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# A New Generation of Buddhist: The Views and Practice of Tibetan Youth

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# A NEW GENERATION OF BUDDHISTS

The Views and Practice of Tibetan Youth

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## Abstract

The Buddhist practices of the Tibetan youth between eighteen and thirty years old living and studying in McleodGanj, Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India, and the nearby areas were examined through a series of 20 interviews and literature research. This research was inspired by previous field work done in Leh, Ladakh, India, carried out by the author, where the youth from Buddhist families rejected ritual in favor of a purely philosophical practice. It was found in Dharamsala that the definition of Buddhism given by the youth was different than the traditional one and that given by members of a monastic institution. Rather than a philosophical definition, the youth acknowledged the philosophy and furthermore believe that being Buddhist is trying to implement the core beliefs of love, kindness, and compassion in their everyday life. Ritual to them was necessary, however they tended to rarely take part, or in the case of those who are in college, only take part consistently when they were living with their parents. The study of Buddhism is stymied by the knowledge of Dharma language among the youth and furthermore it is not being taught to them in their schools, even when those schools are run by Tibetans. This potentially leads to the lack of philosophical discussion among lay Tibetans in Dharamsala.

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## Methods

Upon arrival in McLeod Ganj, I immediately started to reach out to pre-existing contacts in the area. Using their guidance, I was able to start my research.

The first component of my research was an English class for Tibetans I volunteered at run by the “Chu Shi Gang Drug Defend Tibet Volunteer Association.” This class was held for two hours every weekday excluding the days when His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama was teaching. In this class I was able to in the first week discuss religion in a general manner with the students. Following this background knowledge, I interviewed some of the students that I had gotten to know over the course of teaching.

The second component of my research was attending the teachings on *Nagarjuna’s Garland of the Middle-way Approach* from His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama on November 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup>. While some directly useful information was taken from his teachings, they mostly served as a method to hear how His Holiness speaks to non-western communities. This was because his name came up of its own accord in every single interview I had carried out up to that point.

The third component of my research was Interviews. These interviews were done in various settings, and the interviewees were met in a multitude of ways. The first set of interviews, at Sarah College (College of Higher Tibetan Studies), were arranged by Franziska Oertle and Renate Seiwert. They consisted of slightly shorter interviews of many Tibetans studying at the college during their English class. The following interviews were carried out with participants who I had the luck to meet randomly, or through various friends that I made in McLeodGanj. All of these interviews were carried out in a place of the participant’s choosing.

Before all interviews were carried out, I made sure to explain in depth what I was doing. This included the program, subject of the interview, what it would be used for, and information on how it would be used. If possible I used an audio recorder during the interview in order to make the interview feel more like a conversation. Notes were only taken during the interview if there was not consent for the recorder’s usage. If the recorder was able to be used the recording was then transcribed within 24 hours and deleted.

Along with the interviews and teaching(s) I spent a significant time reading about Buddhist practice and philosophy in order to better gauge how well the practice of the participants matches the textual teachings. I also read previous works on how the exile community practices.

One barrier that was encountered in my research was language. While all of my interviews were done with English speaking Tibetans, English being their second language often lead to slight confusion. This barrier was difficult to surpass. In some fashion however, I was able to get past it

by repeating questions with different wordings, as if it were a new question. This allowed for a repeated or similar answer, to confirm comprehension on both sides of the interview.

A second barrier on my research was my limited knowledge of Buddhist practice. In order to remedy this, I read books about Buddhism and looked up information on subjects mentioned by participants. However, my understanding of Buddhism could not reach the fullest of depths in a month of research and so the information on Buddhist philosophy, ritual, and practice contained in this report are not complete, despite my best efforts.

Due to so many Anonymity requests, I have decided to keep all interviews anonymous. The quotes found in the following paper will be identified by number, correlating with the basic information of each participant which is found in the appendix, under the section “Interview Participant Information.” The information contained there is the sex, age, and occupation of the participants.

## Introduction

In the Tibetan community, the Buddhist religion plays a prominent role. In all of my interactions with Tibetans in exile, one of the most tangible aspects of their culture has been their faith. It is one aspect of their culture that those who can put limitless effort into the preservation of while out of Tibet.

While in Asia over about two months prior to living in Dharamsala, I was exposed to Tibetans everywhere I went. First in Boudha, Kathmandu, Nepal, a heavily Tibetan area of the city with a large Buddhist monument in the center. Then in Rasuwa District, Nepal, an area getting close to the border of Tibet where many Tibetans and Tibetanoid people live. Following that, I traveled in Ladakh, India, an area that some claim is part of Tibet, and Tibetan Buddhism and culture are prominent facets of life. Finally, prior to living there for an extended period of time, I visited McleodGanj, Dharamsala for a short period of time. McleodGanj is considered the center of the Tibetan world in exile because it is the location of the Central Tibetan Administration.

