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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

The Systematic Dynamics of Guru Yoga in Euro-North American  
Gelug-pa Formations

by

Christopher Emory-Moore

A THESIS

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the adaptation of the Tibetan Buddhist guru/disciple relation by Euro-North American communities and argues that its praxis is that of a self-motivated disciple's devotion to a perceptibly selfless guru. Chapter one provides a reception genealogy of the Tibetan guru/disciple relation in Western scholarship, followed by historical-anthropological descriptions of its practice reception in both Tibetan and Euro-North American formations. Through a structural analysis of the Gelug-pa school's primary 'guru yoga' text, Blo-bzang chos-kyi rgyal-mtshan's *Bla-ma mchod-pa*, chapter two argues that the ritual's basic definition is the guru/disciple relation mediated by the gift and transvalued through the principle of emptiness. Through structural analyses of anthropological data, chapter three identifies the Euro-North American guru/disciple hierarchy as Tibetan monk teacher/non-Tibetan student, in which the guru's authority derives from his perceived transcendence of what Anthony Giddens calls the reflexive project of the self.

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*To Mom, Dad, and Scott, my triratna*

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the ongoing adoption and adaptation of the Tibetan Buddhist ritual tradition of devotion to the spiritual guide (Skt. *guru*, Tib. *bla-ma*) by contemporary Euro-North American communities. It will be demonstrated that the ritual of ‘uniting with the spiritual guide’ (Skt. *Guru yoga*, Tib. *Bla-ma’i rnal-’byor*) is a system of exchange relations whose subjects (guru/disciple) and mediating objects (gift and emptiness) carry different cultural resonances for contemporary Euro-North Americans than for traditional Tibetans.

Although guru devotion in the Tibetan tradition has received significant attention in Buddhist Studies, the guru yoga ritual has rarely been its focus. Developing forms of guru devotion in Euro-North American Tibetan Buddhist communities have been the subject of a significant body of scholarship in the past twenty years. To my knowledge, however, a structural-anthropological comparative study of the guru/disciple relation in Tibetan and Euro-North American formations has not been done. Toward improved understandings of these two things—traditional Tibetan guru devotion ritual and its transplantation into modern Western societies—this thesis undertakes three projects, one descriptive and two explanatory.

Chapter one provides an introduction to our subject by combining historical-anthropological description of Tibetan guru devotion traditions with genealogies of their reception by Euro-North American scholars since the seventeenth century, and practitioners since the 1960’s. These three genealogies provide an overall sense of how the West has perceived and practiced the Tibetan guru/disciple relation, as well as how these compare with that relation’s traditional role in Tibetan religion and society. This chapter thereby describes the



data the next two chapters attempt to explain: the Tibetan Buddhist doctrine of guru devotion and its Tibetan and Euro-North American praxes.

Chapter two re-describes the Tibetan ritual practice of guru devotion through an etic explanation of guru yoga as a system of exchange relations. A structuralist method of textual analysis drawn from the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Hans Penner is employed to identify the basic conceptual mechanics of Blo-bzang chos-kyi rgyal-mtshan's *Bla-ma mchod-pa*. I argue that guru yoga is a system of exchange defined by a distinct logic: the binary of *guru/disciple* mediated by the *gift* (offerings given, blessings received) and transvalued through the principle of *emptiness* (the lack of inherent existence of phenomena).

Chapter three subjects guru yoga's first and primary element, the guru/disciple binary, to a comparative cultural analysis. Its prevailing Tibetan and Euro-North American constructions are identified through structural analyses of pertinent ethnographies. For the indigenous Tibetan perspective, I rely on Martin Mills' *Identity, Ritual and State in Tibetan Buddhism: The Foundations of Authority in Gelukpa Monasticism* (2003). For a Euro-North American picture I rely on Daniel Capper's *Guru Devotion and the American Buddhist Experience* (2002) and a number of primary and secondary sources documenting the two largest international Tibetan Buddhist networks with Euro-North American origins, the FPMT and the NKT.

I argue that the respective Tibetan and Euro-North American cultural constructions of the guru/disciple binary are *incarnate/non-incarnate* and *Tibetan monk teacher/non-Tibetan student*. The incarnate is elevated above his non-incarnate Tibetan disciples by what Mills calls 'yogic renunciation'—his perceived transcendence of local embeddedness in chthonic body, household, and landscape. The Tibetan monk teacher is elevated above his Euro-North American disciples by a combination of pure teaching lineage and boundless compassion—attributes which I will

argue represent his perceived transcendence of what Giddens calls the modern individual's 'reflexive project of the self.' It is revealed that both guru/disciple hierarchies conform to the same relation between conceptions of personhood and authority: the guru is seen to have subjugated that to which the disciple's identity remains subject.

Finally, these structural-anthropological findings are shown to have the following implications for traditional Tibetan and contemporary Euro-North American guru yoga praxes: In Tibetan formations, the living 'field of merit' and transmitter of blessings is he who is believed to have transcended local chthonic personhood; the cultivator of merit and recipient of those blessings is the ordinary practitioner whose personhood is still subject to local chthonic agents. In Western formations, the living 'field of merit' and transmitter of blessings is he who is believed to have transcended the modern individual's reflexive personhood project (the sustaining and revising of a self-narrative through a multiple choice of Foucaultian "technologies of the self"); the cultivator of merit and recipient of those blessings is the ordinary practitioner whose personhood is still subject to that project.

## Chapter I

### Historical-Anthropological Description: The Tibetan Buddhist Guru/Disciple Relation

Scholarly accounts of Tibetan Buddhism have traditionally noted the exalted position of the spiritual guide. One of the earliest in English was Laurence Waddell's *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*, published in 1895. Although the term 'Lamaism' has long since fallen out of use and repute, the reality is that "devotion to the guru was considered by each [Tibetan Buddhist] school a central feature of religious life" (Donovan 1986, iii). Donald S. Lopez charts the dramatic shift in the Western scholarly perception of the Tibetan *bla-ma* (hereafter spelled lama) between the ends of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Lopez 1998, Chs.1, 6) and finds it to reflect a "legacy of Orientalism ... marked by a nostalgic longing and revulsion" (Lopez 1995, 252). This chapter is an outline of this Orientalist shift followed by descriptions of the lama's actual role in both the traditional Tibetan and contemporary Euro-North American practice of Tibetan Buddhism.

#### 1.1 The Euro-North American Scholarly Reception of the Tibetan Guru/Disciple Relation

##### Ippolito Desideri

The Italian Jesuit priest Ippolito Desideri (1684-1733) produced the first detailed Western ethnography of Tibetan culture and religion. On a proselytizing mission from Rome, Desideri lived in Lhasa from 1716 to 1721 under the patronage of the Koshut Mongol chief, Lha-bzang Khan. In the preface to his *Notizie Istoriche del Thibet*, Desideri describes the motive for his scholarship: "that these pages may induce the learned to confute this new mixture of superstitious errors, and move some to go the assistance of that benighted nation" (Desideri 1932, 49).

In his missionary zeal, Desideri went to great lengths to learn Tibetan Buddhist doctrine, particularly that which he saw as its most prized, emptiness (Skt. *śūnyatā*, Tib. *stong pa nyid*):

[A]bove all I applied myself to study and really attempt to understand those most abstruse, subtle and intricate treatises they call Tongba-gni, or Vacuum, ... their real aim being to exclude and absolutely deny the existence of any uncreated and independent Being and thus effectually to do away with any conception of God. (ibid. 104-105)

The irony is that Desideri's mission depended entirely upon the instruction of Gelug-pa (*dge-lugs-pa*) lamas to help him understand the doctrine he sought to refute. Faced with their reluctance, Desideri describes how his own determined study, combined with the grace of God, led him to full comprehension of "the subtle, sophisticated, and abstruse matter" (ibid. 105).

Fifty years before Desideri's arrival in Lhasa, the German Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher described Tibetans' devotion to the Dalai Lama:

Strangers at their approach fall prostrate with their heads to the ground, and kiss him with incredible Veneration, which is no other than that which is performed upon the Pope of Rome; so that hence the fraud and deceit of the Devil ... in way of abuse hath transferred ... the Veneration which is due unto the Pope of Rome ... unto the superstitious Worship of barbarous people. (Pomplun 2010, 79)

The similarities between Tibetan veneration of the Dalai Lama and Catholic veneration of the Pope was proof for Kircher, not that they were comparable religions, but that Tibetan Buddhism was an idolatrous counterfeit of the true Catholic faith. Citing Kircher liberally, Desideri argues more or less the same position in the second chapter of the *Notizie*'s third book, entitled, "Reasons why this alleged Incarnation of the Grand Lama must be a work of the Devil."

Like Kircher, Desideri's portrait of the Tibetan lama focuses principally on the Dalai Lama and the reverence shown him in and around Potala palace in Lhasa (Desideri 1932, Bk. 3, Chs. 1, 4). It is unclear whether Desideri's clearest depiction of Tibetan guru devotion ritual is related to the practice of *Bla-ma'i rnal-'byor*: "With the greatest devotion the Thibettans beg ...

for [the lama's] excrement, which they either swallow or hang round their necks as relics, and place their images with lighted lamps in their Lha-Khang or private chapel by side of those of Cen-ree-zij, Urghien, and others" (ibid. 292). One passage recounts that Tibetans understand their lamas to be "very intimate with" and to "often consort with" their tutelary tantric deity, the *yi-dam* (ibid. 291). Desideri's description of local lamas, "venerated as masters of law and directors of other men" (ibid. 210), leads him to conclude: "In short the Lamas of Thibet are like our Bishops and Archbishops" (ibid. 210-211). Although Desideri was not especially concerned with its evolutionary status within the history of Buddhism, nineteenth-century Protestant accounts of Tibetan religion portray it as barely Buddhist.

### 'Lamaism'

A term with no equivalent in the Tibetan language, scholars of the late eighteenth century coined 'Lamaism' to describe "the state to which the original teachings of the Buddha had sunk in the centuries since his death" (Lopez 1998, 17). One possible source of the term is the Chinese *lama jiao* ('teaching of the lama') which first appears in a 1775 usage by the Manchu Emperor Qianlong in which he assures his Chinese subjects that Tibetan lamas under his patronage were not influencing his politics (ibid. 19-20). Political in origin, the history of its European usage is also thoroughly political and can be said to trace much of the history of European colonial interests in Tibet. Lopez argues that the history of the effects leading to the twentieth-century Chinese occupation "begins with the particular vicissitudes that led to the invention of the term 'Lamaism'" (ibid. 17).

The English form of 'Lamaism' first appears in a 1788 translation of the German naturalist Peter Simon Pallas's ethnographic account of the Kalmyk peoples of Mongol Russia written in 1769 (ibid. 6, 23). In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* delivered between

1822 and 1831, Hegel uses the term while denigrating the Tibetan worship of the Dalai Lama as a godman (ibid. 23). The most common trope in its early European usage, however, was its association with Roman Catholicism, made most vituperatively by Protestants who recognized the approximate Catholic other. Protestant publications aligning Tibetan Buddhism with Papist ritualism can be found as early as 1745 (ibid. 29) and as late as 1992 (ibid. 16).

A striking example is the entry for ‘Lamaism’ in the *Religious Encyclopedia* of 1891 edited by Rev. Philip Schaff. Based on the 1846 work *Über den Buddhismus in Hochasien und China* by Wilhem Schott, the entry defines Lamaism as a peculiar religious-political development of Buddhism that began in fifteenth-century Tibet. This peculiar development is then immediately aligned with Catholic Papism as “the most extreme form of a hierarchy, the realization of the very ideal for which the medieval popes fought. ... Lhasa is still its Rome, and Thibet its *patrimonium Petri*” (Schaff 1891, 1270). Next, Papist Lamaism is cast as a degeneration of the idealized, more Protestant, primitive Buddhism of Gautama, the self-trained man: “A tricky priesthood, playing upon the superstitions of the mass, had taken the place of the heart’s conversion and the severe practice of self-training” (ibid. 1270).

Finally, the entry describes the Tibetan institution of the incarnate Dalai Lama as representing the “highest form of a hierarchy [that] cannot rest satisfied with an infallible pope: it must have an incarnate pope” (ibid. 1270). In locating Lamaism’s origins in the fifteenth century, Schaff’s encyclopedia clearly aligns the birth of Lamaism with that of the Tibetan institution of the *tulku* (incarnate), the same feature we’ve seen Kircher and Desideri declare to be the work of the devil. Between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries the *tulku* system of identifying the successive rebirths of a respected teacher grew to dominate Tibetan monasticism, and provided a

religious-political means for the rising Gelug-pa school to maintain stable monastic hierarchies under Mongol sponsorship (Mills 2003, 269).

Two of the most prominent British Orientalists of the Victorian period were Thomas W. Rhys Davids and Laurence Austine Waddell, both of whom saw Lamaism at the end of a long line of Buddhism's degeneration—"as something monstrous, a composite of unnatural lineage devoid of the spirit of original Buddhism" (Lopez 1998, 16). Waddell, a British colonial official stationed in Sikkim from 1885 to 1895, sounds ironically similar to his Catholic predecessors speaking of Lamaist demonism: "the Lamaist cults comprise much deep-rooted devil-worship ... For Lamaism is only thinly and imperfectly varnished over with Buddhist symbolism, beneath which the sinister growth of poly-demonist superstition darkly appears" (Waddell 1996, ix).

Like Schaff, Waddell characterizes Lamaism firstly as Papist, and secondly as a debauched descendant of primitive Indian Buddhism. And like both Desideri and Schaff, Waddell's portrait of the lama lays particular emphasis on the incarnate lama and the Tibetan *tulku* system (ibid. Ch.10). His book's first sentence states that Tibet's Buddhism is called Lamaism "after its priests" (ibid. v). In this, Waddell joins a European tradition of glossing *blama* as 'priest.' In 1667 Kircher states that "these Barbarians term their false Deity the Great Lama, that is, the Great High-Priest, the Lama of Lamas, that is, the High-Priest of High-Priests" (Pomplun 2010, 79). Desideri avoids the Italian *prete*, but does describe the Dalai Lama as Tibet's "Chief, Master, Protector and Pontiff" (Desideri 1932, 205). Published in English translation in 1760, Bernard Picart's *Cérémonies et Coutumes Religieuses de Tous les Peuples du Monde*, declares that the "*Mongolian Tartars, [and] Calmoucks ... have, properly speaking, no other God but their Dalai-Lama, which signifies ... Universal Priest*" (Lopez 1998, 21). Finally,

in *The Social Contract* of 1762, Jean-Jacques Rousseau classifies “the religion of the Lamas” alongside Roman Catholicism as an example of “the religion of the priest” (ibid. 23).

Waddell’s own depiction of Lamaism as a religion of the priest lets him not only compare it with Papism, but declare it thoroughly un-Buddhist: “A notable feature of Lamaism ... and decidedly un-Buddhistic, is that the Lama is a priest rather than a monk. He ... has coined the current saying ‘Without a Lama in front there is no (approach to) God’” (Waddell 1996, 153). Waddell could thus define Tibetan religion as “a priestly mixture of Shamanist cults and poly-demonist superstitions, overlaid by quasi-Buddhist symbolism ... and touched here and there by the brighter lights of the teaching of the Buddha” (ibid. 154). The construction of an ‘original’ or ‘primitive’ Buddhism based on a number of recently translated Pali and Sanskrit texts enabled Victorian Buddhologists like Waddell to define and contrast a ‘classical’ Buddhist tradition of reason and individualism with the superstitious and hierarchical tendencies of Lamaism. Lopez summarizes this Victorian evolutionist outlook: “The Tibetans, having lost the spirit of primitive Buddhism, now suffer under the oppression of sacerdotalism and the exploitation of its priests, something that England had long since thrown off. ... Pali Buddhism is to Tibetan Buddhism as the Anglican Church is to Roman Catholicism” (Lopez 1995, 261).

The so-called scholarly comparison of Pagan religions with Roman Catholicism to illustrate their shared backwardness is a highly political rhetorical maneuver whose genealogy is outlined by Jonathan Z. Smith in his analysis of the comparison of Early Christianity to the religions of Late Antiquity (Smith 1990). According to eighteenth-century Deist and Anti-Trinitarian thought, Platonized Catholicism was to primitive Christianity what Lamaism was to primitive Buddhism for Victorians like Schaff and Waddell—a blend of primitive religious purity and polluted pagan idolatry. Lopez refers to this as the imagined “play of opposites: the



pristine and polluted, the authentic and the derivative, the holy and the demonic, the good and the bad” (Lopez 1998, 4). Smith cites the epistolary exchange between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, who “agreed that Jesus’ ‘pure principles’ had been muffled by priests’ ... [and that] One must dismiss the writings of the Christian ‘Platonists and Plotinists’, and return to the ‘simple evangelists ... and the Christians of the 1st. century’” (Smith 1990, 7). In this Protestant myth of primitive purity—“the notion of a pristine church during the first five centuries; followed by a period of ten centuries consisting of an initial stage of ‘mixture,’ then total (Roman) ‘idolatry’” (ibid. 114)—both “the ‘pagan’ and the ‘papist’, were considered ‘other’ with respect to ‘genuine’ Christianity” (ibid. 25).

Smith’s methodological critique of this kind of comparison attacks its superficial scope and blatant disregard for context: “‘Platonism’ is employed as a generic noun, often triggered by a single word, most frequently *logos*, shorn of literary or intellectual context and historical situation. In this sense, ‘Platonism’ is a parallel to the generic notion of ‘heathen’ or ‘pagan idolatry’ or to that of ‘superstition’” (ibid. 17). Such an acontextual comparative method is rhetorically effective (ibid. 25), but empirically out to lunch, as riddled as it is with politically charged pre-suppositions (ibid. 34). Smith’s critique of the study of Christian origins is just as applicable to the bulk of Victorian scholarship on Lamaism, scholarship whose origin “takes us back, persistently, to the same point: *Protestant anti-Catholic apologetics*” (ibid. 34). Lopez summarizes the inherent politics of the ‘Lamaist’ designation: “The very use of the term Lamaism is a gesture of control over the unincorporated and the unassimilated, used first by the Qing over Tibet, then as a code word for ‘Papism’ by the British over Catholic Ireland and Europe, and finally by European Buddhology over the uncolonized and unread Tibet” (Lopez 1998, 44).

### Donald Lopez's Orientalist Shift

Eighty years after Waddell's publication, Herbert Guenther could still write, "The Buddhism of Tibet is commonly referred to as Lamaism" (Guenther 1977, 178). By this time, however, the Orientalist pendulum had swung from revulsion to longing. Tibetan lamas were now sitting before Jeffrey Hopkins's Religious Studies students at the University of Virginia (Lopez among the latter) transmitting the tenets of their Buddhist training through Hopkins's translation and commentary (Lopez 1998, 165). Hopkins not only invited lamas into his lectures but modeled his Tibetan Buddhist Studies graduate program on the classical *geshe* training of traditional Gelug-pa monasteries, through which his students were encouraged to "partake in a form of salvation by scholarship" (ibid. 171).

