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Dharma and the Free Market: Reconciling Buddhist Compassion with a Market Economy in Post-socialist Mongolia

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Dharma and the Free Market: Reconciling Buddhist Compassion
with a Market Economy in Post-socialist Mongolia

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Abstract

In this inductive ethnographic study, I explore the unique social and theological pressures placed on Mongolian Buddhists after the wake of free market transition in Mongolia. It utilizes the Buddhist virtue of compassion as a lens by which the study might examine how Mongolians balance their spirituality and commitment to Buddhist ethics with new roles as rational agents in an emergent free market. In this study I draw on narratives from thirteen subjects as well as extensive participant observation to examine the ways that Mongolian market reform has guided social paradigms of ethic that present ethical contradictions with Buddhist dharma, how Buddhist Mongolians interact with these paradigms, and how they seek to reconcile their roles in a market economy with their religious values.

First, texts, lectures, and accounts from interviewees provide insight into the significance of Buddhism to Mongolian culture, tradition, and heritage. Interview data then elucidates common perceptions of the meaning of compassion in Buddhism and how to practice the ethic in everyday life. Interviewees provide information on the influences of capitalism and free market economics in Mongolia. They explore perceived differences in how Mongolia has changed since the Democratic Revolution and shed light on the application of Dharma in the current post-Soviet socioeconomic context. Finally, I analyze the effects of market transition in post-socialist Ulaanbaatar with critical social theory focused on social strain and disharmonious ethical paradigms, and present possible explanations for observed social phenomena. The study seeks to further the developing conversation of how Mongolian culture and heritage will change in a globalizing world.

Keywords: *Buddhism, market economics, globalization, post-socialism*

An Acknowledgement

When people I meet ask why I came to Mongolia, or why I chose to study abroad (again), I hardly have a good answer. Something in the back of my head often told me that I had been looking for the answer to a question I forgot, but even that idea had been hazy to me.

On the day that the students moved out of our Ulaanbaatar homestays, Andrew and I walked through Peace Avenue and reflected on our time in Mongolia so far. During that conversation, I became fabulously awestruck with my own smallness. I realized how much my family loved me even when I spoke no Mongolian, even when I took too long in the shower and ate my meals with too much ketchup and spoke English on the phone too loudly, how they welcomed me with infinite kindness for virtually no reward. And it wasn't because I was special, because I earned anything; we couldn't communicate and so, really, they knew nothing about me. They agreed to be my family and nurture me because I was human. And I suddenly saw very clearly that, in every move I've made in my twenty years of life, it was the compassion and support of people who loved me for my ordinary humanness that let me lead the life I do. How can I separate my own achievements as an individual from the actions of those who show me compassion and support?

This, if there is one beautiful answer to some general question about the universe that I sought to answer through travel, is that answer: even if it's masked in misunderstandings or cultural context, where you find humanity you find compassion. And so this paper, and everything I do, is dedicated to those who have shown me undue compassion in my lifetime:

SIT's dedicated staff, for helping me through logistics and research planning;

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Ani Gyalmo, Tsenla, and the rest of the staff at FPMT, for guiding me toward research subjects and readings;

my biological family, who I love dearly and have always supported me;
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Glossary of relevant terminology

dharma (*ном; Дээдийн ном*) – in general, religion, but in Buddhism, the doctrine of Gautama Buddha.

Enlightenment (*гэгээрэхүй*) – liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth obtained through becoming a buddha or bodhisattva.

karma (*цйл*) - the sum of a person's actions in this and previous states of existence, viewed as deciding their fate in future existences.

Gautama Buddha (*Туулсан Бурхан*)– Born an Indian prince, he renounced wealth and family to become an ascetic, and after achieving enlightenment while meditating, taught all who came to learn from him. Also referred to as Buddha, the Buddha, the Tathagata.

laypeople (*гегэйнтэн*)– in the context of Buddhism, Buddhist people not affiliated with the *sangha*

Mahayana Buddhism (translation forthcoming) – a sect of Buddhism, and the sect most practiced in Mongolia

monastery (*хийд*) – a place of Buddhist worship which may house members of the sangha and many copies of various sutras

reincarnation (*очиж торох, хойд нас*) – to undergo rebirth in another body

sangha (*хуврага, бурсан хуврага*) – the Buddhist community of monks, nuns, and lamas

sutra (*сургаал*) – canonical scriptures of Buddhism, many of which are said to be written by Gautama Buddha

to take refuge – (*ном итгэх*) - a process by which Buddhist people formally recognize their lifetime commitment to “the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha”, or the Three Jewels

Three Jewels (*Гурван эрденэд*) – the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha

Preface

In the very middle of the room during dharma class there was a man who raised his hand during a lull in teacher's lecture, and maybe he was thinking about putting it back down. He was sitting in front of me so I couldn't really see his face, but his hands were small and the backs were all wrung. In the meditation room there are no tables or chairs, so when he raised his hand he and teacher, the white Australian nun cross-legged on her stool, were the two tallest things in the room.

Everybody in dharma class is always very still. We are learning about taking refuge in Buddhism, how to find a path that will make our lives completely meaningful, and nobody wants to miss even a syllable. Thirty Mongolians and I huddled barefoot on the floor, taking refuge in every word teacher and her Mongolian translator say. They speak quietly but we let the words hang in the room on top of our heads.

The lecture was about the importance of refuge for finding contentment, why we'll never find any satisfaction through working our bodies dead just to be dirty rich, or at least the real kind of satisfaction, because we're just filling our emptiness with stuff that will never last...and then he raised his hand in this way, like his one arm was a lever and one of those words on the top of our heads pulled it up slowly. And then his fingers curled. It was like he didn't want to ask a question but he had to do it anyway, needed to.

He spoke Mongolian in a factual tone and the translator repeated for teacher. He works to take care of his family, long hours, sometimes all night and he doesn't get to be with his family. They have enough and live well, but he worries about being prepared for the future. If something really bad happens to him or them or to the economy and they have nothing and they're bankrupt, what happens? He can't help but be nervous for the future because he doesn't know when something bad might ruin his family.

Teacher nods her head really solemnly and says, it's clear you're dissatisfied. It's good to work and make a living to meet your needs and the needs of your family. But does it come at the expense of your happiness?

The woman next to me coughed really softly from her stomach, like

there was a word caught in her throat. From outside, the noise of two laughing girls smacked against the window of the room and the stillness inside wasn't that stark anymore.

Teacher shifts her weight, her eyes are just half-open like they are in meditation. And what if there is no future? Life is just impermanence, let's be aware of it. Any one of us could pass away at any moment.

When the translator repeated, all the words that had been said today felt like they sank down to our guts. I thought about when my mom was laid off from work when my brother and I were young and nobody saw it coming, and about when my uncle died and how his wife and kids were left with pretty much nothing but government checks. I felt teacher's words tickling the corners of my lips, but I felt that man's question and his lever arm pushing my shoulders close to the earth like a big weight. All us students stayed huddled in the same place but I thought the room felt more crowded now, and I felt like I needed to ask a question too but there were no words for me.

