

## **Devotion to Tibetan Lamas, Self Psychology, and Healing in the United States**

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If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives.

- Bruno Bettelheim

### **An Alternative Model of Healing**

Although much discussion in the humanities rightly revolves around oppressive power inequities, unequal relationships of power are not always unambiguously problematic. The relationships of teacher-student, parent-child, owner-pet, and therapist-client are just some common relationships that are charged with power imbalances from which, ideally, the disempowered party gains something positive.

The relationship of the *lama*, or Tibetan Buddhist guru, with the disciple is inherently rich with similar power differentials. Perhaps surprising to some, these power differentials appear in many cases to result in positive healing outcomes (Capper, 2002). Many disciples in my ethnographic research self-report more positive senses of self-worth and personal autonomy, understood as the capacity for independent, efficacious agency, because of their relationships with their Tibetan lamas. As I will describe, further observational data collected by the ethnographer substantiate many of these disciple claims of lives made more meaningful because of, rather than in spite of, their hierarchical relationships with Tibetan lamas in the United States. A number of disciples externally evidenced increased self-esteem, more satisfying interpersonal relationships, and more positive vocational experiences, thus corroborating their self-reports.

We may surmise that some future researchers may gather similar data. Therefore a psychological model which can understand these healing transformations is necessary.

Unfortunately other scholarly psychological analyses of the guru-disciple relationship in the United States have been predominantly negative to this point (see Deutsch, 1975, 1982; Kriegman, 1980; Levine, 1980; and Storr, 1996; for more positive assessments, see Martignetti 1995, 1998). These studies find the merger-like dynamic of the guru-disciple relationship inherently unhealthy for Americans. A cogent example of these studies is Kriegman and Solomon (1985). For Kriegman and Solomon, guru devotees find their neuroses “ameliorated by a merger with the group and a surrender of the validity of one’s own self-experience” (Kriegman and Solomon, 1985, p. 247). This dynamic is exploited by the guru, who in the guise of “Saviour and Redeemer” openly courts idealization and admiration with the goal of maintaining “interminably the follower’s symbiotic attachment to the leader” (ibid., p. 255). In Kriegman and Solomon’s view, the guru and the group process actively work against the development of introjected qualities and personal autonomy, leading devotees instead to an unconscious pathological merger relationship with the guru from which there is no return. Although devotees may report increased senses of well-being arising from their involvement in the group, these experiences arise from the impermanent and illusory alleviation of symptoms due to the merger experience, rather than any substantial healing of psychological defects.

Kriegman and Solomon’s model fails to adequately understand the cases of a number of practitioners in my ethnographic data. To create their analysis, Kriegman and Solomon assume *a priori* that guru devotees possess more intense idealizing needs than other people and base their conclusions on this assumption. However, C. Anthony Martignetti (1995, 1998) found in a study of Kripalu Hindu guru devotion practitioners, Unitarian Universalists, and employees of a

computer company, that there was no significant difference in intensity of idealizing needs, mirroring needs, or retrospective perceptions of parental authority among followers and non-followers of gurus. Martignetti's findings describe several cases of Tibetan Buddhists in my study more closely than Kriegman and Solomon's do. As well, Kriegman and Solomon arrive at their conclusions by assuming *a priori* that submission to the guru is the goal of the practice. In Tibetan Buddhism, submission to the guru is actually a means to a different goal, that of becoming a guru oneself (Capper, n.d.). Becoming a guru oneself requires psychological introjection and the development of personal autonomy that simple submission does not.

If one reframes practitioners' psychological needs and the goal of the practice, one arrives at a different understanding of guru devotion practice and its practitioners. As I hope to describe, in my ethnographic research guru devotion practice may actually possess a powerful psychological healing potential that other analyses overlook. Taking the healing dynamic of the therapist-client relationship as a model, this essay proposes that a similar healing dynamic may occur in the guru-disciple relationship as found in Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> As I will describe, self psychology offers an alternative model for understanding this potential while retaining the capacity to helpfully understand failures at manifesting this potential.

### **Self Psychology and Ethnography**

Data for this essay derive from a larger project which examines why so many non-Tibetan Americans from Christian and Jewish backgrounds are turning instead to Tibetan Buddhism as a religious option. To investigate the relevant issues I undertook more than two years of ethnographic fieldwork from 1995-1998 at a major residential Tibetan Buddhist center in the United States which I fictitiously call "Siddha Gompa."<sup>2</sup> About 25 Americans and 10

Tibetans may reside at Siddha Gomba, which is fluid in population, at any one time. Popular teachings or rituals may attract as many as 150 temporary guest practitioners, many of whom are quite serious and experienced Buddhists. The Tibet-born abbot of Siddha Gomba, Sangye Rinpoche, has served as an abbot for other important Tibetan *gompas*<sup>3</sup> in Sikkim and elsewhere in India. Sherab Tulku, the Tibet-born resident lama, is recognized as a *terton* (*gter ston*), or mystical discoverer of religious artifacts. Other lamas visit frequently. An effort of Tibetans to preserve and expand their religious heritage in the diaspora, Siddha Gomba is as authentic and faithful to Tibetan models of residential Buddhist practice as any found in the United States.

