Gesturing towards Shambhala: The Mimesis of Modernity, the Dharma, and Science in McLeod Ganj

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Introduction

Hundreds of refugees flock from Tibet every year to McLeod Ganj, the home of the Tibetan government in exile. While reasons for coming may vary, many come to learn English, to visit family, to see the Dalai Lama, and most of all, to escape Chinese oppression (Diehl 2002). Though welcomed in the sense that they are refugees, Tibetans in India are not citizens, but "guests" of an unspecified duration. As "guests," Tibetans have come to bear a sort of double burden: the feeling of alienation not just from their homeland but from the land they have come to take refuge as well. To be a refugee, according to many Tibetans, is synonymous with an eternal transition—to be without a home or voice, and the mere recipient of charity. "Why did you come here as a refugee if you know that this place isn't a permanent home," I asked Dolmo, a twenty-three year-old woman originally from the Tibet Autonomous Region. "I came because I was treated as a second-class citizen. I had no control over my own life in Tibet." Dolmo proceeded to talk about the lack of human rights and religious freedom while living under the Chinese regime. "The biggest problem," Dolmo continued, "is that many Tibetans [in Tibet] don't even know they are oppressed. I didn't know how bad it was until I came here. The schools [in Tibet] don't teach us real Tibetan history. Now I can really see the injustice."

The number of refugees immigrating to India testifies to the sentiment that Chinese ideology reduced many Tibetans to the status of marginality, where the cries for Tibetan independence (*rangzen*) are met with immediate suppression such as imprisonment and torture, among other retaliations (Schwartz 1994). Every Friday at the

Tibetan Hope Center, I encountered examples of this very phenomenon, as ex-political prisoners would speak about the torture they experienced during imprisonment: "While I was in prison, any time I said something they [the Chinese] didn't like, I was beaten. I was hung upside down for hours and I was given very little food. [In fact] the food they gave you was dirty...you could see bugs crawling in it. It was a very horrible time for me. I wasn't treated like a human. I was treated like an animal."

Many of those who have taken refuge in India, like the political prisoner above, are willing to expose the terror of Chinese power, however uncomfortable and painful this endeavor may be. For many, this exposure is paramount to protecting not only the Tibetan people from further harm, but for all people living in China: "Talking about what happen to me publicly makes me very sad, if not depressed. But I do it anyways, I do it because Tibet is more important than myself," one ex-political prisoner said. "But forget about Tibet for right now. It is also a human rights issue. Look at Tiananmen square: on June 4th, 1989, the Chinese government massacred their own people, people who wanted democratic reform." This urgency to speak about Chinese terror, common in McLeod Ganj, exemplified the basic desire of Tibetan ideology of demanding human rights for both Tibetans and non-Tibetans in China. The fight against Chinese power was not only a fight for a homeland, but a fight for justice. This observation became particularly clear to me after I noticed that Tibetans and Western apologists alike used a significant part of the public space of McLeod Ganj to expose the human rights violations committed by the Chinese leaders. The nationalist ideology was everywhere—from "Free Tibet" messages woven into the fabric of spring jackets to public events commemorating political

prisoners and other Tibetans who died at the hands of the Chinese. At this juncture I realized the importance of studying the nationalist project in McLeod Ganj that ferments the possibility of re-claiming Tibet. I wanted to understand: what kept the desire for a homeland alive and why? And how is the Tibetan struggle mobilized through the space of McLeod Ganj?

As I conducted this investigation I noticed another pattern emerging within the public space: the presentation of Buddhism as a distinctly modern, emancipatory credo that sets itself apart from other modern discourses. But what became particularly interesting about this presentation, however, was the insistence of aligning science with Buddhism. As it was presented, Buddhism was not only a scientific discipline in its own right but a collaborator with Western science. "Many think Buddhism is a religion like Christianity," one Tibetan told me. "It is not. It is a science. It is like Western science but different—it is a science of the mind." This conversation had a lasting impression on me, for up until this point, I had commonly been confronted with religion as an anti-thesis to science, as the primitive, premodern form of scientific, rational thought. So I wondered with puzzlement—what was this persistent linkage of Buddhism and science about? Does it tell us anything about Tibetan identity in McLeod Ganj—about Tibetan nationalism perhaps? I was then sitting at a crossroads: to pursue either Tibetan nationalism or Tibetan Buddhism as my ethnographic object—or both and hope for a relationship to emerge. In the end, however, I figured that in order to avoid any form of reductionism I had to find out where these two patterns converged. It was not until I investigated how Tibetans thought of freedom, both in the religious and political sense,

that I noticed the relationship I longed for: that the desire for a homeland was not only co-extensive with the desire to be able to practice Tibetan culture, particularly Buddhism, without the encroachment or abuse of state power; it was also co-extensive with the desire to assert a "modern Tibetan Buddhism," an emancipatory discourse that collaborates with Western science as a means for which to heal both spiritual and physical ailments. But the positing of a "modern Tibetan Buddhism" is not only a re-interpreted Buddhism that proclaims a course of progress; "modern Tibetan Buddhism" is to be presented as an intervention into the problems of the world.

At this point, I wanted to confine my ethnographic observations to these two prevailing currents—nationalism and "modern Tibetan Buddhism," but I had a feeling that my analysis would be incomplete because I hadn't taken into account the economic context of McLeod Ganj. Although initially, I wanted to investigate tourism as my ethnographic object, I later dropped it due to my increasing interest of Tibetan nationalism. To balance the tension, I then decided to track the context as a kind of footnote and continue with these two themes anyway hoping that I could skirt the issue. I soon realized, however, that I couldn't escape the tourist engine that generated the representations circulating within McLeod Ganj, as a large part of what constituted this place was the effect of Western practices. I had to consider not only the fact that McLeod Ganj was a site steeped in romance and commodity fetishism, but a site that held possibilities for Western salvation, a place where Westerners could acquire spiritual epiphanies. After further contemplating the area around me, I realized the interrelationship between these themes: that McLeod Ganj was not only the home of

Westerners looking for a new identity, looking for a tonic to relieve the struggle of Western life, but also the home of a Tibetan renaissance—a movement of spiritual, political, and scientific production. This was not only the result of Tibetans who had an interest in constructing a new vision of reality; it was also the result of Westerners who either lived or spent a significant amount of time in McLeod Ganj or who had been inspired by Tibetan culture in general. The tourism running McLeod Ganj created a "space of dreams," as Ashild Kolas (2008) calls it, which invokes new possibilities, possibilities that envision emancipatory ideals for which Tibetans and Westerners ought to strive. McLeod Ganj may be a hybrid, a romantic landscape that blurs the distinction between fantasy and reality, but it is also a network that builds coalitions among sympathizers for certain political and spiritual causes. By exporting the Dharma to the rest of the world, Tibetans hope to help bring their emancipatory dream of politico-religious freedom into fruition.

It is the relationship among these seemingly disparate events that drives my analysis of McLeod Ganj. In the attempt to make sense of these different threads of experience, I kept the following question in mind: how does one understand the confluence among Buddhist discourse, Tibetan nationalism, tourism, and Western science, as internalized by Tibetans and Westerners in McLeod Ganj? In my attempt to answer this question, I will begin by investigating the relationship among tourism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Western romance as represented in McLeod Ganj. Following this, I plan to explore the overlap between Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan nationalism, showing how the project of nationalism is quilted within Tibetan soteriology. Finally, I

will illuminate how Tibetans living in McLeod Ganj repeat, mimic, and distinguish Tibetan Buddhism as a modern religious discourse, a field of knowledge that intersects, collaborates with, and resists the full signification of the scientific enterprise, by discussing how the insights derived from this hybrid are presented as an emancipatory intervention that could relieve the suffering of an ailing humanity, especially if a homeland is obtained. The argument I will be making attempts to complicate the narratives that bifurcate categories of nation-state, religion, science, and global flow by showing how Tibetans in McLeod Ganj not only construct a hegemonic project that seeks to overcome the oppressive conditions in Tibet but also construct a future imaginary that envision a space of freedom—an ideological fantasy of what a nation-state would look like once the chains of Chinese power are severed.

The Spectacle of Shangri-la

Prior to taking my first steps in McLeod Ganj, I spent an appreciable amount of time reading and immersing myself in the discourse surrounding the "spectacle of Tibetan culture." From these studies I expected to verify that much of the imagery, both historically and currently, orbiting Tibetan culture is an instantiation of Western romance (Bishop 1989; Bishop 1993; Lopez 1998; Schell 2000; Brauen 2004; Kolas 2008).[1] Upon my arrival, I was immediately assured that such an expectation was warranted. Lined up and down the streets were Western tourists, travelers, students, and expatriates buying prayer beads, t-shirts broadcasting "Free Tibet," statues of the Buddha, and a vast array

1 It would be difficult to exhaust the number of authors who have written on this topic. For further reading, see *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies* edited by Thierry Dodin and Heinz Rather.

of related objects from Tibetan street merchants. In McLeod Ganj, goods of an esoteric, beatified Tibet could be purchased, brought home, and placed on one's shelf, observed as a reminder of one's encounter with a once isolated spiritual community that is now increasingly adulterated by a modern consumerist fervor. The irony was that the décor of McLeod Ganj had mirrored the exotic desires of the West at the same time as it profited through selling the simulated images of historical Tibet. Tibetan culture, as imagined by Westerners, was suppose to be free from the desire for material goods, but the tourist logic circulating McLeod Ganj had brought Tibetan culture down from its romantic throne, to the level of ordinary, imperfect and sometimes ill-intentioned humanity.