Teacher continued softly, eyes half-closed. In this class we want to learn how to escape the worries and anticipations of this chaotic world through finding security in Buddhism. Refuge. It's hard, I know. Listen carefully and try to use these teachings.

So I opened my journal and wrote down everything I heard her say, intending to go home and read them again and again until they were my refuge...

What if the future doesn't come? We all must consider how we are living our lives. Are we doing what's meaningful? We are all in dis-ease, there is dissatisfaction in our lives. We search for meaning. In this way we are all Buddhist refugees, looking for answers, seeking comfort and satisfaction. Real, lasting happiness is not findable outside ourselves. If it is findable, it is inside of the mind, not in worldly things we pack away. What if the future doesn't come? The roots of happiness and suffering reside entirely in the mind. All Buddhist teachings are tied to finding lasting satisfaction and will illuminate the way to true happiness. In this way I am a Buddhist refugee. Looking for answers. Seeking comfort and satisfaction...

Introduction

In a newly democratic Mongolia, recent governments have contended with the issue of how to economically cultivate a nation that will stand out internationally. These efforts have squarely focused on maintaining economic growth as well as reinvigorating a unique ethnic heritage distinguishable from geographic neighbors. But in reaching both goals simultaneously, a conflict naturally arises between contemporary economic policies and historical religious values. Buddhism – in particular the concept of compassion that is integral to Buddhist philosophy and dharma – and free market economics seem to inherently contradict each other based on underlying theories of necessary mental paradigms and social interaction. Is it possible for Mongolians to at once prioritize the restoration of their religious heritage based on compassion and the growth of an internationalized free market economy?

This study will utilize the Buddhist virtue of compassion as a lens by which the study might examine how Mongolians balance their spirituality and commitment to Buddhist ethics with new roles as rational agents in an emergent free market. It aims to examine the ways that Mongolian market reform has guided social paradigms of ethic that present ethical contradictions with Buddhist dharma, how Buddhist Mongolians interact with these paradigms, and how they seek to reconcile their roles in a market economy with their religious values.

In reviving an aspect of culture so finely attuned to contemporaneous social values and attitudes as religion, the greatest challenge is to what extent that religion can be practiced in the way it was before historical abandonment. Religions are at once a harmonization of a particularized dogmatic structure and a culturally-significant social environment, and both these structures continuously affect each other in various scales in the case of major religions (Miller, 1975)(Geertz, 1973, pg 90). This same logic elucidates how Mongolians developed their own strain of Buddhism very different in many ways from its Tibetan roots while maintaining its ties with other practices of Tibetan Buddhism. In this system of perpetual co-transmutation it becomes

difficult to imagine that a religion can possibly sustain itself if either its dogma or its socio-cultural context fundamentally disagree with the other. Buddhism's sociopolitical hiatus in Mongolia until the recent present an interesting lens through which one might examine the ethical dilemmas posed to deeply religious citizens of a nation striving at once for global economic eminence and the revivification of a traditional culture partially squelched by Soviet forces. In particular, the development of a national market economy raises particular challenges for Mongolian Buddhist economic actors to practice lifestyles of compassion.

If a Buddhist acts with wisdom and compassion in accordance with the dharma and the teachings of Gautama Buddha, they will be much closer to finding the way to the Path of Enlightenment than if they do not practice such aspects (Smith, 2001). But under what circumstances is acting without compassion permissible within the dharma? What exactly are the supposed “means” of a person in the physical realm? If a Buddhist resides in a social, economic, or political system in which they are directly or indirectly perpetuating suffering for others, how responsible is that individual for alleviating those burdens? How might this affect their karma?

These questions have very real implications for the spirituality of Mongolian Buddhists today in Mongolia's nascent market economy. Market economies rely on theories of supply and demand to dictate price points and wages. Mongolia's Democratic Revolution brought reformers influenced by Soviet *perestroika* to the helm of economic policy reform in the early 1990s, and many were eager to replace what was, under the socialist government, a centrally planned economy (Rossabi, 2005). What was hoped to develop in its place by reformers was, in consideration of Mongolia's rich mineral wealth, an array of liberal policies that fully embraced a free-market establishment and international investment. The assured value of Mongolia's extractable natural resources – copper, coal, uranium, et al – was expected to be so vast at over \$1 trillion that economic growth in the nation would soar to heights unprecedented in the socialist era (Rossabi, 2005). Under these pretenses, a free market Mongolia would be a wealthier Mongolia with wealthier citizens

who could participate in a stronger, more bustling economy.

Unfortunately, the reality of free market operations in Mongolia are more dismal for average Mongolians than purported during the eve of the Democratic Revolution. The number of Mongolians living in poverty rose tremendously after the fall of the planned economy, and even while the national growth rate grew exponentially over the course of new liberal policy, the number of people living under the national poverty index has steadily remained above thirty percent of the population since 1995 (UNDP, 2011). Along with the shift to free market economics, the social welfare initiatives active during the socialist government's regime were scrapped with planned economic policy. Mongolia's most vulnerable populations – herders, the sick, and those without job security in a transitory economic system, among many others - lacked the social safety net necessary to afford the hyper-inflated prices of basic goods and services, and in such they suffered greatly. Some populations have recovered from this economic devastation since the early 90s, but others have remained trapped in that legacy of poverty, particularly because of the nature of free market economics (Rossabi, 2005).

These economies are based on the profitability of scarcity. When scarcity exists in a certain entity, a market may develop for that resource. The principle of operating in a certain market, therefore, is to use the scarcity of that entity to the benefit of those who own the means of producing said entity. In free market economies, the decisions behind who possesses a resource and how that resource is regulated are largely decided by those who own the means of production. Without guiding ethical principles and a social responsibility, it is most likely that those who own the means of production – who hold their production power to their bargaining advantage – will exploit the market, and, thereby, their fellow human beings who have the ability to operate in that market, to accumulate wealth. Such is the nature of the free market, as the goal is for each individual to independently accumulate wealth. Not all economic operators in Mongolia are those who own the means of production – in fact, the vast majority are not. However, those who labor for those who control production may economically oppress each other not in hatred but in self-

interest. For example, a business may fix the price for loaves of bread at \$10. The laborer who makes \$25 an hour in his mid-tier management position may be able to afford the bread with little strife, and so the businessman and the laborer agree to a certain price point that amasses wealth in profit for the businessman and wealth in resource for the worker. The laborer who works a floor position for \$3 an hour, who has no negotiating power to bring down the price point of loaves of bread because the businessman and the management labor have proven that bread priced at \$10 will sell, will go without bread while the other two parties profit.

In this example, the businessman is easily culpable of exploiting its role as the owner of the means of production to widen its profit margin at the expense of the poor. But in the same vein, the management laborer, while not directly interacting with the floor laborer, is complicit in setting a price point far too high for the poor to afford. This economic action, while passive and rationally sound from a free market perspective, is as negative for the low-wage worker as the action taken by the businessman. Through a paradigm that actively seeks Buddhist Enlightenment and embraces social responsibility, it would be most compassionate for the management laborer to withhold from buying the bread and in doing such preventing it from reaching such a high price point. This protest recognizes the suffering of the poor and develops solidarity in such a way that works to relieve that suffering, a noble and compassionate act.