At Siddha Gomba I employed empathic-reflexive ethnographic methods of data gathering of interviews, conversations, participation, and tacit observations. Practitioners described in this essay are all convert, ethnically non-Tibetan American Buddhists. I undertook formal interviews with fifteen members of the center, these interviews lasting from two to four hours with each subject. I can only include fragments of these case studies here. It may interest the reader to know that personally I do not possess a close, long-term relationship with a guru.

To analyze the self-reports of practitioners in my ethnography, I employ self psychology as developed by Heinz Kohut, a theory currently common in clinical psychological practice.<sup>4</sup> Self psychological theory remains more oriented around embodied relationships and less oriented around instinctual drives than classical Freudian theory because of Kohut's concept of the selfobject. Selfobjects are "inner experiences of certain functions of people who, extrospection informs us, are physically separate from them" (Kohut, 1991, p. 494). Even more, "Selfobjects are objects which we experience as part of our self; the expected control is, therefore, closer to the concept of control which a grownup expects to have over his own body and mind than to the concept of control which he expects to have over others" (Kohut and Wolf,

1978, p. 361). A selfobject is our inner experience of another person, symbol, or idea, and also represents our embodied relationship with that person, symbol, or idea. Although an inner experience, real interactions between people can be adduced from it (Kohut, 1991, p. 495). Because of this, the selfobject exists between inner reality and social reality, is experienced as a part of both worlds, and thus exists in the “intermediate space” of Homans (1989) or the “transitional space” of Winnicott (1980). Selfobjects mediate between inner and outer reality and are an indivisible part of the self. The self and selfobjects are of a piece together.

In Kohutian psychoanalytic therapy, it is only in and through the transference of the client to the therapist that healing occurs.<sup>5</sup> The healing power of the transference arises because of its alliance with the processes of optimal frustration and transmuting internalization. In an empathic analytic ambiance, selfobject transferences arise naturally, although with some resistance at first from the client (Kohut, 1978, p. 486). Therapeutic work cannot really begin until the selfobject transference is established. The analyst must not encourage the transference, as this inhibits its later working-through, and generally noninterference on the part of the analyst is encouraged. At first the transference makes the client, whose selfobject needs are now mobilized in an accepting atmosphere, feel very powerful (ibid., p. 487). But inevitable failures, what Kohut calls “optimal frustration,” on the part of the analyst to meet selfobject needs create disappointment and withdrawal for the client, who will then regress to archaic narcissistic or idealizing stages in order to arrive at the genetic moment of fixation. Because of the enormous investment of psychological energy of the client in the transference, it takes only small slights to start this process of frustration and regression. The regression to the fixation point ideally allows thwarted archaic strivings to emerge into consciousness from the unconscious. Old memories, often repressed, resurface, as the analyst focuses on lost selfobjects with interpretations and

empathy. The client slowly becomes more tolerant of perceived empathic failures as correct interpretations maintain the empathic bond between analyst and client. This tolerance arises from and encourages “transmuting internalization,” in which aspects of selfobjects projected onto the analyst in the transference become reclaimed, introjected, and integrated into the self by the client.

The resulting state of health consists of “the capacity of a firm self to avail itself of the talents and skills at an individual’s disposal, enabling him to love and work successfully” (Kohut, 1977, p. 284). This rather Freudian “work and love” formulation, however, strays from classical psychoanalysis in that this capacity is intended to make an individual’s life worthwhile, not pleasurable (ibid., p. 285). This sense of worth and meaning arises naturally as a product of having a dimension of the self through which energy can flow without impedance. This dimension, the “arc” of the self, always includes mature, healthy grandiosity and ambitions, mature ideals, and talents and skills that mediate between the ambitions and the ideals. The healthy self includes a mixture of primary and compensatory structures, with defensive structures at a minimum, and the individual possesses “cognitive and affective mastery” (ibid., p. 4) over these structures. This self continuity is experienced not merely as structural but as historical as well. Fixated structures create a break in the felt continuity of life, and restoring the self to cohesion restores this break in the life historical narrative, so that the individual experiences successive moments in the lifetime as a “Proustian” continuity (Kohut, 1985, p. 217). Personal gains from a cohesive self include increased creativity, empathy, wisdom, a sense of humor, and an ability to accept one’s finitude, this latter representing what Kohut terms “cosmic narcissism” (ibid., p. 111).