The event that had the greatest influence on this radical shift in scholarly valuation of Tibetan religion was the Chinese occupation of Tibet beginning in 1950 and the ensuing diaspora of 1959. A culture heretofore beyond the scope of European and American colonial influence was literally broken open by the Chinese invasion, its religious heritage freshly available to be made into the precious—and ironically, pure—possessions of Euro-North American Buddhologists: "In the years following Tibet's invasion and annexation by China, the earlier Buddhological valuation of Tibetan Buddhism ... as degenerate reached its antipodes, as young scholars came to exalt Tibet as a pristine preserve of authentic Buddhist doctrine and practice" (ibid. 42). Initiating the shift that transformed Tibet's ostensibly aberrant Lamaism into a model for the academic study of Buddhism, the diaspora also radically changed the Western perception of the lama, marking the beginning of the end of Lamaism.

Nineteenth-century Tibetan scholarship was principally concerned with the ways Tibetan literature could shed light on Indian Buddhism—the real one (ibid. 159). Writing in 1998, Lopez

suggests that this Orientalist posture is still at play, causing his peers to shy away from Tibetan literature that cannot be clearly established as belonging to a direct lineage of Indian descent. As such, the early work of Hopkins and his doctoral students tended to focus on Tibetan scholastic philosophy and to neglect, for example, the extensive body of Tibetan ritual texts designed for wrathful deity propitiation or the accomplishment of ‘mundane’ local needs (ibid. 179-80).

In this new more mildly Orientalist environment at the Universities of Virginia or Wisconsin, the lama was rarely the object of scholarship, for the reason that he had become its source. The Tibetan guru/disciple relation was rarely studied, as it had become the prevailing model of academic instruction: “Thus the notion of belonging to a tradition of scholarship ... that extended back to the great Orientalists of the nineteenth century, was replaced by a far more ancient model, in which the master was not *der Doktor-vater* but the lama, whose tradition, it is said, can be traced back to the Buddha himself” (ibid. 169). With this understanding of the Western view of the lama having come full Orientalist circle, we can now consider what the lama has traditionally represented to Tibetans.

## **1.2 The Tibetan Reception of the Guru/Disciple Relation**

### **India**

Before Buddhism began its migration to Tibet in the seventh century CE, India was home to established Hindu and Buddhist traditions of guru devotion. The *Upaniṣads*, the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā* all explicitly encourage veneration of the spiritual teacher. The name of the oldest of these, *Upaniṣads*, is “a Sanskrit term meaning literally ‘sitting-up-near’ the master” (Oxtoby 2010, 16). ‘Guru’ translates directly as ‘weighty person’ (Wayman 1987, 195). Mark Donovan cites the *Maitrī Upaniṣad* as evidence that “to begin with, devotedness on the part of the disciple was a condition of his being instructed,” and the

*Śvatāśvatara Upaniṣad* to demonstrate that “in addition, devotion to the guru was considered, in itself, a means of attaining spiritual ... ends” (Donovan 1986, 4).

The latter sense was developed further in the Hindu traditions of bhakti and tantrism, tantrism being “a body of esoteric knowledge and practice to which entrance may be gained only through initiation (Skt. *dīkṣā*) and only the guru is competent to ... bestow initiation” (ibid. 7).

Since the guru is the human link to the divine, he is also seen as the incarnation of the divine:

In Tantric circles, when a master plays the fundamental role of transmitting a ritual teaching, it is believed that his or her identity as a particular human being is utterly vanquished. At that time the guru is the instrument through which the descent of the spiritual influence takes place. This is why the master is typically identified with the supreme deity itself. As the celebrated first verse of the *Guru-stotra* solemnly declares: “The *guru* is Brahmā, the *guru* is Viṣṇu, the *guru* is [Śiva] Maheśvara, the *guru* is verily the Supreme *Brahman*! Salutations to that *guru*!” (Marchetto 2007, 233)

Donovan explains that “worship of this divine guru is not merely meritorious, it is a path to liberation available to the fortunate” (Donovan 1986, 8). He concludes that “one of the most enduring features of Hinduism has been the central position accorded to the spiritual teacher” (ibid. 2).

The guru/disciple relation has also “existed for as long as the Buddhist tradition has existed” (Capper 2002, 74). The guru has always played both a pedagogical and a devotional role for the Buddhist disciple (ibid. 75), while the emphasis on each has varied between traditions. Previous to the influence of Hindu tantrism, the early Pali *Nikāyas* insist that both the foundation and fruit of spiritual practice depend upon a ‘spiritual friend’ who both instructs and inspires: “In the *Meghiya-sutta*, Buddha explains that having a good friend (*kalyāṇamitta*) to instruct one in meditation is the first requisite of mind-training for liberation, and the *Sagatha-vagga* states that ‘the complete fulfillment of the religious life depends upon a *kalyāṇamitta*’” (Klinger 1980, 10).

In this early Buddhist context, the spiritual friend is “one who encourages, instructs, and acts as a guide or director for those wishing to follow the path of the Buddha” (Podgorski 1986, 29).

From the Theravāda’s emphasis on instruction and encouragement, devotion to the spiritual teacher increased with the rise of the Mahāyāna, until “the guru is the human representative of the Buddha, to whom the bodhisattva is profoundly devoted” (Capper 2002, 77). In Mahāyāna sutras such as the *Prajñāpāramitā* and *Gandhavyūhā*, one’s spiritual teacher remains, however, “but a means toward final enlightenment” (Snellgrove 1987, 177)—a peer rather than a superior (Capper 2002, 78-9). Finally, in the Vajrayāna, “the guru was no longer pragmatically considered *as* the Buddha, but actually *was* the Buddha. That is, the guru doctrinally became synonymous with the Triple Gem (*triratna*), the ultimate source of Buddhist soteriological charisma” (ibid. 82).

The elevation of the guru’s position in Buddhism can thus be said to parallel his increasing status in Indian religion generally (Donovan 1986, 12). As in Hinduism, the total divinization of the Buddhist guru came about from a “shift in soteriological method” (Capper 2002, 82) introduced by “the highly ritualistic Tantric system” (ibid. 83). Access to this tantric system required the guru’s granting the disciple initiation (*dikṣa*) or empowerment (*abhiṣeka*) into the secret and often highly intricate ritual practices of a particular deity (Skt. *iṣṭadevatā*, Tib. *yi-dam*). No longer mere guide, “the *guru* is also the hierophant of the Buddhist Tantras, called *ācārya* or *vajrācārya*” (Wayman 1987, 198); “the immanent manifestation of Buddhahood itself” (Capper 2002, 82); the ‘vajra master.’ Of Indian Buddhist tantras, the *Jñānasiddhi* could not be clearer: “The Guru is Sugata, Buddha and Dharmakāya” (Klinger 1980, 16). Elevated in the Vajrayāna to the status of a fully divine being, “the absolute necessity of total devotion to one’s

chosen teacher or master ... takes the place of all the great perfections ... taught in the Mahayana sutras” (Snellgrove 1987, 176-7).

The definitive Indian tantric Buddhist treatise on guru devotion is the second-century work, *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion (Gurupañcāśika)* attributed to Aśvaghoṣa. After outlining the ten necessary characteristics of a qualified Mahāyāna guru, Aśvaghoṣa states that “A disciple with the good qualities of compassion, generosity, moral self-control and patience should never regard as different his Guru and the Buddha Vajradhara” (ibid. 18).

### India to Tibet

The Indian tantric view of the guru as *more* important than Buddha was also transmitted to Tibetan formations (Klinger 1980, 16; Lopez 1998, 215 n.7) with the greater Vajrayāna between the seventh and eleventh centuries. One of the clearest examples was “from the Indian Tantric Naropa [956-1040] to his Tibetan disciple Marpa [1012-96], and in Marpa’s transmission of the teachings to his disciple, the Tibetan religious cultural hero Milarepa [1040-1123]” (Capper 2002, 88-9). The view of “the cosmic ascendancy of the guru” (ibid. 90) is memorably communicated in the story of Naropa forcing his disciple Marpa to choose between devotion to himself, as Marpa’s *guru*, or to Hevajra, Marpa’s *yi-dam*, and then chastising Marpa’s choice of the latter for the reason that, “the *yi-dam* is the *bla-ma*’s manifestation” (Guenther 1977, 188). In Naropa’s view, “The guru as *Dharmakāya* embodies soteriological charisma and enlightenment occurs only through [his] blessings and grace” (Capper 2002, 89).

Both Klinger (1980, 16) and Donovan (1986, 31-2) also point to the influence of the teachings of the Bengali monk, Atiśa Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna (982-1084), on the transmission of guru devotion doctrine in Buddhism’s ‘second diffusion’ from India. Between 1042 and 1045 Atiśa composed his famous *A Lamp for the Path (Bodhipathapradīpa)* which insists on the

necessity of guru devotion in both Mahāyāna and tantric practice (Donovan 1986, 31-2). Atiśa also worked closely with Tibetans translating Indian tantric ritual manuals such as *Cakrasaṃvara* and *Yamāntaka* tantras (Davidson 2005, 109-11). Among those with whom he worked was the famous translator of West Tibet, Rinchen Zangpo (958-1055), who was the first to translate Aśvaghōṣa's *Gurupañcāśika* into Tibetan (Asvaghosa 1975, 32). The guru devotion teachings of Atiśa, and of the line of Naropa, Marpa, and Milarepa, would have been proliferated among the laity of central Tibet through “the success of the Kadampa preachers and Kagyupa poets” (Davidson 2005, 257), respectively.

Ronald Davidson calls the period during and immediately following this ‘second diffusion’ (approx. 950-1250) the Tibetan Renaissance, a time when Tibetans used the literature and practices of Indian Buddhist tantrism to reorganize their own religion and society after a century of civil unrest following the collapse of the Tibetan empire in the mid ninth century (ibid. ix). Davidson explains that during this period, “Tibetan lamas employed the new ritual and ideological forms [of Indian tantrism] to establish a narrative of the religiopolitical authority of the Buddhist monk, so that monks could eventually replace the old royal line as the legitimate rulers of Central Tibet” (ibid. 3). One of the principal forms employed in this way was the Indian tantric image of the maṇḍala, “the broad metaphor of becoming the overlord of a circle of vassal states” (ibid. 30). Following consecration by a vajra master, the practitioner of ‘generation stage’ tantra trains in visualizing the transformation of the world into “a perfect cosmopolis of Buddhist deities in an impenetrable citadel, with the meditator envisioning himself as the central divinity” (ibid. 36), the *yi-dam*. The identification of Tibetan lamas with particular *yi-dams* (see page 5) was thus part of a tantric “sacralization of feudal authority” (ibid. 142) which would lead ultimately to the Dalai Lama's Tibetan Bodhisattvacracy.

A number of other cultural and environmental factors helped the spiritual guide gain an even more prominent social position in Tibet than in India. Before embracing Buddhism, Tibetan culture was predominantly oral, and would thus have conferred great authority on the spoken words of living Buddhist teachers (Donovan 1986, 32-3). Tibet was also physically vast with a scattered population: “In such isolation, a lama of personal charisma naturally became the focus of his disciples’ spiritual lives” (ibid. 33). Emphases on locality and charisma led to the formation of major Tibetan schools around particular teachers and their respective lineages.

Turrell Wylie argues that early translators’ choice to render the Sanskrit *guru* as *bla-ma* (which he translates as ‘soul mother’) rather than *slob-dpon* (‘teaching master’) was made “in order to facilitate assimilation of the ‘role’ of the guru in Buddhism into the existing shamanic beliefs of the Tibetan people” (Wylie 1977, 147-8). Lopez complicates Wylie’s argument, noting that “as Buddhism was introduced into Tibet the archaic meaning of *la* as ‘life’ or ‘soul’ disappeared” (Lopez 1998, 19). *Bla-ma* has also been translated as ‘highest mother’ (ibid. 18), or ‘highest potency’ (Guenther 1977, 178), sharing the denotation that there is no one higher. Its use began in the ninth century as the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit *guru* (Lopez 1998, 17). Tibetans added the *bla-ma* to the traditional three-fold refuge objects of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, with the Indian tantric understanding that the spiritual guide was the embodiment of all three (Klinger 1980, 9).

### Tibetan Doctrine

The transmission of the doctrine of the outer and inner guru—the relation between one’s human teacher (Skt. *kalyāṇamitra*, Tib. *dge-ba’i bshes-gnyen*) and one’s own potential for enlightenment symbolized by the *yi-dam* (Capper 2002, 85)—illustrates well the manner of Tibetan reception of the Indian guru/disciple relation. The teaching can be found as early as the



Perfection of Wisdom sutras, “where the outer [guru] is a kind teacher ... and the inner is one’s own intense compassion” (Tsong-kha-pa and Sparham 1999, 4). Using one Indian tantric text to illuminate another, Tsong-kha-pa, the Tibetan founder of the Gelug-pa school, cites the oldest of Buddhist tantras in his commentary to Aśvaghōṣa’s verse cited above:

Many tantras mention this [practice of] looking on the guru as an enlightened one. We read in the seventeenth section of the Guhyasamāja Tantra: ... ‘[A]ll the bodhisattvas and tathagatas look on [the guru] as the vajra mind of enlightenment. Why? Because the master and the mind of enlightenment are the same—they are not divisible into two.’ (ibid. 59)

According to Wayman, “the *Śrī-Mahākha-tantrarāja* states: ‘It is said that there are two kinds of gurus—that external guru himself; and the inner guru, the presiding deity (*bdag po’i lha*)’ ... [which] appears to mean the same as the ‘tutelary deity’ (*iṣṭadevatā*)” (Wayman 1987, 200).

In Tibet, the doctrine appears in the songs of Milarepa: “Though the best Guru is one’s own mind, / We need a teacher to illustrate our Mind-Essence— / We cannot neglect for a moment to pray to him. / Because of this, we always need a Guru!” (Mi-la-ras-pa 1989, 439). According to Blo-bzang chos-kyi rgyal-mtshan’s *Bla-ma mchod-pa*, the inner guru is a disciple’s “clear light mind when it realizes voidness” (Berzin 2010, 77). The inner guru is the innate clarity of the disciple’s consciousness, his or her Buddha potential (*tathāgatagarbha*) whose actualization depends upon the outer guru’s guidance and inspiration: “Without the ministrations and blessings of the outer guru, the tutelary deity remains inaccessible and the soteriological relationship with it impossible” (Capper 2002, 85).

Herbert Guenther explains how the Tibetan *dge-ba’i bshes-gnyen* and *yi-dam*, the outer and inner guru, are brought together in what Blo-bzang chos-kyi rgyal-mtshan (hereafter spelled Losang Chokyi Gyaltzan) calls the *bla-ma lha*, the ‘divine master’ (Guenther 1977, 187). The *dge-shes* and the *bla-ma lha* represent the two *bla-ma* concepts in Tibetan society: the spiritual

friend, more or less equated with the spiritual teacher, and “the *bla-ma* proper” (ibid. 181).

Guenther describes the *bla-ma lha*’s relation to the *yi-dam* and the *dge-shes*:

The term *lha* (Skt. *deva*) ... is a label for something in which the sense of the transcendent has found expression. Otherwise elusive and vague it becomes concretely felt and understandable in the form of the *bla-ma* or the *yi-dam*. The latter preserves more of the divine and transcendent, the former has more personalistic traits and therefore fuses more easily with the concrete person who enters and shapes our life as ‘spiritual friend’ (*dge-ba’i bshes-gnyen*). Ultimately both the *bla-ma* and the *yi-dam* are symbol forms of Buddhahood (*sang-rgyas*) which each individual is capable of realizing and which speaks to him through these symbol forms. (ibid. 187)

A symbol of the realization of the disciple’s own Buddha nature, the *bla-ma lha* can be visualized as one’s *yi-dam*, or projected onto another person who acts as one’s *dge-ba’i bshes-gnyen* through teaching the Dharma (ibid. 188). The important, and complicated, point is that there is overlap. The living Tibetan lama is actively endowed by his Tibetan students with the transcendence of a fully enlightened tantric deity.

The highly complex social and ritual dynamics of this relatively simple relation (*bla-ma lha* = *dge-ba’i bshes-gnyen* + *yi-dam*) have been widely observed but rarely understood by Western scholars of Tibetan Buddhism. The history of this misunderstanding follows the same trajectory as the Orientalist legacy defining the West’s misrepresentation of the Tibetan *bla-ma* as degenerate pope of Lamaism or endangered archive of Buddhism—a history of the colonialist will to control the unassimilated rather than understand it.

### Tibetan Praxis and Conception of Personhood

Martin Mills has recently contributed to the rectification of this understanding through his anthropological analysis of the social and ritual dynamics of the lama’s authority in the Gelug-pa monastery of Kumbum and its surrounding Southern Ladakhi villages (Mills 2003). Mills’ theorization of the Tibetan conception of chthonic personhood helps him demonstrate that the

real *bla-ma lha* in Gelug-pa monasticism is the incarnate lama, or *tulku*, whose supreme social and ritual authority derives from his identification with the *yi-dam*'s tantric power to subjugate local tellurian deities.

Based on nineteen months of ethnographic field study, Mills' explanation of "the nature of religious authority in Tibetan Buddhist monasticism" (ibid. xiii) is rooted in what he calls the "core cultural dynamic" of Tibetan civilization: its "cultural construction of the social and ritual capacities of humans, one which conceives of embodied personhood as the nexus of productive and reproductive relationships with local chthonic sources" (ibid. xvii-xviii). His discernment of this Tibetan understanding of chthonic personhood leads Mills to a remarkable explanation of the nature of the lama's authority, couched in the terms of the householder/renouncer relation:

[T]he incarnate lama and the fully-accomplished tantric yogin are, in Tibetan eyes, the consummate renouncers. Through the yogic transformation of the bodies and minds in which they were born ... or through the transformative reconstruction of future bodies within the death process ... they have stepped beyond the symbolic boundaries of the household and released themselves from the confinement that locality and birth hold on their spiritual progress. In this respect, the incarnate ... becomes a symbolic mediator ... between the world as an embodied matrix of worldly presence on the one hand; and as the fully subjugated paradise of the tantric Buddha on the other. (ibid. 308)

Defining Tibetan Buddhist 'clerical renunciation' as "a renunciation of the twin household processes of [economic] production and [sexual] reproduction" (ibid. 74), Mills discerns a hierarchy of renunciation in which a monk's level of renunciation is directly proportionate to his level of socially constructed religious authority. This complex argument relies on three other theories: the ordinary monk as clerical semi-renouncer, the chthonic Tibetan conception of personhood, and the incarnate, or *tulku*, as yogic full renouncer.

Mills demonstrates that the Kumbum monk remained more or less embedded in the household of his birth—that his process of renunciation was marked by a "shifting away from

reproductive and productive endeavour and towards reproductive and productive dependence” (ibid. 66). This was evident from the fact that the monk often had a designated field worked by his lay relatives for the production of his food (ibid. 66), and that the upkeep of his dwelling (*shak*) on the outer perimeter of Kumbum was considered the responsibility not of the monastery, but of his family. “In this sense, whilst the *shak* were *associated* with the monastery, they *were part* of the household estates of the village” (ibid. 65).

