most lamas are highly open to committed working class practitioners and members from minority groups. In all, the experience of advanced American Tibetan Buddhist practitioners contrasts markedly with its Tibetan precursors (cf. Lopez 2002; 1998: ch. 6) in being:

- Primarily non-monastic: few Westerners have taken monk or nun ordination vows – and there are few significant Western Buddhist monasteries or nunneries. American practitioners typically go to teachings near their home area or in another part of the U.S.; complete requested preliminaries; receive a tantric empowerment from a high lama; and then practice on their own or in an informal local sangha. Experience is commonly punctuated by subsequent teachings, empowerments, or meditation retreats.
- Anchored neither in the totalising institution of a monastery, multi-year meditation retreats, nor full devotion of one's life to a guru as spiritual master. In most cases, teachings are attended and practices engaged through meditation retreats of one or a few weeks while otherwise maintaining a wage job or profession.

- Begun by most in their thirties or later – rather than being predisposed from a very young age by Buddhist teachings and prolonged ensuing cultural socialisation.
- Relatively exclusive of and little influenced by ‘pragmatic’ and to some extent ‘karmic’ aspects of Tibetan Buddhism that relate variously to oracles, spells, charms, amulets, relics, and physically dramatic or uncontrolled shamanic or spirit possession (cf. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993).
- Less frequently geared around a single master teacher or guru to whom one is devoted for life, but rather, a diverse range of teachers. This was also possible in Tibet but seems more general in non-Tibetan contexts.
- Ambivalent about the heavily hierarchical nature of Tibetan Buddhist religious authority while being impressed with and committed to the forbearance, confidence, and serenity of high Tibetan teachers as perceived from a Western perspective.
- Relatively gender balanced or with a preponderance of women adherents despite the vast majority of Tibetan Buddhist teachers being men and Tibetan monasticism being highly patriarchal – notwithstanding the Dalai Lama’s emphasis on advocating education and advanced training for Buddhist nuns.
- Highly motivated to achieve spiritual realisation or transcendence intended to produce immediate and significant improvement in one’s personal life.
- More focused within a very few years on transcendent aspects of Buddhist tantric philosophy and practice – which in Tibet would be typically transmitted to those with many years of prior training in classical texts, guru devotion, merit-generating practices, and demonstrated commitment to disciplinary practices and rules of virtue and ethics.

As Lopez (2002: ix) suggests, though modern Buddhism has diverged from its past in major ways during the last century and a half, ‘it does not see itself as the culmination of a long process of evolution, but rather as a return to the origin, to the Buddhism of the Buddha himself’ (cf. Batchelor 2015; see Knaft 2016). This pattern characterises as well the process whereby tantric transcendence is cultivated and absorbed through skillful learning and experiential internalisation, as theorised by Luhrmann (2012: ch. 7; Luhrmann *et al.* 2010). Western practitioners of Tibetan Buddhist tantras quickly aspire to tangible improvement in their social lives through spiritual realisation and ultimate transcendence, as opposed to appreciatively accepting years or decades of preparatory moral and ethical training, logical exposition and debate, study and memorisation of major texts, and performing hundreds of thousands of prostrations, mantra recitations, or mandala offerings.

Amid or just because of these difference with training in pre-1950s Tibet, however, commitment to strictures of living lineage tantric transmission remains very important in American Tibetan Buddhism. Though elderly lamas find themselves giving advanced teachings to Western practitioners who have only a tiny fraction of the knowledge background of trained Tibetan monks, the potential as well as the demand for experiential transformation through direct living lineage conferral of tantric empowerments is strong. Some Tibetan lamas teaching abroad require significant preliminaries – thousands of prostrations, mantra recitations, or mandala offerings – before empowerment may be conferred, but many others are more flexible, assuming that those interested are drawn to advanced teachings and empowerments by deeper karmic attraction – and that those empowered will at least receive a ‘seed planted’ that may develop later or in a future lifetime. Beyond this, webcasts allow practitioners to follow advanced

teachings across countries and continents; some practitioners are highly committed to long-distance learning, empowerment, and practice via one or more revered teachers. Finally, an increasing range of detailed Tibetan tantric teachings, commentaries, and sadhanas are now available in English translation, either in books or via the internet. Some of these are restricted to those who have received the relevant authorised tantric empowerment, though they remain otherwise available even if largely incomprehensible to the uninitiated.

Strictures against divulging the details of tantric empowerments and sadhanas to those who are not themselves initiated also remain resolute. This is explained not on the basis of exclusion; indeed, injunctions against discriminating against non-practitioners are paramount and are explicitly stated in tantric vows. Rather, the goal is to protect would-be practitioners from practices and their associated mental transformations that could be damaging or hurtful without proper understanding and guidance. Insofar as one takes seriously the possibility or at least the potential for deeply and in principle irrevocably reconditioning one's mental state, the proprietary strictures against disseminating tantric content are a bit like requiring someone who wants to do mind self-surgery to first have certified training by a qualified mind-MD teacher. Normally, even acknowledging the fact that one is a tantric practitioner is inappropriate; information is provided on a 'need to know' basis, lest it betoken humility or lack of respect for the non-Tantric practices, perceptions, and activities of others.