## **Mystical Search**

Disciples at Siddha Gompa seem earlier in life to have suffered from greater or lesser feelings of meaninglessness, despair, directionlessness, loss of self-esteem, and lack of purpose. Interestingly, these feelings also represent common complaints told to contemporary therapists by clients in search of help (Watson, 1999, p. 26), and thus perhaps represent common themes of American culture outside of those who attach themselves to gurus. That is, it would seem that Americans in my ethnography in many ways are not significantly different than many other Americans who do not seek or find devotion to a Tibetan lama. Self psychological therapy is directly oriented towards such complaints, which include a lack of idealizable role models and idealizable values and goals. That is, what people with such complaints psychologically crave is idealizable cultural selfobjects such as admired others and respected, embraceable values.

Further, the stories of these practitioners reveal religious themes common among their baby boom cohort. Buddhists in my ethnography participate in what Catherine Albanese has called “the widespread mystical consciousness in America today...which ‘reprimitivizes’ religion” (Roof, 1993, p. 131), or what Robert Wuthnow (1976) has termed “the consciousness reformation.” Roof’s study of baby boom religion likewise reveals “psychological and deeply experiential themes” in boomers’ life stories. Like practitioners in my ethnography, Roof’s subjects showed a “greater concern for spiritual quest, for connectedness and unity, and for a vision that encompasses body and spirit, the material as well as the immaterial” (ibid., p. 26). Seeking cultural selfobjects with a religious, and particularly mystical, orientation remains a common theme within the larger social age cohort of Buddhists in my ethnography and therefore remains a fully understandable thematic aspect of their stories.

Practitioners at Siddha Gomba therefore couch their search for wholeness and meaning in religious, and particularly mystical, terms, and seek mystical cultural selfobjects with whom they can establish an idealizing transference in the effort to heal themselves. This search need not be pathological, as presented by Kriegman and Solomon. Maintaining relationships with idealizable cultural selfobjects is in fact, according to Kohut, part and parcel of a healthy, meaningful psychological life. Coherent selves, needing idealizable cultural selfobjects “like oxygen” (Kohut, 1977, p. 85), naturally flourish within positive cultural selfobject relations. The ideal hungry personality, in search of others to admire, is not a pathological personality type for Kohut. Rather, this personality type follows an understandable strategy for healing and enhancing the self.

Thus the search for idealizable cultural selfobjects does not occur only among those with manifest self disorders but arises in the course of all lives. Gurus represent a new and innovative form of American cultural selfobject target for this search, yet we need not, as Kriegman and Solomon do, dismiss guru seekers *a priori*. As the guru figure may respond simultaneously to the current cultural themes of a felt need for idealizable figures, idealizable values, and a mystical, experiential spiritual orientation, the guru actually could be seen as an efficient resource for psychological healing within the experiential worlds of the baby boom Buddhists in my ethnography.<sup>6</sup> To this end Bogart (1992, p. 9) says that for some Americans, “discipleship is an appropriate, even necessary, step in maturation.” Perhaps these Tibetan Buddhists, like American Zen Buddhists in Preston’s ethnography, are “creative experimenters in an area of culture that still remains largely undeveloped, not the incompetent and inadvertent victims of manipulative religious movements” (Preston, 1988, p. 15).



## **Idealizing Transference**

Simply finding a cultural selfobject does not in itself result in the enhancement of self coherence that I have claimed for some Buddhists in my study. Rather, following both Tibetan guru devotion teachings and Kohutian theory, the qualities of the idealized selfobject must over time become internalized so that they are experienced fully as “self” rather than as “other.”

Transmuting internalization must occur. In self psychology, such transmuting internalization arises from the establishment of the idealizing transference, the full mobilization of the client’s archaic selfobject needs, optimal failure by the idealized selfobject, and reclaiming of the positive qualities of the idealized selfobject within oneself.

I propose that a version of this process occurs within the context of the lama-disciple relationship for Buddhists in my ethnography. Sudhir Kakar found the same for Hindus in India. The process begins, of course, with a deep idealizing transference to the guru. According to Kakar, “the guru is the primary cultural selfobject experience for adults in Hindu tradition and society” (Kakar, 1991, p. 42). The Hindu guru, in fact, provides a dominant cultural form of healing along Kohutian transference paths. “The guru is the culture’s irresistible offer for the redressal of injury and the provision of selfobject experience needed for the strengthening of the self” (ibid.). In so doing the Hindu guru embodies what Kakar calls the “guru fantasy,” a universal fantasy in which humans seek someone “who will heal the wounds suffered in the original parent-child relationship” (ibid., p. 43). Enabling the guru in this healing capacity is the call to surrender to the guru. Just as the Kohutian therapist cannot heal without the transference, without surrender to the guru, the guru cannot heal. Kakar (ibid., p. 46) says,

In terms of self psychology, surrender is the full flowering of the idealizing transference, with its strong need for the experience of merging into a good and powerful, wise and perfect selfobject--the guru...The disciple, in experiencing his or her self as part of the guru’s self, hearing with the guru’s ears, seeing with the

guru's eyes, tasting with the guru's tongue, feeling with the guru's skin, may be said to be striving for some of the most archaic selfobject experiences.