In my travels among the Tibetans, I noticed that on the surface at the very least the young people in the exile communities were less Buddhist. This I took from visual observations of religious sites and conversations with a variety of people. For example, while at the Boudha Stupa, I took note that the appearance of most of those doing circumambulations was that of an elderly person. The same held true in Dharamsala on the Lingkor, or path for circumambulation. In addition to this, while in Ladakh, I had a conversation with a young man who lives in the Leh region. He told me that he has no patience with the ritual that is a huge part of Buddhist practice among

Tibetan(oid)s. He then proceeded to tell me that purely mentally and philosophically was how he chooses to practice.

Because of these trends, and given that the preservation of Buddhist tradition is a main point of Tibetan exile policy, I was inspired to investigate the youth's view of Buddhism, as well as if and how they practice. McLeodGanj, Dharamsala, India was chosen as a location for this further study because it is the location of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). While this has no direct relation to my study, the CTA is the main governing body of Tibetans in exile, and one of the organizations that is most dedicated to preserving the Tibetan Culture and Identity. In Dharamsala they have the most influence because of the proximity, giving me the unique chance of studying Tibetans who are heavily influenced by the CTA, unlike those who I encountered previously in my travels.

## What Makes a Buddhist?

A very broad question, and as it turns out, it has many answers. To begin with, the book *What Makes You Not a Buddhist* by Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse puts forward a very concise definition, and one that I hold to be the standard definition. In the definition from Dzongsar, "One is a Buddhist if he or she accepts the following four truths: All compounded things are impermanent. All emotions are pain. All things have no inherent existence. Nirvana is beyond concepts (Khyentse)." These are the called the four seals (truths) and "[They] are believed to encompass all of Buddhism (Khyentse)." They are direct teachings of the Buddha, unchanged over the 2500 years of Buddhist practice and can be tricky to understand, even at a basic level.

To begin with, the first seal is pretty self-explanatory. All compounded things are impermanent means that all things that are composed of smaller components (compounded) are going to no longer exist at some point. While having a fairly simple definition, it is very hard to fathom. To think of all things that are made out of other things are impermanent is tough, given that all things that we physically see are made of other smaller components. This can even be brought all the way down to the basic visible materials that compose our world of experience. They themselves are impermanent if this is true because they are all made out of molecules, which are made of atoms, which themselves have components in their structure. In fact evidence of this seal can be seen in the behavior of atoms. According modern science, the only circumstances in which an atom is completely unchanging is when it is at absolute zero, a temperature which is impossible to reach.

The second seal is much harder to understand. Reading "all emotions are pain," the second seal is enough to give anyone pause. According to Dzongsar, Siddhartha had the realization that



emotions are the cause of human suffering (Khyentse). But aren't some emotions entirely good or positive? Unfortunately not. "For Siddhartha, anything that has a quality of uncertainty and unpredictability is suffering" (Khyentse). This means that even the love, creativity, and inspiration that one feels is suffering as well because they are both uncertain and unpredictable. Many times in my life I have heard someone say "you never know when or where you'll be when (insert "positive" emotion) strikes." This serves as a testament and reminder that emotions are unpredictable and uncertain that is accepted in cultures that have minimal to no Buddhist influence.

The third seal is the one that is hardest to understand, even if one does believe it. "All things have no inherent existence" is nearly impossible for us to imagine, because it means that everything we observe with our senses is false, or an illusion. This however doesn't mean that this seal, the one that defines the Buddhist belief of Emptiness, negates existence "because in order to negate something, you have to acknowledge that there is something to negate" (Khyentse). The belief in emptiness that is essential to Buddhism is merely saying that our daily experience, our whole lives of experience are in need of examination due to the fact that they could be like a daydream in nature (Khyentse).

The fourth seal, "Nirvana is beyond concepts," is a little more workable in that it is up for interpretation much more than the rest. Some would say that because nirvana is not able to be described or held inside of an idea, there is no point taking time to consider this seal. On the contrary, this seal is important to examine because it gives a Buddhist an idea of what they're working towards. Nirvana being beyond concepts does not mean that it is unattainable, as there is also the Buddhist belief that all sentient beings have the ability to reach that state. It does however mean that Nirvana is not a place, not a beyond. According to Dzongsar it is simply being awake, free from suffering, delusion, and confusion (Khyentse). Even that doesn't describe it because it is beyond dualistic ideas (Khyentse).

This definition based on the four seals is a highly philosophical definition, and one that even Dzongsar recognizes as one that people don't want to hear about, at least without further explanation (Khyentse). This philosophical view encompasses a statement, perhaps simplified for the audience, which the Dalai Lama said during the teachings in November 11-13 2014: being a Buddhist is understanding and implementing the unique teachings of the Buddha (His).