This impression, of a commodified and neatly packaged Tibet, became more pronounced as I attended numerous educational programs at one or another of the NGOs dotting McLeod Ganj—specifically, L.I.T (Learning and Ideas of Tibet), Gu Chu Sum, and the Tibetan Hope Center. As a participant in these programs I was able to take part in interviews, forums, and public showings of documentaries related to the "cultural genocide" taking place in Tibet.[2] Many of the tourists and travelers were initially drawn by the educational opportunities offered by these centers: during the day, they would teach English to the refugees, and at night, they would participate in one of the many events dedicated to informing the public about Chinese oppression. The public space of McLeod Ganj was in many ways reserved for the process of shaping the traveling experience toward what was happening in Tibet and what could be done to help make changes. It seemed almost strategic, in that tourism was deployed as an instrument to

2 Many Tibetans use the term "cultural genocide" to refer to Chinese policies that exterminate Tibetan culture.

construct and distribute a specific logic about the Chinese-Tibetan relationship (Huber 2001; Diehl 2002; Hess 2009). The commodification of Tibetan culture brought by tourism seemed to coincide with the nationalistic fervor of McLeod Ganj.

This process of bringing attention to Chinese oppression isn't limited to McLeod Ganj. In her book, *Immigrant Ambassadors*, Julia Hess describes how the "Tibetan diaspora consciousness" is imbricated within a nationalistic project, generated from networks constructed across certain locations within South Asia. Hess reports that many of the diasporic subjects move to countries in the Western hemisphere, particularly the U.S., in order to raise the profile of the Tibetan situation: "Tibetans see the adoption of U.S. Citizenship as a means to empower themselves as political actors for their lost homeland in a transnational sphere. *In short, by becoming U.S. Citizens they become political agents for their own lost state*" (2009: 9; emphasis hers). Was I, among other travelers and tourists, merely a vehicle through which to advance the cause of free Tibet? Was the consumption of Tibetan culture merely part of this exchange—to obligate the recipient to communicate these injustices to the world?

As I pondered the question of my personal role in Tibetan ambitions and aspirations, I noticed an increasing number of Inji fully adorned in traditional Tibetan monk garb walking alongside other Tibetan monks towards the monastery down Temple Road. It occurred to me that a significant portion of the unfolding story entailed a measure of romanticized, spiritual imitation—a yearning for direct, unmediated experiences within a community casted as mystical. Well rooted in my academic readings, I was at first inclined to analyze this imitation of Tibetan spiritual practice

through a post-colonial query. That perhaps Western imitation of Tibetan monks suggested a kind of cultural appropriation, which conceals a hidden political-economic agenda unknown to the mimics themselves. Based on this logic, I assumed that Western consumption of Tibetan lore was one of two things: a latent tactic deployed by Westerners to control the flow of goods and services produced by the Tibetan people—a tactic woven within an entrepreneurial excess of "neo-imperialism," a phenomenon some scholars might describe as "spiritual colonialism"—or a tactic deployed by Tibetans to cajole the West to accept a carefully drafted Tibetan collective memory, so that they might become diplomats of the Tibetan struggle as well.

These assessments, however, were made prematurely, as my knee-jerk judgment quickly began to evaporate in the face of encouraged cultural exchanges that defied the boundaries of "Tibetanness" and "Westernness." As I allowed myself to engage the experiences around me, my focus became less of an expedition to unveil the insincerity of cultural exchanges and more of an expedition of deconstructing the theoretical presupposition that had framed my initial impulse to begin with: I realized that what established a barrier was the very framework that set up the subject-object relation which assumed a fake or inauthentic performance by either the Tibetan or Western subject. My original impulse within this framework was to construct a logic that either presented the Tibetans as naïve victims of Western economic domination and/or Inji as desperate romantics who had been duped by shrewd Tibetan nationalists. Both conclusions operated from the assumption that the imitative form of Tibetan Buddhism and the growing consumerism in McLeod Ganj were degenerate social practices. The problem

with this epistemological aperture became even more apparent when I noticed that some of the Buddhist teachers were Westerners, with many of them deeply respected by Tibetan monks and other Western students. I pursued this avenue further and found that while many of these students intended to return to their homeland to teach Tibetan Buddhism, many others did not. In fact, many Western students had plans to stay in McLeod Ganj, often at the suggestion of their teachers, and to pursue the monastic life indefinitely. Who could be a Tibetan Buddhist or who couldn't be was irrelevant to the project of Buddhism: as one monk told me, "Anyone can be a monk or nun. We don't discriminate because of one's sex, race, or nationality." What was important was that the teachings were to be passed on—preserved, practiced, and then transmitted. Furthermore, many of these Western Buddhists have become active in the Tibetan struggle for political freedom. While some Western Buddhists think that being part of the nationalist movement is necessary to preserve Buddhism and restore Tibetan culture, some do not. In fact, some, both Westerners and Tibetans, believe that *nangchoe-dharphel* (the preservation and propagation of Buddhism) is necessary even without a free Tibet. There was no heuristic pattern among Tibetans and/or Westerners to follow; thus, the signifier(s) I assumed to denote "Tibetanness" and/or "Westernness" held no ontological weight, so I had to proceed along a different avenue. While pondering the next step I realized that all of what I observed thus far implied something more than mere cultural appropriation—but what exactly? I asked myself: what kinds of problems are revealed by this framework that defines the mimicry I witnessed as Western-Tibetan appropriation?

As I tried to understand the common reaction towards the Tibetan-Western relationship—this either/or framework, where either Tibetans are insincere nationalists zealously attempting to coax the West or Westerners who appropriate Tibetan culture through the commodification of an otherwise authentic, pristine Tibet—I realized that much of the problem represented thus far had stemmed from a theoretical orientation that failed to consider the modernity-tradition dyad. According to Jacques Derrida (1981), notions of modernity and tradition historically refer to polar opposites, with the first term considered good, truthful, authentic, and progressive with the second term considered evil, corrupt, inauthentic, and primitive. Far from framed as independent and equal, these notions are positioned within a hierarchical order that prioritizes the first term and relegates the second term, while hiding the link between these meanings. That is, this seemingly simplistic positing of something good versus something bad, or something fake versus something authentic, assumes a signifier that transcends above all else; but, as Derrida teaches us, the problem with this opposition is that up until this point we have not been able to see how there was never a sharp rupture between these terms to begin with precisely because such would assume a singular signifier existing outside the structure of a text. As Derrida says:

> The ‘primacy’ or ‘priority’ [in the sense we have used “pure”] of the signifier would be an expression untenable and absurd to formulate illogically within the very logic that it would legitimately destroy. The signifier will never by rights precede the signified, in which case it would no longer be a signifier and the ‘signifying’ signifier would no longer have a possible signified. (1998: 324)

To gain a deeper understanding of the modernity-tradition dyad it is helpful to incorporate Kant's notion of pronounced parallax. In a move to overcome the subject-object, rational-empirical, and/or free will-determinism binary, Kant (2005; 2006) introduces a third stance—the form that holds these categories together—that demands we face the problem of universality, a stance Kant calls the "transcendental." For Kant, the "transcendental" is an attempt to develop a position that includes the Other, an Other that is largely absent within the above binaries (Karatani 2003). By positing an axiom that rejects the possibility of signifying the thing-in-itself, Kant demonstrates the optical delusion of both the observer's and the Other's point of view. Kant clarifies:

> Formerly, I viewed human common sense only from the standpoint of my own; now I put myself into the position of an other's reason outside of myself, and observe my judgments, together with their most secret causes, from the point of view of others. It is true that the comparison of both observations results in pronounced parallax, but it is the only means of preventing the optical delusions, and putting the concept of the power of knowledge in human nature into its true place. (Kant cited in Karatani 2003: 47)

What Kant tells us is that without a transcendental stance, other perspectives do not enter into an account of social reality because the Other's perception is rendered equivalent to that of the observer's. Thus, the aim of the transcendental is to assert antimony as the irreducible gap between the positions of self and Other (this irreducible difference Kant calls "parallax"), which resists any reduction of experience to a signifier-signified relation. Hoon Song explains: "the objective of [Kant's] transcendental philosophy is not

simply to speculate on a transcendental entity beyond our grasp, but on something that is discernible only via the irreducible difference among positively identifiable 'points of view' " (2010: 163). If we take Kant and Derrida seriously, then, we realize that the approach we have taken towards the modernity-tradition dyad is such that it repeats a subject-object binary that masks the Other's perception of an object. This is because the relationship between the subject and object is always framed within a posture that fixes the observer's representation of the Other as a template for modernity, a template that judges the Other as primitive in relation to the Observer (that which is assumed as modern). To distinguish between the observer's and the Other's perception of a given object, we have to take, as our starting point, human finitude—to realize that all history is nothing other than an optical delusion—and *diffèrance*—a term Derrida uses to gesture at both the endless deferrals of meanings, and the engendering of binary oppositions and hierarchies that underpin meaning itself—as the condition(s) of possibility (Derrida 1981; Derrida 1998; Karatani 2003; Foucault 2009). Eduardo Viveiros De Castro explains this further:

> If the equivocation is not an error, an illusion or a lie, but the very form of the relational positivity of difference, its opposite is not the truth, but the *univocal,* as the claim to the existence of a unique and transcendent meaning. The error or illusion par excellence consists, precisely, in imagining that the univocal exists beneath the equivocal, and that the anthropologist is its ventriloquist. (2004: 10; emphasis his)

What this tells us is that the fundamental aim of any ethnographic project is not to embrace the problem of duality from the classic modernity-tradition perspective that presupposes a univocal reality underneath these oppositions, but to make visible the unconscious structure that frames all of our binary oppositions to begin with.