For Kakar, devotees approach the guru with ambivalence, with both hopes of ultimate cure as well as fears of ultimate fragmentation, just as occurs in self psychological treatment. He continues by saying that, "The idealizing transference, leading to the merging experience, is thus the core of the healing process in the guru-disciple relationship" (ibid., p. 52). The development of this transference is aided by religious doctrines and practices. Meditation on the guru, common to both Hinduism and the Tibetan Buddhism of Siddha Gomba, encourages a psychological regression to the point of developmental fixation, much as occurs in self psychological therapy.

Even more, the hope for the guru's "grace" (Tibetan *chinlab*) both deepens regression and the intensity of the selfobject transference. Disciples seek this healing grace as a rare nectar. At Siddha Gomba this grace is perceived to flow continuously from the lama, and its perception grows over time, so it is not a once-and-for-all experience. However, dramatically, this grace becomes manifest for some Buddhists in a powerful initial experience of meeting their lama.

Concerning the first time she met her lama, one Buddhist, Maria, said,

Something happened, and there really aren't words to describe it. It was far and away the most deep and profound and heartfelt thing that has ever happened to me. It was like this very small but perfect nuclear fission. And it keeps on radiating, and there's never been a single moment of that not being there. And there's never been anything that I've done right from it that has not been beneficial.

Another Buddhist claimed about his first meeting with his lama:

He was in this large hall, on the other side of the room, on a large seat. And the first time I laid eyes on him I just lit up. And there was nothing conscious, I just lit up, and subconsciously there was some recognition and some joy.

This grace may represent, in Kakar's terms, "the devotee's recollection of an earlier transformed state...which does not take place cognitively but existentially through intense affective experience, even when the latter is not on the same scale as early in life" (ibid., pp. 47-48). The experience of the grace of the lama reflects an intense selfobject experience recalling archaic events and structures of early life and representing the mobilization of concomitant archaic selfobject needs so that they can become transmuted and matured. It represents an "empathic resonance with the selfobject" (ibid., p. 48). Psychologically-savvy practitioners say that it is a real experience as well as an intrapsychic one. That is, for them, the grace of the lama represents both intense subjective selfobject experience and objective mystical ministrations of the lama.

In seeking cohesive cultural selfobjects in the form of Tibetan lamas, then, Buddhists might be said to be seeking intensive therapeutic selfobject relations. The numinous experience of the lama, therefore, would represent the establishment of a powerful idealizing transference with a cultural selfobject, the lama. Experiences such as Maria's "perfect nuclear fission" could be seen as experiences of regression with a selfobject which resonates both with current self structure and selfobject experiences and needs of the distant past. This regression is deeper and more gripping than a psychoanalytic transference, however, as its noncognitive qualities and supposedly spiritual orientation indicate a more encompassing relationship than that found in the therapeutic hour. This transference, therefore, carries a far greater power to heal and effect personal transformation than that found in secular psychotherapy.

### **Surrender to the Guru**

The intensity and transformative powers of this transference arise from and are fueled by personal surrender to the guru. Overt calls for such surrender are rife within the world of Tibetan Buddhism. It is this act of surrender that appears to most offend opponents of guru devotion practice, both within and outside of the United States, and which bears the most surface appearance among Tibetan practices for preventing personal agency and autonomy. However, submission to the lama is not in all cases a final surrender of autonomy, but rather often it represents the establishment of a healthy idealizing selfobject transference. Surrender to the lama, so apparently offensive to American individualism and antiauthoritarianism, actually may fuel a fully American attainment of a vigorous sense of personal autonomy.

Brian Hutchinson helpfully explicates this dynamic from a Jungian point of view with material from the Hindu Akshar-Purushottam Swaminarayan movement. For Hutchinson, the numinous experience of guru devotion corresponds with the projection of the universal Godman, or human savior, archetype onto the guru. Like Kakar, Hutchinson thus finds the grace of the guru to be an intrapsychic process arising from powerful projections onto the guru. Submission to the guru, then, is not so much submission to the guru, but rather the submission of the ego to the self (Hutchinson 1991, p. 47). It is not a form of self-extinction or suicide, but rather indicates a psychic movement towards higher, more individuated, forms of consciousness, in which the ego abdicates its hegemonic control of the personality in favor of the more profound and inclusive metapsychological dimension of the self. According to Hutchinson (*ibid.*), this submission to the guru-as-inner-self must activate consciously in order to entrain unconscious elements of the personality properly, and thus self-conscious submission is indispensable. Through integration of the experience of the self, the process of individuation is advanced, so that submission to the guru results in greater, rather than lesser, personal agency and autonomy.