Is it realistic to say that an entity – here, a person, social group, or government – that sponsors dedication to Buddhism and adherence to dharma can at once advocate, or participate in, free market economics, which in their nature require one to lack and therefore suffer? This is the pressing, urgent question.

Little previous academic study has been done on Buddhist Mongolians' psychosocial reconciliations of contradictory cultural ideologies. Additionally, in the development of this inductive ethnography, a more illustrative portrait of the cultural, historical, and political setting in which this research takes place has been included in the grander narrative.

Methodology and Limitations

This study is carried out as an inductive ethnography. Ethnographic research lends itself best to studying the nature of social interactions, behaviors, and perceptions within a social group. Immersive ethnographic field research holistically aggregates data from a rich variety of sources, from participant observation to formal and informal interviews, and identifies social phenomena that may appear to be unrelated. Ethnographies do not seek to prove any hypothesis about the studied social group; rather, they aim to provide qualitative insights into people and their environment through the triangulation and documentation of detailed observations and interviews. Here, the study of Buddhist Mongolians and their relationship to post-socialist social processes is best carried out by merely qualitatively documenting their opinions, actions, and environment, and, after identifying central emergent themes, developing tentative theories about the subject group. However, because of the nature of ethnographic work and the small subject group it focuses on, this study cannot purport to speak to the behaviors or identities of all Mongolian Buddhists. It simply collects common themes derived from the author's interactions with, and experiences and observations of, Mongolian Buddhism and society.

I use Buddhist compassion as a lens with which to focus on one facet of a wide range of Buddhist values. At first glance, compassion may seem like a narrow extent through which to study Buddhists' holistic relationships with socioeconomic structures and entities. However, nearly all teachings from Buddhist dharma are interconnected. To study compassion I have had to ask questions about other Buddhist values like suffering, karma, rebirth, and attachment. I assert that using one aspect of the theology is not limiting to this research but, instead, serves to develop a richer study of a single facet of a query to which an entire book could be dedicated.

The psychosocial manifestation of Buddhist compassion is a particularly compelling extent for the difficulties of balancing Buddhism with market economics presently in Mongolia. Practicing compassion is perhaps the most outwardly-focused commitment Buddhists take when they take refuge in the Three Jewels. It is specifically developed, theologically, in both

internal and external realms of existence (a concept that will be further explained in a greater discussion of the meaning of compassion). This lends itself as an ethic to comparison with ethics promoted by Mongolian capitalism that also take form in internal values and external behaviors. It is also for this reason an easier concept to substantiate through methods like interview-based research. Participants can respond to questions about social representations of compassion with information they have gleaned from observations of actions by others rather than pure conjecture about the psyches and inner selves of Mongolians.

I completed my research in Ulaanbaatar, where the amount of formal economic processes occurring in Mongolia are densest and where markets are more observantly diverse. For this study I conducted interviews with twelve different subjects of ages ranging from twenty to 63 and in a nearly even distribution of gender. Every subject except one identified as a Buddhist; subjects' occupations were diverse, including college students, a night guard, an international development programmer, and lamas. I recruited each participant by asking contacts in Buddhist organizations if they could refer me to possible interviewees, and also by asking each participant at the conclusion of the interview if they would refer peers to me for potential interviews. I asked each interviewee questions about their relationship to Buddhism, their impressions of Mongolian society, the importance of Buddhism to their lives as well as to Mongolian culture and traditions in general, the meaning of compassion, and the ways that they believe Mongolia has changed since the Democratic Revolution. Four of my interviewees were members of the *sangha* – that is, the Buddhist community of lamas, monks, and nuns. To them I asked the previously stated questions along with questions about their roles in the *sangha*, more elaborate questions about the nature of Buddhist values as according to the dharma, and the activities and programs of their monasteries. Each interview had a general script of questions but were altered depending on their demographics – for example, young people would be asked more about youth culture and less about lived history – and the flow of our conversation. When necessary, I utilize secondary resources to fill in historical gaps in my

collected data.

I chose to record these interviews solely by pen and paper rather than through recordings. In general, I have found in my research experience that participants in research sometimes become hesitant to speak openly or semi-consciously edit themselves when they are aware of being recorded, particularly when the context of the interview is already formalized and possibly intimidating by the inclusion of legal consent forms and language translators. I also wanted to be sensitive to the possible hesitations that Mongolians living through the socialist era may have about speaking about practicing Buddhism during socialism. While this choice in method did not allow me the chance to review the actual speech of each participant and pick up on themes and points I may have missed during the interview, I compensated with a comprehensive note-taking system, and overall I feel that the costs of not using an audio recorder for my research were far outweighed by the informal environment that formed in the absence of recording technology. I also use pseudonyms in my paper in place of subjects' real names, in hopes of avoiding any unnecessary risk.

In addition to gathering interviews, I dedicated myself to practicing Buddhism through observing Mongolian Buddhist practices. For four weeks I kept a Buddhist altar in my apartment and kept the traditions surrounding this part of home life in hopes of being able to better relate to the average Mongolian's day-to-day relationship with Buddhist traditions. I also attended weekly meditation and dharma classes at the Mahayana Center, a Buddhist center in central Ulaanbaatar with English-language and Mongolian-language programming. Throughout the semester I read *sutras* – canonical scriptures of Buddhism, many of which are said to be written by Gautama Buddha – and collected works of Mahayana Buddhist stories and folk tales to explore the themes they present. I also use information gained from lectures presented to students at the School for International Training in Ulaanbaatar, my sponsoring university.

As a young earnest student conducting research and experiential learning in a foreign country, I cannot extract my own subjectivity from the

overall collection of knowledge and conclusions I have arrived at in my time in Mongolia. I therefore strive, as I would with any other set of data, to reflexively address my own experiences in Ulaanbaatar practicing Buddhism for what they are and understand their contributions to the results of this research. When not attending interviews or dharma classes, I spent the better part of a month pondering compassion in my personal interactions with individual Mongolians and, on a larger scale, the landscape of the city. Through this I hoped to enrich my understanding of the nuances of performing compassion internally and externally in an urban capitalist environment. These experiences may seem inconsequential to the body of the paper from an academic perspective, but I believe they have made me more sensitive to the conflicts that arise when trying to practice Buddhist compassion while being besieged with capitalist processes in Ulaanbaatar.

The analysis I perform is largely a connection of thematic elements of primary data organized in a narrative format. I also use social strain theory to deconstruct social relations in contemporary Mongolian society. In instances I conspicuously infuse the narrative with sources of theory – much of it documented by Clifford Geertz – where applicable to support explanations of social phenomena from field data.

This study suffers from limitations of time and access to resources, among other hinderances. The nature of field research is such that when one begins examining their question through interviews they gain new perspectives from participants on a facet of their topic that they would not have identified earlier. This evolution of interview questions over the development of one's research is an important part of the research process that makes interview questions much more investigative and rich. Crunched for time, there was very little time to go through the process of developing and re-developing interview questions; were there more time for fieldwork, the questions presented in interviews would have been much more attuned to trends that were prevalent enough to be considered significant in the context of this paper.

