

The Individual Psychology of Tibetan Buddhism

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All schools of thought can put aside their differences to admit one basic truth: people have problems. Deciphering the possible roots and solutions to the wide, diverse spectrum of individuals' issues is obviously the larger debate. Nothing rivals the complexity of the human brain, and with it the mind. Achieving a full understanding of its mechanics is admittedly beyond comprehension. It is impossible. So, this discussion on the essence of problems within humanity continues. Western psychology points to the reality of experiences along with science. People are impacted, both positively and negatively, by every experience and simultaneously, by their own biology. It's nurture and nature. Various forms of therapy are the solution—the means for individuals to realize themselves and then make progress. Tibetan Buddhism, on the other hand, concludes simply that all life is suffering. Through various practices, namely meditation, people are meant to realize the impermanence of life along with the importance of helping others. Only then the mind can begin to progress toward the enlightened state of being known as Nirvana.

In actuality, there are some definite broad similarities between these two schools of thought. In such a comparison, it is especially important to note that both philosophies and the customs that accompany them are deeply particular. This project by no means attempts to completely outline the details of either school of thought. It instead intends to examine how Tibetan Buddhists reflect on some particular practices and ideals of their own as well as those of the Western psychology world. Furthermore, the real world relationship and how the two accept each other seems an important application that seems essential within this discussion. Literature on this subject was obviously necessary to include, but research was largely based on participant observation and impromptu

interviews with Tibetan Buddhist across a relatively large landscape. The Lama-student relationship, a basic perception meditation, and mental illness were chosen as central topics, and literature was explored accordingly. For a more in depth understanding, several interviews were conducted. Western psychology's equivalent practices and relationships were also researched, and in most cases Tibetan Buddhists' perceptions of this Western connection were sought out. These tactics, along with the mostly theoretical perspective they aimed to investigate, admittedly possess weaknesses. How can a population's point of views be summarized through limited interviews? At the same time, this flaw is a characteristic in the realm of psychology research. Although growing numbers of Americans take part in the different kinds of therapy, psychological diagnoses and techniques remain subjective to a significant extent. Despite the science involved, definitive facts about human thought and behavior seem in actuality rather inaccessible. Fully understanding any component mental illness necessitates a full understanding of mental function. Science simply can offer no such explanation, so the world of Western psychology continues to fall short. Lacking comprehensive definitive facts is unfortunate. It is, however, an unavoidable boundary that can only be acknowledged and considered throughout the findings of such research. With this aside, the interviews conducted give great insight into the individual psychology of Tibetan Buddhism. More practically they display how its philosophies relate to and interact with Western psychology. With this understanding, it seems sensible that the two can negotiate methods and unite.

The Lama-student relationship is central to Tibetan Buddhism. The young boys who go to live in a lamasery, which in most cases is not too far from home, are under the

guidance of the local Lamas. In many senses, the Lamas are like professors of understanding and experience, although an incredible amount of independence is obligatory on the part of each student. A 23 year-old Lama at Jiamei Si in Yongning, Sichuan expressed that he felt like an old man, explaining, “Every boy has to study very hard by himself. They get some guidance, but it is their personal work. It is a heavy responsibility on each boy.” One of his students, a 14 year-old, jumped into the conversation to clarify, “The Lamas help me understand ideas, but more so they encourage me. I, personally, have to focus very diligently.” Grinning, he continued, “When I first began studying, I was very frustrated.” They both smiled at this. “Other boys were the same. Then, I did a lot of studying all by myself. I felt confident knowing that the Lamas can not do it for me.” His Lama teacher smiled, adding, “Yes, that would be too easy” (Interviews at Jiamei Si, May 2007) Such efforts are meant to be challenging; it is what makes experienced Tibetan Buddhist cognitively resilient and equipped. Later that day, a 16 year-old and a 10 year-old got into a relatively physical scuffle over completing a chore. The 23 year-old Lama watched from 30 feet away, and even smirked a bit. The two went on for several minutes, while a fellow student explained his point of view to the Lama on the sideline. Still, he did nothing. A bit later the two students figured out their problem, and before he approached them, the Lama turned toward me, shrugged, and admitted, “I knew they would work it out.” He said that he planned on further discussing the matter with them later that night or the next day. “Tonight or tomorrow, we must think about the problem, how they reacted, and how they treated each other, but at this point, I feel I should avoid the problem solving.” The way he described it, every interaction, every positive opportunity and every difficulty is

“practice” to build up these young men (Interviews at Jiamei Si, May 2007). To each group of young men studying Tibetan Buddhism, their Lamas are teachers, older brothers, friends, fathers, spiritual advisors, and in many senses, therapists.