### **Normative Is As Normative Does**

Between the relative neophyte status of most American tantric practitioners relative to their Tibetan equivalents and the strictures against declaring or even acknowledging one's tantric understanding, it is expectably difficult to obtain first-hand accounts of tantric experience from Tibetan Buddhists – either in the Himalayas or in the U.S., including through participant-observation. At most higher tantric teachings, empowerments, and retreats, the teacher – typically a high lama – is the only one considered qualified to comment on, interpret, explain, or otherwise represent the teaching text or associated empowerment. Many retreats cultivate an ethic of respectful or total silence among practitioners. Tibetan debating of teaching texts and logic is generally absent in modern Western Tibetan Buddhism, though questions from students are not infrequently allowed by lamas or Geshes at the end of a teaching. Student questions tend to relate to the text at hand or to address challenges of insufficiency in their own practices (e.g. asking for techniques to reduce mind-wandering). Casual conversations may take place online or in informal tantric sanghas (roughly, 'congregations') of those who have received a given tantric empowerment and who thus consider themselves life-long vajra 'brothers' and 'sisters'. These are revealing but highly variable in content given diverse personalities and life histories.

In comparative perspective, lack of participant exegesis is unsurprising; secret initiations across many if not most religious and cultural traditions emphasise liturgical acceptance, memorisation, and compliance while minimising exegesis by participants themselves (e.g. Barth 1975). Given the general lack of monastic or other overarching institutional structure for contemporary American Tibetan Buddhists, practice typically focuses on the direct internalisation and self-application of received tantric sadhanas along with reading of and reflection on published commentaries and attendance at dharma teachings either in person or online. In this context, the impetus for

transcendental learning and direct absorption tends to occlude or collapse the divide between tantric ideals and their personal experience by practitioners; the goal is to identify with the ideal state more fully – and to recognise the impediments of one’s existing circumstances as themselves a manifestation or at least as a way-station of transcendence.

Overwhelmingly, tantric practice emphasises the normative procedure of self-deification as transmitted and reinforced by texts, mantra recitations, and authorised daily sadhana practice. These liturgies are explicit, consistently elaborated, and both shared and aspired to in principle by all practitioners of a given tantra across time and space – and as faithfully transmitted from original lineage holders centuries in the past. Great care is taken to translate sadhanas and main texts directly from the most authoritative Tibetan sources – often printed with the Tibetan original in interlinear or page-facing text. In this context, the content and structure of practice are easily both a tangible standard and a deeply embraced goal of total absorption.

The special or what might be called super-normativity of tantric texts is underscored by the spiritual philosophy that underlies them. This stresses not only the inherent non-existence of any pre-given self, but the relative rather than the absolute nature of conventional reality in relation to tantric reality. To take a simple example, the constitution of one’s own wind channels, colours of body nodal points or ‘chakras’, and the Tibetan seed syllables that rests at various chakras, are not given in the nature of conventional reality but becomes real through world-reconstruction that varies depending on the tantric deity practice in question. In the same way that an apple is the same to all but perceived differently by a three-year-old, an itinerant fruit harvester, or a biochemical food scientist, so, too, the conventional world is considered uniform and yet quite differently experienced by tantric and non-tantric practitioners. The pus of a fostering wound may be experienced by the adept as ambrosia, and early tantric adepts in India are said to have practised in charnal grounds strewn with decaying corpses as an index and testament to their transformed experience.

Insofar as one is able to successfully project and experientially fuse with the tantric deity, one is not aspiring to a tantric norm but has already and completely manifested it. In the sadhana practices themselves, this is typically reflected by moving from an initial visualisation of the tantric deity as outside oneself (often called ‘front generation’) to experientially fused identification with the deity *as* oneself (often called ‘divine pride’). From the latter perspective, everything looks and feels different, not because it is intrinsically different at a conventional level of reality, but because one’s own perspective has changed. In short, the taken-for-new-norm *becomes* the norm – from the subject position of a realised tantric being. This is at one and the same time a transcendental state of *mahamudra*, of existential bliss-emptiness (see Gyatso 1997; Namgyal 1986; cf. Rabjam 2002). In the mix, the various experiences recounted and divulged by practitioners about ‘their own’ personal experiences are taken to be, and are self-perceived, to be incidental against the goal of identifying and internalising the super-normative essence of the tantric deity as oneself. If the self of spiritual possession can be its own interpretant of life in action, as Lambek (2014) suggests, then the reconstructed post-self in tantric Buddhism *is*, in a sense, the new norm that it aspires to actualise. In this sense, the super-normative is the ideal, and the ideal remains the focus. Against this, the practitioner is at risk of contravening or degrading the practice by re-representing it to others.