Three observations lead Mills to the conclusion that ordinary Tibetan Buddhist monks “represent *incomplete* renouncers: beginners on a path of renunciation that is left unfinished by mere monasticism” (ibid. 69). The first is that monastic renunciation is “accomplished by mutually performed *divisions of sexual and agricultural labour* by monks and laity” (ibid. 79). The second is that monks appear to occupy a highly ambiguous position “within a complex matrix of renunciation that encompasses both laity and monks” (ibid. 80). The third is that Kumbum’s *gompa*, as “the focus of ritual wealth accumulation ... appears to represent, on a ritual and ideological level, something more akin to religious household than its negation” (ibid. 80). Finally, emic “discourse[s] of inadequacy” (ibid. 80) surrounding the monk’s renunciation and ritual authority lead Mills to contrast him with the incarnate, or *tulku*, “of whom ordinary monks are mere shadows” (ibid. 308).

An explanation of the different levels of renunciation-based authority held by these two figures depends upon an understanding of what precisely they are understood to have authority over. Mills argues that the Tibetan ritual performer holds ritual authority not simply over other humans, but over “a matrix of chthonic forces and sources of symbolic power, within which ‘people’—both laity and monks—are both constituted and embedded” (ibid. 243). The principal focus of authoritative ritual acts in the Tibetan community, suggests Mills, is “the very real and

pragmatic concerns of everyday social life” (ibid. 244): pollution, household integrity, agricultural success, illness, etc. The monastic authority to ritually address these concerns—the concerns of “supporting households and domains that acted as (productively and reproductively) fertile ‘places’” (ibid. 249)—means that “Buddhism was ... practiced, not in a vacuum, but in a dynamic subduing relationship with fertile chthonic territory” (ibid. 249).

This chthonic territory was understood to be inhabited by an elaborate hierarchy of household (*p'a-lha*) and local territorial (*yul-lha*) gods and spirits who exercised considerable power “over the health, welfare and fertility of those born within their domain” (ibid. 249). Just as the Tibetan household and local territory was conceived in chthonic terms, so was the embodied person. In addition to the *p'alha* and *yullha* there were, depending on the astrological conditions of a person’s birth, a number of ‘birth gods’ (*skyes-lha*) that existed in a person’s body throughout his or her life. For Mills, the presence of these bodily numina “marks individuals as being in some way part of specific chthonic and kin groups” (ibid. 256). Finally, Mills recounts how the local astrological use of prayer flags (*rlung-sta*) exhibited “the equation of the external *rlung* [wind] as a feature of the environment, and its manifestation within the body as one of the elemental constituents of bodily health” (ibid. 258). Thus the Tibetan understanding of personal agency was itself intimately linked to the landscape, forming Mills’ notion of “diffuse chthonic agency.”

The relationship between the Tibetan ritual performer and the matrix of chthonic agents inhabiting and presiding over the Tibetan landscape is the site of ritual authority in Tibetan society, with the level of a monk’s renunciation defining the level of that authority. The renunciation of one’s identity with, and contribution to, the fertile household territory, creates the power to influence and subjugate the local elements, gods, and spirits who normally preside over

that territory—land, house, or body. But as we’ve seen, the ordinary monks of Kumbum remain largely dependent on the productive and reproductive processes of their natal household. As such, their “path of clerical renunciation ... was ... seen as limited in that monks remained rooted to their autochthonous nature by the iron thread of their natal bodies—bodies born within the context of local cosmologies, and under the purview of local deities” (ibid. 266). The figure of the Gelug-pa incarnate, or *tulku*, is the complete renouncer, and is therefore seen as the most powerful ritual performer for his supreme authority over local chthonic forces.

The incarnate is the consummate Tibetan renouncer because he is seen as the emanation body of a Buddha who has chosen his current place of rebirth through mastery of the tantric practices of death yoga—a system of ‘yogic renunciation’ understood to affect a complete transformation of ordinary embodiment polluted by local chthonic influences from birth: “[T]rue and definite religious accomplishment, and thence spiritual authority, necessitates either death or symbolic death (through sexual yoga) as a precondition, re-creating a new body which is transcendent of local embeddedness” (ibid. 283). Finally, Mills suggests it is “mastery over the forces of embodiment” (ibid. 283) which defines religious authority in Tibetan Buddhism. In the Gelug-pa, known for its monastic emphasis on clerical renunciation and the discouragement of sexual yoga, the yogic renunciation accomplished through death yoga “acts as the foundation of the ideology of the incarnate *lama*, or *tulku*” (ibid. 283)—the living divine master, or *bla-ma lha*.

The lama has been misconstrued in Western scholarship (as both tyrant and victim) largely because etic descriptions of the social and ritual dynamics of Tibetan guru devotion have not been paired with adequate emic understanding of their explicit doctrinal foundations and implicit cultural construction of personhood. The *bla-ma* has thus often appeared as a self-declared godman imposing his authority over his subjects, when in fact those subjects were

disciples whose tantric practices of guru devotion actively constructed the lama's authority out of a tantric-chthonic conception of their own personhood.

### **1.3 The Euro-North American Practice Reception of the Tibetan Guru/Disciple Relation**

#### Tibet to Euro-North America

Although a few Europeans had the chance to observe the guru/disciple relation within Tibet as early as the seventeenth century, its religious observance did not become a popular option for Westerners until the years following the Chinese occupation. It was then that Tibetans began teaching their Buddhism beyond their own breached borders:

Beginning in the 1960s ... American travellers in search of new spiritual horizons headed for India and Nepal where they encountered Tibetan Buddhist lamas exiled from their homeland ... A few retained a sufficiently serious interest in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism to attempt to pursue their studies back home. But they soon found that this was not possible without the guidance of experienced teachers, so by the end of the 1960s centers were founded throughout America where Tibetan lamas were invited to teach on either a temporary or permanent basis. (Bell 1998, 55-6)

Forty years later, “hundreds of thousands of Westerners are now involved in some way with Tibetan Buddhism” (Cozort 2003, 221). From Geshe Wangyal's founding of the first American Tibetan monastery in New Jersey in 1955 (Chandler 2009, 71), to Chogyam Trungpa's founding of the first European Tibetan centre in Scotland in 1967 (Bluck 2006, 20), to the Dalai Lama's present day international celebrity status (Lopez 1998, Ch.7), the Western embrace of Tibetan Buddhism has been largely defined by its embrace of charismatic lamas.

In 2002, Capper estimated that there were roughly 270,000 “Euro-Americans” self-identifying as Tibetan Buddhists (Capper 2002, 3). Jeannine Chandler recently noted that North American Tibetan Buddhism has “doubled the number of its centers in the last decade. Nearly one-third of all of the Buddhist centers in North America follow some kind of Tibetan tradition”

(Chandler 2009, 102). In 2001, there were seven Tibetan centres in New York City alone (Capper 2002, 4). In Britain, there were 22 Tibetan centres in 1981, 47 in 1991, and 284 by 2001 (Bluck 2006, 21).

The staggering 600% increase in British Tibetan Buddhist centres between 1991 and 2001 is in large part reflective of the growth of the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), a Western Gelug-pa organization founded by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso in 1991. The NKT had 63 British groups in 1993, 183 in 2001 (*ibid.* 21), and today claims on its website to have 1100 centres and branches in 40 countries. Founded by Lama Thubten Yeshe in 1975, the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) is another major Western Gelug-pa organization which presently on its website claims 158 centres, projects, and services in 37 countries. Chapter three will examine and compare the guru/disciple relation in these two largest and fastest growing Tibetan Buddhist organizations in the world today (Cozort 2003, 222).

The NKT and FPMT are the largest examples of global networks “generally centred around the teaching of a single individual lama,” an organizational model which Geoffrey Samuel identifies as “the characteristic context ... of Tibetan Buddhism in the West” (Samuel 2005, 303). Others include Chogyam Trungpa’s Shambhala network, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche’s Dzogchen Community, and Sogyal Rinpoche’s Rigpa network (*ibid.* 303). The centres within these networks generally “maintain a sense of hierarchy and organization by arranging themselves according to lineage and around gurus (almost always Tibetans)” (Chandler 2009, 77).

According to Peter Bishop, the majority of Western Tibetan Buddhist communities are organized quite traditionally according to the Tibetan monastic hierarchy, and consist of four distinct groups: reincarnate lamas, Western monks and nuns, lay practitioners, and other



interested lay persons (Bishop 1993, 98). Amy Lavine explains that although senior American practitioners are given positions of authority and power by the Tibetan founders of their organizations, “American Vajrayana still functions under the fundamental authority of Tibet’s primary religious specialists: the *geshe* and the *tulku*” (Lavine 1998, 104) The problem of continuity represented by the need for Western practitioners to develop meaningful relationships with the newly recognized reincarnations of their own lamas (increasingly identified as Western children) is a fascinating current issue in contemporary Tibetan Buddhism (Campbell 2002, 4). It is especially pressing as most Tibetan founders (for example, of each of the five major Western networks mentioned above) have either died within the past couple decades, or are presently elderly men (Lavine 1998, 109-10).

In some ways, the authority structures of these new Western communities appear to resemble the traditional Tibetan model. They also differ significantly, however:

In particular, modern communications and technology have enabled both a far wider spread to these networks than existed in the pre-modern period, and a greater degree of connectivity than generally existed in Tibet ... This provides the possibility for a greater degree of central control than before ... While such centralization, however, makes it possible for a single lama to maintain a network on a global scale, it has not as yet led to the integration of these various networks into some kind of super-ordinate structure. ... Networks are, in a sense, competing with each other for customers and finance. (Samuel 2005, 309)

Samuel’s last point brings up another important difference between traditional and modern Tibetan Buddhist authority structures: the latter’s participation in the economic system of late phase capitalism. While it may be true that “Western students are involved in a process of guru-shopping” (ibid. 312), some lamas have recently come under fire for involving themselves in the business of guru-selling (Chandler 2009, 94-5). Chandler identifies the NKT and FPMT, in particular, as groups that have successfully embraced the capitalist business model, taking

advantage of “successful marketing techniques, clever advertising, Buddhism study courses and the convenience of the internet” (ibid. 95) to increase their membership.

Other characteristics of Tibetan Buddhism’s adaptation to Western culture directly affecting its authority structures include *laicization*—increased lay involvement in practice and teaching and a de-emphasis on monasticism (Chandler 2009, 104); changing gender roles—a growing community of female teachers (Prebish 1999, 75-9); and democratization—an increase in subdivision of leadership and government by consensus (ibid. 69) “fueled by the indignation of American individualism and the shock that resulted from several guru-abuse scandals of the 1980’s” (Chandler 2009, 106). Discussions of the dangers of uncritically implementing the lama’s traditional level of authority in a Western context have been written by practitioners with direct experience of that authority’s abuse (Campbell 2002, Butterfield 1994, Butler 1991). Although the following analysis will not explicitly consider gender, it should be noted that traditional authority structures in the Tibetan Buddhist monastic system are thoroughly patriarchal (Campbell 2002).

#### Euro-North American Praxis and Conception of Personhood

Daniel Capper’s ethnographic study of Tibetan guru devotion practice in the United States suggests that the degree of psychological benefit a practitioner derives from his or her relationship to a lama depends principally on how well he or she is able to observe the emic terms of the outer/inner guru relation. Capper employs Heinz Kohut’s model of self psychology to answer the question of why Americans practice Tibetan Buddhism:

[E]mic presentations and experiences of Buddhist guru devotion practices parallel the Kohutian self psychological healing process. The growth-enhancing and -inhibiting experiences of my interpreters behind this interesting parallel spark their Tibetan Buddhist participation. Based on this I will argue that Americans in my

ethnography practice Tibetan Buddhism because of their deep interpersonal participation with Tibetan lamas. (Capper 2002, 21)

Capper's most compelling data are the parallels detected between Tibetan guru devotion doctrine, American guru devotion experience, and Kohutian self psychology.

In two years of fieldwork living among American residents of a major Tibetan Buddhist centre in the United States (fictitiously named Siddha Gompa), Capper found that in most cases, practitioners' relationships with their lama brought them "increased personal autonomy, defined as the experience of independent, efficacious agency" (ibid. 13-14). To explain this observation Capper adopts the lens of Kohutian self psychology and finds that his interpreters' experiences of their lamas exhibit the same relational stages mapped by Kohut in the child's developmental relationship with its primary caregiver. These are the same stages that Kohutian psychoanalysis exploits for therapeutic purposes in the analyst-analysand relationship: 1) idealizing transference, 2) optimal frustration, and 3) transmuting internalization.

The *idealizing transference* takes place when the analysand responds to the analyst's empathetic understanding by regressing "to the point of developmental fixation" (ibid. 61), when certain archaic "selfobject" needs were unmet, and then projecting the missing selfobject qualities onto the analyst. *Optimal frustration* occurs when the analyst disappoints the expectations arisen from the analysand's idealizing transference: "The lack of analyst omnipotence becomes revealed as the analysand's archaic needs remain unmet" (ibid. 61). Finally, through *transmuting internalization*, the analysand "absorb[s] those selfobject qualities, representing missing [psychic] structure, that had been projected onto the analyst" (ibid. 62). This three-fold therapeutic technique recreates the dialectical movement of psychological maturation that sees a need-based ideal projected, frustrated, and internalized. When this

dialectic unfolds properly the child, analysand, or devotee develops new psychic structure and an increased sense of personal autonomy.

In American Buddhists' relationships with their lamas, Capper charts these three Kohutian stages in their experiences of what he describes as enchantment, disillusion, and introjection. For Capper's interpreters, "the numinous experience of enchantment ... represent[s] the establishment of a powerful idealizing transference with a cultural selfobject, the lama" (ibid. 219), whose "felt caring and compassionate nature ... [is] a primary foundation for [that] enchantment" (ibid. 177). Capper then describes a number of his interpreters' experiences of their lamas that functioned as sources of their disillusion: the lama's physical absence, his perceived favoritism of other disciples, his delegation of unpleasant tasks, perceived errors or contradictions in his teachings, even downturns in a disciple's own spiritual practice (ibid. 223-5). In any of these experiences the disciple is forced to "perceive that their lama is not an omnipotent wellspring of transforming spiritual energy" (ibid. 225). This come-down is a crucial condition for "the key movement of the disciple towards internalizing and integrating the idealized qualities of the lama through a process that parallels Kohut's transmuting internalization" (ibid. 226).

Those interpreters who experienced this dialectic smoothly "enjoyed increased feelings of compassion, increased self-esteem and confidence, improved interpersonal relations, improved vocational efficacy, and contentment arising from increased meaning in their lives" (ibid. 227-8). Those whose lama relations were less psychologically constructive were those who failed to cap the dialectic by internalizing the projected qualities of the transference in response to their experience of optimal frustration (ibid. 228). Finally, Capper aligns Kohutian theory with Buddhist doctrine stating that for the former group of interpreters, "the admired qualities of the

lama are internalized, the locus of psychological and spiritual control shifts to an internal source, ... and practitioners become, in a sense their own gurus” (ibid. 227).

Through a Kohutian analysis of the American *practice* of Tibetan guru devotion, Capper produces a re-description of the Tibetan *doctrine* of guru devotion. He also reveals the aspect of the latter which is most pivotal to the former: the relation between the outer and inner guru. In Kohutian terms, if the qualities projected onto the idealized lama are not reclaimed through a transmuting internalization, the disciple builds no new psychic structure and experiences no increase in personal autonomy. In Tibetan Buddhist terms directed to a modern Western audience: “[T]o progress along the tantric path to complete self-fulfillment there must be a meeting of the inner and outer gurus” (Yeshe 1987, 100).

Capper concludes with a reflection on the conception of personhood that is “American individualism” (Capper 2002, 230), which, he concludes, “founds, rather than prevents, deep community participation” (ibid. 233) when expressed through the choice to engage in guru devotion practice. All Capper’s interpreters came to Tibetan Buddhism through “individual-expressiveness,” self-consciously choosing it through an embrace of a plurality of religious options. This element of individual choice is what most obviously differentiates the modern Western practice of Tibetan Buddhism from its traditional Tibetan praxis. Speaking of modern individualistic religion generally, Capper cites Phillip Hammond: “Whereas others may regard the church as a natural extension of their social worlds, these people regard it as an avenue to some privately chosen goal” (ibid. 231).

Anthony Giddens describes this reality as a general characteristic of the modern individual’s experience of their social situation: “In the post-traditional order of modernity ... self-identity becomes a reflexively organized endeavour. The reflexive project of the self, which

consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems” (Giddens 1991, 5). This “context of multiple choice” includes a “diversity of ‘authorities’” (ibid. 5), but the main authority, of course, is the project manager, the individual. In his analysis of the Western Buddhist experience, Geoffrey Samuel uses Michel Foucault’s notion of ‘technologies of the self’ to say something very similar. Samuel suggests that the chief appeal of Tibetan Buddhism for Western followers is principally as “a transformative practice, a technology for remaking the self and in the process reconceptualising both self and the world to which the self relates” (Samuel 2005, 338). Paul Heelas describes the “self-ethic” of New Age spirituality, in which “the ‘individual’ serves as his or her own source of guidance” (Heelas 1996, 23)—his or her own authority. Where Mills defined *diffuse chthonic agency* as the distinct conception of personhood of traditional Tibetan civilization, we can adopt Giddens’ notion of the *self as reflexive project* as the modern Euro-North American equivalent.

It is a particularly interesting meeting of authorities when the modern Western individual chooses to practice devotion to an outer guru as part of his or her own reflexive project of self-transformation. As a first step towards understanding the dynamics of that choice, we can turn to an analysis of the Tibetan Buddhist ritual of ‘uniting with the spiritual guide’—a guru devotion practice which, according to Capper, has “an unmistakable surface appearance that parallels the process of Kohutian transference healing” (Capper 2002, 119-20).

## Chapter II

### Structural Analysis: Explanation of Guru Yoga

This chapter explicates the distinct intellectual logic of the ritual of ‘uniting with the spiritual guide’ through a structural analysis of its principal ritual text in the Gelug-pa school, “Offering to the Spiritual Guide” (Skt. *Guru pūjā*, Tib. *Bla-ma mchod-pa*), compiled by Losang Chokyi Gyaltsan (1570-1662) in the mid-seventeenth century. Relying on a structuralist method of textual analysis drawn from the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Hans Penner, it will be demonstrated that the pūjā operates as a ritual gift economy between guru and disciple with the final aim of this binary’s dissolution in emptiness.

#### Guru Yoga and Guru Pūjā

In his *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (Tib. *Byang chub lam rim chen mo*) Tsong-kha-pa concludes a five-part explanation of “How to rely on the teacher, the root of the path” (Tsong-kha-pa 2000, 69) with an appeal to the reader to repeatedly engage in “the instruction that is renowned as ‘guru yoga’” (ibid. 91). The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, explains that “in India there was no manual exclusively for guru yoga practice, although you will find in many Indian sādhanas a guru yoga at the beginning, for the purposes of accumulating merit. In Tibet, however, there are many guru yoga practices” (Dalai Lama 2009, 16). Alex Wayman notes that “While it is reasonable that the practice existed in India, it is undeniable that the Tibetan form is quite elaborate, suggesting a further native development” (Wayman 1987, 209-10).