### Being Buddhist: Defined by Young Practitioners

The idea of being a Buddhist is something that many Tibetan youth subscribe to. However when asked what makes them a Buddhist, their answers vary amongst themselves and without fail from the definitions given by Dzongsar and His Holiness the Dalai Lama.



a word scramble of Tibetan Youths' definition of being Buddhist. Larger words and phrases came up more often. Created at: wordle.com

In a large way, the young Tibetans feel that being Buddhist means having kindness for all sentient beings. The reason for this is no mystery, one of the main points in Buddhism is in fact kindness and compassion for all sentient beings. In addition to this, the teachings of His Holiness emphasize these values with every audience that he speaks to, and His Holiness has a significant impact on the daily lives of nearly every Tibetan.

In fact, nine out of seventeen, roughly half, of my youth interview participants defined their Buddhism by His Holiness. One of my participants even went so far as to say, “To me, being Buddhist is listening to what His Holiness says in his teachings. I try to live by it. (10)” Previously in my travels, I received a similar statement in Ladakh. I took this to be non-Buddhist in nature. This came as a result of the person I was talking to saying that he believes in solely the Kindness and Compassion taught by His Holiness, and nothing more. In my more recent studies I have come to realize that while that is a possibility, it could be the result of one of two language barriers, either the native tongue-English translation or even for the youth themselves not understanding the language that is commonly used in Buddhist texts and teachings. Or I have found that maybe that is just how he defines Buddhism for himself.

Along with kindness, they acknowledge that there is a higher Buddhist Philosophy that forms their religion. Despite knowing that it exists, they claim not to know it well. According to one participant this is due to the education that young Tibetans receive (17). He is a graduate of the Tibetans Children’s Village (TCV) school system in Dharamsala and McLeodGanj, and that is where he claims to have gotten most of his education on Buddhism (17). This education was very basic according him, dealing mostly with the history of the Buddha’s life and his most basic teachings (17).

In fact only a single person told me that she feels that in addition to allowing her actions to reflect the kindness and compassion that Tibetans love to talk about, it is important for Buddhists to learn and understand the teachings of the Buddha (7). The majority of youth are happy to simply know that the teachings and philosophy exist and then act in accordance.

## Being Buddhist: From a Young Monk

A monk who has been a monk for 10 years, and been studying Buddhist Philosophy for 9 of them, had a very specific definition of a Buddhist for me (9). Despite that, his definition does not match the Dzongsar or His Holiness definition. According to him, what it takes to be Buddhist is to take Refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha (9). When he provided me this definition, he gave a brief definition, but leaving me unsatisfied I sought more information, and came upon the explanation in *The Wisdom of No Escape* by: Pema Chondron.

To take refuge in the Buddha according to Pema means to become more connected with your Buddha Nature, or the Buddha that is inside of all sentient beings. Take note that this is a personal matter, not a matter of treating the Buddha as a god. In this explanation, the Buddha himself is an inspiration for one to better connect with the Buddha that inherently is already inside of themselves. This refuge is in finding yourself, not in finding comfort. (Chondron)

To take refuge in the Dharma, or teachings of the Buddha, means not just acknowledging the Dharma's existence, but implementing the Dharma in one's life. In the simple terms provided by Pema, this means to open yourself up to the world, or not get caught in single ways of thinking. Connecting this back to the Dharma itself, that means that one has to always be contemplating and growing in their understanding of the Dharma which is believed to be "inconceivable" in nature. This means that one does not just allow oneself to come to a very basic understanding of the Dharma and not trying to grow from there. (Chondron)

To take refuge in the Sangha, or Buddhist community and high lamas, is to share ideas and help others grow in their thinking. This does not mean getting together and simply discussing Buddhism with friends, but to have to have the love and kindness to help those who are suffering. Giving and receiving feedback on one's own Dharmic interpretations and as a human community growing because of it. (Chondron)

This definition is one that is very deeply rooted in the philosophy, but then only if one takes the time to delve into the meaning of taking refuge in each component. If one does not do that, this definition could be taken to mean that one should just take comfort in knowing that each of those things is out there, where as it is believed that the taking of refuge in each means exposing yourself.

## His Holiness's Unintentional Rebuttal

What is most interesting about this definition is that it is clearly a very prevalent one among those who are learned in some manner on the topic of Buddhism. And yet during the teachings from His Holiness the Dalai Lama November 11-13, he scolds the population that merely repeat

that verse to him when he asks what a Buddhist is (His). When one speaks of that verse they must have a further understanding of what the three mean, but many who call themselves Buddhist cannot explain what the Buddha is, let alone the Dharma or the Sangha (His). According to His Holiness, the populous believes the Buddha to be no different that the gods of other religions, which he explains is what someone who has no understanding of the unique teachings of the Buddha would say (His).

