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Preface

It used to be claimed by anthropologists that they represented the only discipline that conducted field work to assess and define cultures. Clearly the anthropological enterprise has yielded valuable data on a huge variety of traditions throughout the world, some of which have disappeared in recent years under the pressures of modernism. In the last half of the twentieth century our view of the “other” has been less informed by preconceived stereotypes that flourished among earlier armchair anthropologists. This corrective was largely due to the full fledged use of firsthand field work and Malinowski’s method of “participant observation.”

The privileged position of anthropology as the sole discipline capable of conducting sophisticated and informed field work is being displaced. Today geographers, historians and sociologists frequently employ similar methods, including participant observation, in order to conduct field work. Less frequently historians of religion have included a field work component in their quest for understanding different religious traditions. Until recently most religion specialists oriented their understandings of religion around textual analysis. They conducted detailed studies of religion at the Great Tradition level and let anthropologists do Little Tradition studies, a division of labor reinforced by Mircea Eliade. However, this textual bias has been called increasingly into question throughout the religious studies discipline. Now text is defined more in terms of verbal and non-verbal
expressions of religion extending beyond the written word; it also includes the living community within which the written text is embedded. Today many religion specialists appreciate the value of first hand field work because it extends their understanding beyond the confines and biases of the Great Tradition enshrined in written texts. The old distinction between Great and Little traditions is also breaking down. Thus, field work provides text with context. The meaning of the text is not divorced from the social and religious milieu in which it lives.

Still, much of the “field work” conducted by religion specialists is neither systematic nor long term. Full fledged and in-depth ethnographies of particular religious traditions are only recently being conducted. Daniel Capper’s two years in a Tibetan Buddhist community in the United States is an important exception. Not only is this ethnography extensive and deeply probing, it embodies some of the finest postmodern techniques for conducting field work. The individuals who are the subjects of this study are not perceived as “informants” who reveal some objective reality that can be “scientifically” assessed in a positivist manner. They are called “interpreters,” suggesting the polysemic nature of the field work experience. Here Capper clearly sides with the new reflexive ethnography that seeks to elicit multilayered interpretive responses in order to render understanding of complex social and religious data. An ethnography of this sort places the investigator into the center of the piece. There is no pretense of stepping aside or attaining neutrality. The reader always realizes the role of the ethnographer in coloring the insights yielded from the encounter with the “other.”

Capper calls his study an “ethnography of enchantment.” He explores the empty and frustrated lives of a variety of Americans who have become Buddhists. This polyvocal ethnography attempts to understand both the attraction of Buddhism for these individuals, and the special intimacy embedded in the enchantment they enjoy through the unique bond with a lama. The guru-disciple relationship is the centerpiece of Capper’s study. Unlike most ethnographies of religion that stress the ritual and social aspects of the tradition, this study is rich in the difficult, yet critical
task of exploring religion as it is experienced. Capper relies heavily on a variety of concepts from psychology in order to delve deeply into the religious lives of individuals.

An ethnography of religious experience is very rare indeed. Here Capper probes beneath the surface level in order to reveal the powerful emotional bonds between the lama and his disciple, emotions similar to the psychoanalytic notions of transference and countertransference that emerges in psychotherapy. What is at the core of the religious experience of these Americans who are strongly attracted to their Tibetan Buddhist teachers? Unlike many studies of Americans who are drawn to non-Western religions, this one is not contented with the usual economic or developmental explanations that assign such religious conversions to anomie, alienation or boredom. Certainly Capper acknowledges economic and family history as contributing factors in these conversions, yet he goes beyond, pushing deeper into the psychological and spiritual core where enchantment abides. He asserts that what he calls “growth enchantment” is the primary motive for self-surrender in guru devotion. Far from the usual expectation that dependency fosters neuroticism, Capper finds the deep and intimate spiritual dependency fostered between lama and devotee results in an autonomy-enhancing self realization.

This apparent paradox, spiritual dependency on the external guru or total independence through the ultimate goal which is complete introjection of the spiritual model, has no parallel in Western religious traditions. While Tibetan Buddhism has all the external trappings of a rich ritualistic tradition, accompanied by a plethora of highly stimulating sensual ceremonies, it also embodies a science of consciousness that gives the devotee a sense of direction and purpose so that he can follow a clear trajectory on his spiritual journey.

Throughout Capper’s study we are exposed to a variety of particular case studies that illustrate and concretize the many ways in which Tibetan Buddhism can be successfully interpreted in a Western context. Each case represents a different life history unfolding as it manifests the guru-disciple relationship. Enchantment is not
some far out mystical ideal. It is grounded in everyday life, in solutions to problems and in the embodiment of spiritual ideals through work and community. Ultimately enchantment heals the wounds of both childhood and of people cut off from their spiritual centers when surrounded by the materialistic West. According to Capper, surrender to the guru has its dangers and moments of frustration, disillusion and failure. Nor is the trajectory towards higher consciousness an easy path with guarantees or safety from risk. Enchantment is forever fragile and brittle. Idealized relationships are often full of disappointments. There is always potential for blockage, achieving a plateau or remaining stagnant. Despite these inevitable frustrations, the admired characteristics of the spiritual ideal embodied in the lama may potentially become internalized, increasing the individual’s feelings of compassion and contentment.

The great strength of Capper’s sensitive ethnography is its humanity and honesty. There is no attempt here to place himself in a privileged omniscient position as ethnographer. It does, however, differ from most anthropological ethnographies of religion. Capper has placed the religious experience of devotees at the core of his work. All else—symbols, texts, rituals, community—is subordinate to this highly focused approach. For this reason it breaks through to a new style of ethnographic reportage. By placing the core experience in the center where it belongs, the religious community emerges as though it were a setting for a precious stone, the spiritual bond embodied in enchantment with the lama. Thus, this highly focused ethnography gives shape and meaning to all aspects of the spiritual community.