This is not to say that the modernity-tradition dyad is inherently bad—since any disentanglement is impossible. The problem is that one misunderstands this dyad as an opposition that is discrete and compartmentalized. One must note the traces of each perspective within its counterpart—that prior to a representation is another representation that stands in relation to it (Derrida 1981). What this means for the modern and traditional perspectives is this: while the modern perspective understands tradition both from claiming itself in opposition to the other in the set as well as from a seemingly objective third point, what a modernist would call Modern; the traditional perspective, on the other hand, understands the modern as already part of tradition, as already a part of themselves (Hoon Song, personal communication, May 8, 2011). This is because the enactment of one's world produces doubles through constant displacement, through always referring to something that precedes that enactment (Derrida 1981). Now what this reveals about the presumptions I framed within the above subject-object binary—the aforementioned either/or framework relating to the Tibetan-Western relationship—is the tacit prizing of a Western modernity against a corrupted Tibetan culture or a corrupted Western culture by a premodern Tibetan culture, but never Tibetan and Western culture(s) operating as modern in conjunction. Tibetan culture could be authentic, if it remains free from Westernization, but never modern; and Western culture, in relationship

to Tibetan culture, could be modern but never authentic, as Westerners were often considered either the contaminators of tradition or the ones swindled by nationalistic fervor. But the problem I realized was the very impulse to objectively name, label, or describe Tibetan culture as authentic or inauthentic and/or intrinsically modern or traditional, as these were the impediments to understanding the social and political exchanges of Tibetan and Western practices.

To illustrate the aporia of the modernity-tradition dyad through a reading of a Kantian-Derridean critique, take Donald Lopez's book *Prisoners of Shangri-La*. In the attempt to problematize Tibetan exceptionalism[3]—the belief that "religion" is the essential element of Tibetan life—Lopez describes how Western romance has been invoked through Tibetan lamas living in exile. By exposing the distortions of Tibetan culture and history, Lopez attempts to show how Tibet has pivoted around a play of opposites—"the pristine and the polluted, the authentic and the derivative, the holy and the demonic, the good and the bad" (1998: 4). Lopez argues that much of what Tibet has come to mean is framed by what is lacking in the West, a projection that has set the stage for exalting Tibet while demonizing China.[4] Such romance comes at a cost. As Lopez writes, "to allow Tibet to circulate a system of fantastic opposites (even when Tibetans are the "good" Orientals) is to deny Tibet its history, to exclude it from a real world of which it has always been a part, and to deny Tibetans their agency in the creation of a contested quotidian reality" (1998: 11). While advancing this argument, Lopez cites

3 See Peter Hansen's "Why is there no Subaltern Studies in Tibet?" (2003).

4 To the effect that the "good image" of Tibet has been put forward by the Tibetan government-in-exile was contradicted by many of my experiences in McLeod Ganj. From what I observed, many have explicitly recognized the problems of "old Tibet" and used this critique as a strategy for "cleansing" its checkered past and proposing a more democratic future.

instances of mistranslations, chicanery, and fanaticism among Tibetan lamas and Tibetologists, showing how Tibetan Buddhism has been inaccurately represented, and therefore, inaccurately performed (as in the New Age movements which have recreated Buddhism as a psychology or in Theosophy which sees it as an occult practice). Although Lopez insists that the aim is not "to apportion praise and blame...to distinguish good Tibetology from bad, to separate fact from fiction, or the scholarly from the popular" (1998: 13), the reality is the reverse: the very endeavor to identify distortions as inaccurate representations already presumes an accurate reading of a text, as if the proper meaning or truth of a text is revealed once the illusion is exposed. Since the project is to uncover the logic of opposites permeating Tibetan culture, Lopez has unwittingly re-situated the subject-object binary within the classic modernity-tradition dichotomy precisely because his framework presupposes a natural and teleological way of reading Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism. This is not to say that Lopez is entirely wrong in his assessment: Tibet *is* romanticized. Rather, his epistemological venture has led him into a posture that prioritizes his own representation at the expense of that of the Other because Tibetans could never be modern, as they were both premodern charlatans and subjects of Orientialism at the same time.

In an attempt to break from the classic modernity-tradition dichotomy, anthropologists have employed the notion of mimesis to demonstrate how tradition is always, already in the modern. Unlike Plato, who understood mimesis as resemblances or imitations of those forms from which they emanate and thus illusory copies of the original,[5] Michael Taussig (1992; 1993) posits mimesis as a copying of a copy in ways

5 See Deleuze's *Logic of Sense* (1990).

that take on the character and power of the copy that is imitated. Going beyond the surface level of intentionally—of imitating a copy or mimicking nature, mimesis is "the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other" (1993: xiii). This, in effect, tells us two things: that all reality, and not just the Other's, is fictional representation, and also that subjectivity itself, as an adaptive behavior (prior to language), is driven towards assimilation and play, to "not just [be] passive copies but copiers, not just prototypes, but chameleons" (Taussig 1992: 174). As such, mimesis cannot be understood within the process of distinguishing truth from illusions, distortions, and corruptions since human expression *always* lacks originality. It is this observation that had led Jacques Derrida (1981) to characterize mimetic action as that which, within a fictional world, constructs illusions, appearances, and aesthetic images that are appropriated, changed, and re-interpreted, never to become real or tangible. Meaningful engagements, therefore, inevitably perpetuate the illusion of appearance through the assertion of truth, while also concealing the illusion of the very notion of truth. In this sense, the disavowal of the premodern, through the embracing of the classic modern-tradition dichotomy, is a disguising of how the modern is also a kind of premodern magic. This leads me to my questions: what, then, makes Tibetan Buddhism an object of Western mimesis? And what does this tell us about my earlier discussion about Western romance?

It is common in anthropological and religious studies literature to describe the mimicry of Tibetan culture or Tibetan Buddhism as an example of Western romance. Many scholars have theorized that the fascination with Tibetan culture and Tibetan

Buddhism originated with Western travelers' accounts that exalted the beauty of the Himalayas (Brauen 2004). Eventually this fascination crystallized into an index of Tibetan culture as the cure for an increasingly diseased Western civilization. Graham E. Clarke explains: "The Shangri-la[6] fantasy has primarily to do with the psychological needs of certain people in the West. It should therefore come as no surprise that in nearly all works of imagination about Tibet, the country and people come across merely as the mise en scène for the personal drama of white people" (2001: 374). To be sure, many, if not most, of the tourists, expatriates, students, and other travelers come to McLeod Ganj because of their fascination with Tibetan culture—especially Tibetan Buddhism. Thus, as we can already see, the aura[7] of Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism has on some level "seduced"[8] Western desire into constructing a mythology of freedom (Adams 1996; Moran 2004). Perhaps romance explains the initial spark that leads one to pursue his/her interest in exploring Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism.

Similarly, another reason one could posit for Western mimesis is related to the tourist economy of McLeod Ganj. McLeod Ganj is well known as the tourist capital of all the Tibetan settlements in India because it is the home of the Dalai Lama, attracting many people from many cultures around the world (Furer-Haimendorf 1990; Klieger 1992). Many argue that the tourism that fuels the production of McLeod Ganj has reconstructed "Tibetan culture" and "Tibetan Buddhism" as marketable commodities (Kolas 2008). Thus, scholars who study tourism argue that tourists traveling in far away

6 Shangri-la originated in James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon* (1933) as a mystical, harmonious valley encased in the Kunlun Mountains. As of today, Shangri-la has come to represent a mythical, happy filled utopia that is isolated from the diseased, outside world.
7 I borrow the term aura from Walter Benjamin (1968), Peter Moran (2004), and Jean Langford (2010).
8 See Adams (1996) for clarification of this term.

places are often searching for authentic experiences (MacCannel 1992; Langford 2010). This, of course, has interesting implications. One implication is that because tourism creates the illusion of authenticity, tourists who are on a journey for something authentic or sacred are forever chasing the simulation of "real Tibet" (Turner 1994). Oakes writes: "the paradox of authenticity is that it vaporizes only when you look for it...it always recedes and disappears from view" (2006: 247-50).