This psychic action theoretically would be mitigated by a danger indicated by Kohut and by Kriegman and Solomon, that the lama would actively encourage the idealizing transference and thus “misuse” the power of the transference. Such encouragement would permanently solidify the transference and prevent its later working through. And without this working through process, the disciple never will regain personal autonomy surrendered to the guru. For Kriegman and Solomon, it was clear that Guru Mahara Ji actively encouraged such idealization. If so, he did his disciples a great, if possibly unwitting, disfavor. Through coaxing totalizing idealization this guru might indeed have enslaved disciples in a long-term negative symbiotic relationship as Kriegman and Solomon indicate.

In the course of my fieldwork I encountered anecdotal tales of lamas who were intentionally or unintentionally exploitative in this fashion.<sup>7</sup> However, this seems to not be the case for lamas I witnessed at Siddha Gompa. In my years of fieldwork I heard lamas teach many times that Buddhists should essentially idealize the lineage of enlightened lamas who preceded them. I also heard many overt teachings about the need to surrender to one’s lama as completely as possible. However, I never heard a single lama in any explicit or implicit way demand idealization personally of themselves, especially not as Kriegman and Solomon’s “Saviour and Redeemer.” The main lamas of the *gompa*, Sangye Rinpoche and Sherab Tulku, constantly reiterated in their teachings that guru devotion involved becoming a guru in your own right, not worshiping gurus as an end in itself. From this, they never overtly encouraged idealization of themselves. Instead, their dominant teaching styles involved open assessment of their own personal shortcomings in what seemed a very realistic way.

For example, during a *Mahamudra* teaching on levels of meditative attainment, Sangye Rinpoche responded to a question by describing his personal experience as belonging to a

relatively low level. From the ethnographer's point of view his claim to realization was impressive but realistic. Sangye Rinpoche had responded to a major opportunity to encourage idealization by avoiding it, thus unwittingly behaving according to Kohut's guidelines for the noninterfering analyst.<sup>8</sup> On another occasion, he responded to similar opportunity with what seemed an active forbidding of idealization. When asked to tell the story of his life, he sarcastically responded, "I am really a fascinating person - you know, bald head, pot belly, not knowing a single word of other languages, walking like a dog, pretending that I am someone else, trying to put myself in a higher state, and wearing the mask of the dharma. That is my story."

### **Disillusion**

It can rightly be said that, in general, Siddha Gompa lamas did not discourage idealization. Yet, from Kakar's presentation and from a Kohutian point of view, they possessed no reason to do so. Both in emic Buddhist theory and self psychology such idealization, if naturally self-arising, is the warp of the transformative process. Without this self-arising idealization, personal transformation, either towards a more enlightened Buddhist state or towards secular coherence in the arc of the self, will not occur.

More importantly, Sangye Rinpoche and Sherab Tulku, in my experience, never discouraged the necessary experience of disillusion with this idealization, either. This disillusion, embodying the crucial self psychological function of optimal frustration, remains indispensable in the transformative process. Without optimal frustration and disillusion with the perfection of the omnipotent idealized selfobject, the admired qualities of that selfobject cannot become introjected into the psyche of the disciple or client. Just as the lama or therapist should

not interfere with naturally self-arising idealization, so should they not interfere with naturally self-arising doubt and frustration regarding the idealized selfobject figure. And contrary to widespread misunderstandings, doubt and frustration regarding lamas is a commonplace experience, both within and outside of Siddha Gompa. Much of *gompa* gossip among practitioners revolved, mostly implicitly, around themes of realistic assessment of lamas and their capacities. Buddhists in my ethnography reflect the finding of J. Gordon Melton (1993, p. 108) that, “Fieldwork on contemporary nonconventional religions corroborates the many accounts by ex-members that reveal patterns of doubt in individual members and ongoing critical review of leaders by the members of supposedly totalistic groups.”

This disillusion, or the realistic recognition of imperfections of the idealized selfobject lama, remains clearly evident within the interview data deriving from many Buddhists. There are innumerable opportunities to gain such a recognition and I can indicate only a few. For one example, the physical absence of the lama can encourage such disillusion. This factor remains especially salient with regard to Sangye Rinpoche, who rarely socializes with disciples, remaining aloof in his private quarters. He justified this behavior, different from some but not all other lamas, with the philosophy that a constantly available lama inevitably becomes taken for granted. While this absence certainly frees disciples to plumb new depths of potentially unrealistic idealization, it also may sponsor potential disillusion with the lama. For example, while Sangye Rinpoche was abroad, a number of *gompa* residents became more lackadaisical about their work responsibilities through self-conscious recognition that their supposedly omniscient lama would never know that they had spent the afternoon at play rather than at their chores.