## Ritual Practice

One of the aspects of Buddhist practice, especially Tibetan Buddhist practice, that stands out to a foreigner is the amount of ritual that accompanies the belief. From the incredibly visible aspects such as masses of people circumambulating religious monuments or objects every morning and evening (skor ra) to the less obvious like the offering of water that occurs in one's prayer space every morning, Buddhist ritual permeates the everyday life of Tibetans.

One ritual observed daily by many Tibetans is the Circumambulations that they call skor ra



**b** An elderly man doing skor ra, one of the only people on the path at this moment in time.

(Wylie transliteration). These are done around holy sites, both man-made and natural, in order to gain good merit for oneself ("Kora"). Repeating skor ra or doing an auspicious number of circumambulations gains even more merit than one single round ("Kora"). The practice of circumambulation is often accompanied by reciting mantras or spinning prayer wheels ("Kora"). In my experience, it is often the older practitioners of Buddhism that practice more skor ra than the rest of the practitioners.



**c** the mantra "Om Mani Padme Hum" carved into a rock on the skor ra path around His Holiness' residence and temple

Another common ritual for one practicing Tibetan Buddhism is the recitation of mantras. Mantras are thought to bring one merit based on the recitation of a set of words either out loud or silently to ones-self ("Mantras"). The most common mantra in the Tibetan world is the mantra of Avalokiteshvara, "Om Mani Padme Hum." This mantra is thought to bring the reciter the attention and blessings of the

embodiment of Compassion, Avalokiteshvara (“Mantras”). For this mantra in particular, it is believed that seeing it written brings the viewer the same merit as saying it (“Mantras”).



**d** a set of water offerings in front of various depictions of Gods, Buddha, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Daily offerings of small bowls of water in multiples of seven are also a common daily ritual in Tibetan Buddhist practice. This, like any offering, is to cultivate generosity (Wangdu). Traditionally water is chosen because it is considered plentiful and painless to give, as the motivation behind an offering is to give without regards to self (Wangdu). Clean water is essential to the offering because offering non-clean water is considered to be non-selfless (Wangdu).

Burning butter lamps is also a common ritual which can be done daily in Tibetan Buddhist traditions. The burning of a butter lamp signifies the realization of the Sakyamuni Buddha at his moment of enlightenment (“Butter”). It also can be a symbol of a person’s desire to reach enlightenment (“Butter”). They are lit in front of symbols of fully awakened compassion, loving-kindness, and wisdom such as Bodhisattvas and depictions of the Buddha (“Butter”).



**e** A line of prayer wheels on the path of the skor ra around His Holiness' residence and temple.

Another ritual in Tibetan Buddhism that can be done daily is the spinning of prayer wheels. A single spin of the “Mani wheel,” a metal cylinder inscribed or otherwise holding the written form of the “Om Mani Padme Hum” mantra, is equivalent to reciting the mantra once, according to a sign in His Holiness’ temple in McLeodGanj. It is believed that one spin of a prayer wheel is equal or greater in merit accumulation than one, seven, or nine years in retreat (“About”).

One final common ritual in Tibetan Buddhism is the reading of prayer books. This is done early in the morning, and often accompanied by meditation (17). The prayers contained in the books have many meanings, but like most ritual it is believed that it will gain the reader merit (17).

## Ritual Observance among Tibetan Youth

People who are raised in Buddhist families are exposed to these from birth, and it becomes a large part of their daily lives while they are living with their family as youth members of the community. They seem to become parent-dependent as they grow older though. In fact, many of the young people in the community will only practice ritual while they are with their parents.

The reasons behind this are not uniform amongst the youth, but some common threads did present themselves to me. First of all, out of the youth studying in a boarding school, the primary reason they claimed to not do rituals was because they were physically removed from their parents who they do their ritual practice with.

Another major reason that came up among both those living at a boarding school and those who are not is that they are too busy. Whether with studies or a job, they feel that almost all of their time is consumed with trying to learn or make a living which results in their inability to participate in ritual practice.

The final one, which was the least common of the reasons for lack of ritual practice, was laziness. It may have been embarrassment to admit it that lead to this being the least common answer, as those who did admit this to me were sure that their friends were also not doing ritual because they were lazy (16 and 17).

While ritual is not a major part of the youth's daily life, many of my participants told me that ritual was a necessary component of Buddhism and Buddhist culture.