At this point a distinction must be made between the boys who study to become Lamas, with the eventual objective of achieving enlightenment, and common individuals who just practice Tibetan Buddhism. Due to the already relatively broad subject matter, this project focused almost entirely on the young men in the lamaseries. Aspects of the larger population of Tibetan Buddhists are included to a smaller extent, although the system of values is identical. There are, however, clear differences between lifestyles and relationships. To local Tibetan Buddhist townspeople, the Lama is more of a holy therapist. In Xiangcheng, after time at Ganden Shangpo Monastery and twenty minutes into a dinner interview with a 58 year-old Lama, two women joined in on the discussion. They were there for advice and maybe for our chuar as well. The middle-aged woman, mother of the other woman, came to ask about purchasing a new car and because of her worries about her daughter. Her daughter was seeking advice on raising her child, and her relationship with her mother. When they left, the Lama explained that he offered guidance, but told them that they are problems between them that needed to be worked on independently (Interviews at Jiamei Si, May 2007). Again, individual efforts were emphasized in a Lama’s prescription. Lama Thubten Yeshe speaks to this point in how he tries “to have the person analyze the nature of his own problem” (Lama Thubten Yeshe, 1975). In “Make Your Mind an Ocean: A Buddhist Approach to Mental Illness,” his technique represents the ideals of Tibetan Buddhism:

I try to show him the true nature of his mind so that with his own mind he can understand his own problems. If he can do that, he can solve his own problems himself. I don't believe that I can solve his problems by simply talking to him a little. That might make him feel a bit better, but it's very transient relief. The root of his problems reaches deep into his mind; as long as it's there, changing circumstances will cause more problems to emerge...There's no way you can understand your own mental problems without your becoming your own psychologist. (Lama Thubten Yeshe, 1975)

The personal responsibility is quite evident within the Lama-student relationship as well as in the Lama-townsperson relationship. Regardless of this distinction, Lamas enforce incredible amounts of individual cognitive efforts. As spelled out in Lama Yeshe's quote above, a great deal more responsibility is placed on each individual as the sufferer.

Personal confidence on the part of the patient is an important goal within Western therapy as well. Similar to the 23 year-old Lama at Jaimei Si, therapists want to provide guidance and still challenge their patients to make steps on their own. In addition to providing straightforward interpretations, it is not uncommon for therapists to ask questions. Unlike the Jaimei Si Lama, however, Western psychologists and psychiatrists are a bit more deceiving with this technique. They provide a little direction, but always aim for the patient to assemble the larger psychological connections themselves. Still, this tactic should not be equated with individualistic endeavors required by Tibet Buddhism. Western psychology practices are more cushioned for the patient, due to its comparatively shorter time commitment as well as the cost. More importantly, there is no holy aspect to Western psychology. This changes the motivation. A psychologist cannot offer the possibility of an enlightened state of being after a lifetime of therapy. Therapy is not a lifestyle. Compared to life of Tibetan Buddhists in lamaseries, it demands much less time. It's a slower process. It takes some time for each individual to accept and adapt to sharing their inner selves with a professional.

Often in therapy, the patient will be assigned something along the lines of homework—thoughts or actions that should take place outside of meetings to contribute to progress. This also takes getting used to. The therapist cannot be there outside of sessions to enforce this work, and when working with adolescents it sometimes just does not get done. Despite Western psychology's comparatively lenient, less cognitively demanding approach, beginning patients still struggle with accepting the personal responsibility of psychotherapy. This differs remarkably to the adjustment of young boys to lamasery life, although the initial transition by no means appears easy. Their routine is more physically and emotionally challenging from the start. And in all the interviews conducted, no Lama had ever encountered a student who quit the Tibetan Buddhist life after entering the lamasery. After hearing some description of Western therapeutic practices, the Lamas and students at Jaimei Si mostly strained to draw any analogies. When an analogy between Western therapy and life at the monastery was brought up, one young man's reaction was rather comical: "You can't be a monk half of the time." Then, the head Lama jumped in, still laughing a little, "I can understand how I am like the therapist you described, but every day I work all day" (Interviews at Jiamei Si, May 2007). The most common reaction of Tibetan Buddhists to basic forms of Western therapy was that it is not enough time, regardless of the methods. Tibetan Buddhism is without a doubt more spiritual than the ideals of Western psychology, especially in terms of young boys' relationships with the elder individuals who teach and guide them.

Meditation is another aspect that demands great efforts of individual effort, and again shares some similarities with Western psychotherapy. Even among crowds who do not know much about Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhist meditation is recognized as extremely

profound. It includes practices and elements that demand more time for analysis than this project could offer. Although there are many specific forms of meditation, the two main groups are concentration meditation and mindfulness meditation (Pettifor, 1996). Concentration meditation can best be summed up as each individual focusing on a single mantra or phrase, and usually involves chanting. As Eric Pettifor explains in “Buddhist Psychology,” “This could be a syllable or series of syllables chanted over and over as in a mantra, a religious image, the breath, or even a quality such as compassion or loving kindness. The object should be something healthy so that the effect of this concentration is to increase positive factors and diminish negative ones.” This practice aims to strip the mind of everything but this one focus. As every Tibet Buddhist interviewed for this project admitted without any hesitation, this process is not easy. A young Lama at the Beri Monastery in Ganzi, Sichuan was surprisingly enthusiastic on this topic. He found it amazing: “Peoples’ minds keep thinking. Thoughts always come. Even when people try to focus on one thing, other thoughts come. When I first began meditating, it seemed completely out of my control. Year by year, I have gotten better, obviously with much time practicing. Still, it is very fascinating to me how thoughts come.” Interestingly, the younger boys studying to be Lamas do not appear too frustrated by this complication. In the discussion with this Lama and a few of his students, one eight year-old knew how far he had to go. Grabbing his friend around the neck with a smile, he said, “Me and the other boys—we have just begun...and there are many more years to make improvements” (Interviews at Ganden Tubchen Chokhorling Si, May 2007). Concentration meditation involves many stages of awareness (Pettifor, 1996). It is a process and this seems comforting to these young pupils. The Ganzi Lama best clarified this state of mind,

expressing, “No one should put pressure to make improvements. That is negative. Still, they know they must work hard for a long time” (Interviews at Ganden Tubchen Chokhorling Si, May 2007). This is just understood in the ideals of Tibetan Buddhism—the mind is impure and a significant time is necessary to make progress.