Tibetan Buddhists have long held that tantric experience offers the practitioner enormous potential while also posing grave transgressive risk (see, historically, Wedemeyer

2014; in more contemporary contexts, see Lopez 2006; Khyentse 2016a: ch. 5). Tantric adepts have been associated with sporadically eccentric or wild behaviour, reflecting the fact that they experience the world on a transcendent plane that comprehends all conventional designations – and rules – to be empty of inherent existence. This throws into relief the strong importance of having already deeply internalised valid and authentic principles of compassion, virtue, and ethics. These afford the adept full respect of and skilful engagement in the conventional world as experienced by those who are not tantric adepts.

### Outline of Tantric Practice

Following preliminaries that may be rigorous – classically including hundreds of thousands of mantra recitations, bodily prostrations, and/or mandala offerings – the tantric adept takes a set of life-long pledges to uphold and protect Pratimoksha vows of ethics; Bodhisattva vows of compassion; and Vajrayana vows of tantric respect, devotion, and secrecy. As a kind of way-station toward Enlightenment, the tantric practitioner is empowered and then self-trained to become self-possessed by the energy and divine form of one or more tantric deities, including *Yamantaka*, *Guhyasamaja*, *Hevajra*, *Chakrasamvara*, *Vajrayogini*, and *Kalachakra* (see Beyer 1973: 33–54; Vessantara 2008). Iconically depicted, these deities are portrayed as fantastic beings, often wrathful, with several if not scores of arms and legs, coloured bodies, multiple heads, with awesome features and powers, sometimes in sexual union with a female consort (see Huntington & Bangdel 2003; Lauf 1976). Highest yoga tantric adepts self-possess these deity forms after dissolving and transcending their normal notions of self. In the process – and in stark contrast to Mahayana orientations – the energy of normal emotions, desires, and attachments is not repressed or denied but observed and then transmuted into divine forms or manifestations. For instance, craving and attachment are transformed into bliss, anger is transformed into luminosity, and ignorance is transformed into transcendent nonconceptuality. In all, tantric practice is designed to produce long lasting and in principle permanent alterations not just in the identity of the self but in the experienced ontology upon which notions of normal self-hood and reality rest.

May I unite with a mudra of my own capacity, fill the three realms with emanations, cleanse the world and its inhabitants of stains, and generate the supported and supporting mandalas, thus perfecting altruism and taking to the end the absorption of the supremely-triumphant mandala.

-The 2<sup>nd</sup> Dalai Lama, Gendun Gyatso Palzangpo (1475–1542); quoted in Mullin 2006a: 305

In general, daily practice begins with the adept taking refuge and paying homage to the previous lineage masters who have faithfully transmitted the secret practices in an unbroken and unadulterated sequence from their original formulation. The wish is then generated, focused on, and internalised to develop sincere and unlimited compassion – ultimate *bodhicitta* – and to use the tantric vehicle to pursue this end.

Following this, refuge is verbally taken in the Guru, the teachings of the Buddha, and one's fellow tantric practitioners. The adept visualises blessings and proper motivation being solicited, received, and internalised from the Guru into his or her own body, speech, and mindstream. When this is completed, the adept visualises instantly self-generating him- or herself as the designated tantric deity (see Samuel 1993: 233ff.).

Taking on this divinely projected subject position, s/he performs an extended series of blessings, purifications, and offerings, internalises the full capacities of limitless compassion (*bodhicitta*), and requests and receives (imagines receiving) specific tantric empowerments from the Guru, who is thoroughly absorbed and bodily internalised.

On the crown of my head is a jewel splendid as the sun and moon, on which sits my Guru, Marpa the Translator, adorned with ornaments of human bone. He is the Wish-Fulfilling Gem, Buddha's Transformation Body. If you see him with the eye of veneration, you will find he is the Buddha Dorje Chang! He will forever guard you like a son. This rare turban is my secret adornment.

-Milarepa (c. 1052 – c. 1135), quoted by Chang (1962:168)

In this deeply imagined divine state, the adept then dissolves into 'complete emptiness' and transforms a deeply imagined state of physical death into a divine state of blissful nonconceptual awareness. Propelled by motivation to help all sentient beings, the adept imagines with great intensity proceeding from a divine body of clear light emptiness (the truth-body, or *dharmakaya*) back through an intermediate dreamlike state between death and life (the enjoyment body, or *sambokakaya*) to reemerge and be reborn in a form that is evident in conventional reality (the emanation body, or *nirmanakaya*). This experienced process of death and reincarnation does not culminate in conventional human rebirth, however, but rather in a state of transcendent awareness that, for the sake of helping others, emanates or manifests in reborn human form. The goal is hence not to escape from conventional reality, but to transcendently re-engage it. In the process, what would otherwise appear to the adept as a conventional world is now experienced fully instead as a divine mandala world.