“[Ritual] preserves the old and good things. For us this is waking up early and putting out our water offering. Old people are narrow-minded, but they preserve the tradition. Like with skor ra. Its old people who are passing it to us. It also benefits them more than their prayers. Prayer is in their thought, but they are getting good exercise [for their body]”  
(17)

Clearly, although not a regular participant in skor ra himself, he knows of the value of the ritual, both for the internal and physical self. He also seems to have a respect for the rest of the rituals. Think of something as preserving the “old and good” things will usually only come from a place of respect.

## Reading Religious Texts

In the Tibetan Buddhist Community, one of the most common activities is to read a prayer book. In organized prayer the people all read the same prayer book at the same time, but individually it is much different.



As with the teachings of lamas, language is a barrier for a non-monastic individual with a prayer book.

“Only monks know what they’re saying when they read prayer books. They also read them much faster. One hour of my reading, five minutes by a monk. They understand it too, meaning, words, everything. Not common people, we make the prayer as we are taught. No understanding. (17)”

Perfectly exemplifying the problem, this participant points out that their understanding of the prayer books, containing a multitude of Dharma language in Tibetan, is little to none. And beyond that even, they cannot read the language in the prayer books nearly as well as the monks who spend their time studying the teachings of the Buddha.

Another issue with this practice is the time at which it occurs. One has to wake up at four in the morning and read for an hour and a half (16 and 17). Following that, according to one of my participants, meditation is important (2, 13, 17). This means that not only is one waking up at four in the morning, their entire morning is taken up until breakfast time.

One of my participants told me that he only reads prayer books when he has a good mood to do so (17). According to him, this only occurs once or twice a month (17). He thinks that it is counterproductive to read a prayer book when one doesn’t want to (17). His parents on the other hand read prayer books every day.

## Practice Beyond Ritual

Given my findings that ritual is not a common part of the day to day life of young practitioners, I was left wondering how it is that they feel they practice. Simply put: actions. The young people in the community appear to have taken the teachings of Karma, Compassion, and loving-kindness to heart beyond just concepts.

For example, a common action they consider to be telling of their Buddhism is not killing insects. Anyone who lives in a country without heavy Buddhist influence would kill an insect without a second thought. This just serves as a testament to the fact that it is the Buddhist ideals that have become culturally prevalent in their place of living that motivates this.

Another action that was commonly believed to be a part of their Buddhist practice was giving money to the poor or otherwise helping other people. A core teaching, it seems to be carried out without hesitation by the youth. One young woman even told me, “When I can do good for

others it gives me a peace of mind (5).” She told me that she does it as often as she can, and truly likes to do it because it is right (5).

The final commonality among the youth was that they were also sure it was hard to describe beyond kindness how their actions are Buddhist. I asked one girl how she practiced, and she said “doing what Buddhists do (3).” Upon further investigation she did very little ritual, so when I asked her what she meant by that she told me that she meant her daily behavior (3). Being one of the youth who believed the teachings of His Holiness were the most important, I asked her if it was important to her to act with compassion, and she told me that it was more than that, but she was not sure how to explain (3). To be fair this may have been the result of a language barrier, but it is possible she was telling me that acting Buddhist is indescribable.

## Education’s Role

Tibetan education systems in McleodGanj emphasize Buddhism. In fact every child who passes through a TCV school in the area has to take at least one class on Buddhism. This is because Buddhism and Buddhist ideals are such a key component of the Tibetan culture and the TCV system was set up to maintain just that. Another system of education in McleodGanj that emphasizes Buddhism to a greater extent is the Monastic education available to young monks and nuns.

### Tibetan Education

The TCV classes on Buddhism are very basic. They teach the story of the life of the Sakyamuni Buddha, Buddhist Morals, and the concept of Karma (17). This leaves a lot for the young Tibetans to learn on their own or be taught by their parents, lamas, or community.

One Tibetan, who attended an English speaking private school, told me that because of the mix of students in his high school, during the prayer time there were only five students who attended the Buddhist prayer. This made the religion seem less desirable to him during his schooling (16). “I would always ask my mother why she sent me here, away from Tibetans” he told me, “and the answer was so I could speak English good (16).” A very telling statement, showing that his mother’s priority for his schooling was not cultural preservation, unlike students in TCV schools. He said that because his Buddhist education was so lacking at private school, now that he is out of formal education systems, he is actively trying to learn as much about his faith as he can (16).

In higher studies, in the area only Tibetan schools have further teachings on Buddhism. At Sarah College, there are classes available to the students on Buddhist Philosophy (1-15). Along with this, there is a Lha Kang (temple) on campus, and a daily prayer in the morning for the students



to take part in (1-15). At other non-Tibetan schools, Buddhism is not emphasized. This can result in a strange state of being for young Tibetans. For example, if the school is Indian it often will teach students about the Hindu belief system. One of the participants told me that although he is Buddhist by upbringing and practice, he knows much more about the Hindu belief than he does about the deep Buddhist ones because of his higher education (17).