Since absorbing the tremendous details of Tibetan Buddhist meditation demands a considerable amount of time, and because an explanation of such details can get rather confused in translation, this is a pretty difficult topic to discuss. Instead, more physiological effects were explored. At Jiamei Si, I was lucky enough to catch a group of young boys right after their nine o’clock in the morning meditation. They shared some interesting reports of their post-concentration meditation state. One boy explained, “If I am tired or my brain is slow in the morning, [concentration] meditation helps me focus. It helps me prepare for the day.” Another boy laughed, almost shouting, “I can’t not be tired or slow in the morning because of [concentration] meditation.” They all laughed at that. The consensus was that such meditation, at any point in the day, was grounding. If they had conflicts or worries, it helped control these thoughts from being overwhelming. It strengthened their minds.

Western psychological research actually backs the technique of concentration meditation. A concept referred to “self-talk,” more simply talking to yourself, has been explored for quite some time. It appears correlated with self-awareness. “Verbally or semantically encoded knowledge about the self” has been shown to be “effective as memory aids for information about the self” (Morin, 1998), and this does not even imply that what is being said is meaningful like the prayers chanted by Tibetan Buddhists. The depth of one such mantra is well outlined in the Dalai Lama’s “Om Mani Padme Hum:”

It is very good to recite the mantra *Om mani padme hum*, but while you are doing it, you should be thinking on its meaning, for the meaning of the six syllables is great and vast. The first, Om is composed of three letters, A, U, and M. These symbolize the practitioner's impure body, speech, and mind; they also symbolize the pure exalted body, speech, and mind of a Buddha...Mani, meaning jewel, symbolizes the factors of method—the altruistic intention to become enlightened, compassion, and love...The two syllables, padme, meaning lotus, symbolize wisdom...Purity must be achieved by an indivisible unity of method and wisdom, symbolized by the final syllable hum, which indicates indivisibility...In the mantra, or tantric, vehicle, it [hum] refers to one consciousness in which there is the full form of both wisdom and method as one undifferentiable entity...Thus the six syllables, om mani padme hum, mean that in dependence on the practice of a path which is an indivisible union of method and wisdom, you can transform your impure body, speech, and mind into the pure exalted body, speech, and mind of a Buddha. (Dalai Lama)

The “wisdom” that the Dalai Lama mentioned refers to the Tibetan Buddhist ideals of impermanence and also being conscious of our own actions. In terms of self-talk technique, their “information about the self” is that there is no self. Concentration meditation helps reinforce this reality for the mind. Self-awareness is concurrently the goal. In fact, “evidence suggests that highly self-conscious persons, compared with low self-conscious individuals, extensively talk to themselves about themselves” (Morin, 1998). This didn't surprise a teenage student at Litang's Ganden Tubchen Chokhorling Monastery. Slapping his friend on the shoulder, he remarked, “I talk to myself all of the time. That must be why I am cleverer than you.”

The second main classification of meditation, mindfulness meditation, only differs from concentration meditation in how it extends to all moments of life outside of the sitting and chanting. In an interview in Lijiang with a Living Buddha, I ignorantly requested an explanation of Tibetan Buddhist medication. He chuckled a bit and spread his arms out for an answer of everything. He then provided a beautiful explanation of how

everything, every moment of life can be considered meditation (Interview in LiJiang, May 2007). The broad goal of mindfulness meditation is a “full awareness of one’s experiences” (Pettifor, 1996). As the Ganzi Lama so enthusiastically elucidated earlier, thoughts enter the mind in concentration meditation. They are meant to be acknowledged and let go. In mindfulness meditation, emotions are the larger obstacle. According to Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche’s “The Nature of Mind,” “Mind cannot exist without emotions. Daydreaming and discursive thoughts are not enough...In the beginning we create them deliberately, as a game of trying to prove ourselves that we exist. But eventually the game becomes a hassle; it becomes more than a game and forces us to challenge ourselves more than we intended.” Tibetan Buddhism delves far more deeply into the essence of emotions, classifying various forms in detail and how they relate to one another.

Mindfulness meditation aims to strip away the negative emotions, though resolution does not lie in the outside world viewed by the mind, but the mind itself. Rinpoche explains, “We work on the projector rather than the projection. We turn inward, instead of trying to sort out external problems of A, B, and C. We work on the creator of duality rather than the creation. That is the beginning of the beginning” (Rinpoche, 1992). This approach rationalizes the importance of independence throughout Tibetan Buddhism. Each individual must train his mind to comprehend impermanence, that the whole world is basically a product of our mind. To clarify, Rinpoche symbolizes, “By meditating, we are dealing with the very mind that devised our eyeglasses and put the lenses in the rims” (Rinpoche, 1992). The logic is simply that since all humans and their minds are impure,

this is the obvious root of all other problems and should be the focus of all cognitive efforts.