There are, however, problems with this particular explanation as well. One fundamental problem is that most of those who reside in McLeod Ganj long-term for the purpose of studying Buddhism identify themselves as students or practitioners—or as what many in the anthropological literature call "pilgrims." Interestingly, the self-proclaimed students or practitioners differentiate themselves from tourists, stating that while tourists are not serious about practicing Tibetan Buddhism, they are. In fact, according to many of these students, pursuing Tibetan Buddhism as a medical or psychological remedy articulates a different sense of identity, an identity that activates a desire for knowledge and insight unlike that of the tourist who treats Buddhism as a romantic object to be consumed. What does this particular sensibility tell us about Western-Tibetan mimesis? And does this tell us anything about Tibetan nationalism?

As I have already noted, many of those who have taken an interest in Buddhism have done so for the purpose of finding antidotes to their own alienation. While some Western students are devoted to moving up the ladder into higher positions within the Sangha, others have already made plans to take the Dharma back to their countries so they can become teachers of this tradition. In one instance, a middle-aged student with

whom I spoke told me that he plans to return to Chile to open a Dharma center in his hometown after five more years of studying Buddhism in McLeod Ganj. "The Dharma has become the most important thing in my life," he said. "I just want people to have what I have experienced through Buddhism."

Martin, another Buddhist student, had come to McLeod Ganj to heal his depression and addictions—namely sex and drugs. On his third day in McLeod Ganj, Martin had decided to participate in a ten-day retreat at Tushita Meditation Centre. When I asked him about the retreat, Martin described it as "just the right medicine." I had no contact with Martin following that conversation until a month later when I ran into him at a coffee shop on Jogiwara Road. I noticed immediately that Martin was fully converted to Tibetan Buddhism. He began to talk about past lives, karma, and the failures of Western psychology. "Western psychology is so far behind Buddhism it is not even funny," said Martin. "Why do you think that?" I asked. "Because meditation is the only thing that has worked for me. I've had therapist after therapist, but none of that shit worked. I've been on every kind of medication, from antidepressants to all the benzos—uh, you name it, I've tried it [laughs]." This primitivizing of Western psychology I found among Westerners in McLeod Ganj suggested something quite interesting about the relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and Western knowledge: that Tibetan Buddhism, among many Western students, was internalized not as a premodern practice, but as a modern practice, a kind of practice that trumps Western knowledge in the realm of understanding the mind. While the tourist seems to desire the experience of a premodern tradition unspoiled by Western culture, the pilgrim or student seems to desire

the Tibetan Buddhist identity itself, an identity that affirms and repeats a kind of modernity.

The modernity projected by Tibetan Buddhists[9] is often repeated outside of McLeod Ganj as well. In fact, Western desire for Tibetan Buddhism is growing in many parts of the West, particularly academia. Allan Wallace, editor of the book *Buddhism and Science*, argues that "Buddhism offers something fresh and in some ways unprecedented to our civilization, and one of its major contributions is its wide range of techniques for exploring and transforming the mind through firsthand experience" (2001: 6). Wallace further suggest that the coming and going of intellectual fads throughout academia evidences a problem of endless truth seeking dominating the contemporary Western spirit, a problem Buddhism could resolve. For Wallace, this problem, if eliminated, could mark a turning point that could change Western civilization itself. But in order to trigger this shift, Westerners would have to take up the Dharma as a mode of inquiry and then verify its logic through the rigor of scientific testing.

Other academics agree with this premise. Robert Thurman, Tibetan scholar and Buddhist practitioner, constructs a similar vision, of what he calls the "inner revolution," that is based on an evolutionary development of the individual who seeks this ultimate truth. According to Thurman, through spiritual meditation, the dissolution of the "I" would eliminate anxiety and depression while cultivating virtues of responsibility that makes oneself accountable to the interdependence of all beings. Evolved individuals would incite compassionate values that could transform militant civilizations into non-violent, harmonious "enlightenment factories." It is this sociological insight that led

9 Here, I am speaking about Westerners who take up Tibetan Buddhism as an identity.

Rueyling Chuang, Professor at California State University, to propose Tibetan Buddhism as an inquiry through which to heal the post-modern mind: "Buddhism addresses the ontological issues of what is real, or as postmodernists would address it, the notion of hyperreality" (2006: 13).

In short, Western imitation of Tibetan Buddhism is neither a fake performance nor a sheer romancitization of Tibetan Buddhism as such and thus not reducible to the Shangri-la spectacle of McLeod Ganj. This is not to say that romanticization is not an aspect of Western desire for Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism. Nor is this is to say that the tourist context does not matter: indeed spiritual mimesis depends, at some level, on the tourist culture of McLeod Ganj to market the insights of Buddhism, thus offering the Western tourist hope for curing the ills of late-capitalist society. Based on what we can gather from popular desire, Tibetologists, and various Western Buddhists in McLeod Ganj, the gestures comprising spiritual mimesis should not be seen as inauthentic expression of romantic longings but instead as attempts to assert Tibetan Buddhism as a modern discipline of knowledge, a knowledge that can provide meaning for those who could only find half answers and fragmented meanings within their own cultural, philosophical, and/or scientific affirmations. The romance that constitutes Inji involvement of Tibetan Buddhism is therefore already blurred within the process of mimesis—romance, as a result, cannot be clearly distinguished apart from those gestures many modernists would describe as 'authentic.' MacCannell has written, "ethnicities can begin to use former colorful ways both as commodities to be bought and sold, and as rhetorical weaponry in their dealings with one another" (1992: 168). Thus, as I tried to

suggest, the tourist display of McLeod Ganj is a creative, rhetorical weapon, a "mimetic loan" if you will, that invokes sympathy not only for the cause for *rangzen* but also for the desire to repeat Tibetan Buddhism as an emancipatory endeavor. Perhaps it is plausible that the dreams of religious enlightenment among Tibetan and Western subjects are not articulated in vain, as Lopez and other post-colonialists implicitly suggest, but are re-interpreted projects that affirm a universal truth about human nature and human suffering.

The Vision of Buddhist Nationalism

I discovered early on, after having lived several weeks with my host—Phuntsok, a forty year old Tibetan monk and doctor—that the daily experience of a typical Tibetan was filtered through a lens of Buddhism. During breakfast every morning, while Phuntsok and I would discuss the differences between our cultures, I noticed that Phuntsok would evaluate other cultural practices from the perspective of a Buddhist. When I raised the problem of Tibet-Chinese relations, I noticed that the structure of the discussion eventually related back to a logic integral to the Dharma. How Phuntsok viewed the problem of Tibet, as well as the solution, was not atypical in McLeod Ganj: the reason the Chinese still occupy Tibet is that they do not have enough mental stability or "peaceful mind" to clearly see the situation. "The Chinese aren't bad people," Phuntsok said. "I blame the Chinese government because these leaders are delusional...they do not have a clear mind to see the harm they are causing." "What do you mean by delusional?" I asked. "I mean they hurt people because they do not have enough of a peaceful mind to

see how the citizens of their country are suffering...they don't listen to any of their people; it is not a democracy," Phuntsok responded. "What about the police, the military, or the prison guards that beat and torture the Tibetan protesters?" I asked. "I don't blame them as much. These are horrible acts, but they are following orders. In my humble opinion, I think the Chinese government would do much better if they actually listened to what the Dalai Lama has to say. He's a valuable resource." "In terms of what?" I asked. "He has a lot of [Buddhist] wisdom to offer."

Phuntsok added that behind the struggle for free Tibet is the indispensable need to preserve Buddhism, "to save it from becoming extinct," as he put it. The importance of preserving Tibetan Buddhism became more discernible as other Tibetans explained the role of religion in their daily lives. In a conversation I had with Uma, another Tibetan doctor born and raised in McLeod Ganj, I was told that without Tibetan Buddhism, the Tibetan people would be lost.[10]

> Dennis: Why is it so important for the culture and Buddhism to not become extinct?
>
> Uma: It's all we have. It is part of our identity; without it, we feel handicap.
>
> Dennis: So what about Buddhism then?
>
> Uma: On a community level, we cannot have a healthier community, and on a personal level, we cannot have a better life [without it].