## Monastics

The monastic education system is obviously much more focused on teaching Buddhism. Monks are thought of as the Buddhist Elite, and are expected to have a greater understanding of Buddhism than the common folk. This is because they take monastic vows to live a certain way and if they are motivated, they can attain Geshe degrees, the monastic equivalent of a doctorate, in Buddhist Philosophy.

One participant made the statement that monks are much more learned on Buddhism. When I inquired further he said, “They spent all day studying (Buddhism), you know? They do nothing else. (17)” From personal observation, this is both true and not true. Monks are without a doubt some of the hardest working people I have ever met. One monk that I was teaching English told me his daily schedule while he is in Dharamsala: Wake up, Prayer and meditation, Breakfast at eight (20). Following breakfast he has two hours of English classes from two separate teachers, which is then followed by one hour of conversation with a native speaker (20). Following morning classes he takes an hour for lunch, then dives right into another practice session at one PM (20). At two he attends an English class at a Lha (another organization of volunteer language teaching), then goes straight to Chu Shi Gang Drug for one hour of grammar and vocabulary and one more hour of conversation (20). From nine AM to five PM he is studying, practicing and increasing his knowledge. However this is on a subject unrelated to Buddhism, and in no way is contributing to the idea of monks spending all day studying Buddhist texts or Philosophy. Other than this account, I often saw monks, no doubt less studious than my friend, around town sitting in chai shops socializing at all times of day, meaning that they are not studying Buddhism all the time.

Now this does not mean that he does not study Buddhism. On the contrary he (in the opinions of the other monks in our class) is very learned on Buddhist philosophy. One can imagine that someone who study this much when far removed from his monastery in southern India would be a diligent student while in his monastery. It is just important to understand a stereotype of monks and their education, as well as the truth or untruth behind it. The truth being that Monks may study a lot, but they do not by any means spend their entire days behind volumes of Buddhist texts or in front of statues of the Buddha in meditation. Their advanced Buddhist knowledge is a

result of the education that monks receive, which is often then continued by monks who are interested.

The statement that monks spend all day studying Buddhism was given when I was trying to understand a rumor that I had heard, then had confirmed for me by His Holiness the Dalai Lama at the teachings I attended: lay people believe Dharma and philosophy are for the monks. This is not the case according to His Holiness, and even my friend acknowledged it. When talking about it he felt that it was the monks' work ethic and education system that was responsible for that belief if it exists (17). He agreed they know more, and much of the Buddhist teachings weren't accessible to the lay person, but "the teachings are for everyone (17)." However, when many lay people have no way of understanding the Buddhist teachings, it's no wonder why they could come to that conclusion.

## Attending Buddhist Teachings

Attending teachings and blessings is an essential component of Tibetan Buddhist culture, and according to every lay participant, the primary way that the common people get information on their Buddhism.

In fact, the teachings of His Holiness are un-equivocally valued in the Tibetan community. In each and every interview I conducted, His Holiness' public teachings were a part of the tangled outline of how people came to think of Buddhism. He in particular has a hold on how the Tibetan people practice their religion. As previously stated many young people define their Buddhism as following his teachings.

However, language is a barrier at these teachings. Yes, the teachings are conducted in Tibetan, and for high lamas like His Holiness the Dalai Lama, translated into other languages, which would make the teachings seem accessible to anyone who wants to attend. However, there is a component of Tibetan language called "Dharma language" which is not commonly known in the community. This component of language which is not understood on day to day level makes up most of a Buddhist teaching, making it difficult for the Tibetans in attendance to fully comprehend what the teaching is saying.

One participant perfectly exemplified the attitude of many young people:

"I've attended teachings (from His Holiness the Dalai Lama) seven or eight times before... Yes I like to go, but I get scared to go! It's hard, you know? I never really understand what he's saying, and after a few hours of trying to understand I sometimes

fall asleep. That is no good because then people think I went to the teachings to sleep.”  
(17)

They would like to go, but due to difficulty understanding, it doesn't seem to them like it is worth their time. And then to add on a whole other level, if they go, they fear the community's judgment for any small action, even un-intentional, that could be seen as disrespectful.

## In the Parents eyes

Members of the parental generation are without a doubt much more involved in religious practice. And in terms of what makes a Buddhist, they seem to place a greater emphasis on ritual. When I asked one parent how someone becomes a Buddhist, the only hint at philosophy given was when he told me that to become Buddhist, you have to learn how to read the prayer books, along with burning incense, meditation, water offerings and prostration (19). Even this needs to be taken with a grain of salt, reading is not necessarily understanding, and the majority of youth are positive that their parents cannot understand the prayer books. This could be taken to literally mean learn how to make the proper sounds while reading from the prayer books.