As Tibetan Buddhists who study in lamaseries achieve this state of mind to a higher and higher degree, they become quite literally, more mindful. They grow to own their emotional state, although this of course requires a long time. This is well exemplified by the quarrel discussed at Jiamei Si. There was a noticeable difference in the ages of the two students fighting; this distinction was well represented each boy's self-awareness. The younger boy was screaming, crying, running around a fair amount, and approached the older boy with some violent intent. The older was calmer, more in control. He didn't seem too fazed by the dramatics in front of him. He did not let emotions own his behavior. He remained mindful of his actions even in a more challenging situation. The 23 year-old Lama represented an even more advanced meditative cognitive state. While not directly involved in the conflict, he still possesses some responsibility and there definitely appeared potential for a physical exchange. He knew what needed to happen afterwards to dissect the dilemma, and seemed almost to enjoy watching his boys resolve the problem themselves. In control of his mind, he recognized the value for each boy in this experience and stood by to enjoy.

The Western psychology world appreciates this incredible ability to master emotion. Paul Ekman, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of California's San Francisco School of Medicine, believes this tactic can absolutely assist people in managing unpleasant emotions. Similar to the discussed Tibetan Buddhist point of view, he thinks that emotions run our behavior automatically, especially when a quick reactions is necessary. "Buddhist monks," he expressed, "practice a fine-grained awareness of their

own feelings through meditation ‘in order,’ in their own words, ‘to recognize the spark before the flame’” (Dingfelder, 2003). The science that accompanies this opinion connects the Western world of psychology and Tibetan Buddhism:

In the course of his research, Ekman and Robert Levenson, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of California, Berkeley, may have found a man who cannot be startled. In a series of yet unpublished experiments, Ekman exposed one Tibetan Buddhist monk to a sudden sound as loud as a firecracker and monitored the participant's blood pressure, muscle movements, heart rate and skin temperature for signs of startle. The Buddhist monk, possibly due to hours of practice regulating his emotions through meditation, registered little sign of disturbance.

“We found things we had never seen before,” says Ekman, who is in the process of verifying his results through replication of the experiment. (Dingfelder, 2003)

A successful replication would indicate that meditation enables humans to control their reflexes to something like loud, sudden noises. This method of focusing on the mind as the source of emotional problems differs from much Western therapy. It is “preventative mental work,” disagreeing with the Western view of unpleasant emotions as forever inevitable. According to Ekman, “Western psychology tends to focus on emotional damage control ‘after you are already burned up’” (Dingfelder, 2003). In the minds of Ekman and several others Western psychologists, Tibetan Buddhism has a lot to offer their school of thought and people in general.

Obviously this is not the only method employed by Tibetan Buddhists with scientific rationalization for how it strengthens the mind. This is also accomplished through “envisioning complex mental images, including Buddhist deities and symbolics geometric designs called mandalas” (Dingfelder, 2003). Marlene Behrmann, PhD, a Carnegie Mellon University psychology professor, deems Tibetan Buddhists “virtuosos of mental imagery” because they “represent the far end of the sophistication continuum

of mental imagery” (Dingfelder, 2003). In training their minds to transform an idea to an image they enhance their cognitive sophistication. There are close to ten major theories within Western psychology philosophy that deconstruct the important of mental imagery. All plainly contending that this process plays “a significantly role in a number of basic psychological activities, including memory, learning initiating action, reverie, perception, motivation, creative imagination, and emotion” (Morin, 1998). Alain Morin, PhD, of Saint Francis Xavier University further asserts mental imagery’s “role as a mediator of self-awareness and its importance in the acquisition of self-information” (Morin, 1998). While most speculation on this topic maintains that individuals only construct mental images only one stroke at a time, Tibetan Buddhist monks report the ability to create these complicated impressions simultaneously. This offers new possibilities for psychology research on different levels of human visualization, and further scientific psychological investigations could offer Tibetan Buddhists a new understanding of their practices (Dingfelder, 2003). An explanation of this topic, among others, was quite intriguing to monks at many different locations. They always requested more information. The younger, enthusiastic Lama at Ganzi straightforwardly assessed this relationship: “Science is important because it is a different method of thinking about our practices” (Interviews at Beri Si, May 2007).

Tibetan Buddhism and its followers are always open to new ideas, often because their own ideals are so aged and well-constructed that they are able to explain different or fresh understandings of the world. They remain dedicated to their values, yet the Dalai Lama regularly expresses that if scientific proof challenges or contradicts a Buddhist assumption, that position must be reconsidered or abandoned (Kowinski, 2004). This is

an important element to Tibetan Buddhist's assessments of mental illness, although there remain profound intricacies in dismantling this topic. For instance, to accompany this science-oriented viewpoint, Buddhist philosophy also characterizes mental delusions as spirits and demons. In these cases, the mind fails to accurately comprehend itself; it is "lost in illusions and it interprets them wrongly, or it sees them as reality" (Pettifor, 1996). Thus, in Tibetan medical psychiatry, which holds Buddhist thinking as an important foundation, mental disorders are "related to external terrestrial spirits or negative energy influences" (Pettifor, 1996). Even with this basic comprehensive understanding and decent language fluency, attempts to extract verbal judgments on this topic got lost among cultural and linguistic differences. Almost every Tibetan Buddhist I encountered reported no exposure to this topic. In Ganzi, some upper-level Lamas were able to discuss elements within the subject of mental illness, but only one had worked with a disordered individual before and he was not exactly open to revealing much detail (Interviews at Beri Si, May 2007). It seems logical that opinions on matters concerning mental illness exist, but in terms of the interviews conducted, I could not find them.