[A]s if spreading into space, insight-awareness awoke, from which emptiness' clear radiance blazed more greatly, and the entire world of appearance was in a state of nonconceptual radiant light.

-Jigme Lingpa (1730–1798), quoted in J. Gyatso 1998: 23–24

The divine qualities of this bejewelled and exquisite world are rehearsed and visualised in exquisite detail in relation to the transformed and emanated self, which is also elaborately visualised as the tantric deity at the mandala's centre. This is clearly a highly elaborate example of kataphatic or imagination-based spiritual identification (cf. Luhrmann & Morgain 2012, Luhrmann *et al.* 2013). More generally, it strongly facilitates psychological absorption, that is, 'moments of total attention that completely engage one's attentional resources', resulting in 'a heightened sense of the reality of the attentional object, imperviousness to distracting events, and an altered sense of reality in general, including an empathically altered sense of self' (Luhrmann 2012: 199; Tellegen & Atkinson 1974: 268). Against this, imperfect, disagreeable, or noxious phenomena are also perceived in their divine form, for instance, putrid pus might be experienced instead as divine nectar. In this context, the practised ability of the tantric adept to transformatively experience the imperfect world of *samsara* as divine reality is completely manifest.

In his or her divine capacity, the tantric adept can bless and most skilfully help sentient beings. Mentally, the adept concretely visualises her or his ability to take on others' suffering, dissolve it, and send positive energy back compassionately to the afflicted person, including those who might conventionally be considered or experienced to be one's worst enemies. Successive and elaborate rounds of both giving offerings to



deity emanations and receiving back blessings and powers then ensue, including the receipt of protection mantras or ‘armour’ to vouchsafe one’s transcendent reality from being sullied or compromised by conventional concerns. Commonly but not invariably, depending on the tantric deity and the specific practice, experience includes imagined entry into physical union with a sexual consort deity, which catalyses divine inseparability of all-pervading bliss and emptiness (Shaw 1994; Samuel 1993: 206, 240, 275; cf. Chopel 2000). In body mandala practices, the self-as-deity manifests as multiple or prolifically differentiated deity emanations and incarnations. These may constitute parts or extensions of one’s divine body in the larger mandala world – each one with its own characteristics and powers that are themselves elaborately visualised, meditated on, and internalised.

The dakas and dakini’s [male and female spirit emanations] dance a blissful dance in the mystic channels and secret drops. Mundane perception is severed from consciousness and all emanations become ultimately pure.

Visualize yourself as Heruka with Consort, luminous yet void, body empty, energy channels of three qualities vibrating within; at your heart a Dharma wheel with eight petals bears the indestructible drop in the form of HUM between the sun of method and the moon of wisdom: Mind firm on this, tremulous misconceptions are cut, and the clear light, sheer as the autumn sky, arises.

–Kelzang Gyatso [the 7<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama] (1707–1757), quoted in Mullin (2006a: 77)

Typically, the heart of tantric practice is the final dispelling of interfering spirits, re-manifesting as the deity, and, especially, extended recitation of the deity’s root mantras, which reinforce and protect one’s divine identification/identity. After this, the practice ends with a final dissolution into emptiness, further blessings, offerings, and praises, requesting forbearance for any shortcomings of the practitioner, rededicating one’s commitment to the *bodhicitta* of limitless compassion, re-entering conventional reality, and dedicating all merits of the practice to the fruitful success and long life of one’s Guru and other teachers and revered mentors, typically including the present Dalai Lama.

Amid these roughly shared parameters, liturgical practice texts or sadhanas of highest yoga tantra are both significantly variable and highly elaborate (see Beyer 1973). Classical commentaries on tantric sadhanas can run to many hundreds of pages (e.g. Tsongkhapa 2010; Trijang & Rinpoche 2013), and the root sadhana texts can themselves be scores of pages long. These were fully memorised, visualised in great detail, and practised daily by Tibetan practitioners, including during extended retreats, the standard retreat lasting three years, three months, and three days. Accomplished adepts are said to internalise their mandala world so fully that they can experience it in complete detail from any angle, at any size, and even experience it backwards, as it would appear in a mirror. At a minimum, an ‘approximation retreat’ – which authorises the adept to lead tantric practices, and in principle to transmit them to others as necessary – generally entails at least two or more weeks of ritual seclusion during which 100,000 or more recitations of the deity’s root mantra are completed.