Wayman is referring in particular to the elaborate imagery associated with the Tibetan guru yoga practice of visualizing the ‘field of merit,’ or *tshogs zhing* (field of assembly), often configured as a ‘tree’ of lineage gurus extending from one’s root guru all the way back to

Buddha Shakyamuni or his tantric form of Vajradhara. Roger Jackson explains the function of the *tshogs zhing* “as both a 'map' of the Tibetan sacred cosmos and as an index of the guru's crucial role in the tradition as a mediator between the practitioner on the one hand and the diachronic lineage of teachers and the synchronic pantheon of deities, on the other” (Jackson 1992, 157). According to Bishop, its elaborate visualization is “one of the clearest and richest imaginative statements about transmission in Tibetan Buddhism” (Bishop 1993, 108). Guru yoga’s most popular Gelug-pa ritual formulation, Losang Chokyi Gyaltsan’s seventeenth century *Bla-ma mchod-pa* (hereafter spelled *Lama Chopa*), takes as its principal object of worship, seated at the top of the central tree, the Buddhafied image of Tsongkhapa himself.

The literary genre of *Lama Chopa* has traditionally been used for guru devotion rituals in each of the four major Tibetan Buddhist schools: the Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug-pa. The genre consists of “ritual texts in which a guru is taken as the object of his disciple’s meditation and is worshipped as the most sublime being, inseparable from Buddha” (Donovan 1986, 26). Donovan cites Janet Gyatso’s explanation that *Bla-ma mchod-pa* (guru pūjā) is a ritual of offering directed to the lama, and the closely related *Bla-ma’i rnal-’byor* (guru yoga) is “a specialized form of sadhana in which the practitioner meditatively assumes the knowledge and wisdom of his teacher, here equated to the Buddha” (ibid. 55). Guru pūjā is an offering-based ritual of worship whereas guru yoga is a ritual meditation practice often associated, and done in conjunction, with such worship.

Donovan lists the common components of guru yoga texts in each of the four Tibetan schools:

a visualization of the practitioner’s lama in an idealized form, a sevenfold office (...), prayers, including a prayer requesting that the lama bestow the four initiations, the lama’s subsequent granting of these, and a meditative visualization of union between the guru and disciple. (ibid. 40)



According to the Dalai Lama, “It is through such a method that one should try to achieve a transference of the guru’s realizations to one’s own mental continuum” (Dalai Lama 2009, 117). In his *Lama Chopra* commentary, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso defines guru yoga as “a special method for receiving the blessings of our spiritual guide” (Gyatso 2005, 1). Both these Gelug-pa teachers explain this particular *Lama Chopra* as a practice of guru yoga. Donovan describes the ritual as effecting a meditative union between guru and disciple, whereas the Dalai Lama and Gyatso emphasize its role in effecting a transmission from guru to disciple, of realizations and blessings, respectively. We will come to see how these concepts relate.

Description of the Data: Losang Chokyi Gyaltsan’s *Lama Chopra*

Gareth Sparham connects *Lama Chopra*’s visualization practice to ancient India: “[T]he devotee imagines the guru extending to include all the goodness in the entire universe, a notion that goes back at least to the time of the great Indian epic the Mahabharata” (Tsoni-kha-pa and Sparham 1999, 26). This is affirmed by Barker:

*Lama Chöpa* ... is a ceremony as ancient as Guru Yoga and expressed in as many varied forms. Its roots are common to both Hinduism and Buddhism, and in the Indian tantric practices brought to Tibet it held a position of supreme importance. ... So the traditional materials from which they developed their unique form of the *Lama Chöpa* were right at hand for the Gelugpas. (Barker 1975, 51)

This brings us to the divergent emic and etic origin accounts of the Gelug-pa’s *Lama Chopra*.

According to Gelug-pa tradition, *Lama Chopra* was transmitted along with the shorter guru yoga practice, *Ganden Lhagyama*, “by Buddha Manjushri to Je Tsongkhapa in a special scripture known as the *Kadam Emanation Scripture*” (Gyatso 2005, 33). It is said to have then been transmitted orally in what is known as the “Uncommon Whispered Lineage” (ibid. 33) from Tsongkhapa through a successive line of gurus and their disciples to Togdan Jampal Gyatso,

Baso Chokyi Gyaltsan, Mahasiddha Dharmavajra (Chökyi Dorje), Gyalwa Ensapa, Khadrub Sangye Yeshe, and finally Losang Chokyi Gyaltsan, the First Panchen Lama (ibid. 35-8). In Losang Chokyi Gyaltsan's lifetime, "However, because times were becoming more and more impure, and because sentient beings had less and less merit, the Panchen Lama worried that this precious lineage might soon be lost altogether; and so to preserve it for future generations he decided to write it down" (ibid. 39). Gyatso also explains that the First Panchen Lama "compiled" (not composed) *Lama Chopa* "so that faithful disciples could practice the fourth great guide [of guru yoga] as a preliminary to the actual Mahamudra" (ibid. 39).

This account of Chokyi Gyaltsan's altruistic reasons for composing *Lama Chopa* stands alongside the political motives apparent to a secular historian. Barker explains that in the 1640s, following the Fifth Dalai Lama's rapid rise to rule over the whole of Tibet with the support of Gushri Khan and his Mongol army, Gelug-pa monks

needed to come up with something which would legitimate this new order. ... its solution was both elegant and simple, drawing from ancient religious sources and combining them into a new synthesis: Tsong Kha Pa, the scholarly monk who had founded the Gelugpa sect 230 years earlier, became elevated to the status of a universal mystic master, creator of a new order which represented all of the major mystical lineages of philosophy and tantra. His disciples of succeeding generations were thus able to lay claim to the most important mystical strands of national experience, just as they had asserted their control over their political processes. Not surprisingly, the Gelugpa's most venerated living sage was the chief author of this new cult of Tsong Kha Pa. Among the voluminous writings of the First Panchen Lama is a short ritual text which quickly attained a position of supreme importance to the church. It is ... generally known among Tibetans as *Lama Chöpa*, and it is probably the most important single document which pressed the claim of universal mystical authority for the Gelugpa Church. (Barker 1975, 50)

In his own colophon, Losang Chokyi Gyaltsan states that the text was compiled in the High Level Victory Banner dormitory of Tashi Lunpo monastic college. It would have been compiled within the last twenty years of the author's life, since Gushri Khan's final military victories

leading to the establishment of the Gelug-pa as the “supreme spiritual and temporal authority in Tibet” did not occur until 1642 (Smith 2001, 120). Losang Chokyi Gyaltsan’s own sacred biography (*rnam thar*) affirms that it was after the Fifth Dalai Lama’s rise to power that Chokyi Gyaltsan, abbot of Tashi Lunpo monastery since 1601, worked in earnest to spread the Dharma through teaching, gathering disciples, and composing numerous treatises (Willis 1995, 96). It also describes the warring period from 1635-42 as a deeply troublesome time for the First Panchen Lama, when people “were completely carried away by the evil forces of the five forms of degeneracy” (ibid. 95-6)—an angle on events surrounding the *Lama Chopa*’s composition that may help bridge the conflicting emic and etic historical accounts of Gyatso and Barker.

Losang Chokyi Gyaltsan’s *Guru Pūjā* “is written in a highly ornate poetic style, filled with allusions and symbols that operate on several levels” (Lopez 1997, 376). It is composed in metered verse, consisting of eighty-eight stanzas of four lines with nine syllables per line (Barker 1975, 80), and bears the full title, *A Method of Offering to the Guru, The Profound Path Entitled the Indivisibility of Bliss and Emptiness* (Tib. *Zab lam bla ma mchod pa’i cho ga bde stong dbyer med ma*) (Dalai Lama 2009, 8). It is traditionally chanted daily or bi-monthly by all Gelug-pa monks (Barker 1975, 80). Although the text is often recited silently, and the activities it prescribes are principally mental (ibid. 82), the pūjā becomes an important cultural event when performed in publically: “When the ritual is performed in large assemblies with complex chanting and hand gestures by participants dressed in magnificent ceremonial clothing, with elaborate butter sculptures and distinctive music, it represents perhaps the most complex expression of Tibetan religious culture” (Tsoni-kha-pa and Sparham 1999, 26).

English translations of the *Lama Chopa* have been published by David Barker (1975), Alexander Berzin (Blo-bzang chos-kyi rgyal-mtshan 1979), Donald Lopez (1997), Geshe

Kelsang Gyatso (2005), and the Dalai Lama with Thubten Jinpa (2009). The following analysis relies principally on Gyatso's translation and commentary for the reasons that his commentary is especially clear, and because his translation is that which his NKT centres recite bi-monthly, centres whose guru devotion praxes will be analysed in chapter three.

### The Explanatory Theory: Structuralism

Hans Penner, the leading supporter of structuralism in the contemporary study of religion (Capps 1995, 150), defines *structure* as “a system of elements that are defined holistically” (Penner 1989, 8). Penner understands the principle of ‘holism’ to be the essential insight of Ferdinand de Saussure’s structural linguistics and “the foundation of the structuralist edifice that Lévi-Strauss built in his work on kinship, totemism, myth, and culture” (Penner 1998, 7). Penner cites de Saussure’s definition of language as a perfect description of holism: “Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of others” (Penner 1989, 142). It would be an error, therefore, to locate semantic value in an individual linguistic term, or in any kind of sign, and then to go about explaining the system to which it belongs by simply adding individual signs together. The sign ‘guru,’ or ‘spiritual guide,’ for example, is meaningless without the sign ‘disciple.’ The terms exist in oppositional relation and function as communicative signs in dependence upon this relation. Meaning is a function of difference.

De Saussure often compared the project of his structural linguistics—the synchronic study of the formal structures beneath diachronic speech acts—to learning the game of chess: “[W]e do not need to know the history of chess in order to play chess ... [or] to analyze a particular state of a game in progress. But, we do need to know the system of chess in order to describe its history as well as analyze a particular state of the game in progress” (Penner 1989,

138). Chess is thus a fitting analogy of the system and the synchronic: “The elements of the game (the pieces) are defined by the relations they enter into as defined by the rules” (Penner 1998, 127). The following analysis will investigate Gelug-pa guru yoga as a synchronic system of signs; signs defined by relations; relations defined by rules; rules that represent the logic of the ‘chess game’ of guru yoga.

Lévi-Strauss’s well known analysis of the Oedipus myth and Penner’s analysis of the Pali legends of the Buddha present us with two methods of holistic structural analysis which can be extracted from their studies of myth and fruitfully applied to our study of Tibetan ritual. Lévi-Strauss describes the method of structural analysis he applies to the Oedipus myth:

The technique ... consists in ... breaking down [the myth’s] story into the shortest possible sentences, and writing each sentence on an index card bearing a number corresponding to the unfolding of the story. Practically each card will thus show that a certain function is, at a given time, linked to a given subject. Or, to put it otherwise, each gross constituent unit will consist of a relation. (Lévi-Strauss 1998, 52)

With the myth’s basic elements before him (variously called mythemes, relations, functions, actions) he approaches the list as a musical score and charts the myth’s “harmony” by bundling the sentences together into columns “according to what he asserts to be a common property” (Sturrock 1993, 120). Lévi-Strauss then declares particular pairs of these relation bundles to be the concept binaries forming the basic conceptual structure of the myth. More than the details or results of his Oedipus analysis, of interest to us is his method of distilling a text into its most basic action elements, and then discerning the structural pattern of oppositional ideas therein.

The results of Penner’s analysis of the Pali myths of the Buddha are presented in the same terms as Lévi-Strauss’s binary relations: “[T]he simplest set of oppositions that define this religion and its myths is the relation ‘conqueror versus renouncer,’ or ‘king versus monk,’ or ‘householder versus renouncer,’ a relation that is given its supreme status in the pair ‘Universal

Monarch versus the Awakened One” (Penner 2009, 121). This basic oppositional pair of householder/renouncer is made into a “coherent religious system” (ibid. 202), with the introduction of a third element, the gift: “What mediates that set of relations is ... the gift, which entails the twin transcendental doctrines of karma and merit. The Buddha and the Universal Monarch, the prince and the king, householder and renouncer are inseparable; the one defines the other mediated by the gift” (ibid. 219). There we have it, the chess board of Buddhism explained.

While he documents ample evidence for viewing Gotama’s “births, deaths, and rebirths ... as a series of punctuated appearances as monarch / renouncer” (ibid. 122), Penner divulges no particular method for discerning the terms of his triadic atom of Buddhism, other than ‘holism,’ the strict application of what Penner calls de Saussure’s central rule: “never consider a religious element or term in isolation from the system of which it is a part” (Penner 1989, 189).

Penner’s analysis extends Lévi-Strauss’s project—“to investigate all levels and aspects of culture as a system of signs” (ibid. 149)—to early Buddhist literature. He concludes that, “The relation ‘householder <----> renouncer’ is the basic definition of Buddhism” (Penner 2009, 3). It is important for Penner that this basic oppositional structure of the Pali myths is understood not as the *meaning* of the myths but as their *syntax*, or their narrative constraint—“a necessary condition for [their] meaning ... and thus a requirement for a proper interpretation of the mythical language” (ibid. 122).

We can thus proceed in search of the set of oppositional relations which provide *Lama Chopra* with its own distinct syntax, or conceptual constraint. The techniques of Lévi-Strauss and Penner are used sequentially and in conjunction: first, to break *Lama Chopra* into its basic actions or events, and second, to distill this function list into the puja’s fundamental concept binary and have a go at discerning that binary’s mediating term(s).

## Structural Analysis of Guru Yoga

In Gyatso's first appendix, "The Condensed Meaning of the Text," the formal meditation practice of the "the guru yoga of Je Tsongkhapa," the *Lama Chopa* itself, is divided into three sections: the preliminary practices, the actual practice, and the concluding stages (Gyatso 2005, 280). The subsections looks like this:

(The preliminary practices)

1. Going for refuge and generating bodhichitta
2. Self-generation as the Deity
3. Purifying the environment and its inhabitants
4. Blessing the offerings

(The actual practice)

5. Visualizing the Field of Merit and inviting and absorbing the wisdom beings
6. Offering the practice of the seven limbs and the mandala
7. Making praises and requests
8. Receiving blessings
9. Gathering and dissolving the Field of Merit

(The concluding stages)

10. Dedication

It should be noted that in the translations of Barker, Berzin, Lopez, and the Dalai Lama, 'going for refuge and generating bodhichitta' comes *after* 'self-generation as the Deity' and 'purifying the environment and its inhabitants.' The Dalai Lama explains: "In this text, the practices of self-generation and consecration of the environment come first. There is a tradition where these are performed later, but they can be done in this order too ... which is the tradition of Khedup Sangye Yeshe" (Dalai Lama 2009, 53). Presumably Gyatso is following this other tradition mentioned, although the different traditions are not mentioned in his commentary.

It appears Lévi-Strauss's function charting is already almost complete. We need only cite the most representative *Lama Chopa* verse(s) from each section, condensing them where possible, and identify their most important concepts.

(The preliminary practices)

1. For the sake of all ... beings **I shall attain ... the state of the Guru-Deity**, the primordial Buddha. Therefore **I shall practice the profound path of the yoga of the Guru-Deity** (Gyatso 2005, 59).
2. From the state of great bliss **I arise as the Guru-Deity** (67).
3. Light rays radiate from my body, blessing all worlds and beings in the ten directions. Everything becomes an exquisite array of immaculately pure good qualities (69).
4. By nature exalted wisdom ... and functioning as objects of enjoyment ... to generate a special exalted wisdom of bliss and emptiness, inconceivable clouds of ... offerings cover all the ground and fill the whole of space (71-72).

(The actual practice)

5. Within the vast space of indivisible bliss and emptiness ... on a lion throne ablaze with jewels ... sits my root Guru ... the very essence of all the Buddhas (77).
6. **O Vajra Holder I prostrate at your lotus feet** (117); **I offer you** these vast clouds of various offerings (125); **I confess** all [my] ... negative actions (162); we rejoice in all [beings'] ... happiness and ... virtue (165); **please send down a rain of ... Dharma** (169); **we request [you]** to remain unchanging ... without passing away (170); **I dedicate** all the ... virtues I have gathered here, so that [I may] attain the Union of Vajradhara (171).
7. **You are the Guru, ... Yidam, ... Daka and Dharma Protector; ... please hold me** with the hook of your compassion, **liberate me** from the fears of samsara and peace, be my constant companion, and **protect me** from all obstacles (192).
8. [W]hite, red, and blue **light rays and nectars ... arise from the places of my Guru's body, speech, and mind, and dissolve into my three places ... I receive** the four empowerments. I attain the four bodies and, out of delight, an emanation of **my Guru dissolves into me and bestows his blessings** (195);  
[I seek your blessings to realize all the stages of the path;] If by the time of my death I have not completed the path, **I seek your blessings** to go to the Pure Land (261).
9. Due to my making requests in this way, **O Supreme Spiritual Guide, with delight, please come to my crown to bestow your blessings;** and once again firmly **place your radiant feet on the anthers of the lotus at my heart** (271).

(The concluding stages)

10. Through the force of [all the virtues I have gathered here] ... may I complete the paths of renunciation, bodhichitta, correct view, and the two tantric stages (275).

These section titles and action sentences already give us a good sense of the text's structure.

Working through the concepts above, we can chart and then re-describe the text's 'harmonies.'



The pūjā contains at least two levels of relative symmetry, structured something like a sandwich within a sandwich, or two concentric cycles. Gyatso explicates the verse we've cited above under section one: "Having gone for refuge, we now generate a special motivation of bodhichitta ... the wish to become a Buddha to free all mother sentient beings from the sufferings of samsara" (ibid. 57). Where section one opens the practice generating the intention for engaging in it—to complete one's path to Buddhahood for the benefit of others—section ten dedicates the completed practice to the same end. Sections one and ten are thus the motivational brackets setting and sealing the intention for the guru yoga practice. Between the end pieces of this first sandwich of intention there are the remaining three sections of 'the preliminary practices' and the five that comprise 'the actual practice.'

Considered on its own, 'the actual practice' forms the puja's second sandwich-like structure. The general features of guru yoga listed by Mark Donovan correspond to the sections of 'the actual practice' in Gyatso's breakdown. In Donovan's words and Gyatso's numbers, these are: 5) an idealized visualization of the lama, 6) a sevenfold offering, 7) prayers and requests, 8) the lama's bestowing of the four initiations, 9) a meditative visualization of union between the guru and disciple. Section five and nine are an obvious binary: visualizing the field of merit arising out of "indivisible bliss and emptiness," and then visualizing its dissolution into one's own mind, transforming it into the mind of "spontaneous great bliss" mixed indistinguishably with emptiness (ibid. 272). What does this binary of appearance and dissolution initiate and conclude? In short, an energy economy.

The primary verbs in Gyatso's titles for sections six, seven, and eight are 'offering,' 'requesting,' and 'receiving.' The disciple gives things to the guru, asks for things from the guru, and finally in the puja's culmination, receives things from the guru: "The essence of Guru yoga

is to develop strong conviction that our Spiritual Guide is a Buddha, to make prostrations, offerings and sincere requests to him or her, and then to receive his profound blessings” (ibid. 13). The things offered are praise and objects of enjoyment, both material and imagined. The things requested are the guru’s blessings, principally to help the disciple gain the realizations of the stages of the path to enlightenment. Through offering, the disciple *accumulates* merit; through requesting, she *receives* blessings.