Other than that, only one parent I talked to had a more philosophical definition, and he was a monk who had de-robbed. According to him, being Buddhist is more than ritual, or a general demeanor of kindness. In fact he said that he feels that although it will not generate “negative karma,” kindness without the proper motivation gets someone nowhere on their path to enlightenment (18). He emphasized to me the need for an understanding of the Dharma as the motivation for living well (18). He added on that teaching love and kindness first was a good gesture for those who cannot yet understand the Dharma, which would undoubtedly relate to children (18).

The parental generation also was opinionated about the ritual practice of the youth. Generally speaking the theme would be laziness. According to one of the parents I talked to their children would only go five or six times to do morning circumambulations in a month while home for vacation, despite their requests (19). “[My son] sleeps a lot. He sleeps through skor ra most days. Very Lazy. (19)”

Other rituals are the same story. I heard that morning ritual is slept through by most youth. Given that it is often done at hours of the morning which make me cringe, it seems reasonable to me, a member of the age group included in 18-30 year olds. However, parents worry for their children, and when their child sleeps through what is in their opinion important ritual, they are likely to get uneasy. “I worry for my child. If this will be his habit for life, that is not good. (19)”

In fact, many of the youth I talked to said that their parents practice every day:

“[My parents] always do skor ra. They always go to temple. They use prayer wheels and read the books. Every day when they wake up they light butter lamps and set out the offering of seven waters... All Tibetans have a shrine in their house, that’s where they set all of this. (17)”

This is a dedication beyond that of any of the youth I talked to, with the most dedicated of them being attending a morning pray run by the school they attend. Even in that case they only attended it four times in a week at most. It would seem that this kind of dedication is only found among the older generations, and then it’s not even pervasive among them.

## Conclusions

In the end the first clear conclusion one can draw from this is that Buddhist practice among the lay people of the Tibetan exile community in Dharamsala is in no danger of disappearing, as I had once thought it might. Among the 17 youth that I interviewed, every single one identified as Buddhist and had some sort of idea as to how that should be implemented in their lives.

Generally while their definition and practice differ from formal definitions and practice, they are very dedicated to their own interpretations and will likely pass them down when the time comes.

The first of more subtle conclusions that can be made is that youth have an idea of the morals of Buddhism far above the philosophy. When each participant told me what they thought it means to be Buddhist, their responses can be generalized to acting in accordance with the Buddhist moral compass, as set forwards by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and generations of teachers before him. Of course this was only a piece of their responses, but it is the one trend that was unfailing in its appearance to each and every interview I conducted.

Buddhist philosophy’s lack of priority among the young Tibetan Buddhists may stem from a belief that Buddhism is their culture more than their religion. In one interview a young woman told me that everyone can be Buddhist, even practitioners of other religions, because “Buddhism is a culture of kindness” more than a religion to many of the young people (3). This is evidenced in ten out of seventeen youth interviews saying that people who practice another religion can be Buddhist.

To many Tibetan youth, Ritual is an important part of practice. However, it is not the aspect that they are most worried about. Most will only do them when they are with their parents, and that often is only true when they are in the proper mood to do so. This is because of the prominent

belief that doing ritual while one doesn't want to will not bring the benefits that doing the ritual with proper motivation do.

Another aspect of the lack of youth ritual practice is that they feel that it is a good thing for the old people to do. The old people get more benefits, both mentally and sometimes physically, from the ritual practice according to the youth. This attitude seems to have brought them to the point of leaving most ritual for the elderly and monastic members of the community, generally speaking.

Another aspect of my research that truly struck me was that for many of the youth, the Education system was made by Tibetans for Tibetans. The result of this is the Buddhist class in TCV schools. However, there is one seemingly great flaw in the TCV system. Dharma language. While it may not be practical for the TCV system to teach Dharma language in the Tibetan language classes, it leaves the children without the proper tools for further studies in Buddhism. When the most common source of Buddhist knowledge for lay people is the teachings of His Holiness, but they are scared to go because of an enormous language barrier, it would seem that somewhere in the system there is a problem that needs addressing.

This problem is clearly not relevant to the monastic education system. This is a positive of being a monk if one is incredibly interested in Buddhism, however, short of becoming a monk it is hard to learn the Dharma language necessary. A difference between the world of lay people and monks such as this unfortunately just seems to further the thought among the lay people that the dharma is reserved for the monks.

A final conclusion I came to in my research was that Philosophical discussion among the lay people of Tibetan society is minimal, despite their religion or culture (depending on how one sees it) being one rooted in a philosophical search for the root of suffering and how to surpass it. Not only did the common people not have adequate language to discuss the philosophy in many cases, they also did not appear to make an attempt to discuss it on a day to day basis. I was told that Tibetans are now more focused on the outside world, current events and global politics to be specific.