Though the initial or ‘generation stage’ of tantric practices described above is elaborate, this remains ‘imaginary’ in the sense that one is only visualising and rehearsing the actual transformation of one’s body, speech, and mind into divine form on a plane of transcendent reality. The *actual* transformation occurs through yet more esoteric and restricted ‘completion stage’ or ‘crossing over’ practices. Though

described and taught in general terms (e.g. Kongtrul 2002; Kelsang Gyatso 1994; Lodoe 1995), these practices are rarely taught collectively and tend to be transmitted individually or in small groups to highly accomplished adepts by their direct Guru. Completion stage practices are designed to transform one's actual bodily energy and continuum through very subtle mental awareness and physical manipulation of one's 'winds' 'drops' and 'channels', including through breath control and potentially by the aid of an actual tantric sexual consort or *karmamudra* (e.g. Baker & Laird 2012: 33).

Though the above transformations are typically described as experienced from a male perspective, tantric female consorts and adepts have been quite important in Tibetan tantric practice in both practical terms and in Tibetan philosophy (e.g. Dowman 1996; Mullin 2006a: ch. 3). Symbolically, female-associated principles of wisdom/emptiness provide a full and complete complement to emphasis on male-associated method and skilful means, both in practice and in visual representation (e.g. Simmer-Brown 2001; Shaw 1994; Mullin 2003). In social life, however, Tibetan nunneries were decidedly secondary and unsupported relative to their monastic counterparts (e.g. Gutschow 2005; Grimshaw 1994; cf. Lohuis 2013). The equality of women and men among Western Tibetan Buddhist lay practitioners marks a striking and many would suggest positive change vis-à-vis Tibetan progenitors.

The power of physical 'wind' and sometimes of sexual techniques – described by one lama as like rocket fuel – greatly intensifies absorption of transcendence as analysed in general by Luhrmann et al., for example, 'subjects' willingness to be caught up in their imaginative experience' (2010: 73). Combining bodily energy and mental focus, the adept becomes progressively differentiated or 'isolated' from conventional perception and experience of his or her body, speech, and mind. In the process, s/he experiences and is considered to control with unbroken awareness not only the waking or meditative state but his/her dream states (through dedicated practices of dream yoga) and the process of dying, death, and rebirth (through meditative death experience). In this latter regard, the psychic and physical process of dissolution at the death is contemplated, rehearsed, and viscerally experienced – as preparation for experiencing and mentally transcending death, transforming it into an experience of supreme bliss and emptiness. Though scientific documentation has proven difficult to arrange, some high tantric adepts who die in states of samadhi meditation are said with certainty by observers to remain in an after-death state of meditative equipoise (*tukdam*) without *rigor mortis* or other signs of bodily decomposition for days or even weeks following biological death.

In relation to their extensively memorised sadhana practices and mantra recitations, tantric adepts of completion stage practices draw variously upon the mind-training of deep and sustained meditative focus or samadhi, hallucinatory experiences that often attend prolonged isolation and seclusion, and forceful techniques of breathing control, internal bodily manipulation, and sexual energy (*kundalini* in Indian yogas, e.g. Shepard 1993). These practices are elaborated, for instance, in the so-called six yogas of Naropa and Niguma (Mullin 2005a, 2006a; 2006b; Yeshe 1998; Dharmabhadra & Gyaltzen 2014). Properly configured and reinforced, these experiences in principle effect a permanent transformation of the adept's psyche, bodily energy, and world at large. This includes not just the dissolution of the self but the construction of a new ontology that refigures normal assumptions concerning time and space. Insofar as this tantric world is communicated, experienced, and acted in by other tantrikas, it

seen to transpire on a level or plane reality that appears unworldly or magical to normal persons, though it is entered into for their own benefit and conducive to their own progressive realisation.

### Self-hood Redux

The normal or everyday self in Tibetan Buddhist tantras is not considered a basis for psychological order or stability but rather a delusion that ignorantly takes normal waking reality, *samsara*, at face value. As Klein (1995: 129, emphasis original) describes in the context of Vajrayogini tantra,

[T]he over-reified sense of self is known as the conception of a “truly existent,” or “inherently existent” self. The self often *seems* to be massively existent, unambiguously findable, and concretely identifiable, in the same way that one can point to a rock and then pick it up.

Within tantric Tibetan Buddhism, this quotidian self is not findable and non-existent. Rather, following especially Nargajuna’s (1995) early philosophy of emptiness, the reification of a presumed self-existent self is itself the root of human suffering, dysfunction, and unhappiness. The danger is hence not that the self will be possessed, but that the seduction of this-worldly possessions and self-hood will obscure the fact that the normal waking self exists only as a dependently-arisen or imputed subject (compare in Western psychology, Cooley’s [1902] notion that self-hood is imputed from social interactions via the perceptions of others).