Gyatso equates ‘merit’ with good fortune, defining it as “the positive energy that results from virtuous actions” (ibid. 115), and as “the potential power to ... produce happiness” (ibid. 368). Merit thus refers to the karmic imprints of virtuous actions left in one’s mental continuum, or simply ‘good karma.’ Seen as living Buddha, the “Spiritual Guide is a powerful field for accumulating merit, purifying negative karma, and receiving blessings” (ibid. 8). The accumulation of meritorious potentialities in the mind is thus the principal function of the seven-limbed offering, section six of this guru yoga. It is not, however the principal function of guru yoga. Twice we’ve seen Gyatso state that the ritual’s primary function is to receive the guru’s blessings (ibid. 1, 13). Where merit is willfully accumulated through acting virtuously, blessings are a gift that must be received from a holy being.

Gyatso defines ‘blessing’ in reference to its Tibetan equivalent, *byin gyis brlabs* (Skt. *adhiṣṭhāna*), which means ‘to transform’ (ibid. 175). A blessing is “the transformation of our mind from a negative state to a positive state ... through the inspiration of holy beings” (ibid. 360). Although a blessing is defined here as an event, the language of ‘receiving the guru’s blessings’ seems to emphasize the guru’s inspiration itself, more than the mental transformation—causal energy more than resultant event. The analogy most often used to relate merit and blessings is agricultural:

Our mind is like a field, and engaging in spiritual practices ... is like sowing seeds in that field; but without the rain of the Guru's blessings nothing will grow. ... When we receive the blessings of our spiritual guide our mind is transformed into a powerful, virtuous field in which the crops of Dharma realizations flourish; but a mind without blessings is like a dry, arid field in which nothing virtuous can grow. (ibid. 175)

The transformation of a blessing is thus the germination of merit in one's mental continuum. In dependence on the merit field of the guru, the seeds of happiness and realization are planted by the practitioner's virtuous actions; a necessary condition for their fruition is the water of the guru's inspiration. Potential energy requires active energy to ripen as insight experience.

Here, then, is a very interesting economy: the disciple gives objects to the guru and accrues the energy potentials for her own realizations of dharma; the disciple requests the guru's energy to germinate her own energy potentials; the guru gives the disciple his energy and thereby bestows upon her insight and happiness. Sections five and nine are thus the binary visualizations which enable and terminate, respectively, the exchange of offerings and requests for the positive energies of merit and blessings in sections six, seven, and eight.

To what end is all this positive energy amassed? We know from sections one and ten that the ritual is to be enacted with *bodhicitta*—the wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all. More specifically, Gyatso explains that the *Lama Chopa* text was composed “as a preliminary practice for Vajrayana Mahamudra” (ibid. 1). Mahāmudrā is a meditation method referred to as the quick path to enlightenment: “Many of Je Tsongkhapa's faithful followers have reached enlightenment in three years by practicing the Vajrayana Mahamudra of the Gelugpa Tradition” (ibid. 18). In this context Vajrayāna Mahāmudrā refers to the ‘completion stage’ practices of ‘highest yoga tantra’ whose objective is the union of the mind of bliss with the object of emptiness. According to Gyatso, “‘maha’ means ‘great,’ and refers to spontaneous great bliss;

and ‘mudra’ here means ‘non-deceptive,’ and refers to emptiness” (ibid. 62). The subtle mind known as ‘spontaneous great bliss’ is prized for the reason that it mixes so readily with the object of emptiness (ibid. 79). Gyatso defines emptiness as “lack of inherent existence, the ultimate nature of all phenomena” (ibid. 364). Emptiness is understood to be the way things actually exist, and the reality of which sentient beings are utterly ignorant. It is the realization of emptiness which liberates oneself from the cycle of suffering known as ‘samsara’ (ibid. 3).

It is at the close of section nine, having received the guru’s blessings and visualized his dissolution into her mind at her heart that the disciple engages in mahamudra meditation. Having just conjured the spiritual guide in an idealized form, and used this guru-deity to procure the positive energies of merit and blessings, the ritual culminates in the utter dissolution into emptiness, not only of the visualized guru, but of oneself and the universe:

With delight, [our Guru] comes to the crown of our head and ... descends through our central channel to our heart. We feel that our Guru’s mind of spontaneous great bliss mixes with our subtle mind, and as a result our mind is transformed into spontaneous great bliss. With this mind of bliss we then meditate on emptiness ... We should try strongly to imagine that everything has dissolved into emptiness, and that our mind has mixed with this in a space-like equipoise. ... This is definitive Guru yoga. (ibid. 272)

It is in emptiness—the disciple’s perception of which is the final aim of guru yoga—that the distinction between guru and disciple is eliminated. The exchange of energy functions finally, therefore, to accomplish the complete merging of its parties in emptiness.

With ‘the actual practice’ explicated and the concept of emptiness introduced, we can now return to sections two, three, and four. The meditation in section two contains an abbreviated version of that which concludes section nine: “Gradually, from the outer edges of the universe everything ... dissolves inwards, leaving behind only emptiness, until everything has dissolved into our body. Then our body slowly disappears ... Now everything has become

emptiness” (ibid. 65-66). One then imagines emerging from this emptiness in the form of their personal tantric deity (ibid. 67). The generation of pure appearances from emptiness is continued in section three when light rays radiate from one’s deity body and transform all beings and environments into “an exquisite array of immaculately pure good qualities” (ibid. 69). Finally, particular emphasis is placed on purifying the substances, laid out and imagined, that will form the basis of the offerings made to the field of merit in section six. The purified offering substances arise out of emptiness as well as bestow upon their recipients the realization of emptiness (ibid. 71). The role of these three single-verse ‘preliminary practices’ is fairly clear: before the offering recipient of the field of merit is generated from emptiness, the offerer, her environment and peers, and her offerings, must be similarly purified in emptiness.

Our Lévi-Strauss-ian analysis is now complete. Gyatso’s list of ten subsections provided us with descriptions of the ritual’s basic elements. We then explored the major concepts in each section and charted how these elements relate to form the system of guru yoga. We’ve discovered that this system can be described as an energy economy bracketed by the setting and sealing of intention, whose participants—guru and disciple—are generated and dissolved in emptiness. From here it is not difficult to isolate, in the manner of Hans Penner, the mediated binary relation at the puja’s centre. The results are remarkably similar to those which Penner drew from his Pali myth analyses.

Of the action sentences cited in the tenfold list above, the most prominent binary set of relational terms are those highlighted in bold: ‘I’ or ‘me,’ and ‘Guru-Deity’ or ‘Guru’ or ‘Vajra Holder’ or ‘Spiritual Guide.’ Not surprisingly, in a ritual of guru devotion, the central concept binary is guru/disciple. How are these concepts mediated? Our analysis appears to have isolated two mediating concepts, the first of which reaffirms Penner’s findings: the gift

(offerings/blessings) and emptiness. As the principal means of exchange or two-way communication between guru and disciple, the gift is indeed the binary's mediator. Emptiness, however, does not facilitate an exchange between guru and disciple, so much as enable and effect their transvaluation. We can conclude then, using Penner's language, that in the guru yoga ritual of *Lama Chopa*, guru and disciple are inseparable; the one defines the other mediated by the gift, transvalued by emptiness. A brief but insightful discussion of this kind of system is Charlene E. Makley's description of Tibetan tantric rituals as frameworks for offerings-for-blessings gift exchanges in which incarnate lamas act as embodied "media of *transvaluation*" (Makley 2002, 58).

### Chapter III

#### Comparative Cultural Analysis: Explanation of the Guru/Disciple Relation in Tibetan and Euro-North American Formations

This chapter subjects guru yoga's first and primary element, the guru/disciple binary, to a comparative cultural analysis in order to gain an improved understanding of how this practice is being adapted to a Euro-North American context. The terms of the prevailing Tibetan and Euro-North American constructions of the guru/disciple binary are here identified through structural analyses of the ethnographies by Mills (2003) and Capper (2002) introduced in chapter one.

The method of structural analysis employed is drawn from Bruce Lincoln's schematization of "the logical structure whereby social hierarchies are recoded in taxonomic form" (Lincoln 1992, 133). Lincoln's combination of a taxonomic tree with a serial ranking serves as a model for identifying the hierarchical constituents and relational principles of Tibetan and Euro-North American guru/disciple praxes. Generally, Lincoln's method reveals two things: "the sequence of binary oppositions (which organizes the system's form) and the identity of the taxonomizers deployed (which gives it its specific content)" (ibid. 140). In our case: the sets of ranked elements (*taxa*) in Tibetan and Euro-North American praxes of the guru/disciple hierarchy, and the valued bases of discrimination defining each set (taxonomizers).

#### 3.1 Kumbum Gompa, Ladakh: Mills 2003

We have already seen Mills show that the three basic *taxa* of the Tibetan system of religious authority are, in decreasing rank: incarnate, monk, and householder—where the incarnate is the guru, and the monk and householder are subclasses of disciple. In reliance upon his own theoretical constitution of a distinctly Himalayan conception of personhood—defined, as we've seen, by the notion of "diffuse chthonic agency" (Mills 2003, 257)—Mills identifies the

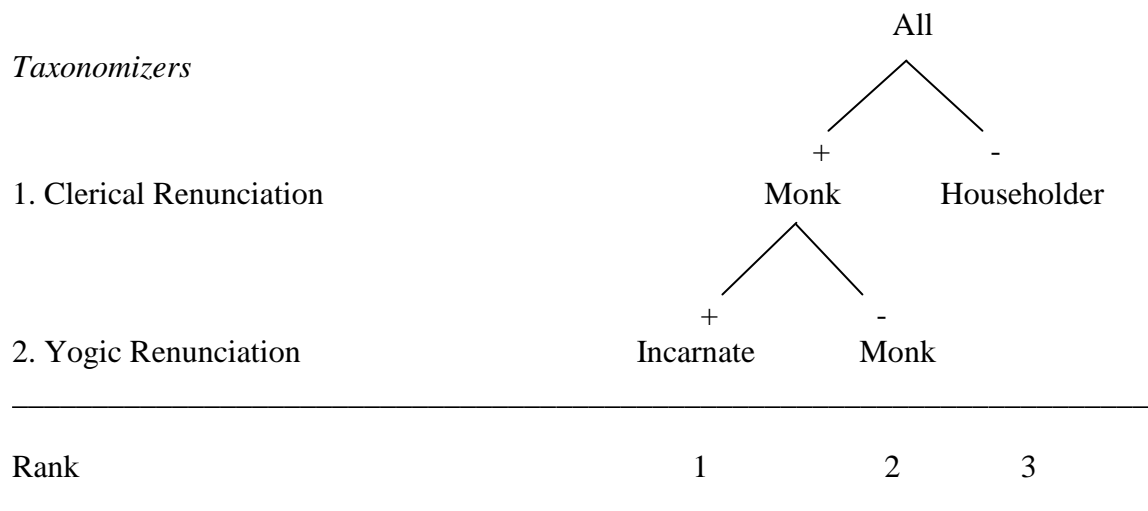
taxonomizers determining the nature of this three-fold hierarchy. Its first-order taxonomizer, the value which sets monk above householder, is shown to be ‘clerical renunciation;’ its second-order taxonomizer, that which sets incarnate above monk, is ‘yogic renunciation.’

To recall, ‘clerical renunciation,’ for Mills, is “the social separation of individuals’ roles from modes of [economic] production and [sexual] reproduction” (ibid. 74); and ‘yogic renunciation’ is “the recreation of the ordinary body as the ‘illusory body’ of the tutelary divinity ... within the death state” (ibid. 282). One’s level of socially constructed religious authority is therefore directly proportionate to one’s level of socially recognized renunciation. It is the degree of transcendence of, and mastery over, “the forces of embodiment” (ibid. 283) which determines one’s place in the Tibetan three-fold hierarchy of renunciation-based religious authority: “[A]lthough monks may attain ritual authority through the renunciation of the active processes of embodiment, they cannot in general overcome the fact of their already established embodiment (i.e. their own births)” (ibid. 305). Only the incarnate lama, or *tulku*, is understood to have accomplished this level of ‘yogic’ renunciation, through his attainment of a Buddha’s illusory body in death and his subsequent *choice* of earthly incarnation.

The traditional Tibetan construction of the guru/disciple hierarchy—its culturally specific system of religious authority—can thus be represented in the following way:



Figure 1: Kumbum Gompa's Guru/Disciple Hierarchy



*Personhood:* *diffuse chthonic agency*  
*Taxonomizers:* *clerical renunciation; yogic renunciation*  
*Taxa:* *incarnate (+/+) → monk (+/-) → householder (-/-)*

### **3.2 Siddha Gompa, New York: Capper 2002**

To discern the taxa and taxonomizers defining the modern Euro-North American praxis of the guru/disciple relation, we can apply Lincoln's structural method to Capper's ethnography of American Tibetan Buddhists. In Mills' work, the guru/disciple hierarchy's taxa and taxonomizers and the cultural conception of personhood at its base are explicitly presented as his work's principal theoretical objects (ibid. 25). Our own constitution of the same theoretical elements from Capper's data requires first charting the general features of Siddha's guru/disciple hierarchy in a manner which corresponds to their documentation by Mills at Kumbum. The most visible features of Kumbum's hierarchy can be located in five different sites of authority, or domains of social differentiation: spatial, economic, institutional, ritual, and charismatic.

### Spatial

Spatially, both the seating (ibid. 34) and sleeping (ibid. 37-8) arrangements at Kumbum Gompa situate the incarnate lama physically higher than the monks, and the laity lower than both. We see a similar seating (Capper 2002, 106-7) and sleeping (ibid. 105-6) arrangement at Siddha Gompa, except that ‘lamas,’ and not monks, occupy the middle position—seated lower than the incarnate’s throne in the main shrine room (ibid. 106) but higher than the rest of the community in the Tara shrine room (ibid. 107). A ‘lama’ at Siddha is not necessarily a Tibetan monk, but anyone (male, female, lay, or ordained) who has completed the requisite three-year meditation retreat and received subsequent certification (ibid. 108-9). Upon the incarnate’s throne at the head of the main shrine room (*dukhang*) at both Kumbum (Mills 2003, 34) and Siddha (Capper 2002, 106), there rest large photos of each community’s principle incarnate. At Kumbum, the representative image of the current Dalai Lama is “more than a nominal presence: the photograph is used as a focus of ritual attention and respect, and is presented with offerings of food” (Mills 2003, 34). At Siddha, the photo is of the monastery’s physically absent founder, Gyalwa Tulku, for whom the elevated sleeping quarters are also reserved.

### Economic

In each monastery, Tibetan and American, the incarnate’s supreme authority is also evident in the economic sphere. In Tibet, whereas the *shaks* of ordinary monks are financially dependent on their natal households, “high incarnates are the inheritors of substantial landed property: each reincarnation inherits the property and religious students of the previous incarnation in their line, an estate referred to as the *labrang* ... or ‘lama’s resting place’” (ibid. 313). Mills considers this economic distinction to be one of the plainest instances of “the *trapa/tulku* divide” (ibid. 312) in Gelug-pa monasticism. There is a clear parallel at New York’s

Siddha Gompa: “Financially the *gompa* is divided into eight departments: hotel, temple, bookstore, Potala Ling [retreat centre], health care, parsonage (Sherab Tulku’s residence), affiliate centers, and the fund to bring Gyalwa Tulku from Tibet to Siddha Gompa” (Capper 2002, 115). This means that of Siddha’s eight accounts, one is dedicated to the local incarnate’s residence, and another to the visiting incarnate’s travel costs. Aside from these two incarnates, no other individual at Siddha has their own allotted source of funds, not even its fully ordained abbot, Sangye Rinpoche.

Thus far, in its spatial and economic aspects, the Tibetan guru/disciple hierarchy of *incarnate* → *monk* → *householder* appears to have been adapted to an American setting without major alteration: *incarnate* → *lama* → *non-lama*. When we look at Siddha’s institutional, ritual, and charismatic structures of authority, however, we find more marked variances from the traditional Tibetan model.

### Institutional

Institutionally, the structure of monastic offices at Kumbum is directly connected to the hierarchy of ordination: the more monastic vows one holds the more authoritative a post one is qualified for. There are six posts which range from gompa ‘manager’ (*nyerpa*), or fundraiser, through to the head monk or ‘teacher’ (*lopon*). The *lopon*’s authority is second only to the ‘professor’ (*khenpo*), usually a highly educated incarnate lama, who, as we have seen, stands above and beyond the ordinary monastic hierarchy. As Kumbum was not large enough to have its own resident incarnate, the *lopon* fulfilled many of the *khenpo*’s bureaucratic duties (Mills 2003, 46-7). The traditional ordination hierarchy is itself a clear indicator of the same *trapa/tulku* divide we saw in the spatial and economic domains. It has three levels: *trapa* (students with no vows), *gyets’ul* (semi-ordained with 36 vows), and *gyelong* (fully ordained with 253 vows).

While the *lopon*, who is necessarily a *gyelong* monk, can admit new *trapas* (ibid. 41), only a *tulku* can admit new *gyets'ul* and *gyelong* monks (ibid. 44-5).

Turning to the institutional hierarchy at New York's Siddha Gompa, we see something else going on. Although Siddha follows the Tibetan tradition of having distinct secular and spiritual "centres of administrative power" (Capper 2002, 111), spiritual authority does not rest with Siddha's resident incarnate lama, Sherab Tulku, as it would traditionally in Tibet. Instead it rests with the gompa's "titular abbot and central guru" (ibid. 109), the non-incarnate *gyelong* monk, Sangye Rinpoche. This appears to represent an inversion of the traditional Tibetan system of religious authority: Whereas Kumbum's *gyelong* teacher, as second to the incarnate, would perform many of the incarnate's duties in his absence (Mills 2003, 46), Sherab Tulku, as second to Siddha's *gyelong* abbot, would take on the role of the community's *de facto* leader only in the absence of Sangye Rinpoche (Capper 2002, 112).

Siddha's secular authority rests with the gompa's President, Lama Sempa, "a former monk who had his vows relaxed by the eleventh Gyalwa Tulku in order to facilitate his integration with American society" (ibid. 111)—although in practice, Sangye Rinpoche's authority often receives privilege in this sphere too (ibid. 112). Then come the rest of the American gompa residents: "Ranking below these three highest sources of authority, all Tibetan, are the manager, assistant manager, fund raising manager, construction manager, and Potala Ling [retreat centre] overseer, all Americans" (ibid. 112), including "a monk named Horace" (ibid. 113). Siddha Gompa's institutional hierarchy can therefore be described as *Tibetan monk* → *Tibetan incarnate* → *Tibetan former monk* → *American Tibetan Buddhists*.