Capper’s research at Siddha Gompa advances the study of Buddhism in America to a new level. It provides access to what might seem to be an obscure esoteric world to outsiders. This volume opens the doors to shed light on the expanding effects of the Tibetan diaspora in the West. Why are so many Westerners attracted to Tibetan Buddhism? Will the tradition change significantly as it becomes embodied in a variety of Western contexts? During the expansion of intentional
communities among the baby boomers, experimentation with alternate forms of consciousness was very much in vogue. Some predicted it would disappear like a passing fad. Capper’s study proves this is not true. The hunger for higher spiritual consciousness abides today.

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Acknowledgments

At the end of a project like this there are so many people to thank for their generous support. It is, however, impossible to thank them all. I am grateful well beyond the limits of what I can express in these pages.

The interests which fueled this project stem from childhood but were radically energized during my B.A. and M.A. stint at the University of Virginia. There I was fortunate to learn about what it means to be a scholar from Robert Scharlemann. John Corrigan catalyzed my interest in religion and psychology while impressing me in so many ways. The study of mysticism came to the fore because of the ideas and kindness of Carlos Eire and Abdulaziz Sachedina. And my involvement in the Tibetan world arose because of a strong intellectual connection I felt in several courses with Jeffrey Hopkins.

The ideas found in this book crystallized at the University of Chicago. Don Browning taught me how to see religion psychologically. Frank Reynolds trained me to be a careful Buddhologist. Gilbert Herdt gave me nudges I needed while educating me in psychological anthropology. Raymond Fogelson took me down alleyways in anthropology that I otherwise would have missed despite their importance. My interest in guru-disciple relationships was sparked in class and then wonderfully supported by Wendy Doniger. And my eternal gratitude extends to ever-patient Peter Homans, whose ideas run through this entire work. He will always influence me in many ways.
I also owe warm appreciation to Sandy Huntington, Gary Herion, and Jim Preston, all of whom gave me direction at a crucial time just by being their impressive selves. Without the support, guidance, encouragement, and friendship of Franz Metcalf, there would be no book at all.

Several people offered helpful comments on some version of the manuscript including Wendy Doniger, Peter Homans, Raymond Fogelson, Patrick Huff, Joshua Maeda, and Mary West. Tammy Greer offered especially helpful advice. John Rupnow and the staff at The Edwin Mellen Press provided the opportunity that is this book. Franz Metcalf and Sandy Huntington wrote helpful reviews. I am very grateful for all of this kind assistance. Any mistakes that remain are, of course, my own.

Being in the field means having a support system and among Buddhists mine was all I could have wished. Without the people I met I now would have no book and less sanity. My Siddha Gompa friends taught me much about living life. I cannot name you but know that I am deeply grateful for your help and for your friendship.
Chapter 1

Encountering Buddhism in the United States

Outside of the windows of a small Tibetan Buddhist shrine room, snow falls gently but persistently. Paintings of Himalayan deities adorn otherwise plain white walls. Multicolored lights and butter lamps on the profuse altar at the front of the room provide primary illumination. Other lighting comes from dimmed fluorescent overhead bulbs, one of the few indicators that one is in a Buddhist monastery in the United States, not Tibet. An elderly Tibetan woman, bundled against the mountain cold with both blanket and scarf, sits in a chair. In her right hand she turns her prayer wheel, a short handle at the end of which rotates a cylinder encasing prayers. Spinning the prayers into the cosmos, the squeak of the prayer wheel provides the only sound.

Silently Sherab Tulku, a short, stout Tibetan spiritual teacher, enters with bent arms and hands in prayer posture in front of him. Tulku sits on an ornate, overstuffed gold cushion atop a low platform. Crosslegged, he arranges his long maroon robe, the traditional clothing of a Tibetan lama, around his legs. From the low table in front of him he grasps a white wooden bell clapper.

Upon the entry of Sherab Tulku the twelve people already in the room instantly arise from their chairs or from their cushions on floor mats. Three of this number are older Tibetans, while the rest are mostly middle-aged, middle class
Americans. Returning Tulku’s prayer posture they bend their heads and necks slightly, respectfully. When he sits, three times they touch the tops of their heads, their throats and their hearts, and then prostrate themselves towards him. Completing their prostrations, they return to their seats.

Sherab Tulku rings an iron bowl bell with the clapper and begins to chant. The others, reading from a liturgical text that Tulku does not need, follow him in tone and cadence. Soon the room is filled with chants in Tibetan sung in unison to changing tempos and harmonies. Some of the chanter sways slightly while others smile and others still focus intently on the text. They chant to the gurus of their tradition:

As is taught, devotion is the head of meditation;
The lama opens the door to the profound oral teachings.
To the meditator who always turns to him,
Grant your blessing that uncontrived devotion be born within.

As is taught, the essence of thoughts is Dharmakaya;
They are nothing whatsoever and yet they arise.
To the meditator who reflects upon the unobstructed play of the mind,
Grant your blessing that the inseparability of nirvana and samsara be realized.

Occasionally the singing stops abruptly to create moments for chanting mantras. One hundred and eight times they chant “Om mani peme hung,” and “Om ami dewa hri” another one hundred and eight times. Periodically the singing stops for silent meditation.

For forty-five minutes these Americans and Tibetans sing homages to great gurus and deities of the form of Buddhism they practice. They praise Chenrezig, the great being of compassion, while they visualize in meditation that they themselves are Chenrezig. They praise Oohpahmei, the great being of boundless light, and pray for rebirth in his Pure Land while they visualize in meditation that they themselves are Oohpahmei. Prayers to their guru for spiritual advancement are expressed through music and words of longing passion. They pray for blessings from great spiritual teachers and then for the happiness and safety of these same teachers:

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1 In this work “America” and its permutations refer to the United States.
I pray that the Lama’s life be excellent,  
That his supreme life be long,  
And that his activity increase and spread.  
Bless us that we remain inseparable from the Lama.  
May the glorious lamas live long.  
May happiness and well-being arise in all sentient beings, equal to the sky.  
May I and all beings without exception, having gathered the accumulations of wisdom and merit and purified obscurations,  
Be swiftly established in the state of Buddhahood.