The goal in tantric adsorptive transcendence is hence not to buttress the normally reified self – as commonly emphasised in Western therapeutic psychology – but to deconstruct and dissolve it, and, more fundamentally, to undercut its very presumption of existence, its ontological imputation. In Tibetan tantric practices, this is done proximately through mind-training and meditative investigation, through which the normal self is found to be non-existent, dissolved, and then self-consciously *reconstructed* in divine form or emanation. This ‘divinity’ is not, however, produced by an external force or being; Buddhism has no creator god and no ultimately existent deities. Rather, deified or divine forms are understood by adepts to be projections of mind. Though such awareness is typically outside the purview of lay Tibetan practitioners, who often prostrate or pray to Tibetan deities as actual gods, tantric reality does posit neither an inherent self nor any independently existing external entities. As if merging with Western postmodern sensibilities, the world of tantra is one of deeply embraced and radical constructivism – while being ethically grounded in a prime directive of compassion for all sentient beings.

### Tantra Meets Foucault

The skilful learning and psychological absorption of Tibetan tantric spirituality can be elucidated by considering their foundational structure and method as a Foucauldian technology of the self, that is, how it changes subjects’ relationship to themselves in their capacity *as* subjects (Foucault 1988). For Foucault, the ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents rest on subjectification – the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject (Foucault 1997: 262; 1982: 208). This relationship to oneself (*rapport à soi*) has four major aspects as described by Foucault in ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics’ (1997: 263–267). The first dimension is the interior target of

ethical pursuit, that is, the ethical substrate (*substance éthique*) that delineates those aspects of the self that are most subject to ethical concern and intervention. In the ancient Greek and Greco-Roman époques and contexts that Foucault discusses, these are variously the ethically problematic nature of one's desires, one's intentions, and one's feelings.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the primary target of ethical concern is, in step-wise fashion, one's body, one's speech, and one's mind. More specifically, the ethical self-relationship engaged by the first turning of the wheel of dharma is associated with the body – with bodily discipline that resists and renounces the superficial attractions and aversions of samsara, the conventional world. Ethical subject-positions associated with the second turning of the wheel of dharma build upon bodily discipline to cultivate ethical speech, associated especially with limitless compassion for others. The third, vajrayana subject position of ethical relationship emphasises mind, including control and ultimately transcendence of normal mental states. As such, whereas Foucault assesses that different historical times and places emphasise different foci of ethical concern and intervention, Tibetan Buddhism presents a scaffolded structure that ethically targets body, then speech, and then mind. This tiered emphasis is pervasive in Tibetan Buddhism and is reflected, for instance, in Tibetan Buddhist shrines, which include statues of Buddhist deities (symbolising Buddha's body), texts of Buddhist teachings and commentaries (symbolising Buddha's speech), and a stupa (symbolising Buddha's mind).

Foucault's second aspect of ethical self-relationship is the mode of subjectivation (*mode d'assujettissement*). This is 'the way in which people are invited or incited to recognise their moral obligations' – for instance, by means of a divine law, rational law, or rational rule (Foucault 1997: 264). From a preliminary Buddhist perspective, subjects are invited or incited to morality by 'the four thoughts that turn the mind' towards the dharma. Respectively, these are:

- the preciousness of being born as a sentient human being
- the ultimate impermanence of everything in the world, including our lives the certainty of death
- the strong influence on the course of our lives by our own virtuous and non-virtuous thoughts, feelings, speech, and actions
- how ultimately unsatisfying it is to fixate on the pleasures of a material world (*samsara*), as these are hard to attain in life, ephemeral, and end completely at death.

Building upon these deeply encoded and rehearsed incitements, deeper levels of tantric practice engage modes of subjectivation – incitements to morality – by means of what we might call 'subjective empiricism'. This is the very careful, attentive, and systematic empirical investigation understanding and control of one's own mental state—the exploration of the nature of one's mind through analytic and then open-presence meditation. This rigorous subjective investigation is perceived to reveal the deeper nature of reality, in particular, the deeply felt and absorbed experience as well as the cognitive understanding that neither one's self nor the external world exist independently of the conceptual mode of designation that imputes them. This experiential understanding presents a fundamentally different view from Western psychology and philosophy, which from Descartes to Heidegger has wrestled with how Being can be at once a subject of objective understanding and the vehicle through which

understanding and experience occur. In Tibetan tantric perspective, this dilemma is resolved by comprehending – and experientially embracing – the import of *differentiated* subjective positionings. In this perspective, the contradiction between categorical attributions of objective reality and the infinite ineffability or oneness of transsubjective experience is resolved by first parsing and then collapsing and fusing in a single awareness – primordial or Buddha mind – the competing subjective perspectives of conventional conceptuality, on the one hand, and, on the other, of transcendent nonconceptuality that is neither existent nor non-existent in conventional terms (e.g. Tsongkhapa 2002).