I had very little prior knowledge of Buddhism or Buddhist cultures

before I arrived in Mongolia. While I do not believe this hindered my study in any significantly deleterious way, the process of learning basics surrounding Buddhism did slow down my capacity to engage in research, as I had to often halt my research development and ensure I understood certain tenets of *dharma* before I could continue further. Some of my misunderstandings of *dharma* disrupted interviews, with participants pausing to correct my faulty knowledge and thereby interrupting the flow of the conversation. Along the same vein, I had not taken on research on religion in my academic life before conducting this study, and this meant that the theories and methods I use to analyze and examine facets of religion and society are borrowed from social theory, a discipline I am much more familiar with. This is not markedly damaging to this study as it is focused more on socioeconomic entities, but researchers more well-versed than myself in mainstream methodologies by which to examine a religion's effects on cultures and societies would have performed more comprehensive analyses in these parts of this study than I currently have the capacity to do.

Finally, the response rate to my request for interviews was not very high. I received information from maybe a quarter of the people that I approached. I don't think that I was aggressive enough in following up with potential interviewees. Oftentimes when I approached somebody about participating in my project I was received with interest and would leave my contact information with them to reach me soon about an interview. In the United States it is proper etiquette to wait for people to contact you when they say that they will, but I understand now after losing many potential interviewees to my lack of Mongolian social savvy that I needed to assertively follow up with potential participants rather than expect the other way around. Had I started my research with this culturally-specific knowledge in mind I might have had a greater number of participants in my study.

Results

The data is presented in subsections of relevantly-grouped material. First, texts, lectures, and accounts from interviewees provide insight into the significance of Buddhism to Mongolian culture, tradition, and heritage. Interview data then elucidates common perceptions of the meaning of compassion in Buddhism and how to practice the ethic in everyday life. Interviewees provide information on the influences of capitalism and free market economics in Mongolia. They explore perceived differences in how Mongolia has changed since the Democratic Revolution and shed light on the application of Dharma in the current post-Soviet socioeconomic context. Finally, a discussion is held of how potentially-conflicting values stemming from capitalist ethics and Dharma co-exist in Mongolian Buddhists. An analysis of the “revival” of religion in Mongolia will conclude the study in its present state.

A religious heritage

Developing a sense of the historical narrative presented around Buddhism will glean a better understanding of the significance of religion to Mongolian culture. When asked to impart the history of Buddhism in Mongolia, every participant began the story at various points in time. The earliest account told begins with Chinggis Khan, the celebrated emblem of Mongolian identity and culture. “During the Chinggis Khan era they killed many people and animals and generally were a warring nation,” reports Tsetseg, 37. She tells me that when Buddhism came to the immense empire, the religion and its doctrine of non-violence and compassion “made them calm, told them not to kill, and changed their hearts.” Tsetseg also describes the prominence of Buddhism in the 15th and 16th century in Mongolia, much in the same way that other Mongolians are eager to laud the vastness of the historic Mongol empire. Soninbat, a 35-year-old monk at a monastery in Ulaanbaatar, describes the setting for Buddhism's arrival to present-day Mongolia. He reports that many Mongol ideologies in that time were more or less compatible with Buddhist dogma and that this made it easier for the

religion to permeate Mongol culture: “Mongolia respects the elderly and loves nature. So these things connected well with Buddhism.” This peaceful narrative of how effortlessly the Mongol empire took to Buddhism almost insinuates that the religion was a perfect, natural match for that culture and ignores historical arguments surrounding the intention of Buddhism's introduction to the Mongols by Tibetan to suppress radical political dissent (Elverskog, 2006). Furthermore, the statement is particularly curious as there are few Mahayana sutras which expressly address compassion or reverence for the elderly or nature; rather they advocate kindness toward all sentient beings in general. This romanticized view of the natural relationship between venerable Mongolian culture and Buddhism is perhaps indicative of beliefs that Buddhism is a perfect fit for traditional Mongolian sensibilities.

Buddhism lived on in Mongolia relatively unthreatened as a religious institution until the rise of the socialist government in 1921. Here more interviewees chime in on the historical significance of Buddhism. Onontuul, a nun in her early sixties, reported that before the socialist government ordered the assassination of most of the sangha, nearly thirty percent of men were Buddhist monks. She cites that faith in Buddhism was very high before socialism prohibited the open practice of religion. Tsetseg, though she was not witness to this herself, states that during this pre-Soviet period, “we used to use Buddhism in our everyday lives and traditions. Not just reading the sutras, but the dharma; we always used it in our lives.”

Questions about the practice of Buddhism during the socialist regime retrieved little variance in data. All but three of the sample population were old enough to be alive during, and have memories of, living in socialist Mongolia. Nearly every participant in this age range noted that Buddhism was “closed”, “secretly practiced”, or “hidden” during this epoch, yet most mentioned that their families still practiced religion to some degree in this time. One interviewee mentions that his family hid their stupas in boxes; another said that when a family member died they would secretly chant Buddhist mantras.

The resistant presence of Buddhism in the household developed a young generation of Mongolian Buddhists despite the state-sponsored

deconstruction of all religious dogmas. All thirteen participants testified that their first exposure to Buddhism was from their family and that their families were, to some degree, Buddhist. Nearly every participant was asked when they first became Buddhist, and seven answered that they have always been Buddhist. Delger, 56, said that “I have always been Buddhist. I got it from my family.” A formal dedication ceremony to taking refuge in the Three Jewels is the technical marker of having committed to Buddhist faith, but a majority of Mongolian Buddhists do not bother with the formality of a ceremony to prove their devotion to the religion.

When the socialism was ejected from the government in favor of a reformist democratic party and Buddhism was once again free to practice, attempts to recover a popular understanding of dharma gained steam. Four of my interviewees recalled finding Buddhism and dharma “interesting” and this intrigue leading them to further exploring their faith. Ragchaa, a 52 year old layperson, states that when she was 29 she found and read part of a book about dharma and found it “interesting”, often thinking about it later on until she decided to study dharma. Altanzaya, a 21 year old college student, notes that when she mentions to her friends that she often attends meditation retreats they think it's very “interesting” and want to learn more. I receive similar reactions from Mongolians who do not actively study dharma when I tell them that I attend meditation and dharma courses, remarking that they are very “interested” in this type of study. I myself find the repetition of the term “interesting” quite “interesting”, and while it may be the only word used to describe a certain feeling that cannot be communicated through a language barrier, the recurrence of some collection of feelings expressed in a singular word hints at a possible cultural fascination with the intricacies of Buddhist faith.

Compassion in context

Every interviewee was asked for their understanding of compassion from a Buddhist perspective. Every definition was slightly different, but most shared a few key elements and seemed to come from similar standpoints. Four central themes can be identified in the definitions:

Helping: Nearly all responses involved the word “help” in them. Most simply put from Ragchaa, “It means to love and help others, especially the poor and destitute...To try to help as much as you can.” Delger says that when people help others, they collect good karma and then in their next rebirth they will “go to heaven, or be reborn in a nice place.”

Love and kindness: Gambold, 28, likened compassion to reflecting the loving relationship between a mother and her child, an allusion to a simile utilized in many stupas on compassion. Onontuul expressly says that compassion “is related to love.” She notes that since becoming a nun she has studied endlessly about loving everything that is alive. “This is the main part of Buddhism.”

