

A Transnational Tulku: The Multiple Lives of FPMT's Spanish-Born Lama Ösel

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In this article, I will discuss the unique case of the largely non-heritage Tibetan Buddhist community,¹ the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), and their young non-heritage reincarnation, Lama Ösel.² I will discuss how FPMT and Ösel have both spun Geertzian webs of signification about complexities of tulkus, lineage, guru devotion, and faith that have themselves ensnared and enabled one another in turn.

The case of FPMT's young tulku is unique in that some of the institution's non-heritage followers are agnostic about the notion of reincarnation altogether. In an ethnographic analysis of the conventionalities of faith production, we see that institutions like FPMT secure faith, dispel skepticism, and enable trust in the sangha

¹ Herein, I use the terms "heritage" and "non-heritage" Buddhists to distinguish between those who came from a markedly Buddhist background from those who did not. I have chosen not to use Jan Nattier's (1998) popular distinction between "elite" and "ethnic" (and "missionary") Buddhists, since it carries the problematic linguistic baggage that: 1) non-heritage Buddhists are definitely economically elite while heritage Buddhists are not (which is patently inaccurate); 2) that all non-heritage Buddhists are white people (an over-generalization, to say the least), *and* that white people are somehow non-"ethnic" (although that flies in the face of the multiplicity of disparate heritage groups amongst American whites). I have also chosen to eschew the use of the word "convert," since some of my FPMT informants refused the appellation, for example, second-generation non-heritage Buddhists whose parents converted to Buddhism, and those who continue to feel connected to their heritage religious identity even as they also practice Buddhism.

² This article is primarily, although not exclusively, based on ethnographic work on FPMT and its Maitreya Project that I did from 2005-2007, which was funded by a generous grant from the American Institute for Indian Studies. I have also observed the social media presence by (and about) FPMT and their lamas from roughly 2002 through 2016. Interviews with FPMT interlocutors were confidential, and thus I have changed the names of my informants to protect their privacy.

faith by disciplining one's mind and body with repeated guru yoga³ bowing and genuflection, and the expectation that one will obey the advice of one's spiritual master. Guru devotion permeates the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, but in translating the practices of guru worship to Western non-heritage devotees it is notable that the path to burgeoning faith is constructed by especially active engagement with, through, and beyond skepticism.

As I trace the many "lives" or transformations of Ösel Hita throughout this chapter, I will make the case that insofar as skepticism is an important strategy in FPMT's work to inspire faith, Ösel's journey into and now out of cynicism is itself providing new models for being Buddhist in the organization.

Although Ösel himself was never my informant (and I've never met him in person), he was considered a guru and celebrity for many of my FPMT informants (the sangha and the committed devotees, at any rate);⁴ thus, my anthropological understanding of Ösel's journey is largely being refracted through FPMTers' experience of it. As Ösel is a public celebrity, this paper will address Ösel's many lives within the FPMT social imaginary, and as such, my paper is primarily concerned with the ways that a relatively nascent transnational Buddhist organization has engaged with its most transnational young tulku.

³ Guru yoga is an aspect of Tibetan Buddhist practice that entails the visualization of one's guru as a buddha, in order to: 1) purify one's karmas; 2) exalt the guru as teacher; 3) reaffirm the innate capacity of all sentient beings to eventually achieve buddhahood (Powers 1995).

⁴ Non-heritage Buddhists are a disparate lot themselves, so I have found it useful to establish subcategories that acknowledge the nature of their commitment at the time of the interview. Based on their interviews with me, I situate my non-heritage FPMT informants on a spectrum ranging from "students" to "devotees" to "sangha." "Students" are active and interested learners, who may or may not self-identify as Buddhist, but feel a connection to some elements of the practice and/or philosophy. FPMT "devotees" have placed their faith and commitment in the gurus of the organization (to be precise, I would add that this does not preclude guru commitments to non-FPMT teachers). "Sangha" have become monastics and dedicated themselves to teaching dharma. These are non-essentialist categories that obviously change over time (perhaps more than once in a person's lifetime). These appellations are also not necessarily linear or progressive, as some informants zig-zagged back and forth between categories during their relationship with FPMT.