The third aspect of self-subject relationship for Foucault is ‘the means by which we change ourselves to become ethical subjects’ (1997: 265). These are the *pratique de soi*, the practical activities, the methods – often some version of asceticism, very broadly construed – by which ethical transformation is properly effected. In Tibetan Buddhism, as before, the methods used to create ethical self-relationship vary depending on the level and subject position of the practitioner, being divided into three paths or ‘vehicles’. Initial-level practitioners, who follow precepts of bodily discipline and avoiding harmful actions against others, focus in ethical method on renunciation and follow the ‘lesser vehicle’ or ‘listener’s vehicle’ (Hinayāna, Śrāvakayāna / Pratyekabuddhayāna). Those endeavouring to achieve renunciation and also to extend limitless compassion to all other sentient beings follow the ‘Great Vehicle’, or Mahāyāna path. This entails meritorious, merit-making activity, controlling speech, and taming and training one’s thoughts – mind-training (*lojong*). Maintaining and building on this, meditation that includes intense mental investigation, familiarisation, cultivation, and internalisation of superordinate reality is practised by adepts who additionally follow the ‘Diamond Vehicle’ or ‘Indestructible Vehicle’ (Vajrayāna). This vehicle not only escapes or counteracts afflictions but transmutes them by deconstructing and transcending the conventional mode of reality upon which they are based.

Self-evidently, methods of ethical cultivation are progressively tiered in Tibetan Buddhism, with each level serving as the condition and basis for the next. Among these, tantric practitioners who have sufficient awareness of the deepest and most subtle nature of subjective vis-à-vis ostensibly objective reality can fundamentally recast *samsara*. As Tibetan Buddhist teachers consistently emphasise, these higher level practices carry absolutely no benefit whatever – and produce great harm – if they are not based on a complete foundation, and consistent daily practice, of renunciation of craving, on the one hand, and unreserved compassion for all living beings, on the other.

Foucault’s fourth and final dimension of ethical self-relationship is ‘the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way’ (1997: 265). This is the cultivated end or *telos* of ethical practice (Foucault 1997). In Tibetan Buddhism, the desired end state of renunciation, which is accomplished through the ‘lesser’ or ‘listener’s vehicle’, is complete liberation from one’s negative mental states and emotions that harm others. Those who achieve this state of liberation are called *Arhats*. Those who reach the higher desired state of having attained liberation and also having limitless compassion in body, speech, and mind for sentient beings have achieved Bodhi status and are called *Bodhisattvas*. Those who have achieved the full culmination of awareness through the full range of tantric generation and completion stage practices achieve Enlightenment and have attained *Buddhahood*.

Overall, Foucault’s four axes or aspects of ethical self-relationship are heuristically useful for parsing out and refining our understanding of how tantric Buddhist

transcendence is learned, cultivated, and absorbed. In particular, they foreground how the ethical features of tantric Buddhism correspond with three fundamentally different tiers or levels of subjectively positioned reality. These associate not with a single overall objective reality but with three world views, the ethics and ‘vehicle’ of which is relationally dependent in each case on the subject position, abilities, and training of the aspirant. In Luhrmann *et al.*’s (2010) terms, the first and much of the second vehicle involve the deliberative cognition and discipline of objectivist ‘system two’ learning and training, whereas the third Vajrayana vehicle increasingly and then exclusively induces spontaneous, direct, and intuitive ‘system one’ experience of transcendent absorption.

In comparative perspective, it is notable that these processes are believed, practised, and, in principle, experienced to be the same, identical, both in classical Tibetan Buddhism and in contemporary Western practice. At the same time, tensions remain. For centuries Tibetan Buddhism has harboured a tension between dominant practical emphasis on different levels and layers of realisation, including between relatively greater scholarly Gelug focus on Mahayana principles and strictures, and relatively greater emphasis in Kagyu and Nyigma sects on experiential Vajrayana transcendence. In analytic terms, this contrast parallels the difference between intense visualisation as opposed to unmediated experiential absorption associated with kataphatic spirituality and apophatic experience associated with withdrawal of awareness into an enduring epiphany of bare internal meditative experience shorn of imagery or liturgy (Luhrmann 2012: 161ff.). The tension between these also informs modern American Tibetan Buddhism, for which training in foundational preliminaries of renunciation and mentally trained compassion is much less prolonged and rigorous than was the case in Tibet – while individualistic desire for tantric transcendence is often particularly strong. Tantra is distinguished especially by its powerful quick methods, which in principle allow adepts to attain Enlightenment in a single lifetime. However, as depicted in the mythic origin of Yamantaka, one of the major Tibetan tantric deities, being closer to Enlightenment also raises the risk of becoming an all-the-more powerful negative or demonic force, that is, if one is ill-prepared to endure the challenges of renunciation and compassion that attend the path of direct realisation. Like Buddhism in Tibet prior to Chinese occupation, American Tibetan Buddhism continues to wrestle, albeit in new guises, with the perception that intense realisation quickly obtained risks being deeply degraded or ‘degenerate’ relative to its forbearers. The perception of this risk increases as the few remaining lamas trained in pre-conquest Tibet give way to younger adepts, some of whom are themselves Westerners (e.g. Khyentse 2016a: ch5).