Being of calm mind: Tsetseg paused when asked what compassion is, and after a moment said: “Most people want to change others' behaviors. In Buddhism, we want to change our own minds. We have attachments and bad things. Compassion means to change your mind to think about other people. It means not only thinking about myself but also to love other people, and all living things. To learn and change your mind for others.”

Onontuul also mentions here that to be compassionate, “you need to be calm and kind and loving.”

Sincerity: Compassion must take root from a place of sincerity in order to be truly compassionate. Soninbat defines the virtue straightforwardly with this statement: “If you see a poor person, you must love them from your real heart.” Tsetseg agrees: “It is easy to say, but in reality people are always thinking of ourselves first.” Bulag, a lama at a monastery in Bayankhongor *aimag*, says that compassion should be present in every facet of your existence.

Participants said that compassion should be practiced to all sentient beings, but four respondents explicitly mentioned practicing compassion toward people suffering from poverty. Five participants noted that compassion was the most significant Buddhist teaching to them on a personal level.

Interviewees outlined ways to practice compassion in the world. Actions can be focused on interactions with two people in passing, or a more sustained method of expressing kindness and love through aid. When asked about the meaning of compassion, Altanzaya excitedly reports on her experiences volunteering for an organization that works with disabled children. “I give them an opportunity to socialize, make friendships.” On the other hand, Delger says that having good energy and treating people well is just enough, noting that “the good things are small.”

The concept of charity and giving generously, a central element of faith-based compassion in cultures like the United States, was not outrightly referenced by most participants as a key component of universal Buddhist compassion. When I ask Ragchaa how she practices compassion, she mentions that “when I meet people asking for money, I give them just a little.” Altanzaya says that “most Mongolians don't give a lot of charity”. Instead, generosity with money is addressed in the context of how rich Buddhists can perform meritorious acts. Batbold notes that if the wealthy give money to the poor, they will receive good karma, bringing up how a financing group of Buddhist businessmen help fund the organization for young Buddhists that he is a member of. Tsetseg tells me that “some people say that rich Buddhists have no attachment [to material things]. They give money to the monasteries. It's a good thing.”

Nayra, a Tibetan nun in her fifties who has worked in several countries with Buddhist populations and is currently affiliated with an NGO based in Ulaanbaatar, ruminates on Mongolian acts of charity and compares them to other cultures: “When Tibetans are financially successful, they do lots of charity work. They become more generous. You don't see that as much in Mongolia.” She notes the expensive cars she sees about on the road and anticipates that there must be wealthy people here, “but I don't see people

involved in developing social projects...they donate to [the translation of stupas into Mongolian language] a lot more. It almost seems like people are more generous to the monasteries than the poor here, yeah? They are more interested in giving money to the spiritual than the social.”

A change in the city

My apartment in central Ulaanbaatar is surrounded on all ends by market processes; it's a rich data mine for any research on capitalism. Five minutes up the city blocks, streets lined with commercial banks, world cuisines, and several stationary stores selling identical products overwhelm the senses. The sight can far remove one from the reality of Mongolia's post-socialist context and the turbulent transition to free market policies. Mongolians who have lived through socialism and recent democratization perceive differences not only in the urban landscape of Mongolia, but in other facets of society.

“Maybe when capitalism gave people the chance to own property, now they think in 'I', 'me', 'mine',” says Soninbat, reflecting on if he thinks people's mindsets have changed since the democratic transition. “During socialism, people were different. They were calm.” He references the traffic jam we navigated to walk to our interview location, indicating that the flow of traffic on main streets in Ulaanbaatar is horrendous because every individual wants to go first. Gambold says that people have been misguided by capitalism, that it has made them less kind. “They think democracy is to do everything freely, and they do everything for themselves. People stop respecting each other...this is only getting worse.” Burag laments that Mongolians have “devoted everything to wealth...everything goes towards 'success'.”

These changes, according to some participants, stem from materialist concerns. Nayra says that in her time here she has found that “financial and material concern are very strong,” and that “making money is as strong of a concern as faith” in Mongolia. Soninbat surmises that people have become more eager to consume because they think it will make them feel happiness. “They are not satisfied with stuff; they have no patience.”

A few participants mentioned a spike in theft as a recent phenomenon. “Capitalism has made people lose their kindness,” Gambold says. “They steal, don't do their jobs, only thinking about themselves.” Soninbat is asked about the kind of person who commits theft, and he says that “people will cheat and steal even if they already have things. They are just jealous.” Batbold also thinks jealousy is poisoning Mongolian psyches: “If people are jealous, they are collecting that jealousy inside. People never feel like they have enough.”

The result of it all – the jealousy, the materialism, the theft – is, according to Buddhism, suffering from attachment. And as claimed by many participants, it is breeding a sort of nervousness in urban Mongolians. Gambold laments that “now people are always on guard. If you are near their bag, they will say, 'Don't touch my bag.' And we always need to ask when we touch or borrow pens. This is only getting stronger.” Soninbat says that countryside life is much more calm in this regard, “but in the city...people are nervous. It's a big change when I go.” He tells the story of his friend who recently bought a very nice luxury car, but now is constantly paranoid that it will be stolen or defaced, “so now it causes him suffering.” A majority of interviewees feel that in general Mongolian society has been becoming less kind and open in this way.

Paranoia and the people

What is it that causes this paranoia and attachment, and why is this change occurring in present-day Mongolia?

Some of this is accepted as a sort of human nature. Batbold, a twenty-year-old college student, admits that “people are usually loving themselves, but not others” and Tsetseg finds that “[being compassionate] is easy to say, but in reality people are always thinking of ourselves [sic] first.” Soninbat tells me that human beings have the capacity for 84,000 different bad characteristics, and from all those possible roots of suffering it can be hard to pinpoint where negative behavior comes from.

Other interviewees believe international influence is to blame for this shift to materialist ideology. Tsetseg thinks that greed abounds today “because

of abroad influences. They see that other peoples' lives are so good. Now they're more materialist. They [are] jealous [of] people with nice clothes, cars. They think about big apartments, cars, how to get them.”

Some other participants acknowledge that the starkest changes to Mongolian society are specifically related to the economic shift. Gambold, who studies economics at a university in Ulaanbaatar, points the finger specifically at capitalist processes: “Buddhism tells people to do good things but capitalism is about competition and and causing inequality. So this is bringing down Mongolian people.”

“People became less kind after the democratic revolution...now they're more materialist,” says Tsetseg. “[But] people were very poor and need to think about themselves.” She notes that during the socialist rule she felt that people had no real reason to steal from each other. “After that,” she says, in reference to the revolution, “there were no jobs, no food, and they had to find their own way.”