When the ritual is complete they thank Sherab Tulku and each other for creating the ritual. The congregation rises as Tulku does and silently waits for him to exit, hands again in prayer posture. Only after Tulku has left will others depart or commence light, friendly conversation in low voices. Relaxation follows the completion of the daily Chenrezig meditational worship service.

Until relatively recently this experience of the Tibetan Buddhist monastic ritual for Chenrezig was unavailable in North America. Tibetan Buddhism got a later start in the United States than did Zen or Theravāda Buddhism. In 1955 a Mongolian named Geshe Wangyal, a monk from the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, arrived in the United States and settled at Freehold Acres, New Jersey, among fresh Mongolian immigrants. He had long considered teaching Buddhism in the United States, and the coming of the Communist Chinese to Tibet marked for him an opportune occasion to realize his vision. By the end of 1955 Geshe Wangyal received a charter from the Dalai Lama to establish the Lamaist Buddhist Monastery of America, thus initiating the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the United States.

Since that first institutional expansion of Tibetan Buddhism into the United States, the Tibetan tradition has blossomed. This growth shows no signs of abating. Accurate statistics revealing practitioners in the United States are lacking but one might hesitantly guess that in 2002 there are 270,000 Euro-Americans who self-identify as Tibetan Buddhists, and accounting for refugees would increase this
Each year there are more Buddhist teachers, more Buddhist centers, and more Americans taking up Buddhist practice. In 2001 in New York City alone there were seven meditation centers for “white, mostly middle or upper class young adults and middle-aged people” (Mullen 2001, 45). Books on Tibetan Buddhism are among the top selling religious books in American bookstores; Sogyal Rinpoche’s The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying made bestseller lists. Movies about Tibetan Buddhism continue to emerge and several Hollywood actors have made headlines because of their involvement in the Tibetan Buddhist world. The Dalai Lama’s name, relatively unknown just a few decades ago, now has become a household word, along with a widespread popular image of him as a champion of gentleness and nonviolence. News from the Tibetan Buddhist world frequently inhabits not only back pages, but also the covers, of mainstream American magazines such as Time and Newsweek. Televised Tibetan Freedom Concerts in the U.S.A. featuring Buddhist monks now reach large global audiences.

Because of this visibility it is remarkable that there are still relatively few scholars seriously studying Tibetan Buddhism in America, and substantial studies are of quite recent vintage. Donald Lopez’s (1998) erudite Prisoners of Shangri-la focuses on general cultural trends regarding the adoption of Buddhism by Americans. The American Occupation of Tibetan Buddhism by Eve Mullen (2001) offers helpful

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2 This number represents a haphazard estimate. In 1997 Martin Baumann placed the number of all “Euro-American” Buddhists at 800,000 (Coleman 2001, 19). My estimate is derived from division of this number by three, representing the Three Vehicles or major divisions of Buddhism. As Coleman states that Tibetan Buddhism claims a larger share of the American audience than does Theravāda Buddhism, my estimate may err towards conservatism.

3 For an example see the growth in interest in Buddhism in the 1980’s in “Middletown” as documented in Tamney (1992).

4 “Rinpoche,” literally “precious,” is a title of respect frequently accorded Tibetan spiritual teachers considered of high stature. This honorific appears repeatedly in this book.

5 See for example Time’s 10/13/97 cover, “America’s Fascination with Buddhism,” an issue which included articles, “Buddhism in America,” “Zen and the Art of Moviemaking,” and “A Conversation Runs through It.” Other articles are too numerous to mention; an archival search of “Buddhism” conducted on 5/7/02 revealed 48 articles in Time since 1985 and 73 articles in Newsweek since 1993.
ethnographic data and analysis regarding the experiences of ethnic Tibetans in New York City. Neither of these fine studies, however, explores on-the-ground lives of non-Tibetan practitioners.

The study of American Tibetan Buddhism thus remains in embryonic form, a somewhat neglected yet vital subject. This is unfortunate. Tibetan Buddhist practice is extremely demanding physically, intellectually, and emotionally. Understanding why Americans would pursue a practice that is so demanding while being, for most practitioners, originally foreign, remains as important as it is elementary.

This study sojourns into this academic desert in an attempt to explore the practice of Tibetan Buddhism in the United States as it currently stands. Such an expedition precludes strong claims and synthetic generalizations, and none will be found here. What I will do, however, is attempt to answer, preliminarily, a very basic question: Why do Americans practice Tibetan Buddhism? My response to this question contributes unique ethnographic data arising from American Buddhist life. And I hope the analysis which probes this data will provoke even more discussion and movement towards more comprehensive answers, and eventually, further investigation into important questions that can not even be asked right now. This study represents only an oasis in the desert that is this scholarly field; perhaps later the desert will attract further settlement. For now, one must start somewhere in describing American Tibetan Buddhism.

To find out why Americans practice Tibetan Buddhism I undertook ethnographic fieldwork for more than two years at a major Tibetan Buddhist center in the United States which I will call Siddha Gompa. At Siddha Gompa I conducted a “reflexive ethnography,” following a methodology now widespread in anthropology. This method is founded on the postmodern proposition, now common in the philosophy of all sciences including ethnographic theory, that positivist-conceived objectivity in research is impossible. Instead, the researcher describes a field situation from a self-aware position within that field situation, as a piece of the
puzzle the anthropologist attempts to decipher from within. Ideally, what results is a polyvocal ethnography in which multiple perspectives of interpreters and ethnographer evoke a world from the field without privileging any one voice.

I term my informative fieldwork subjects “interpreters,” rather than the more traditional “informants,” following a style established by Herdt and Stoller (1990). My terminology reflects my reflexive ethnographic methodology. In a reflexive environment, the idea of sage informants who offer objective, expert material from inside a cultural complex is nonsensical. Rather, emic experts offer their points of view from their subjective social and psychological location within culture. It is the ethnographer’s primary task to account for their emic subjectivity along with the unavoidable subjectivity of the ethnographer. Therefore, “interpreter” appears a much more satisfying term, as it more fully represents the role of subjectivity on several levels for data gathering and analysis.