This leads to any discussion of Buddhism between Tibetans that I witnessed to be solely on the ritual, if it happened at all. The closest to philosophical discussion I got to with a lay person was when I was told that if I wanted to become Buddhist, before ritual I should learn about the life of the Buddha. But even that conversation stopped short of the realizations of the Buddha, and was focused entirely on the actions of the Buddha, such as where and when he was born, became enlightened, and so forth.

## Ideas for Future Research

First of all I propose a further investigation on the impact of Buddhist Education in CTA supported schools on the Buddhist identity of Tibetans in exile. Given that the CTA provides an education on Buddhism for the common people, its impact on the Buddhist knowledge and identity of the Tibetan community could be key to the continuation of Buddhist tradition in Tibetan society in exile.

Another investigation I would like to propose is into the understanding of ritual practice among the Tibetan Exile community. Many people said that they or their parents did not understand what they were doing, they just did as they were taught. Why this is the norm among Tibetan Buddhists would be an interesting bit of research.

I would find it fascinating to look into the image that other religions hold in Buddhist Tibetans heads. One of my standard questions was if other religions had merits, and could other religions members be Buddhist as well. In general, the answers singled out Christianity as the only other religion with almost all merit and no downfalls, whereas Hinduism and Islam were thought of as being less virtuous. Why this is the case interests me because I know that His Holiness preaches that all religions are good because they teach love and compassion.

A final investigation I would like to propose is into the Migratory nature of Tibetans in Exile. Countless Tibetans I talked to in McLeodGanj were far from their home with no plans of a quick return. Many said they were studying, but only were spending a few weeks in each location, leading me to believe there is another motivation than study.

## Appendix

### Interview Participant Information

- 1) Female, age 25, Student
- 2) Female, age 22, Student
- 3) Female, age 22, Student
- 4) Female, age 22, Student
- 5) Female, age 23, Student
- 6) Female, "over 20", Student
- 7) Female, age 21, Student
- 8) Male, age 23, Student
- 9) Male, age 28, Monk
- 10) Female, age 18, Student
- 11) Female, age 18 Student
- 12) Female, age 19, Student
- 13) Male, Age 26, Monk
- 14) Female, age 20, Student
- 15) Female, age 25 Student
- 16) Male, age 26, Unemployed
- 17) Male, age 29, Shop keeper/Café-bar owner
- 18) Male, age 53 or 54, Shopkeeper
- 19) Male, age 45, Ex-monk
- 20) Male, age 34, Monk

### Interview Questions

This is the list of prepared questions that I went into an interview of a Tibetan young person with. Naturally this is not what the interviews were limited to, as each one would take its own direction. This means that it is not the list of all questions asked over the course of the ISP and not all of these questions were asked in every interview. In addition to that, each question was a guide-line, and not the exact way I posed the question.

- What makes you as an individual a Buddhist? (generally I was looking for a short answer, such as "Acting with kindness at all times" or "Studying the Dharma" or "Taking refuge in the three jewels")
- In what ways do you practice? (This question was too general to get a full answer, so I approached it by asking about specific aspects of practice that I had been told about)

- Is your family Buddhist/in what ways do they practice/please compare how you practice to how they practice.
- Do you try to go to the teachings?
- Do you see a more personal teacher/lama?
- Do you read any prayer books or Buddhist texts?
- Do you have any interest in doing (any of the activities mentioned in the previous 3 questions) or doing them more often?
- Where did you learn about Buddhism?
- Do you discuss religion/Buddhism with your friends? (why/why not)
- Have you studied any other religions/Do you think any other religions have merit or don't have merit?
- Can someone who practices another religion also be a Buddhist? (how/why not)
- Do you think that common people can understand the full extent of the Dharma?
- Are the ritual aspects of practice important to Buddhism in your opinion? (why/why not)

### Glossary of Terms

Word/Pronunciation	Wylie Transliteration	Meaning
Kora	Skor ra	Circumambulation of a holy site.
Dharma	-	The teachings of the Buddha.
Sangha	-	High Lamas or the Buddhist community.
Mantra	-	A set of words believed to hold religious value.
Bodhisattva	-	An enlightened being remaining in samsara for the benefit of all beings.
Lingkor	Ling skor	Path in McleodGanj around both His Hominess' temple and residence meant for circumambulation.
Chu Shi Gang Drug		The name of the Tibetan freedom fighters from the Khampa region of Tibet. In Dharamsala there is an English teaching volunteer organization called the "Chu Shi Gang Drug Defend Tibet Volunteer Association."



## Me during Research



f Just post interview, had to ask a passerby to take the picture.

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