This championing of Buddhist discourse suggested that the category of religion in this case was far from a subsidiary force—unlike the more commonly acknowledged

10 See Girija Saklani's *Uprooted Tibetans in India* (1984) and Margaret Nowak *Tibetan Refugees: Youth and the New Generation of Meaning* (1984) for more information on this subject.

notion of religion as being packaged as an isolated practice specific to the private sphere, untouched by the projects of the state. In the minds of many Tibetans living in McLeod Ganj, Buddhism not only held a kind of power that can be redefined as a set of modern values, but also held a kind of power that surpasses and/or embodies almost every other category. In this sense, Buddhism operated as a framework that furnishes meaning to political, economic, and social experiences through evoking ethical precepts to inform new projects. That is not to say that every Tibetan I spoke to privileged Buddhism over all other modes of inquiry—that was not the case. For the most part, those who took Buddhism as the register to make sense of social, political, and economic life do so with a "vow" of changing the world in a way that echoes a strategic reading of Buddhist principles. It occurred to me at that point that the categories of culture, state power, nation, and the political economy had already been blurred, leading to what has been referred to as the secularization thesis[11]—the view that religion detaches from politics, economics, science, and other "secular values" with the development of modernity—as a hollow explanation of Tibetan reality. In other words, the above categories have no ontological significance outside of their relation to the logics comprising Buddhist discourse since Buddhism, as internalized by the singular Tibetan subject, is the preferred register through which meaning and identity are apprehended.

The all-encompassing power of Buddhism became even more obvious as I began to notice the suturing of politics and Buddhism (*chosi zungdrel*). In fact, most of those living in McLeod Ganj now draw their ethics from a mix of Buddhist and Western political values—particularly within conceptions of human rights and democracy. For

11 See Talal Asad's *Formation of the Secular* (2003).

instance: as far as the direction from Western values to Buddhist ethics is concerned, merit can be acquired through political action, especially if it furthers the cause of a free Tibet (Schwartz 1994). But the direction from Buddhist ethics to Western values is also quite prominent: that is, the commitment to protect the sacredness of all human beings falls under one's personal responsibility towards respecting the interdependence of all beings. Any violation of human rights is therefore a violation of Buddhist ethics.

The desired operation of the state within McLeod Ganj is also shaped by a similar mixture of Buddhism and politics. But the way they are mixed is particularly important —not to elevate religious notions at the expense of democracy, but to use religion to inform political practice. The following dialogue describes how these two share the same field of experience:

> Dennis: Do you think politics and religion should be separate or one?
>
> Phuntsok: There are two ways to look at this. The government we had in Tibet before the Chinese occupation was a theocracy—using religion for political ends...
>
> Dennis: What do you mean by this?
>
> Phuntsok: Well, the government consisted of only monks, and very few people outside of government had a say. Even few people inside government had a say. The thirteenth Dalai Lama made plans to reform the educational system...to modernize it, but it was rejected by other cabinet members. Sometimes the outcome is negative if these two are mixed like this. The other way to look at it is at the individual level. They [religion and politics] come together if the

> individual is both religious and political. We have to start at the grassroots level...to be kind and do things that will liberate people. This is what we do here in McLeod Ganj.

The mixture of Buddhism and politics informs day-to-day life in that it highlights the necessity of practicing love and compassion as values for self and Other. I realized this during a public forum conducted every Friday at the Tibet Hope Center, where ex-political prisoners would speak to the public about what happened to them while imprisoned in China. In a personal interview after one of these events, one of them stressed the importance of having Buddhism in one's life when one is stripped of everything. "The only thing that kept me going [in the Chinese prison] was my faith in Buddhism. I was in a lot of pain. But Buddhism helped me get stronger; it helped me to forgive." Interestingly, this ability to forgive reminded me of a story about the love of a bodhisattva—a story told to me by Gelek, a middle-aged Tibetan monk.

> While in the forest one day, two brothers encountered a tiger dying from starvation. The brothers, who had taken the bodhisattva vow, felt a lot of suffering after seeing the tiger weak and helpless. To help the tiger, one of the brothers decided to sacrifice his body to the tiger" (the ending of this story was audibly indiscernible).

After the story Gelek proceeded to tell me that love itself is not just a gesture of kindness, but a practice of dissolving attachment through giving and self-sacrifice. The commitment to love, as I was told, is not only a way to experience happiness but a way to generate love for others. "If you want to be happy, to feel lightness in your body, you

have to give," said Gelek. "How does one go about learning to give?" I asked. Gelek responded, "If you can control the mind, you can develop love for almost anything."

It is through the signifier of compassion (*nyingje*) that we can see how Tibetans understand the notion of religious freedom. Tibetan Buddhism distinguishes itself from other forms of Buddhism in terms of what is valued as the aim of practice. In Theravada Buddhism (Thai Buddhism, for instance), the ultimate goal of the individual is to achieve nirvana, while Tibetan Buddhism is about attaining Buddhahood—the state of perfect enlightenment—through cultivating compassion and developing the wisdom of emptiness or no-self (Samuel 1992). In other words, the development of enlightenment in Tibetan Buddhism coincides with the practice of compassion because one acquires merit necessary for a higher rebirth through arousing bodhicitta (*jang chup sem*)—this union of compassion and wisdom (Pabongka Rinpoche 1997). But this process of releasing oneself from samsara (*khorwa*) mostly takes place over the course of many life times. Thus, the significance of generating compassion should not only be seen as a means to acquire freedom in the present—to be happy here and now; it should also be seen as a means to acquire freedom in the future. Since most Tibetans understand the inevitability of rebirth, the aspiration towards altruism already embodies the happenings of the present because what one plans to do in the future begins to affect the present and future conditions immediately.

Dennis: Why did you become a monk?

Phuntsok: For a couple of reasons. Most importantly, I wanted to live an easier life. I don't have to focus on taking care of a family and children, so I won't have

all the stress that goes with that—so yes, it is easier to become a monk because it helps with internal contentment. Secondly, I wanted to do well at my job. I was told that I would have a better career if I were to become a monk [he laughs]. It is also better for the environment—because I wear less clothes, there isn't as much production that goes into sustaining our lifestyle. But also, it gives me more time to help others who need it [help] more than I do.

Dennis: But does this help you have a better life in your next life?

Phuntsok: Of course!

We can get the sense that Phuntsok's decision of taking up the precepts of monk hood was rooted in a desire for freedom—to "live an easier life" in this life as well as in the next—because of the "transcendental rewards" that come with his practice. It is here that we can see how judgments articulated by many Tibetans are embedded within the logic of karma—the theory of cause and effect.

But karma is not only a logic that governs ethical conduct of the present and future, it is also a logic that justifies why the present conditions exist, based on what has happened in the past. For example: the doctrine of "karmic retribution" (*lenchak)* explains present crises as the result of past misdeeds for both the individual and the collective simultaneously. This occurred to me after a conversation I had with Nyima, who explained to me that the sins they committed in previous lifetimes were in part responsible for Tibet's occupation by China: "We were content. Perhaps too content, as His Holiness says. And somehow we lost our country. We are happy people and always have been, but we must have done something bad in our past life in order to have had this

happen." What's more is that these past misdeeds are also thought of as burdens on the present and future because they weigh down the Tibetan culture itself. Lobsong, a thirty-one year old refugee from Tibet, told me in an interview: "One reason why we lost it [Tibet] is because over the centuries there was corruption within the monasteries. Many of the lamas took advantage of its citizens and now we are paying the price. We have lost our country and are now losing our culture." Since past collective transgressions have created bad karma in the present, Lobsong and other Tibetans, feel the pain of losing the identity of Tibetan culture, a "loss" that becomes fuel for correcting the accrued karma. In fact, this "fuel" spills over many life times because karma governs the relationship between reincarnation and political action. But not all is lost. As Lobsong explained to me, Chinese oppression does in fact motivate Tibetans to act with compassion because acting with anger would only reproduce bad karma in the present and future, thus laying down conditions that would exacerbate the problem: "China is a conditioner for Tibetans...a lot like a Dharma teacher. The more oppressed we become, the more we learn compassion." And by furthering compassion, Tibetans acquire merit conducive to a higher rebirth.

While the logic of karma explains the present suffering of Tibetans, it also explains the present and future suffering of non-Tibetans. During a conversation I had about a new Chinese plan that will curb the use of Tibetan language in schools in Tibet, I was told by Lhakpa, an older refugee woman who has lived in McLeod Ganj for a while, that the Chinese are creating more karmic suffering for themselves by virtue of these misdeeds:

Lhakpa: Yeah, I can't comprehend what they are up to. I feel sorry for those people [the Chinese] because they are creating bad karma for themselves.

Dennis: But what happens when bad seeds are planted though?

Lhakpa: They will reap bad fruit, both in the immediate and distant future, since it is based on the law of causality.

Dennis: So you mean this lifetime as well as the next?

Lhakpa: Certainly.

Finally, other than justifying the past and present conditions, karma can also justify future conditions by explaining, in advance, future possibilities extrapolated from present notions of justice. I discovered this after a conversation I had with Dolmo, a recent refugee from Tibet, about the power of Buddhist rituals as a causal force for social justice. Praying, according to Dolmo, is more than a meditative technology that expunges one's karmic sins—it is a spiritual mechanism, a magical power, as it were, that can transform the world in ways that are favorable to the performer of the ritual.

Dennis: Does Buddhism at all hurt the cause of free Tibet?

Dolma: No.

Dennis: Why not?

Dolma: Because it helps people to have a happier life. It is not just for Tibetans, but for everyone. It helps all sentient beings.