1. *Ösel's early years*

FPMT was founded in the 1960s by Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. At the time FPMT was organized, Lama Yeshe was a Tibetan refugee living in exile, and Lama Zopa Rinpoche (a Nepali-born heritage Buddhist) was his student. FPMT was founded at the behest of Western students who begged for dharma teachings. Today, the devotees, monastics, and administrators worshipping at FPMT's global network of over 150 centers are as likely to be from South Carolina (USA) as South Korea (ROK), and the majority of FPMTers are still non-heritage Buddhists.

I will begin Ösel's story where my informants tend to, with the death of Lama Yeshe on March 3, 1984.⁵ After Lama Yeshe's death, Lama Zopa Rinpoche took on the work of running and expanding the FPMT empire. By the late eighties, there were fifty FPMT centers worldwide.⁶ After a search, Lama Zopa Rinpoche recognized Lama Ösel Hita Torres (born to Spanish parents—who were both FPMT devotees—in February 1985) as the reincarnation of Lama Yeshe; the Dalai Lama confirmed this identification in 1986.⁷ Shortly thereafter, Lama Zopa Rinpoche began plans to educate him at a Tibetan monastery in India in the manner he felt befitted a reincarnate lama.

⁵ Lama Zopa Rinpoche noted two different causes for Lama Yeshe's failing health and ultimate demise: 1) he blamed deficiencies in the FPMT sangha's level of devotion; 2) he blamed the "problems regarding our center in England, Manjushri Institute" (Wangmo 2005: 281). In terms of the first cause, Lama Zopa Rinpoche suggested to FPMT devotees that Lama Yeshe could have lived another ten years, but that his lifespan had been dependent on the integrity of the prayers and karma of his followers, who had essentially failed to muster the conviction to keep him healthy (Mackenzie 1988).⁵ The second cause, the secession of the Manjushri Institute from FPMT in 1984, was upsetting to Rinpoche not only due to the loss of the physical center, but also because it became the founding "mother centre" of the group called the New Kadampa Tradition. The New Kadampas are one of the groups aligned against the Dalai Lama's restriction on the propitiation of the Shukden deity, and therefore, they are extremely controversial in the milieu of contemporary Tibetan Buddhism. Lama Zopa Rinpoche had reportedly said that the secession of the center was a significant cause in the fast decline of Lama Yeshe's health (Wangmo 2005). For more on the Shukden controversy, see Dreyfus 1999, and for more on the role of the FPMT and the Manjushri Institute, see Kay 2004 and Cozort in Heine and Prebish 2003.

⁶ Mackenzie 1988.

⁷ Wangmo 2005. Non-heritage, not ethnically Tibetan tulkus are not unheard of, but they are still quite rare. There are several Western tulkus who have been identified by Tibetan lineage holders from all the major Tibetan sects. Most were the boy children of non-heritage Tibetan Buddhist devotees, but there have also been a few adult Western men (Steven Seagal, e.g.) and women (such as Catherine Burroughs, a.k.a. Jetsunma Ahkon Lhamo, e.g.) recognized as tulkus over the past few decades as well.

The FPMT students and devotees I interviewed dozens of years after Lama Yeshe's death were split about whether they believed in Ösel as a tulku. With the caveat that these memories were shared in retrospect, some acknowledged an initial cynicism that they slowly resolved, while others said they were always sure that Lama Zopa Rinpoche and/or the Dalai Lama must be right in their recognition of Ösel. Others maintained a connection to FPMT, but never managed to generate faith in Ösel or to become certain that he was the legitimate successor. As one might expect, this latter perspective is especially prevalent amongst those interviewees who had already phased out of FPMT after Lama Yeshe died; among former FPMTers, there was a great deal of deep-seated ambivalence about the authenticity of the identification.

Vicki Mackenzie, a Buddhist journalist and a devotee of Lama Yeshe, has documented Ösel's life from the time she met him as a 20-month old toddler (1988) to his pre-teen years (1995). In her books, she writes of her own shock at seeing aspects of her former teacher's personality reflected back to her through a child. She discussed how other devotees looked for clues as to whether he was an authentic reincarnation with both hope and doubt. Her two books addressing Lama Ösel read as hagiographies designed to convince the reader that he is a genuine tulku; in part, she does this by highlighting her initial skepticism and describing how she was gradually convinced Lama Ösel was truly Lama Yeshe's reincarnation. That someone who had such extended exposure to him became convinced of his status as a tulku is meant to be understood by others as evidence that they too should become confident of his identification.