Buyandelgeriyn, an anthropologist studying changes in shamanic practices during the democratic transition, notes a similarly peculiar shift in the security of Mongolian society:

“Many Buryats and ordinary Mongols who lived through socialism had not expected that the transition from socialism to a market economy would actually mean the collapse of the state. They were unprepared to deal with the dissolution of state enterprises without any (at least short-term) governmental support during the shift to the new system. The disappearance of a strong, omnipresent, and ordered state was shocking. The early 1990s were characterized as a time of social anxiety (*niigmin buhimdal*), which was largely an outgrowth of the socialist state’s failed promises. To most people it became clear that there was no way back to socialism, and, unlike other parts of the world where people resisted the market economy, the Mongols embraced the new system.” (Buyandelgeriyn, 2007)

The deregulation and privatization efforts developed by the new democratic government in 1991 to promote a new free market economy is commonly referred to as “shock therapy”. A series of liberal reforms as eagerly promoted by international monetary organizations, like the

International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, led to massively volatile currency; as a response to the first set of policies enacted, the value of taxes and tariffs doubled and the purchasing power of all cash deposits and cash in private hands halved due to devaluation of national currency (Shagdar, 2007). Annual inflation rose to 325.5% in 1992. The price of petrol products quadrupled in June 1991; inflation of prices in foodstuffs rose to 476.6% (Shagdar). Output of food products like grains and butter halved, and wool fabric production plummeted by 94 percent (Poole, 1998). And while Mongolians were not exceptionally rich during socialism, the reforms and resultant devaluation of currency hit Mongolians very hard. In 1998, nearly one-third of Mongolians lived below the poverty line and one-fifth were unemployed (Poole).

The public was mostly left in the blue concerning the government's agenda during reforms; the study notes that economic policy was often introduced without explanation or a chance for public debate (Shagdar). According to an economic analysis of Mongolian shock therapy, “Although the public was somewhat prepared for the reforms and a new economic system, this sudden change without prior explanation was a shock for most citizens” (Shagdar). And so when Mongolian in-pocket currency devalued overnight, shock treatment was not only in store for the economy, but for individual Mongolians' perspectives on the economic prosperity of the nation as well. “Unlike some other places, where the local economies prior to the arrival of capitalism had been relatively orderly...in Mongolia, socialism had already produced a failed economy prior to the arrival of the market economy...In particular, agriculture, including wheat harvesting, had proven to be unprofitable for climatic, economic, and geographic reasons. Yet the losses of agriculture had been fixed with Soviet subsidies, and socialist media propagated the illusion of success” (Buyandelgeriyn).

The socialist government swept the concern of resource scarcity under the rug away from its population before the democratic revolution went underway. Economic shock therapy pulled that rug out from underneath them, and instantaneously – literally overnight – Mongolians were unanticipatedly

put in the unfamiliar position of needing to honestly address such large-scale scarcity in an economic climate that requires it. The damage to that national psyche, claims Buyandelgeriyn, manifested in anxiety about about what could come next.

“The future was laid out for many people within the socialist structure...This structure showed one the possibilities as well as the limits. At least to a certain extent, not only one’s past but also the imagining of one’s future shapes identities and individualities. The Mongolian past was altered and suppressed by socialism. The imagined future of socialism disappeared with the 'storm of the market economy.' The present was ridden with changes and was out of control. What, then, does it mean to live in a place with an unimaginable future, an unknown past, and a present full of misfortune?” (Buyandelgeriyn)

In an 1998 article in the UK Independent, a father of a nomadic family 500 miles out of Ulaanbaatar describes economic conditions after the series of sweeping reforms: “In the old days, even if you just had a cold, you could go to the doctor for free. Now we just try to stay healthy” (Poole). Without any certainty of what the future will bring, including disease, Mongolians could not do anything to prepare except worry.

To Buddhists, as Mongolians individual existences as people who experienced this economic trauma firsthand, their accounts of would seem particularly salient, but no participants offered any histories of their personal lives and hardships during economic reform. On a social level, Buddhists participate in the same social circumstances as Mongolians across other demographics, and so are likely subject to the same social patterns and processes. The way cultural insecurity is purported by participants to manifest itself in Mongolian culture – particularly the manner in which urban Mongolians tend to distrust others, prioritize their own individuality, and guard their personal possessions – seems inhibitive to compassionate Buddhist love for others, particularly from the disdain that participants expressed for this kind of behavior. So how, in only twenty years' time from halved wealth, food rations, and extreme national poverty, do Buddhists fight socially conditioned uncertainty in order to act with compassion toward their fellow

human being?

How to swallow your hurt and love the city

Insecurity is one of the underpinnings of religion in a world of increasing rationalization. In a rationalizing, globalizing world, the mode is to reject that which is nebulous, imprecise, analog, in favor of the scientifically objective (Weber, 1902). The word *faith* itself, a synecdoche of religion, requires the existence of uncertainty before it may be employed; there must be a semblance of doubt before one can perform faith of any strength. Nayra remarks that in her time working in many countries with large Buddhist populations she finds that Mongolians are remarkable in that “they have some of the strongest faith I’ve seen”. She notes this alongside an observation that “financial and material concern are also very strong. In places like Hong Kong, or Taiwan...their depth of faith is not as strong as in Mongolia, but neither is financial concern.”

For Mongolians, in this curiously insecure world there is no certainty of what the future will look like. And in theory this uncertainty pairs quite well on the palette with the teachings of impermanence instructed in Buddhism. Dharma emphasizes that worldly suffering stems from the misconception that the experiences and entities perceived by human cognition are truly existent and meaningful. Gautama Buddha taught that all beings will pass away eventually, and that we should all contemplate that our individual lives are impermanent despite how much we all cherish them and find comfort in them. In recognizing how precious life is, we are more likely to live it fully. This impermanence of body in death directly parallels an economic reality that has no security in the minds of many Mongolians. In not anticipating an unrealistic ideal of how long one will live, or how long one will have wealth, they can focus on the here-and-now, an ensured reality of physical existence.

The problem with this perspective is that, at its core, it exactly negates the fundamental elements of capitalist economics. Capitalism is dependent on concepts like accumulation of capital, long returns, price systems – it relies on the assumption that there will be a future from which investments will yield

some sort of gain. And while the concepts of uncertainty in both Buddhism and Mongolian economics mirror each other, the way that Mongolians experience the impermanence of body and the impermanence of money are outstandingly differently. Death has not been experienced first-hand; scarcity and poverty, on the other hand, has, very severely. The anticipation of both entities are very different.

Additionally, the action of bodily death in dharma has a possibly pleasant outcome as determined by your karmic state: rebirth. Good Buddhists who are compassionate, of clear mind, and karmically wealthy at death can be reborn as a human or a being in a higher realm. A man can be a fine capitalist who is kind and follows the rules, but if political, social, or economic tragedy strikes tomorrow he will be assuredly impoverished. To the Mongolians who witnessed the effects of shock therapy, there is no resolution to scarcity. It hurts you and your family, and if there's nothing left then you will still be around to suffer the consequences of that.

Clifford Geertz asserts that this conflict is not sustainable. “Religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysic, and in doing so sustains each with the borrowed authority of the other” (90). He claims that religions as a cultural phenomenon affirm the ethical ideal of their members by being shown to symbolize a way of life best fitted to reality, while simultaneously the image of reality is constructed in such a way that it seems like it is best suited to accommodate a particular way of life. This establishes moral and aesthetic righteousness and objectivity by depicting these values as the “imposed conditions of life” associated with a particular empirical reality. It also supports these determined truths about the nature of reality by claiming these ethics and values as verification of a certain order in the world (Geertz, 90).