To further confuse this assessment, the initial step towards improvement in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is accepting that your own mind is not perfected. With this belief, it is not inconceivable to label all individuals as disordered. In the first case, defining mental illness is a challenge since a classification of "abnormal" is actually based on a larger population being "normal." A cross-cultural definitional and treatment comparison then adds another layer of possibilities and confusion. In one culture a behavior may be branded as a symptom of illness, while in another culture the same behavior is considered quite ordinary.

Lama Thubton Yeshe proposes this Tibetan Buddhist definition: “By mental illness I mean the kind of mind that does not see reality; a mind that tends to either exaggerate or underestimate the qualities of the person or object it perceives, which always causes problems to arise” (Lama Thubton Yeshe, 1975). Compared to widely held current views of mental health within the Western psychology, this asserts a rather radical notion: more non-symptomatic consideration. Over the last half century, there have been somewhat revolutionary changes in Western psychology’s approach to mental illness. Once regarded as an incurable defect, or a sign of weakness, mainstream medicine now attempts to see mental illness through the same eyes as physical illness. Volumes have been written relating symptoms with treatments and prognoses, although a great deal of subjectivity remains evident in these processes. Even classifiable symptoms differ in clear ways. Through all of this study, there is no doubt that mental illness is far more complex than its physical counterpart. In recognizing this distinction, a more complicated, maybe even spiritual element seems necessary to include to fully explain mental illness. So if a universal definition of mental illness or some combination of the mentioned ideals is the goal, Lama Yeshe’s definition and the standard Western DSM-IV style approach make for a good comparison. The narrowness of Western psychology’s DSM-IV emphasis is restraining, yet individual symptoms should not be entirely disregarded. In order to broaden the concept of mental illness we must be willing to dispatch the idea of concrete symptom-based diagnosis, and understand that symptoms are only indicative of mental function when taken in cultural and personal context.

The Tibetan Buddhist and Western psychology views on treatment of mental illness in a way parallels the previously discussed relationship within mental illness. In

this excerpt from the Dalai Lama's book "Freedom in Exile" it is clear that medications are quite an acceptable treatment: "As regards treatment, the first line of approach concerns behavior and diet. Medicine forms the second line; acupuncture and moxibustion the third; surgery the fourth. The medicines themselves are made from organic materials, sometimes combined with metal oxides and certain minerals." It seems very unlikely that, given the Dalai Lama's position, Tibetan Buddhism would be unwilling to accept psychopharmacology. They require more a careful, natural approach supplemented by therapeutic measures. Akin to the topic of mental illness, Tibetan Buddhists were not too excited when medication was brought up. In Tibet's Reting Monastery and Ganzi, Sichuan as well, Tibetan Buddhist monks approved the notion of drugs for very serious mental problems; however, they would say no more. No data really stood out on inquiries about these two subject matters.

Needless to say, today's Western psychology has a somewhat different take on medication. Psychoactive drugs are well accepted by most medical authorities as effective treatments for certain sets of symptoms. Prescription drug usage continues to increase exponentially even though the market is relatively young in the scheme of time. Despite the general lack of knowledge more psychoactive drugs are released every year. Along with them come countless studies to exhibit their effectiveness, and testimonials of people who tell of improvement. There are, of course, many successful cases. When drugs are administered cautiously and additional therapeutic steps are taken, dramatic improvement can be accomplished. A sizable population of the western world relies on prescription medication for important reasons, but even the most adamant proponents of psychoactive medications admit that it does not always work. Finding the right chemical

and dosage can be a matter of trial and error, a process which is condemned by opponents. Similar to the DSM-IV—classify symptoms and provide a mental health diagnosis approach, there isn't too much consideration of context when it comes to prescribing drugs. An individual's history usually receives attention, yet for many psychoactive drugs, there always remains the possibility for biological side effects that depends on each specific person. Psychoactive drugs definitely play a critical role in Western psychology's practices, but it is also an industry that could focus more on how its product interacts with the human body and less on the high-grossing overwhelming product demand. Seeking the Tibetan Buddhist point of view on this industry or on the medication it produces was impossible. No monk, Llama, Living Buddha, or Tibetan Buddhist townspeople that I came across during my weeks of travel had ever encountered or had any real understanding of Western psychopharmacology. Admittedly, this must at least partly be attributed to the language barrier, especially because most research was conducted in medium-sized towns overwhelmingly populated by Tibetans.