Capper makes it clear that although Sherab Tulku is a married layman, technically—or traditionally, we could say—his spiritual authority is greater than that of Sangye Rinpoche:

“Sangye Rinpoche is the titular head as abbot but Sherab Tulku, as a *tulku* (Tib. *sprul sku*), is a Tibetan-style avatar of Buddha and thus is spiritually higher” (Capper 2002, 112). This may explain why “generally members of the *gompa* community will take one of these lamas as their *tsawe lama*, or root guru” (ibid. 109), although none of Capper’s seven American interpreters took Sherab Tulku as their root guru. In institutional title and practice, Sangye Rinpoche holds the highest spiritual authority at Siddha Gompa.

### Ritual

One of the more disappointing aspects of Capper’s ethnography is its poor documentation of Siddha Gompa’s ritual activity. Aside from “the presiding lama,” we are not told, for example, who bestows tantric empowerments at Siddha. At Kumbum, Mills recounts an anecdote that illustrates both the guru-deity status of Dagon Rinpoche, an eminent visiting incarnate, as well as the gulf between his ritual authority and that of ordinary lamas. For several weeks leading up to a Yamantaka empowerment in 1994, a group of novice monks worked under the instruction of a visiting *gyelong* tantra teacher to construct a highly elaborate sand mandala. During this time “laity regarded the rite with neutral indifference, declaring it to be ‘monks’ business” (Mills 2003, 130). When the construction was complete and the mandala consecrated, Dagon Rinpoche arrived at Kumbum, took over from the senior tantra teacher and presided over the rest of the empowerment. “Immediately lay interest increased dramatically, and village households suddenly started jockeying for a position on the sponsorship rota for the rite” (ibid. 131). It is not that only incarnate lamas could perform empowerments in the traditional Tibetan system, but rather that “empowerments by incarnates attract such attention because of their enhanced ability to ‘manifest’ divine realities as focuses of blessing, over and above that produced by ‘ordinary’ (non-incarnate) monks” (ibid. 131).

In Capper's account of Siddha Gompa's six principal Buddhist practices (ibid. 116-21), the clearest picture of a social hierarchy appears in his description of teachings: "Teachings are given, with the exception of beginning meditation, only by lamas who have completed at least one three-year retreat" (ibid. 117). Thus in the ritual forum of pedagogy, the social distinction is the same as was constructed spatially in the Tara shrine room: those who had completed a three-year meditation retreat above those who had not—lamas as teachers, non-lamas as students.

### Charismatic

Finally, we can consider charismatic forms of authority at Kumbum and Siddha Gompas. The above story of the Yamantaka empowerment at Kumbum also demonstrates what Mills insists is the essentially charismatic authority of the incarnate: "the ritual authority of incarnates was located within their status as yogic renunciators ... who had *personally* attained a certain level of renunciation. ...the ideology of [Dagon Rinpoche's] position was located in his acts as a sacred centre, a Buddha figure in his own right" (ibid. 301). Examples abound in Mill's ethnography of Dagon Rinpoche being shown the respect of a deity by Kumbum monks and local laity, the most colorful of which is the account of his retinue's arrival in Lingshed in August of 1994, whereupon "laity rushed ahead of the monks, pressing their heads against the soles of the incarnate's feet" (ibid. 265).

At Siddha Gompa, one of the closest correlations to the level of respect shown Dagon Rinpoche at Kumbum is an account of the respect shown Sangye Rinpoche, whose "authority on all matters is deeply entrenched. For example, all rise and raise hands in prayer, necks slightly bent forward, when [Sangye Rinpoche] enters the room for meals. No other resident receives this honor" (Capper 2002, 111). Once again, the figure at Siddha whose level of authority most

closely resembles that of Dagon Rinpoche, Kumbum's visiting incarnate, is Sangye Rinpoche, Siddha's resident full monk.

### Taxa and Taxonomizers

There appear to coexist two distinct authority structures at Siddha Gompa: a traditional, largely symbolic, *incarnate* → *monk* hierarchy evident in the spatial and economic spheres; and another living, operational hierarchy of *monk* → *incarnate* in which Sangye Rinpoche's authority is higher than that of Sherab Tulku in institutional, ritual, and charismatic terms. The first model affirms Bishop's assertion that Western Tibetan Buddhist communities are organized traditionally according to the Tibetan monastic hierarchy (Bishop 1993, 98). It also, however, seems to affirm Samuel's claim that such contacts between Western organizations and their traditional "higher-level [Tibetan] structures" (Samuel 2005, 307) "are significant, but they do not ... amount to very much in the way of hierarchical authority" (ibid. 308). Siddha's second hierarchical model, we must conclude, represents an American adaptation of the traditional Tibetan authority structure.

What is the basis of Sangye Rinpoche's unmatched authority as the "central guru" of Siddha Gompa? Why do American gompa residents choose, as part of the "technology of the self" that is their practice of Tibetan Buddhist guru devotion, to bestow upon Sangye Rinpoche the authority of their own *tsawe lama*? According to all Capper's interpreters, the primary factor in their wish to adopt this guru/disciple relationship lay in the charismatic person of the lama, this time in the felt experience of his compassion: "All ... interpreters, and many other Americans I have spoken with, describe the felt caring and compassionate nature of their lama as a primary foundation for enchantment. These interpreters are unanimous in describing their lamas as nearly superhuman in the embodiment of concern for the welfare of others" (Capper

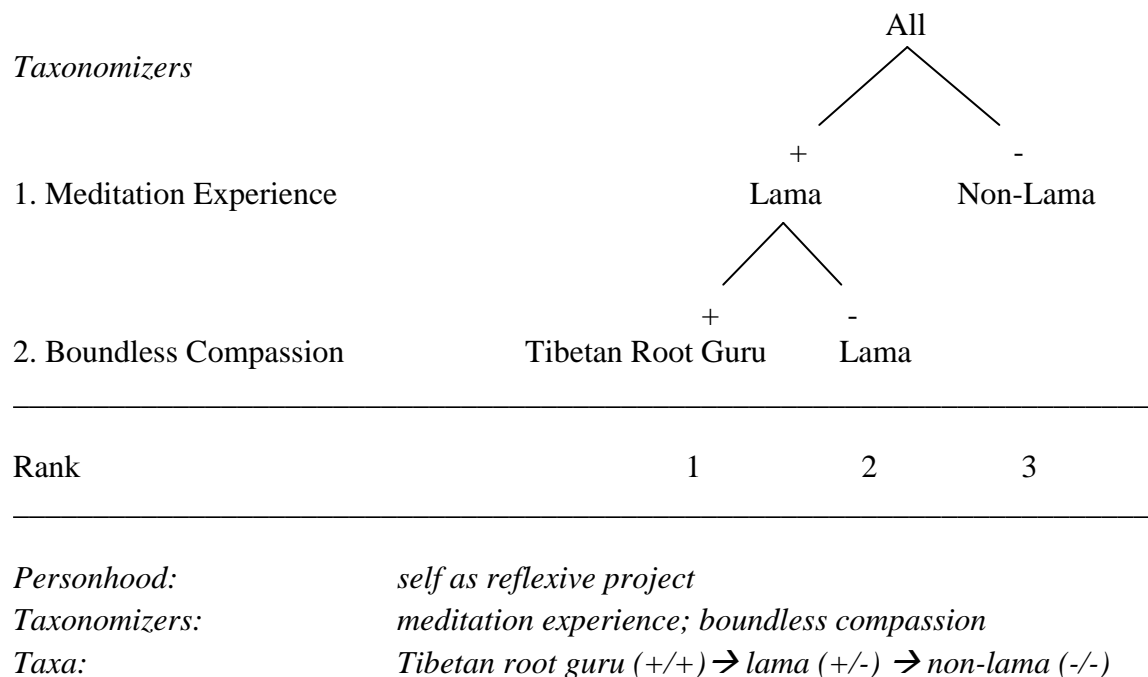
2002, 177). Capper concludes that through “idealizing and introjecting notions of compassion as embodied in their lamas, these Buddhists appear to resolve American difficulties that are at once psychological and social” (ibid. 233).

A portrait of Siddha Gompa’s functioning system of religious authority is now discernible. In institutional and charismatic domains, Sangye Rinpoche, the most commonly adopted root guru of American residents, clearly holds Siddha’s highest authority. In the spatial and ritual domains, lamas, as three-year retreat graduates and qualified teachers, occupy Siddha’s intermediary authority position between Sangye Rinpoche and American disciples. This system’s three basic *taxa*, therefore, are, in decreasing rank: Tibetan root guru, lama, and non-lama. Its first-order taxonomizer, the value which sets lama above non-lama, is a publically recognized level of meditation experience; its second-order taxonomizer, that which sets root guru above lama, is a disciple’s privately recognized experience of a lama’s “felt boundless compassion” (ibid. 178).

The contemporary American construction of the guru/disciple hierarchy—its culturally specific system of religious authority—can thus be represented in the following way:



Figure 2: Siddha Gompa's Guru/Disciple Hierarchy



### Kumbum and Siddha

From our analyses of the guru/disciple hierarchies practiced in Ladakh and New York, we can make the following preliminary conclusion: *In the transplantation of Tibetan Buddhism to the United States, the basis of the guru's authority has shifted from institutionally recognized renunciation to individually felt compassion.* With Capper's portrait of Siddha Gompa as exemplar, we can now take as test cases, the two international Tibetan Buddhist networks with Euro-North American roots already briefly introduced: the FPMT and the NKT.

### 3.3 Euro-North American Case Study 1: FPMT

On its main website, the FPMT describes itself as an organization “based on the Buddhist tradition of Lama Tsongkhapa of Tibet as taught to us by our founder, Lama Thubten Yeshe and our spiritual director, Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche.” Recognized as a child as the reincarnation

of the abbess of Chi-me Lung Gompa near his Tibetan birthplace, Lama Yeshe entered Je College of Sera Monastery near Lhasa at the age of six. There he lived and studied until 1959 when he was forced to flee into northeast India with many of his peers (Melton and Baumann 2010, 1125) The FPMT “derived not from Dharamsala but from a small centre established in 1971 at Kopan, near Kathmandu, by Western followers of Lama Thubten Yeshe (1935-1984) and his student, a young dGe-lugs-pa incarnate lama from Nepal, Thubten Zopa Rinpoche (b.1946)” (Samuel 2005, 301).

Lamas Yeshe and Zopa founded the first organization of Western monks and nuns at Kopan, which became the basis of one of the earliest Tibetan Buddhist teacher training programs for Westerners (Cozort 2003, 225-6). After Lama Yeshe’s death in 1984, Lama Zopa inherited the role of FPMT’s spiritual director and “announced that Lama Yeshe had taken rebirth in the West in the form of a Spanish boy called Osel Hita Torres” (Kay 2004, 114). As a young boy ‘Lama Osel’ began studying at the re-established Sera Monastery in India, in line to replace Lama Zopa as the FPMT’s spiritual director (Melton and Baumann 2010, 1125). The FPMT’s website explains that “Today he prefers to be called simply ‘Osel’ ... [and] is completing a course of Western studies in Europe.”

### Spatial

The most notable evidence I found of a spatially constructed hierarchy in the FPMT was a pair of photos, taken in 1975 and 1976, published in the July-September 2010 issue of its official magazine, *Mandala*. They each depict a senior Western male student, one lay and one ordained, delivering a public examination under the direct supervision—and seated directly under the throne—of the FPMT’s two founding incarnate lamas, Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa

(FPMT 2010, 18-9). Both photos spatially exhibit a hierarchy of *incarnate founder* → *non-incarnate senior practitioner*.

### Economic

Of the FPMT's seventeen "charitable projects" welcoming donations through the organization's website, only two are for the general activities of particular individuals: "Lama Zopa Rinpoche's Other Projects" and the "Osel Support Fund." Another one is the "Long Life Puja Fund" which welcomes donations in sponsorship of pujas dedicated to the long life of either the Dalai Lama or Lama Zopa. Donors can choose whose long life puja they would like to sponsor by clicking separate links from the project's website, which explains: "FPMT is committed to offering long life pujas every year for our teachers, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and our immeasurably precious Spiritual Director, Lama Zopa Rinpoche. These pujas include ... beautiful traditional offerings, modern gifts, and money offerings." A practitioner who attended a one month Lam Rim course at Kopan Monastery in Kathmandu recounts that the course "culminated with participants making the traditional offering of long life prayers and monetary donations to Lama Zopa Rinpoche at the end of his teachings ... [and] at the close of Chokyi Nima and Thrangu Rinpoche's seminars" (Moran 2004, 72). The latter two teachers are both incarnate lamas.

In her recent ethnographic analysis of Buddhist practice at Vajrayana Institute, an FPMT centre in Ashfield, Australia, Glenys Eddy explains:

The Centre has a director, a board or executive committee, a centre manager, an office manager, and one or two paid administrative staff. Since 1991 the Centre has had a succession of highly revered lamas as resident teachers. The teacher-in-residence from 1991 to 1999 was Geshe Thubten Dawa ... Other resident lamas have been Logoan Rinpoche (December 2000 to January 2002), and Geshe Ngawang Samten (August 2003 to the present). (Eddy 2007, 122)

None of the resident geshes mentioned are incarnate lamas, but according to FPMT policy, they would each receive a salary: “An FPMT geshe is a qualified geshe requested by Lama Zopa Rinpoche to serve in one of his centers when that center has a stable, committed community that can support a residence and salary for the geshe” (FPMT 2010, 22).

It appears the FPMT’s incarnate lamas are the only official ‘merit fields’ as institutionalized recipients of monetary gifts, while resident Tibetan geshes and certain non-Tibetan administrative staff receive a salary for their services. The economic hierarchy is therefore *incarnate* → *non-incarnate*.

### Institutional

As spiritual director, Lama Zopa holds the position of highest institutional authority in the FPMT. Lama Zopa’s institutional authority is shared with the organization’s board of directors, the members of which are Tibetan and non-Tibetan, ordained and lay, male and female, and whose only incarnate is Osel.

Each FPMT centre also has a resident teacher (RT), a centre director (CD) and a spiritual program coordinator (SPC). The latter two positions seem to respectively parallel the separate secular and spiritual centres of administrative power we saw at Siddha. Anyone with institutional authority in the FPMT is to understand themselves as an ambassador of their spiritual director: “FPMT center, project, or service teachers, directors, and staff are ... seen as representing Lama Zopa Rinpoche, and the FPMT; in that way, they act as ambassadors, and their behavior is a reflection on Rinpoche and the entire organization” (FPMT 2008, 4). The FPMT’s institutional hierarchy can be described as *incarnate founder* → *others*.

## Ritual

The FPMT's preeminent ritual performer is, not surprisingly, Lama Zopa: "Although various meditation and Tantric practices are taught, the FPMT describe their main practice as 'following the spiritual advice of Lama Zopa Rinpoche,'" (Melton and Baumann 2010, 1125-6). Numerous monthly newsletters, viewable on the FPMT's website, indicate that Lama Zopa, an incarnate non-geshe, frequently bestows initiations of 'highest yoga tantra' (*anuttara yoga*) and of lower tantras such as 'action tantra' (*kriya tantra*). In addition to its RT geshe, "FPMT has four geshe who serve as touring teachers for the organization, giving teachings, initiations and commentaries in FPMT centers worldwide" (FPMT 2010, 22). One of these three geshe, Lobsang Tenzin Rinpoche is a non-incarnate who was invited by Lama Zopa to act as an FPMT vajra master, according to a July 2010 newsletter available on the organization's website. An October 2006 online newsletter from the FPMT's Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London announces that the same Lobsang Tenzin Rinpoche would be giving the initiation of Yamāntaka in Barcelona later that month, an initiation of 'highest yoga tantra.' This indicates that both incarnate non-geshe (e.g. Lama Zopa), and non-incarnate geshe (e.g. Lobsang Tenzin) have the authority to bestow highest yoga tantra initiations in the FPMT.

During a Medicine Buddha practice day at Vajrayana Institute, Geshe Samten, the centre's non-incarnate RT, gave the precepts, while a lay Australian woman, Margaret Castles, facilitated the day's *sādhana*s and meditations (Eddy 2007, 271). In general, Eddy explains that "the organization and facilitation of group rituals are by the experienced, advanced practitioners" (ibid. 126). Cozort specifies the highest level of ritual authority given to its non-lamas:

The FPMT is planning to designate as *Lopon (slob dpon)* a group of senior teachers who will carry the most authority. ... Lopons are approved by the spiritual director of the FPMT, Lama Thupten Zopa Rinpoche. The principal criteria for Lopons is that they have at least ten years of service to the FPMT ... Lopons can teach broadly ...

[and] can also confer certain types of [non-initiatory] vows ... [and] transmissions (*lung*) of mantras ... In other words, Lopons can function as lamas, although they will not give tantric initiations. (Cozort 2003, 242-3)

It appears, therefore, that the FPMT's highest ritual actions (tantric initiations) can only be performed by Tibetan incarnates or geshe, while senior Western practitioners can do all else.

The FPMT has always tried to establish Tibetan geshe as the RT's of its major centres (Samuel 2005, 311-2), a strategy which David Kay suggests has been a major factor in its success (Kay 2004, 55-6). Many of them have a Western monk or nun as an assistant (Melton and Baumann 2010, 1125). Officially, the job of an RT geshe is "to teach, to provide spiritual guidance, to inspire each student on their path to enlightenment, and serve as a significant object of merit, particularly if he is ordained. ... He becomes the heart of a center on Lama Zopa Rinpoche's behalf" (FPMT 2010, 22). Not only incarnates, as we saw above, but geshe too are to act as official 'merit fields' for their community.

Of the FPMT's fifty-five RT's listed on their main website, forty-one, or 75%, are geshe. Of the nine RT's listed in the United States, there is one non-Tibetan nun, one non-Tibetan lay male, one non-Tibetan lay female, and six geshe, one of whom is also an incarnate. All FPMT RT's are appointed by Lama Zopa.

Eddy explains that the teachings at Vajrayana Institute are given in either Western or traditional Tibetan style, the former being introductory 'Discovering Buddhism' (DB) classes given by non-Tibetans, the latter being more advanced weekly courses usually given by a Tibetan monk (Eddy 2007, 135-6). Both "conclude with the dedication of merit, and usually the long life prayer for His Holiness and Lama Zopa" (ibid. 128).

In addition to DB, the FPMT offers two advanced education programs, the 'Basic Program' (BP) and the 'Masters Program' (MP). Completion of BP requires five years of textual

study, completion of a one-month meditation retreat, and usually the lay *pratimoksa* vows. Generally, BP graduates can teach DB topics they have studied, and can sometimes become RT's of smaller centres (Cozort 2003, 226-8). The MP is a seven-year residential program at the FPMT's Instituto Lama Tsong Khapa in Italy, taught by two geshees with senior Western assistants. In addition to intensive textual studies, MP graduates must complete three months of meditation retreat during the program, and upon graduation can become senior RT's of major centres (ibid. 228-9). The FPMT's ritual hierarchy appears to be *incarnate founder* → *geshe/incarnate* → *senior practitioner*.