My ethnographic data derive from the classic anthropological sources for data-gathering of observation and interview. Following my ethnographic method, it also derives from intensive participation. At my fieldwork site I had a regular volunteer job as a fund raiser. I also volunteered for other jobs, such as housecleaning and dish washing. I ate with my interpreters, I stayed with my interpreters, I practiced Buddhism with them, I recreated with them, and I shared emotional experiences with them. I entered my fieldwork universe deeply. It is clear to me that this greater participation enriched my ethnographic data by allowing me access to important information that would elude others.

At the same time that I plunged into my fieldwork environment I always remained a scholar. While my interpreters became my friends, they also were my fieldwork subjects, and despite my deep involvement in my field site I never compromised my scholarly integrity or project. Personally, I do not possess a close, long-term relationship with a lama like the ones I will describe in the chapters that follow.
My ethnography emerged from two years’ unfunded fieldwork which was not constant because I was working for mundane life support at the same time. The data that form the backbone of my presentation in Chapters Five through Eight derive from interviews. I undertook formal interviews with fifteen members of the center and present here life-historical material from seven of these interview subjects. These interviews lasted from two to four hours with each subject. They were semistructured in the sense that there were basic questions, such as “How did you become Buddhist?,” for which I sought answers, yet I allowed interpreters to associate as freely as possible during their interviews, much as one might do in a psychoanalytic setting. For example, one interpreter was asked only the question of how she became Buddhist in her first interview and proceeded to comment nearly nonstop for two hours, touching on every question I would have asked in a more linearly structured interview. My goal was to collect life-historical personal material relevant for a psychoanalytic analysis, as well as emotional reactions to this life-historical material and events in the world of the Siddha Gompa retreat center. My interview data therefore include a great deal of personal and intimate information from each of my main interpreters. Again, following the ethnographic experiences of others such as Brown (1991), Luhrmann (1989), and Favret-Saada (1980), my willingness to participate as a “native,” rather than a more distanced academic, allowed me to gain the trust necessary for interpreters to reveal more intimate experiences than the superficial data that might otherwise arise.

To complement my interview data I have nearly 350 single-spaced typed pages of notes recording additional conversations, events, and observations. Supplementing these notes are about one thousand pages of biographies of teachers, catalogs, memos, letters, financial information, membership lists, practice instructions, liturgical texts, and miscellaneous documents.

6 See Appendix A.
Because of the intimate nature of the material that I elicited as part of my ethnography, I make every effort here to disguise my interpreters, who generously spoke to me on the condition of anonymity. All proper names in my ethnography, including those of lamas and the name “Siddha Gompa,” are fictitious. I have altered details of practitioners’ life stories to further insure anonymity while taking care not to alter significantly the context or authenticity of their reports.

It should be indicated that in this I do not address the population of Tibetan Buddhists in the United States without communities. There are a growing number of Americans who consider themselves to be to some measure Buddhist yet do not belong to or are only nominally affiliated with a Buddhist spiritual community, or \textit{sangha}. Thomas Tweed has termed such practitioners Buddhist “sympathizers” (Tweed 1999). Because of the nature of my ethnography, I lack reports from this set of Buddhists. I imagine many of them would give different reasons for their attraction to Buddhism than those discussed here.

My ethnographic data suggest some tentative answers about why Americans practice Tibetan Buddhism, as they reveal several germane responses on the part of practitioners. Several practitioners in my ethnography, like those in Coleman’s (2001) sociological study, are attracted to Buddhism by meditation practice. Others, reflecting Tipton’s (1982) ethnography of Zen Buddhist practitioners, are attracted by Buddhism’s moral system. For others Buddhism offers a cognitive framework that is experienced as more satisfying than extant American world views for understanding what William James called the “buzzing, blooming confusion” of human psychic life. Still others claim to have experienced mystical states which they understand best in terms of Tibetan psychology and metaphysics.

As I hope to illustrate, the linchpin tying these different explanations together appears to be the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual teacher or guru, who in Tibetan and

\footnote{The name of the Dalai Lama has not been altered because it does not impact the anonymity of my interpreters and remains important for the discussion of Tibetan culture. On the importance of the Dalai Lama see Mullen (2001) and Nowak (1984).}
increasingly in English is called *lama*. In my research I propose that Americans practice Tibetan Buddhism primarily because of their positive relationships with Tibetan lamas. Relationships with lamas can be so intense that other reasons for practicing Buddhism, like meditation, morals, cognitive orientation, or mysticism, merge into and are subsumed by the appeal of the lama. Positive personal relationships with lamas tend to solidify one’s identity as a Buddhist and provoke long-term commitment to Buddhism. In fact, my ethnography points to a correlation between positive relationships with lamas and deep Buddhist involvement. The more positive the experience with the Tibetan spiritual teacher, the closer is one’s subjective relationship with that teacher. And the closer one's subjective relationship with the teacher, the more developed and internalized is one's identity as a Buddhist.

Sometimes the lama is not mentioned in self-reports as a primary reason for Buddhism's attraction. However, even in these cases my ethnographic evidence suggests that the figure of the lama is still crucial. For example, several Buddhists told me that they were most attracted to meditation and then continued to say that meditation might make them more like their lama. And practitioners who explained that their attraction rests in Buddhist values such as compassion might later add that they want to be "as compassionate as my lama." The teachings of lamas remain the most valuable source of cognitive guidance for many Buddhists. And even those motivated by their own mystical experiences are attracted to the lama, who represents one accomplished in those same mystical experiences as well as a source of practical guidance for further pursuing them. The example of the lama as role model dominates religious practice for Buddhists in my ethnography, rendering other issues of Buddhist involvement secondary. With all of this in mind, I suggest that the primary attraction of Tibetan Buddhism for Americans in my ethnography is the charismatic person of the Tibetan lama.