Dennis: Okay, but how does practicing Buddhism alone help make a free Tibet?

> Dolma: It is possible to have a free Tibet if we just pray. Prayers are strong and it can help the cause [of a free Tibet] because it can lead us and other people to a better life.

For many Tibetans, the ethical imperative of Buddhist discourse is to experience happiness in the present and future moment(s)—to be free from the retribution of karmic actions. The karmic debt that Tibetans seek to resolve is both religiously and politically motivated: that is, the desire to "live an easier life," now and in the next life, as well as the desire to assert values of justice and democracy are imbricated within the pursuit of expunging bad karma and acquiring good karma. Hence, the logic of karma rationalizes the practice of love and compassion in order to create the possibility of a social order that is oriented towards collective salvation. In other words, this pursuit of constructing a social order is therefore activated by the desire to free the self and Other from the plight of present social, political, and spiritual conditions—that is, to relieve the karmic debt that binds Tibetans to the past and to bring the present and future freedom into fruition. Political affairs are thus not distinct from Buddhist representations. To the contrary, one might say that the political vision asserted within McLeod Ganj is a vision that asserts a kind of Buddhist nationalism.

Monk Science

The impulse of a post-colonial inquiry, as I am beginning to allude here, is to externalize Tibetan Buddhism from the project of Tibetan nationalism, to place the former subsequent to the latter. But any understanding of Tibetan nationalism indeed requires a

dedicated examination of what many Tibetans describe as "modern Buddhism." This is because, as I have already mentioned, compartmentalizing "modern Buddhism" and Tibetan nationalism—considering them as discrete topics of examination—risks one's understanding of how the latter is couched within the aspirations of the former, that Tibetan nationalism itself is engaged within the logic of "modern Buddhism." Thus, the questions I want to ask now are these: what is "modern Buddhism" and how is it significant to Tibetans' notion(s) of freedom? For many Tibetans, "modern Buddhism" distinguishes itself from other forms of Buddhism through its emphasis on practicing the Dharma on a day-to-day basis and its emphasis on learning Western science as a complementary discourse.

I first noticed this relationship between Western science and Tibetan Buddhism while attending a forum that took place at the Tibetan Hope Center. For three days in a row, for four hours a day, a number of Tibetan monks and Western travelers converged to discuss the differences, similarities, and possibilities of collaboration between Buddhism and science. One of the more revealing disclosures was that a sizable portion of the discussion was centered on the inadequacies of scientific explanation—namely science's inability to understand many of the religious experiences cultivated through Buddhist practice. In fact, many of the monks insisted, as a kind of meta-theoretical claim, that because science focused so much on material reality, human consciousness largely remained a mystery (a mystery that could be explained by Buddhist dialectics). As the monk leading the forum said, "Buddhism is open and willing to change if science disproves it. But it has not. Science has not been entirely useful to Buddhism." What

catalyzed the monk's response was the conception shared by the many Tibetans (both monks and lay persons alike), and even some Westerners who attended the event: that science alone is not sufficient in addressing issues of human suffering. Part of the reason for this is due to the fact that Buddhism has been left out of scientific discourse. This is because in the West the tendency is not only to shelve Buddhism within the conventions of scientific logic (and we very well may include the logics of Western philosophy), but to explain it away. In McLeod Ganj, on the other hand, science is already subsumed within the conventions of Buddhist logic and therefore unable to surpass or embody the dialectics of Buddhism. It was this juncture that allowed me to see the rhetorical power of Tibetan Buddhism—that is, how the aura of Tibetan Buddhism inspired the Westerner to imitate its practice, and more importantly, how Tibetan Buddhism, for Western and Tibetan subjects, was repeated as an emancipatory discourse.

As I watched people's reaction to the forum, I noticed that the rhetoric of Buddhist discourse had charmed the audiences, as many Westerners quickly made their way to the Tibetan book store along Jogiwara Road to purchase books on Buddhism. As one Westerner told me, "I was so inspired I had to buy three or four books [on Buddhism]." The final question on the last day solidified my impression. The monk leading the forum was asked by a Westerner how he felt about Marxism as a possible supplement to Buddhist philosophy. The monk responded, "Well Karl Marx believed in economic equality, but that is difficult to do...if not impossible. Buddhism, on the other hand, believes that everyone could have a peace of mind. Not everyone will have a peace of mind now because of their past karma, but everyone could in the future because we

have many opportunities to find long-lasting happiness. Every moment is a possibility to be happy." Hidden within the subtleties of his response was not only an allusion to how Marxism had failed to fit into the overall framework of Buddhism, but also how Buddhism had a kind of potency or power that superseded any ideal reality formed through economic practices.[12] This is because the most important contribution Buddhism makes, according to the monk, is the moment-to-moment possibility of transforming one's body and mind. Accordingly, this becomes an important intervention within any discussion of world philosophy, insofar as the transformation derived from Buddhism has the capacity to overcome the problem of everyday stress, independent of any social, economic, or political condition.

The trump card was played during the monk's final statement, when he said that Buddhism was a lot like science in that it too pursues knowledge on the basis of logic, debate, and empirical investigations. Anyone who wishes to pursue happiness can in fact "test" what the Buddha had said about human suffering by merely observing and analyzing their "discursive thoughts" at any given moment. The possibility of being able to "test" the logic of Buddhist discourse, not unlike the procedures of scientific investigation, became an important rhetorical device for those who sought happiness promised in Buddhist colloquies.

The aura of science provided many Tibetans with a powerful metaphor to reference the good, thus shaping the representation of Buddhism through an analogical

12 This is not true across the board however. Some Tibetans I spoke to thought of Marxism as a fruitful supplement to Buddhism. Even the Dalai Lama in the past classified himself as "half-Buddhist and half-Marxist" (Bharati 2006).

frame that splits Buddhist inquiry into two different disparate camps.[13] Uma said: "I'm not interested in Buddhism as a religion—as a bunch of rituals; doing prostrations and things like that. I'm interested in Buddhism as a philosophy, or a science, something I can test." Testing, Uma adds, is what makes something scientific, rational, and credible; unlike religion, on the other hand, which are unquestioned "rituals" that nears superstition. But like most Tibetans in McLeod Ganj, Uma represented Buddhism as both a science and a "religion of reason." This doublet became clear to me after a conversation I had with Phuntsok when I was told that other religions, when compared to Buddhism, did not share this same level of rationality: "Christianity and Muslims have deep faith, or belief, but this is not enough. The Buddha said, 'Check and see if what I am saying is true; if it does not work, change it then.' Other religions have no reason or logic, or at least not to the extent of Buddhism; they believe everything they are told. Buddhism, on the other hand, is built around reasoning." For Phuntsok, Buddhism is like a science in that it is built around "reasoning," but it is also different from science in that it promotes values such as love and compassion, values that are not always part of scientific investigations. As Phuntsok said, "See, science created the atom bomb. It [science] hasn't always been used for good things." Furthermore, this "religion of

13 One of the reasons behind the tendency to present Tibetan Buddhism as a scientific discipline, both in and out of India, is because of its continuous dialogue with Western science. But the representation of Buddhism as a collaborator with science is not a recent development (Lopez 2008). Particularly within Tibetan history, there have been a number of moments when Tibetan Buddhists have taken an interest in Western science (Jinpa 2003). Beginning in the 1930s, for instance, Gendun Chopel campaigned for the modernization of Tibet by arguing that Western science had much to offer Tibetan Buddhism. In an attempt to renegotiate Tibetan scholasticism, Chopel disputed the cosmology presented in the abhidharma literature, borrowing from geographic sources to demonstrate that the world was not flat. This venture, however, failed to convince Buddhist thinkers, leaving Chopel's legacy as that of one of the first Tibetan Buddhists who hoped for a Buddhist-Science unification (Lopez 2008). It was not until the Dalai Lama's participation in the Mind and Life conferences that we see the dialogue of Buddhism and science shaping the perception of Buddhist scholars and lay persons in McLeod Ganj (Jinpa 2003).

reason" that constitutes Buddhism, Phuntsok claimed, is what distinguishes the different types of Buddhism. As I was told, the Buddhism of the past is marked by tradition, monastic practices, and theocratic politics while "modern Buddhism," what Phuntsok also calls "pure Buddhism," is marked by its interest with Western education—science, computers, technology. While "traditional Buddhism" is oppressive, corrupt, and outdated, "modern Buddhism" is rational, compassionate, and contemporary. Phuntsok describes:

> There are two types of Buddhisms: pure Buddhism and impure Buddhism. Impure Buddhism is the monastic Buddhism that had governed Tibet before China had invaded us. Because the government was ruled by the monasteries before the Chinese invasion, the ruling monks decided to isolate Tibet from the rest of the world. Tibet was therefore prevented from modernizing. They [the ruling monks] didn't use religion positively—it was very oppressive. But pure Buddhism is different. It is the philosophy behind Buddhism. It is about truth, compassion, tolerance, and peace. This is what His Holiness practices. This means we have to educate ourselves in science, computers, Western philosophy—it is about having a modern education. Pure Buddhism wants nothing else but the liberation of all beings, not just human beings. Impure Buddhism cannot achieve this because it is a past philosophy.