People derive meaning from, and learn to navigate the world through, symbols which communicate certain representations of the world; reading a book communicates to a literate human being a particular sense of reality. People, in order to navigate a chaotic world, seek out these symbols so that they may inform further decisions. Even the atheist relies on a particular

symbol system to provide them information on what the nature of the world is: science and “rationalization”. “Man depends upon symbols and symbol systems with a dependence so great as to be decisive for his creatural viability and, as a result, his sensitivity to even the remotest indication that they may prove unable to cope with one or another aspect of experience raises within him the gravest sort of anxiety...” (Geertz, 99).

But at the same time, no society is without incongruities in function. “All [social arrangements] are riddled with insoluble antinomies...further, this friction or social strain appears on the level of the individual personality – itself an inevitably mal-integrated system of conflicting desires, archaic sentiments, and improvised defenses – as psychological strain. What is viewed collectively as structural inconsistency is felt individually as personal insecurity, for it is in the experience of the social actor that the imperfections of society and contradictions of character meet and exacerbate one another” (Geertz, 204).

So in the current post-socialist Mongolian context, taking shelter in faith, and by consequence that taking refuge in the impermanence of life and the possibility of rebirth, is potentially a psychologically wearisome task. So how do Buddhists balance these conflicting realities: the fear of suffering on a material and social plane guiding you to hoard and guard wealth from fellow economic competitors with the spiritual want to eschew material concern, practice compassion toward all sentient beings, and embrace your impermanence on this earth?

In my interview with Altanzaya she clearly is eager to only divulge to me positive statements about Mongolia, Buddhism, and culture. She volunteers with disabled children, attends meditation retreats, and kindly asserts that things are only getting better and kinder in Mongolian society and Buddhist practice. But when I ask her about theft in Ulaanbaatar, she immediately becomes invigorated. She tells me about the time last year when pickpockets stole her laptop from her bag, and then about the time that she stopped her friend from being . “Pickpockets are everywhere,” she laments, “stores, bus stations, the black market especially. I have no idea why people

would do that. You must always watch.” This type of enthusiasm to perform compassionate acts, coupled with a guarded nature and a hesitancy to trust others, is the kind of contradiction that may be necessary to equally navigate both the spiritual and economic realm.

The radical answer would be to withdraw from participation in the formal economy in hope of avoiding some sort of further social conditioning. But I found few accounts of active resistance from capitalist systems that perpetuate hostility and acute competition in narratives from interviewees. Monks and lamas that I interviewed were much more likely to speak to breaking bonds of attachment with material things and only have as much as necessary to ensure survival. Soninbat often commented throughout the interview that in earlier times, lamas consumed the absolute minimum and were seeking constantly to survive on less and less. Over the course of our discussion, he mentioned his vegetarian diet to me a number of times, a lifestyle quite impressive in meat-enthusiastic Mongolia. Lama Bulag said that while some element of attachment is necessary to exist in the physical realm - “with no attachment to the materialistic world, you can't support life” - the sangha should refrain from any participation in materialist pursuits and rather devote their minds and bodies to more virtuous things.

One of the most striking themes I found through study and interviews is the interpretation of economic class as an application of karma in previous lives. Ragchaa outlines it succinctly: “The conditions of this life are mostly karma of the previous life: your old age, how rich you are, where you're born. What you do in this life is because of past life.” This statement is supported by most of my interviewees, and even a number of stupas. If you collect negative karma in your previous life, your next life may be potentially born into poverty. This cosmic explanation for market processes blends the rational with the personal and social quite stunningly; it humanizes the situation of the impoverished, settling the faithful's minds by explaining why material suffering occurs while at once rationalizing karma as almost a kind of currency to collect so that one might be able to spend it the next life on a good rebirth. It allows the the dissolution of tension between Buddhist dogma and

social worth pioneered by a capitalist work ethic. As Weber notes in *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the ethos affirmed by a religion are reflexively collaborative with social reality and, as he illustrates with an example of Protestant Calvinism infusing their own brand of capitalism with spiritual enthusiasm, can provide ethical congruency in social realms (Weber, 1904).

And, most importantly to Mongolian psyches, it carries with it an implication that you can, in fact, control your economic future simply by being a good Buddhist. Just like conservative social policy dictated by devote capitalists in the United States might submit that everybody “gets what they earn”, this interpretation of karma carries with it a very similar narrative. After telling me about this truth of rebirth, Ragchaa mentioned a quote that she had read somewhere: “You are the slave of your past and the king of your future.’ I really like these words.”

Many interviewees noted other ways that they justified their social inhibition to trust on a spiritual level. The competitive aspect of capitalism is unavoidable, says Gambold. When dealing with processes like wealth accumulation, where the scarce wealth collected means that it will not be afforded to other, more needy people, he affirms that “the most important thing is intent.” Both Onontuul and Ragchaa remind me that if somebody has suffering in their lives, they cannot help but cause suffering to others. When I ask whether people can truly act compassionately if they always are causing suffering, Soninbat tells me that the perpetuation of suffering is “just the way that life is”. He informs me that there are two kinds of suffering that are inflicted by people: intentional and accidental. Both are bad, he says, “but accidental isn't as bad”. To have good intent and a clear mind, according to Gambold and Soninbat, prevents one from having severe karmic ramifications from the causing of suffering to others. In the case of wealth accumulation, Gambold notes that some people accumulate wealth and help others with their riches; this is right intent, he says, and right intent when causing suffering does not inhibit compassion.

And while it may not hamper the possibility of compassionate action, it

also does not open one's social consciousness to acting fully compassionately. And thus a question, one of this post-socialist social context but also of general human nature, arises: how does one open up oneself to the world and practice uninhibited when one recognizes the liability to hurt, when one has their own socially conditioned fear of further suffering, when the social script is to guard and protect and worry about your wealth?

In our interview, Ragchaa mentioned that she practices compassion by praying for the benefit of drunks on the street, that they will overcome their suffering and stop drinking and be happy. I asked her what people need to be happy and not have suffering, and she told me that they “must see the meaning of life, and know how to see the outside world.” She paused while I scribbled down her words, and I could tell she was thinking even though my eyes were at my notebook. She then told me a story: “My husband died four years ago. And it was very bad. I have a son, and he had a mother and father...my in-laws. And I wanted to know how to not suffer anymore, and so I just thought about dharma teachings, and my son's loss and my in-laws' loss, and I helped them. And then I was not suffering as much for myself. By concentrating on others' suffering you can be happy. And the teachings...they help a lot.”

The dharma course taught at the Mahayana Center in Ulaanbaatar during my time there was focused on the concept of Buddhist refuge and what it means for Buddhists to take refuge in The Three Jewels. Taking refuge is a process by which Buddhist people formally recognize their lifetime commitment to “the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha” (or, the concept of nirvana, the teachings of the Gautama Buddha which will lead to happiness and fulfillment, and the Buddhist community).