The relationship with the lama is so important because of its intense emotional and cognitive quality. Many Buddhists in my ethnography consider the religious experience of their lama to represent the bedrock of their spiritual lives.
Many take seriously the Tibetan teaching that spiritual practice essentially consists of "mixing" one's own mind with the mind of the enlightened teacher. Many fairly frequently feel the presence of the physically absent lama. Lamas are commonly described in spiritual superlatives, such as the "most compassionate person I've ever met," or "the wisest person I've ever met." The Tibetan tradition considers the inner, intangible relationship with the lama to be the source of all spiritual growth, and many practitioners experience the relationship in this way.

What this leads to is the disciple's experience of the relationship with the lama in terms of what I call "enchantment" with the lama. Enchantment describes an experiential state on the part of the practitioner that is rare as an American model for spirituality, as it is almost entirely lacking from American Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Max Weber might describe it as an enduring mystical charismatic experience. Enchantment is a state whose hallmark is numinosity, or experienced spiritual potency. It is a whole-being response to and participation in a relationship with another.

Further, enchantment refers to a complex and powerful cognitive and emotional state akin to erotic love or a psychoanalytic transference, yet it is different from these. Enchantment is like erotic love in terms of the cognitive, emotional, and spiritual closeness of the bonds between people. However, enchantment differs from love relationships between partners since Buddhists understand this state as necessarily transcending lifetimes as well as being essentially spiritually educational, nonsexual, and more profound in nature.

Enchantment is like, although it actually exceeds, the psychoanalytic transference in terms of the cognitive and emotional intensity of the experience. "Transference" is a psychoanalytic therapeutic concept derived from Freud. For Freud,

If someone’s need for love is not entirely satisfied by reality, he is bound to approach every new person whom he meets with libidinal anticipatory ideas; and it is highly probable that both portions of his libido, the portion that is capable of becoming conscious as well as
the unconscious one, have a share in forming that attitude. (Freud 1958, 100)

This approach to other people, laden with unconscious “libidinal anticipatory ideas,” is the transference. “Necessarily brought about during a psychoanalytic treatment” (ibid., 99), the transference represents the patient’s unconscious attitude towards the analyst or therapist. Constellating powerful life-long psychological forces during the analytic hour, the transference consists of a deep, charged, and essentially unconscious relationship of patient to healer. As an example, a patient’s depression when the analyst is on vacation arises from the strength of this unconscious interaction. Inversely correlated to the transference is the concept of countertransference, the healer’s similarly powerful unconscious attitude towards the patient.

Enchantment carries with it ontological and soteriological pretensions far beyond the ken of psychoanalysis. An analyst may be held responsible for the creation of some worldly problems or solutions but never can be held responsible for creating the universe itself. Thus, for Buddhists, since the experience of enchantment is essentially religious, it remains far broader and deeper than a psychoanalytic transference.

In fact, Buddhists describe enchantment with the lama as the center of their spiritual lives, as the most profound spiritual experience possible. The intellectual, emotional, and for my interpreters, spiritual power of this state of enchantment makes it possible for the lama-disciple relationship to transcend and subsume other reasons for Buddhism’s attraction as well as to empower personal transformations of the disciple that I will discuss.

The Tibetan term for what I call the enchantment experience is mos kus, which I gloss phonetically as mugu and which roughly means in Tibetan “devotion,” “adoration,” or “veneration.” My American interpreters generally reference mugu
simply by the word “devotion.” The emic explanation given for it is a deep “karmic connection” with the teacher, an intense personal nexus that transcends lifetimes and individual incarnations. In my ethnography enchantment may be found in all the reports of serious practitioners, and when this quality is missing, one practices Buddhism in a much lighter, distanced, more limited way. Conscious reasons given above for devotion precede enchantment with the teacher for some, while for others, the conscious reasons are later elaborations for understanding the noncognitive experience of initial enchantment.

An aspect of this enchantment which should not be overlooked is its inherently mystical yet interpersonal nature. Enchantment exists as the whole-being mystical experience of another person. Mystical experience and deep participation in another person are coincident in enchantment, so that the experience of enchantment is a shared mystical experience. This interpersonal quality remains unusual in discussion of mystical experiences, which more commonly are viewed as individual events.

As I will argue, enchantment seems to be most vital and productive when experienced over a length of time rather than simply temporarily. This fact allows me to address an important demographic issue in the study of Asian religions. Asian religions in the United States are notorious for attracting "flash-in-the-pan"-type converts. Eastern religions in America generally entertain a high turnover of people who drop alternative religious forms as quickly as they picked them up. My ethnography, however, considers very few Buddhists of this type and instead focuses on a high percentage of serious, long-term, committed practitioners. My ethnographic evidence is biased in this way because I did my research at a center that attracts mostly committed individuals, so that a population with long-term Buddhist devotion was self-selected for me. But, as part of my central topic and in response to other

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8 In ethnographic description I use “emic” to refer to the syncretic subcultural reality of Siddha Gompa during the period of my fieldwork, regardless of whether specific subcultural elements ultimately derive from Tibetan or American sources. “Etic” therefore refers to perspectives arising outside of the subcultural reality of Siddha Gompa.
demographic data, the question remains for me, "Why are these Americans so committed to Buddhism?" My suggested response, which echoes Metcalf's (1997) fine research into Zen but in a different form, is that these practitioners remain ardent Buddhists over decades because of their abiding, growth-enhancing relationships with their lamas. In my research I have seen repeated examples of people who will not give up Buddhism because they will not give up their relationship with their lama and the positive ongoing effect that this relationship provides. In my ethnography, enchantment with lamas sometimes seems to lead to very positive long-term growth simultaneously as it sponsors long-term Buddhist commitment.