But in the end, since science only helps in the physical, mundane world, it is ultimately limited. "Science focuses too much on the outside world. There is not enough focus on the inside. Buddhism is a study of the mind. It is a study of internal meaning.

There needs to be more Buddhism in the world," said Phuntsok. The trope that science is concerned with conventional truth and Buddhism with the ultimate truth appeared time and again in the conversations permeating McLeod Ganj, and among many of the Westerners who had come to McLeod Ganj to exalt Buddhism as the final aim of human life. This is because Buddhism offers what science does not: a solution to Western alienation. Interestingly, Western science was not the only perspective criticized as limited in scope; for Phuntsok, and many other Tibetans, Western science is a product of Western education and therefore a reflection of a failing philosophy to meet the needs of human nature in general. "What did you mean," I asked Phuntsok, "when you said that we need more Buddhism in the world?" "Western education has created more problems, yeah? It has solved many problems but it has created many problems too. Mao Zedong has a Western education but he was a ruthless leader," said Phuntsok. I responded: "Well, it is more because we are becoming aware of problems that were invisible before..." Phuntsok interjected: "No! It is because of the quality of education! Yes, it is good to have a Western education, but it is a paradox, no? It is good, but it is one-sided—it spends too much time on the external and not on internal study. There is in need of more compassion."

Phuntsok explained what he described as the paradox of Western education; that many of our problems were the result of "too much time on the external" and "not enough time on the internal." For Phuntsok, it is this lack of "internal investigation" that is in part responsible for the unhappiness in the West, and for the rest of the world. "Why do you think so many people come here to study Buddhism?" Phuntsok asked me.

Before I could respond, Phuntsok looks directly at me and adds: “It is because there is so much unhappiness in the West. When I travel [to the West], I always see big houses, many cars, and a large backyard. But we have next to nothing. We don’t even have our own country, and yet, we are happy. While in the West...there is so much unhappiness...so much depression.” The deluge of travelers and students within McLeod Ganj revealed to Phuntsok the importance of Buddhism for developing “internal contentment” because of the excessive materialism that bankrupted the happiness of Western life. But it isn’t just the preoccupation of material goods that causes Western misery; it is also the lack of openness, trust, and interdependency: “When I travel to the big cities in Russia or in Spain, I notice that people don’t often trust each other. I notice that people are lonelier and isolated...more locks on the door, less time is spent visiting with their neighbors...I think that Western education has helped a lot, but it is not enough.” “What do you think is needed then?” I asked. Phuntsok responded, “Western education is great, but it is only study [of the external]. It is not practice. It does not provide us with moral principles to live by.”

According to Phuntsok and other Tibetans, learning and studying the Dharma is important in that it offers a more dedicated practice of morality (values such as love and compassion) and a more sophisticated practice of developing “internal contentment.” In fact, the cost of neglecting one’s “internal contentment” is catastrophic. I was told that the consequences of this are that we not only begin to fear death but we begin to deny its inevitability as well. “It seems that, from my experiences from traveling, people in the West are so scared of death,” Phuntsok said to me during breakfast one morning. “They

think about it too much. Death is a part of life. There is no control, and so if there's no control, there's no problem. But they [Westerners] worry too much about it [death]." Phuntsok added that our fear of the death extends deep into our cultural practice, manifesting in the very compulsions comprising the affluent Western lifestyle. The very desire to consume, to work excessively, to destroy the planet are all effects of a constructed self, a self that avoids confronting the specter of death. For Phuntsok and other Tibetans, this denial, most importantly, is much deeper than an affliction to one specific culture; rather, it is a problem that puts the entire world in danger. As Sogyal Rinpoche confirms in the famous text *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, "...the disastrous effects of the denial of death go far beyond the individual: They affect the whole planet" (2002: 8).

As we can see, many Tibetans and Western students residing in McLeod Ganj, permanently or otherwise, project Tibetan Buddhism as a solution to the alienation and unhappiness afflicting the West, if not the whole world. One Tibetan educator said: "We hope to produce learned men who are familiar with both English and Dharma. We are not teaching Buddhism as missionaries, but because it is very beneficial for all living beings; for peace and happiness. That is why we are studying dialectics: to give these teachings to the West" (taken from Nowak 1984: 113). But what is of interest here is that this projection is related to Tibetan nationalism such that the desire for *rangzen* parallels the very desire to maintain and propagate Buddhism as a mode of inquiry, as a soteriological vision. Again, as Sogyal Rinpoche explains:

> A large part of the future of humanity may depend on the reestablishment of a free Tibet, a Tibet that would act as a sanctuary for seekers of all kinds and of all faiths, and as the wisdom heart of an evolving world, the laboratory in which highest insights and sacred technologies could be tested, refined, enacted again, as they were for so many centuries, to serve now as an inspiration and help to the whole human race in its hour of danger. (2002: 365)

But if the project of Tibetan nationalism includes the desire to assert Tibetan Buddhism as an emancipatory intervention, why was Buddhism and science often positioned in conjunction in McLeod Ganj? Theoretically, what is this relationship about?

One might argue that the heightened conjunction between Buddhism and science is due to the Dalai Lama's fascination with Western science. The Dalai Lama writes in *The Universe in a Single Atom*: "if scientific analysis were conclusively to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon those claims" (2006: 3). While the Dalai Lama has recently abandoned some parts of Buddhist cosmology, he still remains firm on the belief in rebirth. Through a classic modern-primitive dichotomy, the assumption is that if one is faithful to the trajectory of rational thought, then one will (and ought to) abandon the primitive, irrational ideas—those ideas such as rebirth, celestial deities, and the formation of multiple, cosmic planes. It would follow then that Buddhism and science, as a persisting conjunction, are in somewhat of an aberrant dialogue, a dialogue that derives from either Western romance, spiritual colonialism, Tibetan fanaticism, or Tibetan mythopoeisis—the exaltation of Western practices—because of the Dalai Lama's willingness to combine

something modern with something premodern. The implicit assumption of all of this would be to suggest that the persistence of this dialogue is none other than an inauthentic exchange of cultural ideas.

Donald Lopez offers a different interpretation. In *Buddhism and Science*, Lopez (2008) argues that the effort to show the compatibility between Buddhism and science is driven by the desire to prove that Buddhism is not a superstition, but a science. Lopez writes, "the claim for a compatibility of Buddhism and Science offers a kind of defense against modernity, even striking out against it, by proclaiming that an ancient Indian religion is a 'science' and thus is 'modern' "(2008: 192). Thus, for Lopez, in order to understand the conjunction between Buddhism and science, one must understand the history of its formation; and so the task then is to "document some of the ways that Buddhism has been represented as compatible with Science over the past 150 years" (2008: 216). By unfolding the history of the Buddhism-science conjunction, Lopez aims to show the difficulty of representing Buddhism as a fashionable, up-to-date science. Lopez writes: "to see Buddhism as ever modern comes at a cost, a price that many may consider well worth paying. But before paying that price, it is perhaps useful to recall those elements of Buddhism that are so starkly premodern, and to ask what is at stake in their loss" (2008: 216).

The weakness in Lopez's present critique is in line with the problems underpinning the classic modernity-tradition dichotomy: in fact, the implicit question of whether Tibetans are performing under a veil of authenticity is resuscitated within the very representation of Tibetan Buddhism as half-modern and half-premodern. For

Lopez, the gesture to "proclaim Buddhism as modern" is an attempt to explain Tibetans' desire to celebrate their position of marginality, to exploit the popular credibility of scientific rhetoric by calling the relationship a "collaboration," as a weapon to defend their Buddhist faith. Compared to Western power, Tibetans certainly exist within a position of marginality, but this position itself is not necessarily the motor for re-claiming power. From the perspective of many Tibetans, Western science may be a "modern" practice, but to be "modern" is not necessarily a culminating point of rationality. Time is not linear, but cyclical. To be "modern," rather, is not only to live in what is described as a contemporary world, a world that is more democratic and more technologically oriented, and thus more free in terms of allowing one to practice one's cultural identity, it is also a willingness to incorporate practices that would maximize an economy of happiness and compassion. Perhaps, then, we should start from the perspective that science is already subsumed within Buddhism: that the Tibetans' sense of the limitations of science (and the limitations of Western knowledge itself) along with Western desire for Tibetan Buddhism confirms, through Buddhist logic, what the Tibetans suspect about Western afflictions. Tibetan representation of the West is re-affirmed not only by every Inji who develops an interest in Buddhism but also by any Inji engagement itself that is considered immoral or a failure to address human suffering.