Related to this is the lama who is distracted by the needs of people other than the disciple. One disciple clearly became upset when she saw Sangye Rinpoche paying attention to and ministering to the needs of others when she felt he should have been paying attention to her. The lama was not omnipotent, but in fact revealed that he could offer worldly aid to disciples only one at a time, in turn. For many Buddhists this represents imperfection and limitation in the perfect selfobject.

Disciples also can feel disillusion with the delegation of unpleasant tasks. This disillusion seemed to reach to all corners of Siddha Gompa. For example, construction workers sometimes perceived that directions given to them by a lama were insensible, feeling there were better means to the ends intended by the lama. One staff member left the *gompa* during my fieldwork tenure because he was given jobs by a lama that had nothing to do with the construction tasks for which he was originally hired and which he dearly wished to pursue. When he left his descriptions of his foreman lama more resembled complaints about a misguided boss than recognition of a perfect, infallible spiritual authority.

In financial realms, lamas characteristically assigned any surplus funds to building projects without much consideration of other options, as building remains their primary objective. However, a number of Americans felt that the long-term welfare of the *gompa* lay in investing at least some of the surplus funds. Some of these Americans openly expressed their opinion that lamas seemed to lack the business sense required by economic dimensions of American society and in so doing recognized limitations in their lamas.<sup>9</sup>

Even in more spiritual realms, lamas left plenty of room to create optimal frustration. For example, every teaching event included a “question-and-answer” session, in which lamas fielded questions on a wide variety of topics which might not be even slightly relevant to the subject of



the teaching. This task must be daunting for lamas. In these sessions they are confronted with people who often are strangers to them, yet frequently these strangers ask questions pertaining to very personal aspects of their lives. It seems humanly impossible to fulfill such a task without frequent mistakes, yet the perfect selfobject lama would, in disciples' expectations, respond to each question with perfect insight into these foreign lives and offer perfect advice. Of course this did not happen and I sometimes heard people complain that the lama had responded to their question inappropriately or not at all. Critiquing lamas' answers was in fact a favorite activity of some Buddhists as they reviewed the events of the day over dinner. The question-and-answer sessions, an institutionalized occasion for lamas to fail, thus offered prime opportunities for disciples to appraise the limitations of selfobject lamas realistically and many disciples took advantage of these opportunities.

Related to this, the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism are vast and multifaceted, reflecting various personal interests and philosophical differences arising over centuries of development. Contradictions and divergent viewpoints in teachings and practices are myriad and unavoidable for the teaching lama. Inevitably one lama teaches the opposite of another lama, even if both lamas possess sound knowledge on the subject. Inconsistency in teachings theoretically indicates the limited, socially constructed nature of the teachings of all lamas. Some practitioners are quick to notice these apparent discrepancies in teachings and therefore may recognize a limited, rather than perfect, embodiment of Buddhism found in the selfobject lama.

A final example of a source of optimal failure in the lama arises from the inevitable downturns in spirituality that all Buddhists seem to experience. Although practitioners wish for constant forward progress in their spiritual lives, it happens that Buddhists experience periods of stagnation or even backsliding in their felt spiritual progress. These disconcerting events

demand explanation on the part of the disciple. Since one's spiritual life, according to guru devotion teachings, arises exclusively through the grace of the lama, downturns in practice often are interpreted as blockages in the flow of this grace. Although some disciples entertain the thought that the blockage results from some misstep on their part and reflects justified penalizing by the lama, other Buddhists experience such occasions as indicating the limitations of the lama's grace. The disciple can perceive that their lama is not an omnipotent wellspring of transforming spiritual energy. This latter interpretation opens the door for disciples to see that they are not passive, weak inheritors of grace, but are active players in their own spiritual progress on the basis of their own, not solely their lama's, spiritual qualities. In this way it is interesting how the doctrine of the lama's grace controlling the disciple, so apparently opposed to the idea of personal autonomy for the disciple, actually can lead directly, through natural and common occurrences, to a golden opportunity for the disciple to introject psychological structure and reclaim personal authority and autonomy. Several Buddhists during my research expressed that they had exploited just this opportunity with positive effect.

### **Transmuting Internalization**

The process of disillusion with the omnipotent perfection of the lama sponsors 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. A number of disciples in my ethnography appeared through this process over time to possess more and more the admired qualities of the lama. These qualities include perceived innate goodness, leading to increased self-esteem; perceived compassion, and especially felt empowerment towards greater idealized compassionate action; and vocational direction and efficacy. The lama was previously cathected

as the ego-ideal or idealizing pole of the self by the disciple, especially during the beginning process of “fabricated” devotion.<sup>10</sup> As devotion becomes more and more “unfabricated,” which is the Buddhist ideal, and qualities of the lama become more and more transmuted and internalized, more and more the idealizing pole of the personality becomes stronger, allied with other sectors of the personality, and diachronic in terms of integrating ideals over an entire lifetime. The psyche becomes reoriented to form a coherent arc between ambitions, skills, and ideals. The locus of control concerning values of the disciple shifts from an external locus, in the form of the lama, to an internal locus, reflecting a transformed and coherent idealizing pole of the personality.<sup>11</sup> One Buddhist, Bob, described this process with his late lama:

I always felt that he could show me by just the simplest gestures or words that I could develop more potential in myself, and also allay some of the doubts that I had about myself, and what I could do. I think that what it's really done is that it allowed me to develop as a person, through my relationship with my teachers. I used to say, “It's really hard and I can't do it.” Rigpa Rinpoche used to say, “Try,” just try to do it. And every time I took his advice it always worked out.