But this view contradicts recent scholarship. Scholars such as Deutsch (1975, 1982), Levine (1980), Kriegman (1980), and Kriegman and Solomon (1985) have found the guru-disciple relationship intrinsically unhealthy for Americans, an escape from personal conflicts or social anomie through a merger with the powerful figure of the guru. My research suggests, however, that their perspectives tell only part of the story. These studies reflect what Freud taught us at the beginning of this century: religion can be experienced to maintain or even aggravate personal psychological problems for some people. To this end the presentation of my ethnography will recount some unfortunate events. But religion can be a healthy experience for some people, as religious studies, psychology, and anthropology scholars have told us for decades. There seems a deep, subtle, and often therapeutic process at work in the guru-disciple relationship, and the common belief that submission to a guru inhibits autonomous growth overlooks this important dimension.

Many, but not all, of the interpreters in my study actually found that the hierarchical relationship with the lama aided, not stifled, their development of a sense of personal autonomy and empowerment. I suggest that most practitioners in my experience stay with Buddhism because the relationship with their lama is growth- and autonomy-enhancing for them and thus is not something that can or even should be given up. Guru devotion may lead to increased personal autonomy, defined as the
experience of independent, efficacious agency, despite its sometimes-perceived surface appearance of leading instead into pathological dependency.

Perhaps surprising to some, Tibetan Buddhism considers an increase in personal autonomy as a result of enchantment to be normal and desirable. The goal of the practice is to experientially become a lama, a Buddha, oneself. Since to be a lama is to be enlightened, enchantment serves as the mechanism for the disciple’s experience of the fundamental Buddhist goal of nirvana. Enlightenment and its accompanying empowerment of the disciple are the ideal results of enchantment.

The experience of nirvana is synonymous with the experience of anatta, or no-self. The concept of anatta denies that humans ultimately possess selves that are continuous in time or separate in space. But Buddhism does not deny that people possess selves at all. The Buddhist theory of the “Two Truths” posits that enlightened no-self occurs only in conjunction with conventional notions of self and agency. Utter no-self pertains to paramattha sacca, or reality from an ultimate perspective, while nominal appearance of selves remains granted within sammuti sacca, or reality from a conventional, worldly perspective. All three major branches of Buddhism acknowledge the simultaneous propriety of both of these perspectives, that is, simultaneous relative self and ultimate no-self.

Thus, as long as we restrict ourselves to the conventional level of sammuti sacca, we may speak of selves, self processes, self identity, and like psychological concepts. “The Arahant, Bodhisattva, and Mahasiddha are not psychological vacuums” (Mullen 2001, 41). From this we may speak of personal autonomy and its regulation in a fully Buddhist sense. I suggest that Buddhas function as if they possess independent, efficacious agency. For example, Śākyamuni Buddha evinced this simply by leaving home. This is true because the experience of reality as it truly is remains a defining characteristic of nirvana. This naturally would include a profound experience of conventional reality in its various masks, including the masks

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9See for example the canonical The Questions of King Milinda (Rhys Davids 1963, 43-44), which quite clearly supports the designation of conventional, mundane selves.
of apparent selfhood of both self and other. Buddhism teaches that enlightened beings possess effortless mastery with regard to problems which may plague the unenlightened, and in this case this means easy mastery of psychological and social navigation of autonomy negotiation.¹⁰

Therefore becoming an enlightened lama oneself, the goal of guru devotion practice, inherently includes a dimension in which personal autonomy is healed and honed, at least ideally. When one considers also the many pastoral counseling duties of lamas, one sees that the goal of lamahood unavoidably requires the development of an experience of independent, efficacious agency. Wielding this autonomy in an effective way is required for a lama to be both enlightened and successful. To become a lama oneself in Buddhist terms means developing a sense of personal autonomy as understood by Western psychology.

In addition to promoting ostensible personal autonomy, the experience of enchantment with the lama remains important for practitioners in my ethnography because of its uniqueness. Practitioners find that the relationship with the lama is unlike other American interpersonal experiences. Relationships with either spiritual leaders or healers in the United States generally do not follow this model of enchantment. One’s local priest, rabbi, minister, imam, or therapist neither asks for nor accepts the intimate love and devotion involved in the relationship of enchantment, and in fact such relationships are generally shunned by religious and therapeutic figures. In general Christian, Jewish, and Muslim theory and practice in the United States, intimate relationships with religious leaders are not cultivated, as they cannot offer access to the soteriological goal on their own as they do in the Tibetan context.

In terms of healers, the therapist-client relationship has long been colored by Freud’s dictum that a good therapist must remain neutral, emotionally unengaged, for the psychotherapeutic process to work. There is some evidence that psychotherapy

¹⁰Perhaps a parallel argument to mine here is found in Maslow’s Motivation and Personality, in which Maslow finds that self-actualized people enjoy a more accurate perception of self and other as well as a greater acceptance of both self and other (Rowan, Compton, and Rust 1995, 1011).
is changing now, as it gives greater focus to the healing power of the countertransference in short-term therapeutic alliances and more therapists work on longer emotional leashes.\textsuperscript{11}

Perhaps part of the attraction of Tibetan Buddhism, as found in my ethnography, is its ability to follow this trend with spiritual teachings. That is, I am suggesting from a psychoanalytic point of view that the main attraction of Tibetan Buddhism is the powerful person and attitude of the lama as it is experienced by Buddhists.

The compassionate nature of the lama appears to be a primary theme of this countertransference for very many interpreters. Interpreters universally describe the foundation for their enchantment arising from the perception of the vastly caring and compassionate nature of their lama. In every interview interpreters used words such as “kind,” “caring,” “loving,” and “compassionate” to describe at least one Tibetan lama. It is generally considered at Siddha Gompa that lamas automatically see one as one truly is. And they are, as one interpreter describes later, unavoidably in consonance with the bodhisattva aspiration for the benefit of all beings. Hence lamas can and will act fully to one’s benefit unlike any person one knows. Every practitioner I knew at Siddha Gompa consciously wished to participate in the compassion of lamas with the hope of developing a measure of such compassion for themselves.