It's clear that if Buddhism represents anything to the faithful in Mongolia, it is just that: a refuge from something. Onontuul says that she went into the sangha because “at the end of my old age I wanted to be calm and study Buddhism.” Tsetseg claims it saved her from a sad life of material attachment and chemical dependence. Ragchaa uses it to quell the grief of death. “As we grow, we take different refuges,” says Ani Gyalmo, the instructor of dharma class. As a child, we take refuge in our mothers, who

provide us with seemingly endless security and warmth. As we grow out of childhood, we leave our mothers and seek sanctuary elsewhere: drugs, food, ideologies. Gyalmo describes us in dharma class, those seeking refuge in Buddhism, to refugees: people seeking security, protection, from whatever in life causes strife. For Mongolians, Buddhism is a chance to find refuge from the haunting ghosts of economic turbulence and immense uncertainty. It is a distinctly Mongolian institution that can offer shelter from the disappointing aftermath of a revolution that was intended to restore Mongolian culture to its formerly illustrious position. It's a blueprint by which one can extract a plan for dealing with suffering. And as Geertz notes, “as a religious problem, the problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering but how to suffer, how to make of physical pain, personal loss, worldly defeat, or the helpless contemplation of others' agony something bearable, supportable – something, as we say, sufferable” (104)

On reviving and repurposing

Buddhism in Mongolia is currently experiencing what is referred to by many as a “revival”. It started nearly immediately after the resignation of the socialist government.

The most recent generation of young Mongolians growing up in socialism, who were raised Buddhist in the household by watching their parents take refuge by whispering dharma through the space between their fingers, is matured. They are the generation in charge of governmental bodies, media outlets, economic entities, and, now that freedom of religion has been procured by the democratic government, monasteries. According to most participants, many people in this generation feel Buddhist and may call themselves Buddhist but do not have a relationship with dharma. Their link to faith stems from traditions, the ones they watched happen growing up with no explanation attached. “Most Mongolians don't read dharma texts or sutras,” Ragchaa admits. “They say they're Buddhist but only pray and get blessings.” Gambold notes that “older people do Buddhism a certain way. They believe in ethical things from tradition, but not the actual Buddhism. Buddhism is the

philosophy.”

Ragchaa observes that this ignorance of dharma has been changing in the past ten years; the monasteries are teaching more dharma and more Buddhists are reading translated texts. Soninbat notes that “people are starting to finally do research in Buddhism and studying it very well.”

And this revival could be for any number of reasons. Most interviewees do not chalk up the revival of theological Buddhism in Mongolia to the advent of religious freedom in post-socialism: rather, they attest that only in the past few years has Mongolia been “cleaning up” – or, at least, according to Altanzaya. Now that the country is reaping profit from the mining industry and bouncing back from economic turmoil, monasteries and other religious institutions finally have the funding to begin educating people on dharma.

But Soninbat surmises that it may have to do with the youngest generation of Mongolians, the only living generation born into a democratic epoch. “Young people study Buddhism very well. They know what it actually means, not just rituals.”

I asked many participants whether or not they believe that the youngest generation is less religious than their parents, and while most responded in the affirmative, many agree with Soninbat: while youth are less likely to have any religion, let alone Buddhism, those who do claim that faith are much more well-versed in dharma than the older generation.

Nayra has little experience with Mongolian teenagers, but speaks to the lack of faith in youth in general, “They have a different set of priorities...with more life experience under their belts, they will learn one day that there's only so much you will ever learn externally.” While many Mongolian youth were born during the hardship of economic reform, their cognitive memories formed after the most devastating impacts subsided. Their generation was nursed on television: American movies with Chinese dub, Korean pop music videos, ads glamorizing Western fragrances, romances, and cars. They witnessed the packaging and shipping of these cultural products to their own part of the world, and that is their suffering: while their parents had

attachments to the material world out of economic insecurity, they have attachments for attachments' sake.

Gyalmo speaks to that mindset in dharma class: “We save money to work hard, earn that new thing, and we feel so good about it.” Then when the new model comes out, what we have is obsolete and we feel dissatisfied. Happiness doesn't come from those things, she says. It is only temporary. And if advertisement media continues to purport this cycle of obsolescence as the only way to be relevant in a consuming society, Mongolian youth will experience an insurmountable bout of suffering. Their only refuge from this suffering is to buy more, nicer, better, newer things.

Those young Mongolians who do steadfastly pursue Buddhism recognize this phenomenon. They come off as critical of Mongolian materialism as the lamas and monks I've interviewed. “People's minds need to change,” said Batbold on what he perceived as a lack of kindness in Ulaanbaatar. “Everybody is so jealous.” It is apparent that Batbold and Gambold's refuge from the materialist pursuits that so strongly affect their peers is in dharma.

While both generations of Mongolians host a percentage of those who are seeking refuge from something through Buddhism, they are sought for entirely different purposes. So goes the evolution of religion, shifting in utility as often as the cultural landscape of Mongolia does.

Conclusion

To the interviewees, Mongolian Buddhism is considered an institution of Mongol heritage. Inherent to the practice of Buddhism is the practice of compassion, which takes form in many ways in Mongolian society and interpretation of dharma. Participants have observed stark changes in how urban Mongolians relate to each other, and especially have noticed a sense of anxiety about them. This is likely the uncertainty of economic catastrophe and the protectionist nature of scarce goods originating from the economic reforms following the transition to a democratic government. Buddhists in Mongolia are in a difficult position to reconcile the ethics of their faith, particularly compassion, with their own personal fears of economic uncertainty.

Buddhist Mongolians have found various ways to cope with these co-existent incongruous paradigms, including the application of dharma to free market ideologies and withdrawal from the formal economy. Ultimately, Buddhist Mongolians mostly use the application of Buddhist values to dispel their own personal suffering, allowing them to act compassionately. In this way, Mongolians can be seen as “seeking refuge” in Buddhism in order to find some security from socially-disseminated anxiety and general suffering. Furthermore, the current reality of young Mongolians and the different challenges they are presented have led young Mongolian Buddhists to come to the faith by other means, particularly as a reaction to an overly-materialistic pop culture. This calls into question the legitimacy of the term “revival” in reference to the re-development of Buddhism in Mongolia, as the significance of Buddhism in Mongolia seems to be heavily dependent on the social context.

Future studies in this topic of interest might benefit from a discussion of these ethical paradigms outside the context of Ulaanbaatar. It would be compelling to see how rural environments alter the social landscape, and how urban dwelling affects kindness in the city. My experiences in the countryside have led me to believe that the symbolic aspects of nomadic life hold within them their own particular set of ideologies that were not as fundamentally undermined with the introduction of market reform. This research would be all

the more comprehensive and insightful with remarks on that aspect of Mongolian Buddhism.

Geertz asserts that “religious symbols provide a cosmic guarantee not only for their ability to comprehend the world, but also, comprehending it, to give a precision to their feeling, a definition to their emotions which enables them, morosely or joyfully, grimly or cavalierly, to endure it” (104). Likewise Buddhism in Mongolia will serve as an accommodating schematic for whoever seeks it out, likely as a means of finding endurance against some jarring element of discordant reality. So long as Buddhism is allowed to be practiced in Mongolia, there is likely no need for a “revival” of Buddhism; where there are those who need refuge, faith will thrive.

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