## Implications and Conclusions

Tibetan Buddhist tantric experience is as yet difficult to parse through self-accounts by Western practitioners but is suggestively triangulated by considering Tibetan Buddhist practices and teachings in the context of changed sociocultural contexts and imputations of Western conventional selfhood. Tibetan Buddhist tantras provide an elaborate, ethically informed, and graded path for sustained transcendental experience through skilled learning and absorptive identification. This process fundamentally recasts notions of selfhood and of the perception of reality generally; practitioners’ world views are ontologically deconstructed and creatively reformulated in association with transcendent awareness and experience. In Tibet itself, self-transcendence was considered practically self-evident in the case of lamas and *tulkus* and was a pervasive

cultural ideal reflected, *inter alia*, in the prolonged socialisation of monks and nuns. In contemporary American Tibetan Buddhism, by contrast, self-transcendence is cultivated as a strong if not radical departure from twenty-first century notions of Western self-hood as autonomous neo-liberal individualism. In Western Buddhist contexts, aspiration to contravene received self-hood is typically linked to altruistic ethics and humanitarian ideals along with desires for personal improvement, typically including a desire to better accept and to manage with greater equanimity life stresses in middle age or later. As such, it is usually cultivated through secondary or tertiary rather than primary spiritual training and socialisation. For American tantric Buddhist practitioners, this puts a premium on quicker progress and more immediate results – while engaging in a new or higher key the challenge of having an adequate ethical foundation in ‘preliminaries’ that are typically learned more quickly and internalised less fully than was the case in Tibet and other Buddhist Himalayan areas.

Though Tibetan Buddhist tantras provide rigorous and systematic methods, they also carry potentials for transgressive self-interest or self-indulgence. This negative potential has been evident in tantric practices virtually since their inception more than a dozen centuries ago (Wedemeyer 2014) – and it poses distinctive challenges and problems in modern Western contexts. Moral challenges have ensnared a range of contemporary tantric teachers and practitioners, including *tulkus* (see Khyentse 2016b), not to mention the use of tantric idioms for activities such as ‘tantric sex weekends’ that have nothing to do with either the potentials or the power of tantric experience. On the other hand, the relatively individualised and deinstitutionalised character of contemporary Western as opposed to prior Tibetan training opens tantric experience to creatively re-envisage non-normative aspects of selfhood in diverse areas of contemporary life, including repositioning normative Western assumptions concerning alternative lifestyles and social conduct in relation to race, age, sex, sickness and dying, and other areas of life pervaded by normative codes of Western conduct. In all these areas, a Foucauldian impetus suggests the possibility of critical repositioning by exploring alternative technologies of self-relationship and subjectivation.

When Foucault was asked if Ancient Greek ethics were a plausible alternative to our own, he responded,

No! ... You can't find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people. ... My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism. (1997: 256)

Taking Foucault seriously on this point suggests the drawbacks of considering Tibetan Buddhist tantras as a new panacea for self-transformation by Western practitioners. It also suggests the importance of exploring these significant potentials on their own terms, including in altered Western contexts as opposed to Tibetan (or original Indian) ones.

Tibetan Buddhist tantras, including in Western usage, do appear to have potential for cultivating refined awareness of both epistemic and ontological relativity – issues that have been of special concern in Anthropology and in Western understanding more generally. The radical perspectivism of tantra has intriguing parallels with the genealogical perspectivism of Foucault (Knauff 2017, 1996: ch. 5; cf. Koopman 2013) and also with multiperspectival orientations in relativist American philosophy

(e.g. Putnam 2002, 2012, 2016). It also embraces rather than elides a tension between concrete ethics and possibilities for radical even if not transcendent self-transformation (see Lambek 2015; cf. Robbins 2016).

More generally, amid their plethora of intricate detail, tantric Tibetan Buddhist practices present a striking example of skilled learning that cultivates absorption of guided transcendental experience (Luhrmann *et al.* 2010). This experience is designed to dissolve normal selfhood, deconstruct conventional worldview, and reconstruct an alternate sense of reality. This transformation is developed through elaborately cultivated techniques of visualisation, mantra recitation, and prolonged meditation. Socially as well as psychologically, extended periods of targeted mental training, repetition, and internalisation effect changes in selfhood that are felt as profound and described as ultimately irreversible. How and in what ways these potentials will be developed in distinctively Western and specific American contexts remains an open question. The implication is that potentials for fundamental self-reorientation, including in Western contexts, are greater than is commonly appreciated or ethnographically understood. If the human mind is self-domesticated, as Geertz (1962) suggested, it may also have the potential for being more creatively self-possessed and self-governed.

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