Ultimately, Lopez's avowal of the Buddhist-science dialogue as a "defense against modernity" can really only function as the second step of a larger process, a process that fundamentally stresses the performative enactment of everyday life as one of a play of figuration. Therefore, the gesture to "defend Buddhism" is not necessarily a

gimmick, a "staging of modernity"—as if the participants are posing as modern to strategically wheedle the West into equating Tibetan Buddhism with a special authenticity as implicitly assumed within Lopez—but part of a process that begins with the very internalization of Buddhism as a prioritized perspective, a perspective that includes and judges the Other from the basis of its own internal logic. Buddhism has always been and is already modern to the Tibetan subject and the Western mimic; thus, the adoption of science, as coterminous with modern Tibetan Buddhism, is merely an extension of the "historical" or "traditional" vision of Tibetan emancipation, but understood and represented as "modern."

A similar scenario of philosophical re-textualizations has occurred many times throughout Tibetan (and Sherpa) history. In *Himalayan Dialogue*, Stan Mumford discusses the heteroglossia of Buddhist-shamanic discourses that re-frames the prevailing paradigms of thought. Mumford argues that Tibetan reality has been modified through reciprocal illumination, through "dialogic events that reflect arguments, reflections, and moral choices which become turning points that can be recalled" (1989: 139). But the shift in the Tibetan order as an effect of the reflexive dialogue between Tibetan Buddhism and shamanism reveals more than a mere change in discourse; it reveals a transformation in the imagining of a future order, a vision registered through the trope of the Tibetan Shambhala—the mythological kingdom that will be the center of a future utopian era where peace, tranquility, and happiness reign. Mumford describes the Tibetan aspiration: "Having promoted the inner life, they [Tibetan lamas] can now draw the larger world into the basic aspiration of their unfinished project: the construction of a

cultural order responsible for the destiny of humanity and organized for the enlightenment of all beings" (1989: 254).

Tibetan history can be described as cyclical, oscillating between 'evil-eras' and 'good-eras.' With the loss of Tibet and the increased suffering among many Tibetans in and outside of Tibet, many Tibetans now believe that they are currently living in an 'evil-era.' In the attempt to partially achieve what is spelled out in the Shambhala myth, Tibetans within McLeod Ganj are engaging the dialogue between Buddhism and science as an emancipatory vision that projects and resolves the crisis of world endangerment—with the crisis as one of worldly unhappiness and misery and the solution as the partnership between Tibetan Buddhism and science in order to realize a new 'Golden-era' within the trajectory of Tibetan life. In other words: by expanding the meaning of emancipation to include the mundane, physical dimension of human life as a corrigible space as well as those who are also non-Tibetans, Tibetan and Western participants plot a future imaginary, an imaginary that repeats the Shambhala motif of preparing everyone for eternal, spiritual happiness. As the Dalai Lama once wrote:

> Generally speaking science has been an extraordinary tool for understanding the material world, making vast progress in our lifetime though of course there are still many things to explore. But modern science does not seem to be as advanced regarding internal experiences. […] The next question is how are we to share these beneficial results [results derived from Buddhism] with people beyond those who happen to be Buddhists. […] The spiritual methods are available, but we must make these acceptable to the mass who may not be spiritually inclined.

> Only if we can do that will these methods have the widest of effect. This is important because science, technology, and material development cannot solve all of our problems. We need to combine material development with the inner development of such human values as compassion, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment and self-discipline.[14]

Conclusion

In his seminal book *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, Donald Lopez argues that Tibetans have exploited the "romantic images" projected by the Western imagination to serve the Tibetan cause for independence. While it cannot be denied that Tibetan culture is romanticized in the West, a conclusion of this kind can easily be taken too far, to the point where Tibetan Buddhism is seen as a mere medium through which to advance a nationalist agenda. But Lopez cannot be entirely to blame for the momentum of this argument: in fact, Lopez has inherited a legacy that often reduces the Tibetan-Westerner relationship to romance, chicanery, and/or appropriation. As a result, the tendency has been to implicitly frame this relationship through a modernity-traditional duality that presupposes the evaluation of Tibetan and/or Western identities as authentic, progressive, primitive, or fake based on the intention or character of the form in question. This is why the temptation has been to thread the Shrangri-la myth nesting within the Western imagination to the clarion call of *rangzen*, citing the exaggerations of Tibetan culture and

14 This was written on January 14, 2003 and retrieved from the Dalai Lama's website on June 6th, 2010.

Tibetan Buddhism presented by the Tibetan government in exile as evidence for this claim. [15]

But the problem with the classic modernity-tradition duality underlying these presentations is that it fails to consider how Tibetan-Western mimesis goes beyond the intention of any action or the imagining of any representation. As I have tried to show, since Tibetans and Westerners do not share common customs, the mimesis of Tibetan Buddhism and Western science, for instance, is not necessarily an exchange between modern and primitive or colonial and pristine representations but rather an exchange of strategic, risky[16] "modern" representations that aim to forge an ideological alliance for the purpose not only of achieving Tibetan independence but also of expanding the field of emancipation. As such, the question of whether or not Tibetan or Western identities are authentic or inauthentic and/or modern or traditional cannot be objectively answered because the identities constructed through mimetic action subsume the representations of the Other. The very representation of "modernity" is not only constructed but centered through mimetic relationships. That said, any gesture towards this evaluation would only reinforce the compartmentalization of Tibetan Buddhism and science, Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan nationalism, and Tibetan culture and Western culture, because these

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15 In fact, many Tibetans wish nothing other than to jettison this myth. Tashi Rabgey writes:

> It is arguable that the Tibetan way of life could contribute significantly to the future as we enter a postindustrial age. This is not to say, however, that I espouse any inflated notion that Tibetans have been withholding some grand secret from the rest of humanity or that Tibet should properly assume the position of the navel of the universe. *On the contrary, it would be a welcome development if the popular image of Tibet as the utopian Shangri-la were definitely dispelled. Tibet was no utopia and injustice was far from unknown.* (1998: 13; emphasis mine)

16 By 'strategic' and 'risky' I do not mean those actions as understood within performativity. In many ways, actions are always strategize and imbued with risk but never are they executed according to a template occupying the mind, as assumed by modernist notions of the 'self.' I wanted to capture here those aspects within aspirations that are oriented towards achieving a dream, but without recuperating an *a priori* or signifier-signified residue.

categories are represented as equivalent signifiers that could be exchanged on a one-to-one basis. None of these categories can be reduced to singular, atomized beliefs or representations. Hence one cannot talk about Tibetan nationalism without talking about Tibetan Buddhism and one cannot talk about “modern Tibetan Buddhism” without talking about “modern science.” In the attempt to disrupt the classic modernity-tradition frame, I argued instead that the Tibetan-Western relationship informed a “modern” emancipatory discourse that sutures democracy, science, and Buddhist salvation, a “modern” emancipatory discourse that is more free and more compassionate than the emancipatory discourse represented in the West. This discourse, as implied within the sub-text of the Tibetan vision, is not only represented as an intervention that would resolve the problem of Chinese oppression but an intervention that would resolve the problems afflicting the contemporary world through the very “seduction” of the liminal communities of McLeod Ganj, Tibet, and Western society into gesturing towards a Shambhala utopia.

Finally, the narrative I am constructing here is not only about questioning the perspective that presupposes “Tibetanness” and/or “Westerness” as compartmentalized identities, it is also about questioning contemporary meanings of nationalism as well. Benedict Anderson argued in *Imagined Communities* that the concept of nationalism is an artifact of Western modernity and that the construction of the nation is disposed for the inculcation of utopian values within “an imagined political community [that is] imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (224: 1983). As we can see, Anderson’s thesis is useful insofar as it highlights the imitation of Western nationhood such that the Tibetan

vision seeks to render utopian values within a politically established community that adheres to principles of sovereignty (or autonomy). But what needs to be questioned within Anderson's thesis are the assumptions that (a) Western modernity operates as the exclusive blueprint for nationhood and (b) nationalism itself is too readily preoccupied with a community that is inherently limited. As demonstrated throughout this essay, the nationalism that runs through Tibetan ideology is not necessarily aimed at inscribing a sense of loyalty solely to those who belong to a nation-state or region, but rather aimed at constituting a legitimate space that saves, enriches, and expands what is perceived as freedom. This is because the regulation of either of these possible social spaces is as much political (i.e. constitutional law) as it is religious since the language employed to frame social, political, and economic projects is fastened within Buddhist judgments. In other words, the commitment to a possible nation-state or autonomous region is sustained insofar as the political imaginary is in the service of protecting the soteriological vision of Tibetan (and Inji) identities that dreams of liberating all sentient beings from karmic suffering. Thus, the utopian values driving Tibetan nationalism may have one foot in Western modernity—democracy and science—but one foot, too, in Buddhist ideology genealogically linked to the Shambhala myth. This is evident in the very fundamental values occupying the imagined Tibetan utopia—this positioning of modern science alongside *nangchoe-dharphel* in order to maximize merit acquisition. Many choose to imagine "Tibet" not only as a sacred space in which Tibetans may dwell but also as a mecca of religious prosperity for all humankind. Therefore, if one's nationalist ideology "transcends" the boundaries of nation or a region, as in the case here, then we have to re-

assess nationalism as an ontological category useful for understanding the notions of "sovereignty," "community," and "state-power."

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