Therefore, for many of my interpreters, enchantment arises because the relationship with the lama is both personally fulfilling and satisfyingly unique. These experiences of enchantment follow a general master life-historical narrative with some personal deviations. Interpreters generally describe their lives before meeting their teacher always with a sense of something missing and sometimes as downright disastrous. Following their connection with their teacher, they seem to undergo a personal change arising from that connection which brings about a shift in their lives.

\textsuperscript{11}See, for example, Schamess (1999).
towards greater self-reported satisfaction. This shift may occur in a flash or over some period of time. In the end, interpreters generally describe the integration of these experiences in positive ways, as moving towards greater self-reported well-being.

Since data and analysis ultimately are one, I will insert some relevant self psychological understandings of the ethnographic material as I proceed through the narratives. This effort structures the subsections of my three narrative segments while it represents themes that are also important to my interpreters. Focusing on the experience of enchantment with one’s lama while attending to other elements of the syndrome of guru devotion as I described it above, I will use Kohutian self psychological theory to highlight how the lama-student relationship has affected my interpreters. I employ the well-established and widely-practiced Kohutian self psychology for several reasons. Although the lama-student relationship cannot be reduced to psychoanalytic transferential and countertransferential phenomena, the concept of a selfobject transference relationship can be useful for explicating themes found in my ethnography as well as for testing the self-reports of Buddhists through Ricoeur’s (1970) “hermeneutic of suspicion.” Heinz Kohut’s psychological theories also remain unparalleled for their sophistication in examining these transferential relationships, as Kohut based his widely-accepted notion of psychoanalytic cure on the concept of the transference. Further, I selected Kohut because his experience-near focus is necessary to fully develop the rich experiential thrust of my data. Also, Kohut’s psychology was developed in the treatment of middle-class Americans, like those in this study, so that cultural bias inherent in the application of psychoanalytic theory is minimized. Finally, Kohut’s “empathic” methodology complements my reflexive ethnographic methodology.

Using a self psychological model, I will suggest that the attraction to lamas can be a genuine one, that is, that relationships with lamas can be healthy, life-enhancing choices on the part of my interpreters, because of the healing power of transference and countertransference. Just as contemporary psychoanalysis has
discovered (or perhaps rediscovered) the potential for healing in the countertransferential relationship with an engaged and caring therapist, so the Buddhists in my ethnography appear to grow from their relationships with engaged, caring religious teachers. Striking an interpreter as “different than any other person you’ve met in your life,” the countertransference of the lama, or the lama’s unconscious attitude towards the disciple, commonly is experienced as almost superhumanly compassionate and powerfully healing by my interpreters. I suggest that relationships with Buddhist lamas, through disciple response to the lama’s perceived countertransference, often represent a positive response on the part of practitioners I have interviewed towards answering deep psychosocial needs that have otherwise gone unfulfilled.

Supporting some of my interpreters’ self-reports, my self psychological analysis will reveal developmental gains and greater happiness in terms of vocation, stable and esteem-enhancing ideals, improved interpersonal relations, and holistic self functioning. The analysis will also point to some potential difficulties sustained through the experience of enchantment. For example, some interpreters left me unconvinced of self-reports of greater holistic functioning. As I will show, some interpreters appear to have missed the healing process as delineated by Kohut in the ways they constellated Buddhist theory and the practice of guru devotion. Perhaps these interpreters exemplify the difficulties that arise for some in the experience of Tibetan guru devotion.

Like all academic projects, this book arises from personal involvement on the part of the investigator with the subject of the investigation. My academic involvement with Tibetan Buddhism grew from the University of Virginia. At Virginia I took several courses with Professor Jeffrey Hopkins which resulted in my being deeply intrigued with Tibetan Buddhism. I found the art, music, and religions of Tibet to be strange, but in a provocative way, as I struggled (and still do) to understand the rather odd response that arises within me when confronted with Tibetan aesthetics. I find Tibetan artistic traditions to be at once foreign and familiar.
I was likewise drawn to Tibetan religious concepts such as the nature of Buddhahood and the Tantric path, in which desire is spiritually embraced, rather than eschewed as it was in my Protestant childhood environment. Tibetan religious concepts regarding a creative withdrawal from mundane life continue to fascinate me in the face of seemingly overwhelming demands described by Kenneth Gergen (1991) in his presentation of “saturated” selfhood in contemporary American life. This curiosity about Tibetan Buddhism has led me to deeper involvement in its academic exploration, as I continue to plumb the uncanny effect that Tibetan Buddhism has on me.

The Tibetan tradition, however, is rather insistent that mere study of Buddhist tenets results only in increased alienated cognition. That is, from the point of view of the tradition, academic study without practice such as meditation and guru devotion entirely misses the point of the teachings. In this perspective academic study ties one to samsara, the reality of unsatisfactoriness, yet the Buddhist tradition teaches that we should be freeing ourselves from samsara with great diligence. To paraphrase the teaching of a lama I encountered in my fieldwork, academic study of Buddhism without practice is like being handed a diamond that one then throws away, thinking it worthless.

From this point of view I am guilty of discarding diamonds. Despite my fascination with the Tibetan tradition and experience of several different Buddhist groups, I have been unable, despite false starts, to develop a serious regimen of practice. I meditate in a formal fashion only sporadically. I have attended teachings or worship (puja) when inspirational and convenient, not always as a matter of daily habit. My attempts to develop devotion for a personal guru, the mainstay of Tibetan teachings, have all failed. I simply have not found the trust in either an individual teacher or in a cultural tradition necessary for developing a full-fledged identity as a practitioner of Buddhism.
At Siddha Gompa I gave my best good-faith effort to the first step of guru devotion, that of fabricated devotion. *Gompa*¹² resident lamas always impressed me a great deal with their razor intellects and gentle behavior in ways not unlike the experiences of those with deep enchantment. And I tried to visualize lamas as Buddhas because the teachings told me that was the true nature of reality that was hidden from me. I tried to visualize lamas as Buddhas because the exercise would be helpful for an ethnographic project. I tried to visualize lamas as Buddhas just to make the effort and see what happened. From my efforts I did have a very powerful experience at an empowerment one Saturday night in which my experience of the reality of Sherab Tulku, the presiding lama, being one with Green Tārā, the saving goddess, was numinous and rich. I also had a powerful experience during a teaching by Sangye Rinpoche which I describe briefly in Chapter Five. The theory and practice of Siddha Gompa describe the cause of both of these experiences as the ministrations through blessing power to me by the lama.