Considering combinations between Tibetan Buddhism and Western psychology inspires some curious possibilities, both for China and the western world. With all of the evaluation of individual psychology in this project, it seems necessary to consider the real world application of this relationship. Specifically in The United States, that is actually an incredible history of Buddhist influence in psychological research. Kerry Moran, M.A., offers examples to speak to this relationship, and how it exists today:

William James, the American writer and psychologist, predicted a century ago that Buddhism would deeply influence Western psychology...We see this synthesis in Jon Kabat-Zinn's work with stress reduction, in techniques like Hakomi and Integrative Processing Therapy, and in Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, which uses Zen principles to work with

personality disorders. A uniquely Buddhist psychology is being articulated by writers like John Welwood, Tara Bennett-Goleman, Mark Epstein, and Tara Brach. This new field is called presence-centered psychotherapy, or sometimes contemplative psychotherapy, after its meditative roots. It's a way of working that uses the wisdom of the present moment, enhanced by a patient inquiry into body-centered awareness, to unfold our innate potential for healing. It sounds simple, but it's radical in practice. (Moran, 2003)

Moran asserts that this spiritually astute psychology successfully combines Tibetan Buddhist meditation practices and Western psychotherapy. She is certain well-qualified, traveling Tibet in the 1980s, working in Kathmandu as a journalist and trek leader for four years, then studying and practicing in the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism for roughly the last 19 years. For the past nine years, she has practiced a form of depth psychotherapy, deeply influenced by her Tibetan Buddhist background (Moran, 2003).

In her article, "Wisdom & Compassion: Buddhist Psychotherapy as Skillful Means," she explores virtually all of the topics surveyed by this project, borrowing ideals from both Tibetan Buddhism and Western psychology. A relationship with a therapist is crucial to this process, yet therapist is not the accurate descriptive. More desirable is merely another person "who is open, relaxed, and aware; someone who is willing to completely be with us without having to change our situation in any way" (Moran, 2003). Simply expressing inner emotions with this type of person can seriously help. Moran explains that "being fully seen and understood by another, even if that understanding is entirely wordless, can support us in understanding ourselves" (Moran, 2003). Although another person is present, this work is individual. The other person just listens. The patient did the work of sharing and reconsidering him or her self, and this independence should inspire pride as well as progress. Each individual must work to "stay with his or her own experience. The type of therapy practiced, the duration of the work, even the

particular therapist, did not matter nearly as much as this basic ability to simply experience what one is experiencing” (Moran, 2003). Moran tells that this ability is not often taught in Western therapy. This self-reliance is quite reminiscent of Lama Yeshe quote where he prescribes that all people must develop the ability to be their own therapist.

I dragged a cushion into Nick’s room, and sat there every day with my grief, anger, and pain. Whenever I felt the waves coming up inside, I’d sit and be with my feelings with a ferocious intensity. Somehow the awareness took off some of the pressure...I learned that if I could just be present for whatever emotions arose, if I could just embrace them as fully and completely as possible, the storm would pass more easily. I began to practice tonglen, the Tibetan meditation on “sending and receiving,” in which you imagine yourself taking in the suffering of others with every inhalation, and with every exhalation send them all your happiness, all your joy, all your strength. This worked like nothing else did to ease my own suffering. In some mysterious alchemical fashion, the pain in my heart melted when I connected with the pain of others. I didn’t stop to think why this might be so, or how it worked. I simply sat and took in more, grateful for even a few breaths of relief. (Moran, 2003)

During meditation, Moran allowed her unconscious to roam free. She psychoanalyzed herself in this sense, and at the same time realized the important Tibetan Buddhist value of compassion. This deeper understanding of personal emotions generated a critical awareness, and allowed healing of negative feelings. She explains that a common misunderstanding by Americans is that the notion of detachment implies stripping away all feelings. To clarify, Moran informs that feelings are even intensified within a state of mindfulness. They come and go as usual. Instead of being bogged down by all of the cognitive clutter that accompanies emotion, the aim is to “learn to open to the actual quality of the feeling, the pure painfulness of the pain, rather than trying to control it or reject it” (Moran, 2003). Mindfulness meditation actually deliberately encourages vulnerability. This shed humans of their protective emotional armor. Ron Kurtz, the

founder of Hakomi, defines mindfulness as undefended consciousness. According to Krutz it is “a bittersweet unfolding of the pleasure and pain inherent in every moment. And this fuels the therapeutic process with some very high-octane energy. When we open up to our own inner process, we open the gates of self-exploration and new discovery” (Moran, 2003). Moran thus uses the tactics from each school of thought to work off of and drive each other.

This combination is successful because the both Tibetan Buddhism and Western psychology agree on the goal of heightened awareness. Comparatively, Western psychology’s view of awareness is basically more restricted—grounded in reality. It is not conceptual, not based in the pains of the past and their impacts, no matter how painful or traumatizing. “It’s awareness itself, awareness pure and simple,” Moran clarifies, adding that, “This type of awareness applied in the therapeutic context is an exceedingly powerful skillful means” (Moran, 2003). This compels patients to acknowledge personal experiences only in how they exist in the moment. They then are released and can not remain a burden.