Bob perceived that his lama always acted out of compassion, a value he feels has been lost in current American society. One might say that a role model for compassionate action was what Bob had been searching for. Of this Bob said,

You see the people who will inspire you, and people who can enhance you as a person, and make you live up to the potential you have as a human being. That's what Buddha-nature is about and that's what realizing your Buddha-nature is. Being the best person that you can be. And you see these embodiments, especially Rigpa Rinpoche or Sangye Rinpoche, and whether you believe in reincarnation or not, you know that this person is different than any other person you've met in your life. And you realize that if you do these practices and work on yourself you can be, perhaps, like them some day. And I think that's very, very important. It gives you some sort of positive aspiration, and path, instead of all this despair and anger that you see in our society.<sup>12</sup>

The stories of several practitioners strongly suggest that American Buddhists effect this transmuting internalization, in which admired qualities of the lama are internalized, the locus of

psychological and spiritual control shifts to an internal source, greater coherency for the self is established, and practitioners become, in a sense, their own lamas. These Buddhists appear through devotion to their lamas to have 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. As one Buddhist said,

I see that I've changed a lot over the period of time that I've known him [her lama]. And it's not just the social thing of turning from a shrinking violet into a blabbermouth. Something inside has changed, and there's a level of confidence that I'm developing in my own capability.

Self psychology helps to substantiate their self-reported experiences of increased well-being as arising from positive forms of relationship which parallel the transference healing process as described by Kohut. But the parallels between self psychological healing and Buddhist guru devotion stretch even further. Both are technologies which attempt to respond to questions about leading a meaningful life. Both see meaning inhering ultimately in the experiential acceptance of one's finitude. This is expressed in Kohut's concept of "cosmic narcissism" (Kohut, 1985, p. 111) and in the Buddhist concept of *nirvana*. Such acceptance brings freedom, for Kohut in terms of freedom to choose selfobjects and for Buddhism in terms of freedom from dissatisfaction and rebirth.

### **Negative Outcomes**

I have made a point of revealing the shortcomings of perspectives such as Kriegman and Solomon's, which highlight only negative outcomes of the guru-disciple relationship, because they represent fairly widespread views found in the academy as well as the nonacademic world. It seems important to redress the rather narrow focus of such views in order to encourage scholarly progress in the study of guru-disciple relationships. These views, however, do not

completely lack merit. They do help to explain dimensions of the experiences of a few practitioners.

All disciples appear to engage an idealizing transference to a Tibetan lama or they would not be disciples at all. The crucial point of difference between cases of growth and those of stagnation, or even regression in development, arising from the guru-disciple relationship, turns around the concepts of transmuting internalization and optimal frustration. One disciple in particular, for example, appeared not to have enjoyed transmuting internalization in her transference experience. When offered opportunities for optimal frustration so that she could re-examine the apparent perfection of the idealized selfobject lama, she did not. Rather than viewing her frustration as arising from limitations, and hence imperfections, in the person of her lama, she chose instead to blame herself for shortcomings in the relationship.

It would appear that this disciple more closely resembles those individuals described by Kriegman and Solomon (1985, p. 245) in which an original critical-mass minimum of self-confidence, required for entering the experience of transmuting internalization, is lacking. Without this self-confidence, one remains in a circle of recriminations towards oneself and saved perfection in the other, so that narcissistic dysfunction is enhanced, rather than alleviated, by opportunities of possible optimal frustration. Meditative insights which might be domesticated to improve self-coherence instead become used defensively (Epstein, 1990, p. 18). One thus is prevented from internalizing the qualities of the admired other and cannot become a lama oneself, instead remaining an unempowered vicarious participant in the projected perfection of the other. The idealizing transference to the lama is, in these cases, perhaps a liability to personal growth and self coherence. A Canadian-born lama at Siddha Gompa taught that some

Buddhists need secular psychotherapy more than they need spiritual devotion and perhaps it was to cases such as this that he referred.