Despite these experiences my devotion never progressed beyond heartfelt admiration for the resident lamas, and a few visiting lamas, at the *gompa*. I simply never experienced reality in the way that I would were I enchanted. For example, genuine guru devotion requires following the dictates of the lama in terms of career counseling. I was not sure that lamas who grew up in Tibet were always culturally sensitive enough to the secular dimensions of my religious studies academic world, as religion and education are inseparable in Tibet. Few at the *gompa* really understood my constraints as an ethnographer, anyway. I thought I might get unsolicited and problematic career advice to stay at the *gompa* too long or to write my ethnography a specific way. This was because the lamas seemed to like me and have some confidence in me, and some at the *gompa* seemed to consider me an asset to the point of offering me long-term opportunities. I feared that following such

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¹² *Gompa* (*Tib. dgon pa*) is commonly is glossed as “monastery.” This translation is inadequate, as a *gompa* may contain both ordained and lay of both genders, even in positions of power, unlike Christian monasteries. I retain the Tibetan word in recognition of this social and religious institutional arrangement that is unique to Tibet.
advice could have negative repercussions for this project, yet following such advice would be required for my real enchantment.

This obstacle to enchantment made it easier for me to justify others. As an example, the gossip at the gompa is rife with discussions about different lamas and not all of the stories are favorable. As an ethnographer my approach to these tales involved critical appraisals of the messengers as well as the messages. These appraisals restricted my awareness and shut off vital avenues to enchantment. If I were to pursue enchantment seriously I might have tried to transcend this critical gaze more. In this lack of enchantment I differ from the majority of my interpreters from whom I have learned much but, from a gompa perspective, I have failed to learn the most important lessons of all. Despite these limitations I push on in the Tibetan Buddhist world.

To present my argument that, for my interpreters, the lama is the primary attraction of Tibetan Buddhism in America, I will explore necessary methodological issues pertaining to ethnographic method and my psychological model in Chapters Two and Three. Then I will describe the guru-disciple relationship in historical and doctrinal context. Chapters Five through Eight will present my ethnographic data. I apply my Kohutian psychological model in an extended way to my ethnographic data in Chapter Nine. In this final chapter I synthesize and summarize previous data and reflections while adding perspectives from Homans, Kakar, Parsons, Ricoeur, and others. In the end I arrive at an understanding in which emic 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 suggest that Americans in my ethnography practice Tibetan Buddhism because of their deep interpersonal participation with Tibetan lamas.
Appendix A: Interview Questions

General:
1. What is your name? Your age?
2. Where were you born? Where, and for how long, have you lived?
3. What kind of education have you had?
4. How would you describe yourself, both socially and economically?
5. What is your religious background?

Social Environment:
6. How many people are in your family? What is your birth order? Where are they now, and what do they do? Describe your family. How important is it to you? How do your family members understand your participation in Buddhism?
7. Do you have a significant other? Describe him/her. How important are they to you? How do they understand your participation in Buddhism?
8. Describe your friends. Tell me about as many as you like. How do they understand your participation in Buddhism?
9. What is your current vocation? What would you like it to be? How does Buddhism fit into your vocational plans? Do you have any hobbies? How do they fit in with Buddhism for you?

Religious Life:
10. Have you had experiences you would describe as spiritual? Describe them. How and why might they be important to you? How might they be related to Buddhism, if at all?
11. What is Buddhism? What does it mean to you? How did you first become acquainted with it? How and why did you begin practicing it? What do you think other people think Buddhism is?
12. What Buddhist practices have you undertaken? Why did you choose them? What did they mean to you? Where do you think your practice is heading?
13. What other religious practices have you done or you think you will do? What other practices have you or will you do that seem unique to yourself?

Monastic Life:
14. How did you come to the monastery? What prompted you? Describe your life at the monastery. Do you think monastic living is more demanding or less demanding than life outside? Why? If you find it demanding, why do you assume these demands?
15. How did you find out about Sangye Rinpoche? How would you describe him? What is your relationship to him like? How important is he to you, and why? How do you think other monastery residents feel about him?

Contemporary Society:
16. Have you ever had psychotherapy? Have you ever wanted to try it? Do you think that therapy and Buddhism share parallels? Why or why not?
17. How would you describe your relationship to technology and technological science? How do you think others relate to them? What do you think are their roles in our society? What do you think are their roles in the life of a Buddhist?

Other Questions:
18. Describe your self. What are you really like? If you are not "selfless" in the Buddhist sense, then what does your self look like? Or are you "selfless" in the Buddhist sense?
19. What does it mean to be both American and Buddhist?
Appendix B: Abridged Lineage Prayer

I pray to you, great lamas,
Grant your blessing that I may follow your tradition and example.
As is taught, detachment is the foot of meditation;
Attachment to food and wealth disappears.
To the meditator who gives up the ties to this life,
Grant your blessing that attachment to ownership and honor cease.
As is taught, devotion is the head of meditation;
The lama opens the door to the profound oral teachings.
To the meditator who always turns to him,
Grant your blessing that uncontrived devotion be born within.
As is taught, unwavering attention is the body of meditation;
Whatever arises is the fresh nature of thought.
To the meditator who rests there in naturalness,
Grant your blessing that meditation be free from intellectualization.
As is taught, the essence of thoughts is Dharmakaya;
They are nothing whatsoever and yet they arise.
To the meditator who reflects upon the unobstructed play of the mind,
Grant your blessing that the inseparability of nirvana and samsara be realized.
Through all my births, from the perfect Lama,
May I not be separated and so enjoy the glorious Dharma.
May I completely accomplish the qualities of the path and stages,
and quickly attain the state of Dorje Chang.
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