### Charismatic

Although he holds no institutional position in the FPMT, the world's most famous incarnate, the Dalai Lama, "continues to represent [FPMT's] highest source of inspiration, authority, and legitimation" (Kay 2004, 114). In the FPMT's administrative training manual, Lama Zopa states: "Any good thing the FPMT organization has been able to offer ... comes first by the kindness of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and second by the kindness of Lama Yeshe" (FPMT 2007, 8). The Dalai Lama's authority in the FPMT, however, appears to be akin to that of Gyalwa Tulku's "absent presence" (Samuel 2005, 321) at Siddha Gompa—that is, mainly symbolic.

On the following page of the same manual, Khenrinpoche Lama Lhundup delivers what is surely the strongest statement affirming one individual's active authority in the FPMT: "[I]t is extremely important to realize and always remember that being part of an FPMT center and part of the organization naturally means that Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche is our main spiritual guide and advisor—our heart" (ibid. 9). Lama Zopa is the principal guru of all FPMT practitioners.

Eddy notes that the figure of the Tibetan lama generally holds a certain level of symbolic power over Vajrayana Institute's Australian students: "From my own observations, the lama or geshe as a symbol of religious authority, and as a representation of the enlightened mind, becomes a strong influence, from philosophical and ethical perspectives, in the deliberations and actions of students" (Eddy 2007, 163). She also reminds us that individual practitioners' attitudes towards all these authority figures varies greatly, as was true at Siddha Gompa:

[L]ocal lamas, geshe, Sangha members and lay teachers can all be seen as authority figures in a more immediate sense. ... I have observed from students' responses ... that individual responses to the role of the teacher vary. Some acknowledge the position of teacher and simply pay respect to the person who occupies the position, while others exhibit more of a tendency to cast *their* teacher or guru in the role of parent or therapist. (ibid. 162)

What seems self-evident to Eddy is that it is the figure of the teacher whose authority carries the most weight for FPMT practitioners, the bulk of whom are students. We have already seen that teachers are either geshe or senior practitioners. The hierarchy of charismatic authority in the FPMT is therefore *incarnate founder* → *geshe/incarnate* → *senior practitioner*.

### Taxa and Taxonomizers

When all five domains are consolidated, the ritual and charismatic hierarchies can be said to reflect the basic authority structure of the FPMT: *incarnate founder* → *geshe/incarnate* → *non-Tibetan*.

Although the FPMT recognizes Lama Yeshe as its founder, I have been referring to Lama Zopa as 'incarnate founder' because as the former's closest disciple and partner in the organization's founding, he is presently seen as Lama Yeshe's living representative—aside from Osel of course, whose authority is in the wings. As is plain in each of the five domains, and unequivocally confirmed in Lama Lhundups's statement, Lama Zopa is the FPMT's central guru.



This brings us to the question of taxonomizers: What is the basis of his unmatched authority as the “main spiritual guide” of the FPMT?

Another reason I refer to Lama Zopa as the FPMT’s ‘incarnate founder’ is because the word ‘founder’ seems to identify an essential quality of seniority which differentiates Lama Zopa from the FPMT’s other incarnates. What, for example, makes his authority, as an incarnate non-geshe, higher than an incarnate geshe, since the latter would traditionally hold greater authority in Tibet? The fact that the former founded the very institution which supports both figures’ authority in the West. Only as a result of the FPMT’s founding, and only *within* the FPMT’s authority structure, is the traditional hierarchy reversed. As such, founderhood itself seems to chiefly define Lama Zopa’s authority as the main guru of the FPMT.

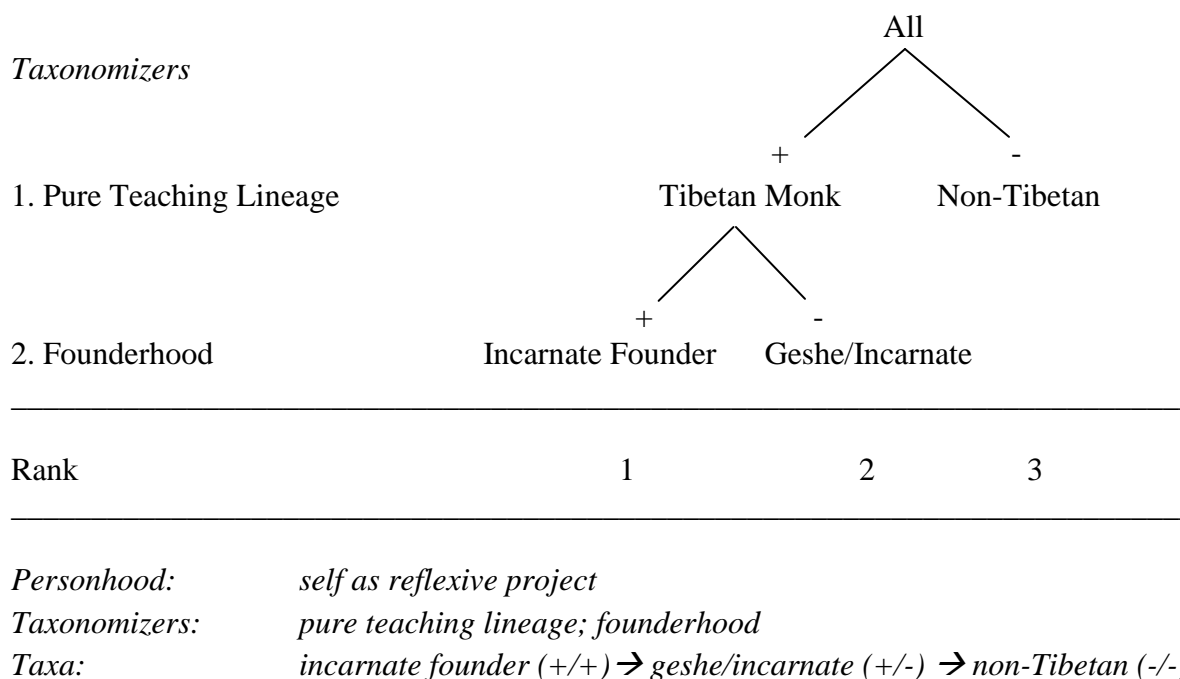
Among the FPMT’s teachers, what differentiates the authority of a Tibetan geshe/incarnate from that of a senior Western practitioner? We saw that the Tibetan lama or geshe acts as “a representation of the enlightened mind” (ibid. 163), and that a FPMT geshe’s official job description includes “to serve as a significant object of merit, particularly if he is ordained” for his students (FPMT 2010, 22). The answer, therefore, appears to be a combination of monkhood and Tibetan ethnicity. Bishop suggests that in Western communities, this divide reflects an emphasis on authenticity of lineage more than on clerical renunciation:

[A]n immense symbolic gap exists between ordained and un-ordained individuals. This gap has less to do with the rules of monastic discipline than with fantasies about the *authenticity* and *purity* of the Tibetan teachings, as well as fantasies about the uninterrupted authority of the reincarnated lineage of lamas. (Bishop 1993, 99)

We can conclude, then, that the first-order taxonomizer of the FPMT’s authority structure, that which sets the geshe/incarnate above a senior practitioner, is his possession of pure teaching lineage; its second-order taxonomizer, that which sets incarnate founder above geshe/incarnate, is founderhood itself. Both taxonomizers contain elements of seniority, or having experience.

The FPMT’s construction of the guru/disciple hierarchy—its specific system of religious authority—can thus be represented in the following way:

Figure 3: FPMT’s Guru/Disciple Hierarchy



### **3.4 Euro-North American Case Study 2: NKT**

All scholarship on the NKT notes the unmatched authority of its Tibetan founder, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso. Cozort describes the NKT as “a Western order that draws primarily upon the teachings of the Gelukpa tradition but is not subordinate to Tibetan authorities other than Geshe Gyatso himself” (Cozort 2003, 231). Born in Tibet in 1931, Gyatso was ordained a monk at the age of eight and enrolled at Sera Je college in 1950 (ibid. 230), a peer of Lama Yeshe’s. Gyatso is not a recognized incarnate lama. He fled Tibet in 1959 and lived in northern India until 1977, when he was invited by Lama Yeshe, and asked by his own guru, Trijang Rinpoche, to teach at the FPMT’s Manjushri Institute in Britain as its first resident geshe (ibid. 226). From the time of

Lama Yeshe's death in 1984, "Manjushri Institute began to develop primarily under the guidance of Geshe Kelsang and without reference to the FPMT" (Kay 2004, 64). Gyatso and his Manjushri students officially split from the FPMT in 1991 when they took over ownership of the centre property and formed the NKT (ibid. 64).

There are presently no incarnate lamas in the NKT, and aside from Geshe Kelsang, no other ethnic Tibetans (Bluck 2006, 145). The NKT's official statement that it will not follow traditional divinatory means of *tulku*-identification suggests incarnate lamas will have no role in the network's future: "To prevent Dharma being used for political aims or worldly achievement, no NKT-IKBU Dharma Centre shall follow any tradition of recognising and relying upon oracles, or follow any system of divination" (NKT 2010, 16§2).

### Spatial

Helen Waterhouse describes the main shrine room at the NKT's Amitabha Centre in Bath, England: "The room ... contains Geshe Kelsang's seat, made of flat dark red cushions such as might be seen in any traditional *gompa*. The seat is normally unoccupied except for a large framed photograph of Geshe Kelsang. Next to the seat Geshe Kelsang's china tea cup is always laid ready" (Waterhouse 1997, 149). Patricia Campbell describes the same *gompa* arrangement at Chandrakirti Centre in Toronto (Campbell 2011, 34). Several photos in the NKT's online image gallery depict a consistent seating pattern: Geshe Kelsang or a non-Tibetan monk or nun teaching from a raised throne; directly in front of the teacher are several consecutive rows of Western monks and nuns; behind them are many more rows of lay practitioners. The evident spatial hierarchy is *geshe founder* → *non-Tibetan ordained* → *non-Tibetan lay*

### Economic

Waterhouse suggests that, in contrast with another British Buddhist community, the NKT's emphasis on institutional expansion trumps its funding of individual members: "While the English Sangha Trust finances a monastic community, the NKT funds buildings and centres" (Waterhouse 1997, 144). At Manjushri Centre in England, "a few people are sponsored because of their NKT work but others are on 'extended working visits' or work locally" (Bluck 2006, 147). Their policy of individual sponsorship is explained on an official NKT website called *New Kadampa Truth*: "Many NKT members are supported with sponsorships to fulfill responsibilities such as teaching and other administrative tasks. ... Those sponsored by NKT Dharma Centers receive a monthly allotment for accommodation, utilities and food, plus a stipend."

With no evidence otherwise, this level of basic sponsorship presumably includes Geshe Kelsang, whose financial situation is mentioned on the same website: "Geshe Kelsang ... possesses very little. He gives everything that he is offered away, including the royalties on his books and all gifts of money, property, statues and so on." Finally, the NKT's *Internal Rules* details that no individual member shall receive gifts of funds generated from NKT festivals (NKT 2010, 14§8), nor shall benefit materially from "the name, resources or activities of any NKT-IKBU Dharma Centre, or the position given to them by the NKT-IKBU" (ibid. 18§8). There appears to be no clear economic hierarchy in the NKT.

### Institutional

Similarly to Siddha Gompa and the FPMT, the NKT's organizational structure is "predicated upon the complete separation of the spiritual and secular" (Kay 2004, 85). Each NKT centre has "three basic positions of responsibility: the resident teacher and the education programme co-ordinator, who jointly oversee the centre's spiritual growth, and the

administrative director, who takes care of its legal, financial and material concerns” (ibid. 85). Kay quotes a senior NKT monk’s general explanation of the authority structure of the organization: “The NKT hierarchy is Geshe Kelsang; and then there’s a successor, someone who will be the spiritual director of the NKT after Geshe Kelsang passes away; and then there’s everybody else, all on the same level really” (ibid. 84).

Six years after Kay published the above quote, the NKT’s 2010 edition of its *Internal Rules* indicates that the organization has since developed a system of succession in which no single individual is chosen as permanent successor to Geshe Kelsang. The document specifies: “The NKT-IKBU shall always have a General Spiritual Director and a Deputy Spiritual Director (‘the GSD’ and ‘the DSD’), who shall each carry the title ‘Gen-la’” (NKT 2010, 5§1.) The GSD and DSD are not appointed by Geshe Kelsang, but chosen through election by all NKT member centres represented by their resident teachers (RT) (ibid. 1§4, 5§10, 5§12), to eight-year terms of office (ibid. 5§7). Charged with the responsibility “to lead individuals and society in general into the pure spiritual paths of the New Kadampa Tradition” (ibid. 5§4), the GSD clearly holds the NKT’s highest institutional authority: “The Spiritual Director of each and every NKT-IKBU Dharma Centre shall always be the person who is the duly elected General Spiritual Director of the NKT-IKBU” (ibid. 1§2). Every country with NKT centres also has its own National Spiritual Director (NSD), “the spiritual representative of the NKT-IKBU in that country,” who is recommended by the GSD and DSD, and elected by the country’s RT’s (ibid. 6§1) to a term of four years (ibid. 6§4).

Kay explains that “Except at the very highest levels of the organisation, positions of responsibility, teaching and leadership are as likely to be filled by lay practitioners as they are by monks or nuns” (Kay 2004, 85). Although largely “democratised and laicised” (ibid. 85), the

*Internal Rules* stipulate that “Only the GSD and DSD shall have the authority to grant ordination within the NKT-IKBU. Because of this, it is necessary that the GSD and DSD themselves shall always be ordained” (NKT 2010, 5§5). The website of Kadampa Meditation Centre Canada in Toronto names Geshe Kelsang as the “Founder and Spiritual Director of the NKT,” and Irish nun, Gen-la Kelsang Dekyong, as the NKT’s “elected General Spiritual Director.” The NKT’s institutional hierarchy is therefore *geshe founder* → *non-Tibetan ordained directors*.

### Ritual

Bluck (2006, 136) explains that “Originally [Geshe Kelsang] performed all empowerments himself ... but this became impractical as the movement grew and spread.” While initiations of the lower tantras (e.g. *kriya tantra*) can be given by all NKT RT’s, those of ‘highest yoga tantra’ can only be granted by the GSD or DSD (NKT 2010, 5§6), or by an NSD “on the instruction of the GSD” (ibid. 6§3). Since an NSD need not be ordained (the UK’s current NSD is a lay woman), this means that a lay person, male or female, can grant *anuttarayoga tantra* empowerments, although his or her authority to do so is bestowed upon them temporarily by the ordained GSD.

As for teaching: “New Resident Teachers shall be chosen only from those practitioners ... who have completed or are following the NKT Teacher Training Programme, who follow the New Kadampa Tradition purely, and who have good moral discipline” (ibid. 8§1). Acting jointly with the NKT’s secretary and deputy secretary, the GSD appoints RT’s of new centres (ibid. 5§4), while RT’s can appoint other local teachers at their own centre (ibid. 8§4). Finally, “ordained Resident Teachers who have taught successfully for four years shall carry the title ‘Gen’, and NKT-IKBU lay Resident Teachers who have taught successfully for four years shall carry the title ‘Kadam’” (ibid. 8§6). A senior NKT monk reaffirms Geshe Kelsang’s authority

here too: “[T]here is only one teacher in the NKT, Geshe Kelsang; all the other NKT Teachers are his emanations” (Kay 2004, 95). The apparent ritual hierarchy is *geshe founder* → *ordained GSD/DSD* → *NSD* → *RT*.

### Charismatic

The monk’s words quoted above, as well as the observations of Waterhouse (Waterhouse 1997, 173), indicate that Geshe Kelsang, seen as a Buddha by his followers, is clearly the holder of the highest personal, charismatic authority in the NKT. Waterhouse concludes that “Faith in Geshe Kelsang is the foundation of the organization” (ibid. 181). This is also reflected by the NKT’s publication and frequent recitation of two long life prayers for Geshe Kelsang (NKT 2001). Finally, Bluck states plainly that “the primary spiritual guide for NKT members is Geshe Kelsang himself” (Bluck 2006, 141).

Bluck’s statement is confirmed in a dedication read aloud at Calgary’s Akshobya Centre in its bi-monthly *Lama Chopa* ceremony. Not only does it identify Geshe Kelsang as the guru-deity, but also serially identifies the other taxa of the NKT’s hierarchy of charismatic authority:

We dedicate this puja to the long life and excellent health of our kind Spiritual Guide, Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, inseparable from Lama Losang Tubwang Dorjechang. ... We dedicate for the long life and excellent health of our NKT directors, Gen-la Dekyong and Gen-la Kunsang. ... We dedicate for the long life and excellent health of our precious Resident Teacher, Gen Kelsang Dema. (AKBC 2012)

The hierarchy of charismatic authority in the NKT is therefore *Tibetan founder* → *directors* → *RT*, which, in the case of Akshobya Centre, whose RT is a nun, is *Geshe* → *Gen-la* → *Gen*.

### Taxa and Taxonomizers

Each domain indicates that Geshe Kelsang holds the NKT’s highest authority. Each domain also indicates the elevated status of ordained practitioners, either in their sitting closest to

the shrine, or in their exclusive qualification for the organization's top two positions under its founder, those of GSD and DSD. When consolidated, the basic authority structure of the NKT can be described as: *geshe founder* → *non-Tibetan ordained* → *non-Tibetan lay*.

As for this hierarchy's taxonomizers, firstly, what is the basis of Geshe Kelsang's unmatched authority as the "primary spiritual guide" of the NKT? We can recall Bishop's statement that the symbolic capital held by Tibetan monks over Western practitioners "has less to do with the rules of monastic discipline than with fantasies about the *authenticity* and *purity* of the Tibetan teachings, as well as fantasies about the uninterrupted authority of the reincarnated lineage of lamas" (Bishop 1993, 99). Since he himself is not one, Geshe Kelsang's lineage is obviously not defined by reincarnate lamas. He is, however, the NKT's only Tibetan monk.

Further, Waterhouse notes "the emphasis placed within the organization on the pure lineage of the practices which Geshe Kelsang teaches" (Waterhouse 1997, 151). She suggests that "Fundamental to the NKT's self-identity is the notion that Geshe Kelsang holds and has passed on, a pure lineage which has not been mixed and has therefore neither been diluted nor corrupted" (ibid. 152). As such, his possession of pure teaching lineage seems to chiefly define Geshe Kelsang's authority as the primary guru of the NKT.