## **Conclusion**

Examples of failures with transmuting internalization indicate that guru devotion, like psychotherapy, is not a foolproof process from which all grow equally. This, however, does not negate the positive experiences of Americans who benefit from the practice of guru devotion. In my ethnography, some disciples, by striving to become lamas themselves and thus internalizing the admired qualities and experiences of their Tibetan lamas, thrive within a religious symbolic system that is fully understandable within the context of their larger social age cohort.

Observational data support their self-reported experiences of increased personal autonomy arising from increased feelings of self-esteem, improved interpersonal relationships, improved vocational satisfaction, and an increase of meaning in their lives. The cases of these practitioners reveal an ability to introject the admired qualities of the lama, to make them one's own. Their stories lack a sense of a terminal symbiotic relationship with the lama, instead exhibiting themes of separation and autonomy as a result of resolving a deep relationship. Like clients in successful self psychological therapy, they build a sense of autonomy on the only ground on which it can be built, that of self-worth (Benson, 1994).

From this point of view, the stories of practitioners in my ethnography suggest that guru devotion can sponsor a genuine healing process in terms of self psychological transference therapy. A self psychological approach to the transference to the lama and the vicissitudes of Buddhist practice can explicate the contours of these positive growth processes. This allows for an alternative model for conceptualizing the guru-disciple relationship which may appreciate the

possible healing power of the relationship's dynamics. Perhaps this will encourage further scholarly exploration of the guru-disciple relationship, which remains such a pivotal part of many forms of Tibetan Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic Sufi, Taoist, and Hasidic Jewish religiosity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As Sudhir Kakar (1985, 850) wrote, "The guru-healer of the religious tradition and the analyst of the newer relational approaches are therefore certainly not strangers, but siblings, with recognizable features of a common ancestry in development of the self as a locus of relationships."

<sup>2</sup> All proper names found in the ethnographic portions of this essay are fictitious.

<sup>3</sup> *Gompa* (*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.

<sup>4</sup> Self psychology evolved from Kohut's theoretical background and clinical work with middle class Americans. The subjects of my study are also middle class Americans. Therefore, the cultural skew and bias often associated with psychoanalytic anthropology is rendered negligible for this work.

<sup>5</sup> The transference consists of a deep, charged, and essentially unconscious relationship of client to analyst. As an example, a client'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 analyst's similarly powerful unconscious attitude towards the client.

<sup>6</sup> Many Buddhists in this study reflect Kakar's findings that a dominant attraction of mysticism is the healing relationship with a spiritual teacher, not so much esoteric rituals or doctrines (Kakar, 1985, p. 851).

<sup>7</sup> There have been over the last few years several cases of apparent exploitation of surrender to Tibetan, Zen, and Hindu spiritual teachers. Dimensions of exploitation from a disciple's point of view have been ably and intelligently portrayed by Katy Butler (1990), Stephen Butterfield (1994), and June Campbell (1996), who survived what they experienced as exploitative treatment by their Buddhist teachers. In my presentation I in no way intend to minimize

the existence or the potentially shattering nature of such relationships, whether they arise from unfortunate ministrations by teachers that are intentional or not. However, in my years at Siddha Gompa I witnessed nothing that would lead me to suspect any kind of intentional exploitation, and unintentional exploitation, while rare, seemed restricted to fairly commonplace and innocuous events, such as asking for short-term help from an already busy disciple. These latter events, rather than being purely oppressive, actually represent opportunities for growth on the part of disciples. Verbal or physical gestures intimating expectations of a permanent, hierarchical, symbiotic guru-disciple relationship appeared lacking from lamas I met at Siddha Gompa.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Finn (1998, p. 167) noted that the famous Indian Tantric Buddhist guru Tilopa likewise behaved as a good therapist in his ministrations toward his disciple Naropa.

<sup>9</sup> Reflecting this, the fund raising director of the *gompa* remarked to me with facetiousness that if they could, lamas would use the surplus funds to increase the altitude of the mountain on which Siddha Gompa rests.

<sup>10</sup> Guru devotion at Siddha Gompa begins with fabricated devotion, in which one consciously perceives one's lama as already enlightened, as the Buddha, even if this perception must be somewhat forced. Ideally, what follows is unfabricated devotion, in which the perception of the innately enlightened nature of one's lama arises naturally and without effort.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps this movement reflects a Weberian elective affinity with aspects of American culture. Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka (1981, pp. 528-529) report that between 1957 and 1976 young Americans described a shift in perceived self understandings away from a conformist culture, featuring an external locus of control, towards a self of one's own chosen construction, featuring an internal locus of control. Buddhists in my ethnography largely belong to this cohort group.

<sup>12</sup> Bob's situation may reflect a common one in American society. For example, Pelletier (1977) indicates that dominant American role models may actually increase tension and pathogenic influence through their stress on ambition, drive, and financial success. Bob's case supports Wilson's (1985) assertion that gurus, as role models, may counteract this influence by offering empathic support and guidance and the introjecting of acceptance.



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