To complement this blend of beliefs, Moran reminds readers that it is pretty radical to consider the human mind either inherently free or flawless. This Tibetan Buddhist rational that all people are impure has incredible potential amidst “the disease-oriented medical perspective of mainstream psychology” (Moran, 2003). It is extremely comforting to wholly accept that others feel similar to you. In therapy, this may be emphasized, but others sharing comparable pains is still rooted in reality’s experiences. A therapist could remind a patient, “You are not alone. Many other people were beaten by their parents, so it is not your fault.” If Tibetan Buddhism was incorporated, the therapist

might say, “You are not alone. Everyone feels pain like this at some point. All people are the same in this respect, including the people who hurt you. More important is how you understand these experiences as just that: experiences.” This difference here is critical. The patient must realize not only that the traumatic experiences are not the source of his or her pain. All people must make great efforts to purify their mind and body. Then the patient can learn that such efforts toward self-realization are individual because they must be identified with independent, but at the same time, all people attempt this simultaneously. A widespread appreciation for this truth would benefit mentally ill patients and also the people who surround them, viewing them as mentally ill.

Although there was definite appreciation for several goals within Western psychology, Tibetan Buddhists appeared to struggle comprehending the possibility of this fusion. They tended to look puzzled and contemplative even after asserting that they understood the translated explanation Moran’s combination. The main obstacle seemed cultural. They could not deduce how Western psychology practices would adjust Tibetan Buddhist practices, or maybe purely the concept of adjustments to Tibetan Buddhist practices seemed unreal to them. They could understand therapy in the context of meditation, but could not recognize any alterations to what they knew. The one exception was the oldest Lama in Ganzi, who remarkably grasped his own confusion: “Western psychology’s habits—the therapist and psychoanalysis you mentioned, and also some of the medication—would not change Tibetan Buddhist’s way of life.” Despite this, most monks I met seemed to identify with how blending Tibetan Buddhism into American psychology culture would be successful.

Kerry Moran exhibits the possibility of this success. She maintains a steady career practicing Tibetan Buddhist psychoanalysis, so the real question is whether or not this form of therapy could become a larger, more widespread trend. This is a practical combination, exhibited well by Western Psychology's modern therapy techniques. Over the last few decades, Western society, specifically the States, has explored and developed several new forms of mental health management. Psychotherapy and psychopharmacology are arguably more socially acceptable than ever in the States. Simultaneously, Eastern thought and medicine gained credibility, continuing to do so. In addition, practicing meditation is without a doubt growing in popularity, although this appears mostly along the lines of concentration meditation. Individuals already invested in the idea of therapy would probably have no qualms with some extra meditation on the side. Still, procedural differences are just the tip of the iceberg. There have been many ideals of Tibetan Buddhism discussed in this project, and many of them do not exactly fit well into Western society's norms.

Above all else, the standard of impermanence would be a challenge to accept. Understanding its conception is one matter, but living as if nothing is permanent through life is almost implausible. There is an incredible amount of attachment—to objects, to money, to family, and to living—in American culture. The economic implications of this alone are mammoth. Even if impermanence is only partially assumed, things begin to lose value. Tibetan Buddhism and capitalism are not too compatible. Another related idea that would likely test Western societal norms is the notion that there is no self. Contemporary Western science can actually rationalize this, but even this modern thought is challenged by the much older, more deeply-rooted ideals of Western religion. A lot of

Western psychology philosophy relies on how every experience impacts each person in the short and long run. There is a large focus on development through childhood. Not that incorporating Tibetan Buddhist ideals would mean ignoring childhood development, but it does mean a considerably bigger focus on death. In Tibetan Buddhism, Karma acts as natural law. It “determines how one moment conditions the next. Consequently, the moment of death is very important” (Pettifor, 1996). In Western society this could maybe be more easily understood as cause and effect, even though this is certainly a simplification (Pettifor, 1996). It would be a significant challenge to convince both atheist and religious cultures within The United States that committing wrongs against others worsens your personal Karma, and this will in some way come back negatively for you. Karma is perhaps comparable to “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Yet even more accurate is “As you do unto others, so they shall do unto you” (Pettifor, 1996). The disparity between these phrasings is not too large, yet again, the former is supported as the words of Jesus, so the change is much more of a stretch. And if going to a therapist even somewhat implies questioning God or Jesus, this assimilation of Tibetan Buddhism into Western psychology loses a large population.

Tibetan Buddhism is as much a philosophy as it is a religion. There is no God. With most of The United States following Christianity or at least “Christian values,” these assertions pose a problem. With no God, there is no one to pass judgment. With no God and no self, there is no dichotomy of what is right and what is wrong. Karma is not deterministic (Pettifor, 1996), so proof of the effects can not be assessed. Expecting that surrounding populations will learn to live based on Karma would require a whole new and substantial form of faith in the States. The patient’s devotion to mental health is not

nearly the same as in Tibetan Buddhism. The obvious consistent difference here is that Tibetan Buddhism is a lifestyle, while psychotherapy remains a practice—simply viewed as a method to improve mental health. Patients ideally take what they learn in therapy and apply in to outside of the meeting space, but realistically it does not expand like meditation does to every moment of life. Plainly said, The United States, and much of the Western World, is too cognitively conservative to consider this sort of transition in values.

Tibet and Han-people China each have entirely different cultures with completely new obstacles for this theoretical blend of Western psychotherapy and Tibetan Buddhism. Within the technical Tibetan borders and the surround regions, which are home to numerous towns made up almost entirely of Tibetans, the Tibetan Buddhist population is without a doubt growing. This was the opinion of every Tibetan Buddhist, monk or not, within Tibet as well as in Xiangcheng, Litang, and Ganzi. As the elderly Lama in Ganzi clearly expressed, this new strand of therapy could never succeed. They could appreciate or maybe even relate to its intentions and ideals, but would never consider adopting psychoanalysis and other practices of Western therapy. Regardless, from afar, the Tibetan people do not seem the need for therapy. They were largely open-minded to new ideas, more than hospitable to strangers, and have the best sense of humor I've ever experienced in China.