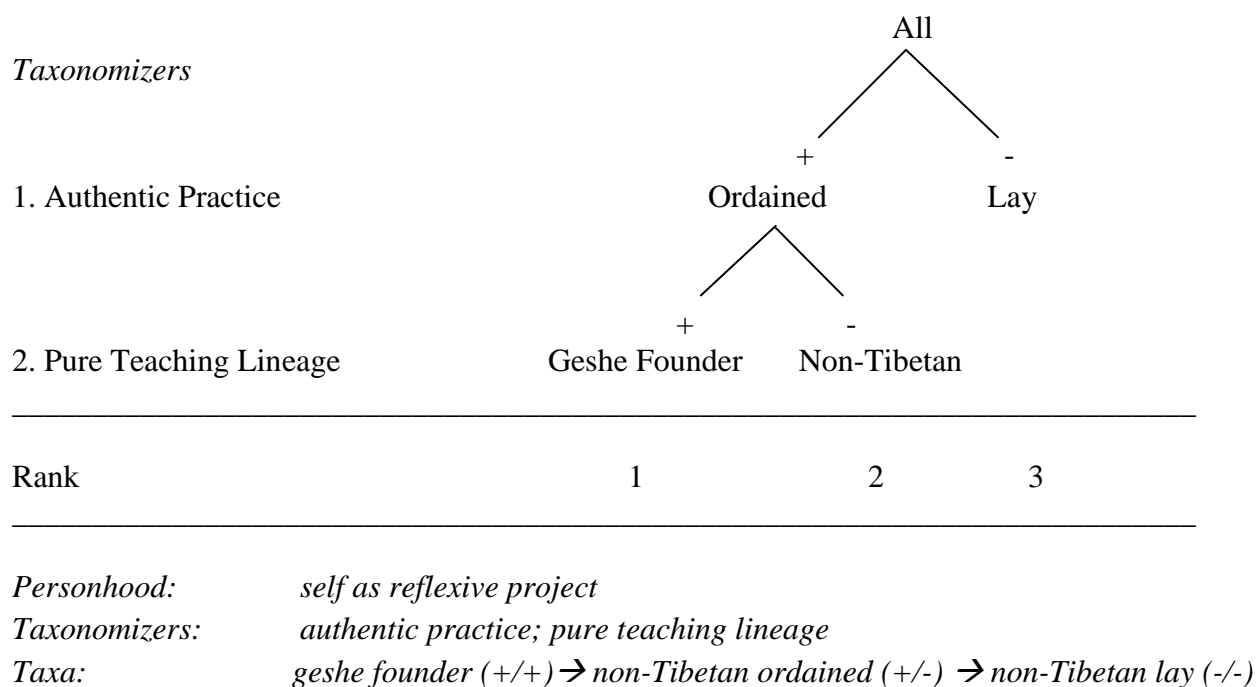
Secondly, among NKT practitioners in general, and its teachers in particular, what differentiates the authority of a monk or nun from that of laity? Again, we can return to Bishop, who adds to his précis of the Western symbolic capital held by the Tibetan monk, a statement of the Western symbolic capital of ordination in general: "In the West, ordination is a symbol of authentic and serious practice" (Bishop 1993, 99). In the NKT, as in other Western Buddhist communities, monks and nuns are seen to be particularly authentic, or particularly devoted, dharma practitioners.



The three basic taxa of the NKT's system of religious authority are, in decreasing rank: Tibetan founder, ordained practitioner, lay practitioner. This hierarchy's first-order taxonomizer, the value which sets ordained above lay, is a publically recognized sense of authentic practice; its second-order taxonomizer, that which sets Tibetan founder above non-Tibetan monk or nun, is an equally publically recognized possession of pure teaching lineage.

The NKT's construction of the guru/disciple hierarchy—its specific system of religious authority—can thus be represented in the following way:

Figure 4: NKT's Guru/Disciple Hierarchy



### **3.5 Conclusion**

Our analyses of the guru/disciple hierarchies in three Euro-North American Tibetan Buddhist communities indicate three different systems, each with its own pair of taxonomizers:

Siddha

*Taxonomizers:* meditation experience; **boundless compassion**

*Taxa:* Tibetan root guru (+/+) → lama (+/-) → non-lama (-/-)

FPMT

*Taxonomizers:* pure teaching lineage; **founderhood**

*Taxa:* incarnate founder (+/+) → geshe/incarnate (+/-) → non-Tibetan (-/-)

NKT

*Taxonomizers:* authentic practice; **pure teaching lineage**

*Taxa:* geshe founder (+/+) → ordained non-Tibetan (+/-) → lay non-Tibetan (-/-)

While the second-order taxonomizers in the FPMT and NKT hierarchies are different, we've seen that in fact founderhood and pure teaching lineage are important qualities attributed to both Lama Zopa and Geshe Kelsang. As the first-order taxonomizer in the FPMT, pure teaching lineage is seen to be held by all FPMT monks including Lama Zopa; Geshe Kelsang's authority as the only Tibetan monk and pure lineage holder in the NKT is clearly connected to, and enhanced by, his status as its founder.

Kay points out that the belief in Geshe Kelsang's possession of pure lineage is directly connected to his status as the organization's founder: "Through writing his books and founding the NKT, Geshe Kelsang is believed to have transmitted a pure lineage to the West and to have created the structures to ensure its continuation in the future" (Kay 2004, 99). In other words: "He has the credibility of a genuine Tibetan teacher and the vision to instigate an organization to present that teaching to westerners" (Waterhouse 1997, 182).

The power to found indicates the authority to adapt, while the possession of pure lineage grants the authority to conserve: "The dynamic of *conservation through adaptation* is a special feature of the NKT's identity that may well accompany the transplantation of other conservative and clerical forms of Buddhism, Tibetan or otherwise, in Western societies" (Kay 2004, 223). The FPMT is one. The basis of the guru's authority in both Western Gelug-pa networks is his possession of pure teaching lineage and his power to transmit that lineage through founding

action, namely teaching and enabling teaching. The Western Tibetan Buddhist guru is knowledge holder and knowledge transmitter.

Capper's findings support the pedagogical emphasis of the Western guru/disciple relationship:

A number of practitioners expressed to me that their involvement with formal Buddhist practice arose because of the need for a spiritual teacher. ... they felt they needed to consult an 'expert,' in the form of a Buddhist lama, much as one might seek ... an accomplished craft master with whom to apprentice to learn a trade. (Capper 2002, 125-6)

According to Bishop, "Images of the *professional*, the *expert*, and the *technocrat* ... follow on naturally from the fantasy of Tibetan Buddhism as a vast storehouse of inner technology and science, an immense system of spiritual techniques" (Bishop 1993, 100-1). Fantasy or not, our own analysis of Capper's data has shown that the Western practitioner's experience is not merely that of apprenticeship under a Tibetan lama whose cultural and symbolic capital make him the ideal spiritual technocrat. It is also an experience of relying on an uncommonly caring individual.

One of the more interesting results of our analysis of Siddha Gompa's guru/disciple hierarchy was that while its first-order taxonomizer was publically, institutionally, or objectively attributed, its second-order taxonomizer came from the private, individual, and subjective experiences of disciples. In our two test cases, however, none of the taxonomizers were defined chiefly by the felt experiences of disciples. This is likely because our exemplar analysis made use of Capper's practitioner interviews, while our test cases relied principally on organizational data. When we look at disciples' personal experiences in the two Gelug-pa networks, we find that like Capper's interpreters, practitioners' personal faith connections to their guru are based in large part on their perception of his wish for their well being.

An official documentary called “Work in Progress,” available on the FPMT’s main webpage, includes five brief clips of practitioners speaking about their experiences in the organization. In two of these, practitioners describe the FPMT’s founding lamas. The first shows an American woman named Shasta Wallace whose only words are: “Lama Yeshe really captured my heart. It was as though I got to go beyond myself for a moment, and experience this incredible happiness; and then Lama would say, ‘Yeah! That’s it! That’s what you’re going for; and that kind of love is what you can have for everybody.’” The second clip, a minute later, is of a Singaporean man named Hup Cheng shown receiving a *khatag* scarf from Lama Zopa in a ritual ceremony, and then saying to the camera: “There is only one Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Everything is compassion with Rinpoche, all benefitting others. To see a person in flesh and blood manifesting loving compassion like all the Buddhas in the past have done, that’s rare.” Between these two clips, a single quote from the Dalai Lama appears on the screen: “My religion is kindness.”

According to Waterhouse, many members of the NKT’s Amitabha centre in Bath describe Geshe Kelsang as “really sweet” (Waterhouse 1997, 137) or “as compassionate and pure with an incredible mind” (ibid. 171). One individual cites Geshe Kelsang’s selflessness as a proof of his authenticity: “There are times when I have no doubt at all that he is like a Buddha and there’s other times when I am really questioning. Like, is it really true what he says? But questions like, what if he is not genuine? doesn’t really occur because he doesn’t seem to show any sign of having any personal gain from this at all” (ibid. 182). For this practitioner, Gyatso’s qualifications as a knowledge holder are confirmed by her perception of Gyatso’s kindness. Finally, in a short video called “Festival Life” available on the NKT’s website, a young woman

at an NKT Dharma festival describes how moved she is “seeing Geshe-la and his humble example, and his kind warm heart and how it touches everyone here.”

We can therefore add *boundless compassion* to the qualities of *founderhood* and *pure teaching lineage* as the defining values of the guru for Western Tibetan Buddhists. Capper even observes that the guru’s founding actions are a decisive indication for his Western disciples of his compassion: “This compassion is not a passive quality but is admired by Americans for its active dimensions, for its ability to create social forms that likewise are idealized by my interpreters. ... Compassionate action is one of the primary *faits sociaux* at the *gompa*” (Capper 2002, 229). The guru is believed to possess pure teaching lineage, seen to act as founder, and felt to act out of compassion. Holding pure knowledge and transmitting it with pure intention, the Tibetan lama is perceived by his Western disciples, above all else, as a kind teacher—a *dge-ba’i bshes-gnyen* (Skt. *kalyāṇamitra*).

### Tibetan and Western Authority Structures

Although combining all three Euro-North American sets of taxa and taxonomizers inevitably forfeits some subtleties from each, it enables the following comparison:

#### Tibet

*Personhood:* *diffuse chthonic agency*

*Taxonomizers:* *clerical renunciation; yogic renunciation*

*Taxa:* *incarnate (+/+) → monk (+/-) → householder (-/-)*

#### Euro-North America

*Personhood:* *self as reflexive project*

*Taxonomizers:* *authentic practice experience; compassionate knowledge transmission*

*Taxa :* *Tibetan monk (+/+) → ordained non-Tibetan (+/-) → lay non-Tibetan (-/-)*

We can formulate the following revised conclusion: *In Tibetan Buddhism's transplantation to Euro-North American formations, the basis of the guru's authority has shifted from renunciation of the forces of embodiment to compassionate knowledge transmission.*

In Ladakh, territory, households, and human bodies are all conceived in chthonic terms, as inhabited by a hierarchy of gods and spirits who have power over the welfare of those born within their domain. Renunciatory transcendence of these “forces of embodiment” defines religious authority. The incarnate's ‘yogic renunciation’ (and thus his ritual authority) is total because he is seen as the divine emanation body of a Buddha who has chosen his current place of rebirth through mastery of the tantric practices of death yoga. *The Tibetan person is understood to be under the authority of local chthonic agents; through his yogic renunciation, the Tibetan incarnate has transcended those agents and thereby gained authority over them and other Tibetans.*

What is the relation of the Euro-North American guru's knowledge/compassion-based authority to the notion of self as reflexive project? We can recall the words of Giddens: “In the post-traditional order of modernity ... self-identity becomes a reflexively organized endeavour ... [which] takes place in the context of multiple choice” (Giddens 1991, 5). This multiple choice includes a diversity of authorities, while the main authority is always the chooser—the individual. Increasingly, since the 1960s, Euro-North Americans have had the option of adopting the authority of the Tibetan lama as an ‘outer guru’ to aid them in their project of transforming or remaking their very selfhood. *The Euro-North American person is understood to be under the authority of herself—her individual self-project; through his compassionate knowledge transmission, the Euro-North American Tibetan lama is seen to have transcended the individual project of the self and thereby gained authority over other Euro-North American individuals.*

How does the guru's compassionate knowledge transmission represent his transcendence of the individual's project of the self? As holder of a pure teaching lineage, the guru is an agent of a "chain [that] is more important than any link" (Bishop 1993, 101). Like a radio broadcasting the information contained in its signal source, this particular function of the guru is to transmit the Buddhist teachings with as little interference as possible. Just as English NKT teachers "emphasise the importance of becoming an effective 'conduit' by 'getting yourself out of the way'" (Kay 2004, 95), so would their guru's "emphasis upon conserving the pure tradition of *Tsong Khapa*" (ibid. 99) be seen as mastery of the self-effacing act of pure transmission. The Western Tibetan guru is not only believed to transmit a pure teaching lineage that extends beyond him all the way to Buddha Shakyamuni, but he is felt to do so with no self-interest. It is clear how a perception of the lama's "nearly superhuman ... concern for the welfare of others" (Capper 2002, 177)—his selflessness—represents his transcendence of the individual project of the self. The guru's compassion may even act as a causal condition for his power to transparently transmit. It is a remarkable irony that the 'weightiest' individuals in the communities we've looked at—Sangye Rinpoche, Lama Zopa, and Geshe Kelsang—are granted the enormous levels of charismatic authority they are, because of their perceived *lack* of individualistic action.

Finally, our analysis of *Lama Chopa* indicated that the most precious knowledge a Tibetan lama can possess and transmit is an awareness of the emptiness of the self, something the ritual aims finally to affect. We can now return to *Lama Chopa* in light of our new understanding of Tibetan and Euro-North American guru/disciple relations.

## Conclusion:

### Implications for the Euro-North American Practice of Guru Yoga

Mills' analysis of authority structures at Kumbum Gompa in Ladakh revealed that a Tibetan cultural conception of diffuse chthonic personhood generates a hierarchy of religious authority defined by one's transcendence of the chthonic forces of embodiment—what Mills calls renunciation. Our analyses of Siddha Gompa in New York and of the two largest global Tibetan Buddhist organizations revealed that a modern Euro-North American cultural conception of the individualistic personhood 'project' generates a hierarchy of religious authority defined by one's transcendence of that very project—what we've called possession of pure lineage combined with boundless compassion. Both models indicate a common relation between conceptions of personhood and authority: *the guru is seen to have subjugated that (agent or agenda) to which the disciple's identity remains subject.*

To determine the implications of each culture's hierarchy for its practice of guru yoga we can fit their respective elements into the ritual's basic structure—*guru/disciple* mediated by the *gift* and transvalued by *emptiness*. First, we can recall how guru and disciple are mediated by the gift in the ritual context of *Lama Chopa*. Offerings and requests are exchanged for the positive energies of merit and blessings: (1) Disciple makes offerings to guru, and accrues merit; (2) disciple requests guru to ripen that merit; (3) guru gives disciple blessings.

In Tibetan cultural formations whose guru/disciple binary is *incarnate/non-incarnate*: (1) Subject of local chthonic agents makes offerings to their subjugator, and accrues merit; (2) subject of local chthonic agents requests their subjugator to ripen that merit; (3) subjugator of local chthonic agents gives their subject blessings. The implication is that in traditional Tibetan



Buddhist formations, he who is believed to transcend chthonic personhood through his yogic renunciation functions as a field of merit and transmitter of blessings.

In Euro-North American cultural formations whose guru/disciple binary is *Tibetan monk teacher/non-Tibetan student*: (1) Subject of the individual's reflexive project of the self makes offerings to subjugator of that project, and accrues merit; (2) subject of the individual's reflexive project of the self requests subjugator of that project to ripen that merit; (3) subjugator of the individual's reflexive project of the self gives that project's subject blessings. The implication here is that in modern Euro-North American Tibetan Buddhist formations, he who is believed to transcend the individualistic project of selfhood through his pure lineage and boundless compassion functions as a field of merit and transmitter of blessings.

Second we can recall how guru and disciple are transvalued by emptiness in the ritual context of *Lama Chopa*. The ritual culminates in a meditative visualization of union between the guru and disciple within the emptiness of their inherent existence, their true nature: (1) disciple requests guru to “firmly place your radiant feet at anthers of the lotus at my heart;” (2) guru dissolves into disciple who dissolves into emptiness.

In Tibetan cultural formations whose guru/disciple binary is *incarnate/non-incarnate*: (1) Subject of local chthonic agents requests subjugator of local chthonic agents to “firmly place your radiant feet at anthers of the lotus at my heart;” (2) subjugator of local chthonic agents dissolves into subject of local chthonic agents who dissolves into emptiness. The implication is that subjugator and subject of local chthonic agents are the inseparable binary constituents of the traditional Tibetan Buddhist system of religious authority—mutually defined, individually empty.

In Euro-North American cultural formations whose guru/disciple binary is *Tibetan monk teacher/non-Tibetan student*: (1) Subject of the individual's reflexive project of the self requests subjugator of that project to "firmly place your radiant feet at anthers of the lotus at my heart;" (2) subjugator of the individual's reflexive project of the self dissolves into that project's subject who dissolves into emptiness. The implication here is that subjugator and subject of the reflexive project of the self are the inseparable binary constituents of the modern Euro-North American Tibetan Buddhist system of religious authority—mutually defined, individually empty.

Mills observes that guru yoga's interpersonal logic of inequality appears to be at odds with the modern individual's reflexive project of selfhood:

In tantric traditions such as Guru Yoga (*bla-ma'i rnal-'byor*), the student visualises himself 'receiving' the Body (*sku*), Speech (*sung*), and Mind (*thugs*) of the lama ... [S]uch meditations imply inherently unequal social relations ... [T]he formation of all social identities revolves around this question of hierarchy and authority, because, initially at least, we are incapable of 'authoring' ourselves ... a view which is in radical opposition to the kind of self-'re-branding' that characterises Western ideologies about modern identity. (Mills 2003, 141-2)

This thesis asked the question: What does guru yoga look like for the modern Western practitioner who does believe him or herself capable of self-authorship?

First, it has been shown that guru yoga and Western individualism are not in fact necessarily in contradiction. As part of his or her reflexive project of self-re-branding, the Euro-North American individual *employs* the "inherently unequal social relations" of guru yoga as a technology in service of that very project. As we saw in Capper's analysis, guru devotion's Kohutian dialectic of projection and introjection is engaged in by Western individuals as a means towards increased personal autonomy, something which Capper suggests the practice generally accomplishes.

Second, our analysis has revealed *who* Euro-North American Tibetan Buddhists are adopting as the spiritual authority of their outer guru: ordained, Tibetan males who are both culturally believed and individually perceived not to be engaged in the same endeavour for which they are being employed—the project of the self.

Peter Bishop opens the penultimate chapter of his work, *Dreams of Power: Tibetan Buddhism in the Western Imagination*, with a sweeping assertion and cluster of questions: “Spiritual transmission is the most profound and paradoxical idea to be found in all mystical traditions. But what is it? What actually is transmitted? Is there anyone who transmits or who receives? Is there really any transmission?” (Bishop 1993, 107). It has been demonstrated that in Tibetan Buddhist guru devotion ritual, spiritual transmission takes the form of a meditative ‘gift’ exchange between guru and disciple, thought to procure for the disciple the potential and active energies of merit and blessings—the former generated by the disciple, the latter transmitted by the guru. Together, the ‘seeds’ of the disciple’s merit and the ‘rain’ of the guru’s blessings are thought to ripen as the disciple’s realizations of Buddha’s teachings, which, of course, the guru is believed to possess. This technology of transmission known as guru yoga is thus rooted in inequality even while it aims to overcome that inequality through ripening the disciple’s realization of its emptiness, or lack of inherent existence. This thesis has argued that in the ongoing adaptation of Tibetan Buddhist guru yoga praxis to Euro-North American cultural formations, the inequality being adopted is that of a self-motivated disciple requesting and receiving transmission from a perceptibly selfless guru.

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