In the rest of China, conversely, there is a great deal of repression of thought. The “Communist” Government is realistically more of a single-party dictatorship. They control every source of information within the country. With no position on the positives or negatives of this situation, there is a large tendency in the history of society for people

to break free from any sort of repression. Obviously this is far-fetched and theoretical, but if the Chinese Government were to work to develop an acceptable form of therapy, it might be possible for the important Chinese ideals of nationalism and economic progress could be maintained in this form of therapy. A Tibetan Buddhist-psychotherapy approach to issues may fit into the government atheist ideal, and such an approach would also create a whole new arena of jobs. At the same time, this would never happen. Conversely, and much more realistically, the Chinese Government would likely view this approach as a threat. Psychoanalysis involves delving deep into an individual's experiences to free repressed thoughts and emotions. Simply in the context of Chinese culture, it is odd to share this level of personal sentiment with a relative stranger, no matter that person's academic credentials. Problems within a Chinese family are often kept within the family, and this seems to be the preference for the Chinese population.

This blend of ideals and practices in Western psychology and Tibetan Buddhism seems great in theory. In real world application, however, it is not as clearly appropriate. As is the current situation, it is practical within certain, more liberal populations of The United States. Throughout most of American population as well as in Tibet and China, its function is not too suitable.

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Interviews

(In order of date visited)

- 10) Interview in Lijiang with HuoFuo. Date visited: May 1, 2007.
- 11) Interviews at Jiamei Si in Yongning, Sichuan with Lamas and students. Dates visited: May 2-3, 2007
- 12) Interviews at Ganden Shangpo Si in Xiangcheng, Sichuan with Lamas and students. Dates visited: May 5-6, 2007.

- 13) Interviews at Ganden Tubchen Chokhorling Si in Litang, Sichuan with Lamas and students. Dates visited: May 5-6, 2007.
- 14) Interviews at Beri Si in Ganzi, Sichuan with Lamas and students. Dates visted: May 12-14, 2007.
- 15) Interviews at Reting Si in Tibet with Tibetan Buddhist monks. Date visited: May 23, 2007.

Fieldwork Itinerary

-Lijiang

-Interview with Living Buddha

-Yongning – Jiamei Si

-Interviews with two of the lamaseries high-ranking Lamas and several students

-Zhongdian – Songzhanlin Si

-Interviews with several monks

-Interviews with Zhongdian Tibetan Buddhists

-Xiangcheng – Ganden Shangpo Si

-Interviews with Lamas and their students

-Dinner interview with high-ranking Lama

-Litang – Ganden Tubchen Chokhorling Si

-Interviews with Lamas and their students

-Ganzi – Beri Si

-Interviews with Lamas and their students

-Interview with group of high-ranking Lamas

Tibet

-Lhasa

-Interviews with Tibetan Buddhists; monks at Potala Palace and Jokhang Temple were too busy for any real conversation

-Reting Si

-Interview with group of monks

-Ganden Si

Additional information

About five or six days total in between these locations was spent in smaller towns due to travel circumstances. I took seated busses everywhere except for the plane to and the sleeper train from Tibet, as well as the land cruiser exploration through Tibet. I stayed in most of the Monasteries I visited for a night and time during the following day. I made sure to spend a good amount of time, at least a full day, at each monastery for appropriate research. They usually offered that I stay for longer, but I was clearly inconveniencing their situation and chose not to take advantage of their hospitality. When I left I always gave a donation of at least one hundred kuai. Otherwise I slept in hostels and cheap hotels.

Personal Reflections

I learned a lot. At this point I honestly can not entirely comprehend my experience entirely and how it has influenced my thought. I am excited for the weeks of down time I have at home in the States (in two months) to reflect on my pictures and more on my experiences. Tibetans have a remarkable way of life. It is visibly more relaxed than Han-China. I say Han-China because much of the minority life I have viewed also seemed more relaxed. I have no intention of judging all Han. Still, throughout the small Tibetan towns outside the border of Tibet and more so within Tibet, I found myself frustrated with how the Han tour groups were treating Tibetan culture. At Namtso Lake in Tibet, there was a group of Han women take pictures of this poor Tibetan getting water from the lake. It was as if she was only a spectacle for them. They gave her no compensation. I went over to them and expressed that I thought it was rather rude in as polite a tone as I could express, and then caught up with the poor woman and gave her a few kuai. This may seem silly, but I feel that there is an important method of displaying respect for the Tibetan culture. Every year, their communities become more and more populated with Chinese and foreign tourists. It's changing their compassionate culture.

Outside of that negative point of view, I was quite inspired by Tibetan Buddhist life. During my ISP, and even now, I began to make more of a conscious effort to be healthy, although I am not entirely sure why this has manifested. I have been meditating, both concentration and mindfulness, and I have been trying to eat more healthy and stay more physically active. Again, I am not exactly sure why this has developed, but it has and I am rather happy about it.