Since Lama Ösel's parents were dedicated non-heritage FPMT Buddhists from Spain, they were willing to let Lama Zopa Rinpoche take charge of his education from an early age. At the age of three he was being taught by his parents, by an FPMT Geshé in Spain, and at Kopan monastery by Lama Zopa Rinpoche. At the time, young Lama Ösel traveled often from Nepal to India to Spain and also to many centers all over the world. In 1991, he was sent to a very prestigious Tibetan monastery, the Sera Je monastery in exile, located in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. According to my informants (and his own later public missives on the subject), Lama Ösel often struggled against the traditional Tibetan Buddhist pedagogy of intense memorization, strict discipline, and tightly controlled schedules. After two years, he left the monastery, and the ensuing "crisis" alerted various layers of the FPMT community to some uncertainty about Lama Ösel's future with the organization. Eventually, a resolution was reached, and Lama Ösel returned to Sera

Jé on the condition that his father and a beloved brother could accompany him.⁸ He reintegrated into the system at Sera with some special accommodations, and stayed for several more years. After resolving to finally leave Sera Jé after his eighteenth birthday, he took off his monastic robes for good, and went to a private school in Europe. Since Ösel left behind the title, "Lama," I will not use it to characterize him during the years following his eighteenth birthday.

2. Waiting for Ösel:

Hopes and anxieties after the abdication of the heir apparent

During my fieldwork period studying FPMT and their Maitreya Project plan in India from 2005-2007, Ösel Hita was entirely out of the public eye, but he was still a minor celebrity. He had asked FPMTers to leave him alone for the time being, as he pursued a Western education, without FPMT responsibilities. At that time, many of my FPMT informants, especially those who were long-term devotees, regularly whispered to one another about "Lama Ösel" at mealtimes and in line for the bathroom during breaks. His future was a popular topic of discussion amongst devotees at the FPMT centers where I did research.

In a conversation over breakfast at the Root Institute in Bodh Gaya in 2006, I heard the gathered students and devotees talk about the fact that they had heard that "Lama Ösel" was now asking to be called just "Ösel." This gossip was met with some consternation. A devotee from North America, a volunteer at the Root Institute, exclaimed, "He'll always be Lama Ösel to me!" One woman said that his abdication of the title was just a symptom of his humble and nontraditional nature (both qualities that they associated with Lama Yeshe); this comment was met with approval at the table. Although some of the discussants were relatively new to FPMT and what I would call "students," no one at the table expressed doubt about his authenticity during the conversation. Yet, this was not always the case with students at the Root Institute that year. There were many people who saw Ösel as a failed experiment, a strategic choice that blew up in their faces, and while there were occasional discussions about this in the open, most of the real nay-saying about Ösel's authenticity as a reincarnation by students and devotees alike was

⁸ Also, he had specific desires for a replacement tutor, and he asked be given concessions about his food arrangements there (Mackenzie 1995).

done in hushed voices in more private conversations and in confidential interviews.

In the midst of an interview with me in 2006, one informant, a non-heritage devotee, recounted that she heard that Ösel was dressing in “Goth” or “punk rocker” fashions, and he was drawn to the dregs of society—sitting with them and listening to their stories at dirty bars in California. A different American, a non-heritage Buddhist devotee, sounded a bit concerned as she told me that she had heard that he had a Mohawk hairstyle.

My FPMT informants in 2006 and 2007 often noted that he was studying film at a university in North America—some said in Canada and others said in America. While gossip about Ösel’s whereabouts and activities were a source of some consternation and excitement around the dining hall tables of FPMT centers in India in the mid-aughts, the news of his educational pursuits was often met with positivity by many devotees who said that he was learning the film medium in order to benefit the greatest possible number of people. For example, one of my informants, a long-time staff member at FPMT’s Root Institute, told me in 2006 that Ösel was expected to go his own way for a time, and then return to the FPMT fold. She said:

Lama Ösel is pursuing his Western education now. He hasn’t disrobed: since he was never ordained, he was never really robed! He is doing film studies. He is keeping a low profile. He wants to understand what life is like for his students. He had been at a boarding school in Europe for a while and no one there even knew that he was a tulku. One of his friends from there went to Kopan and saw his friend’s photo all over the place. He hadn’t known that Ösel was a lama. [Ösel] doesn’t want Mandala to do any sort of article, since he’s trying to stay out of the spotlight. He’s doing it all his own way. This doesn’t surprise anyone. Lama Yeshe was quite an unconventional lama. He used to drag Lama Zopa Rinpoche to strip clubs and Disneyland. He wanted to understand the world of his students. We expect great things from [Ösel] still, and he will come back to us when he is ready.

There are many devotees like her who always hoped that he would stay active in the organization and take over from Lama Zopa Rinpoche as spiritual director, but there are others who always felt that as a Westerner he would go his own way, and contribute to the

dharma in his own unique manner, becoming a kind-of Buddhist "talk show host."⁹

So although Ösel had left the organization, he had stayed fixed in what Vincent Crapanzano calls the "imaginative horizons" (2004) of FPMT devotees. Their desires, hopes, and anxieties about the future hinged largely upon Ösel, even after several years of radio silence from the young man himself. Ösel's unconventional ways were compared to Lama Yeshe's mores, and anyone who disagreed was often dismissed as having the wrong karma to recognize the truth of the matter.

In the summer of 2009, a controversy ensued regarding Ösel Hita Torres' just published interview with *Babylon Magazine* (Pontones 2009). The article quotes Ösel as saying that he did not consider himself a Buddhist, that he had a very difficult childhood as a tulku, and that he had sometimes felt that he was living a lie; the article quotes Ösel insisting that he will not teach in FPMT in the future as they had hoped, since he had left his robes and monastic education behind. He would be a filmmaker instead. A few media outlets, such as the *Guardian*, sensationalized the interview by emphasizing quotes about the suffering Ösel described in terms of his childhood in seclusion, and by making it appear the rift between FPMT and Ösel was fierce and acrimonious.¹⁰ Soon afterwards, on their website, FPMT posted a letter from Ösel to FPMTers that decried this sensationalism without ever actually refuting the main points or quotes from the *Babylon* article ("Osel" 2009). Ösel did, however, try to ease possible hurt feelings by writing that he was grateful for the opportunity to have lived and studied in India, for although it had been difficult, it had been a formative experience. He worked to assuage the controversy by saying, "FPMT is doing a great job and Lama Zopa Rinpoche is an immensely special person..." He signed it: "Big Love, Ösel."

However, even after the *Babylon* controversy and the subsequent truce, Ösel did not recant his concerns about his upbringing. In 2012, the BBC interviewed Ösel and his mother for a piece called, "the Reluctant Lama" (Jenkins). In the interview, Ösel states that he still harbors misgivings about being raised in a monastery away from his family. Ösel and his mother both painted an unflattering picture of FPMT, especially as regards their handling of his ultimate refusal to return to the monastery: Ösel was apparently pressured to return by FPMT leaders; FPMT vocally blamed his mother for his departure;

⁹ Mackenzie 1995, 207-208.

¹⁰ Fuchs 2009.

and FPMTers told her in no uncertain terms that she should also advise him to return. In the interview, Ösel said he was hounded for years after he left. In the BBC piece, his mother said that she stood by her decision to allow him to give up his title and religious education: "He felt like a clown. He felt he was being used to act as a master, to be seated in a throne, to visit a center, 6000 people coming there to see him and make offerings to him. He saw himself as representing something, or playing a role."¹¹ However, despite articulating an uncertainty about whether he was actually Lama Yeshe's reincarnation,¹² or whether he was a Buddhist even, in the same interview Ösel expressed interest in taking a more active role in FPMT. Thus, Ösel embodies a public model of moving forward in FPMT, despite some uncertainty and ambivalence.

Ironically, while the controversy started by the Babylon article had caused consternation and ruffled feathers, it actually served as a turning point in the story of Ösel's public relationship with FPMT. The outcome of the kerfuffle was the start of a new "life" for the transnational tulku, one in which he began engaging with FPMT on his own terms, as a non-monastic teacher, documentarian, and neophyte administrator.

3. *The return of the prodigal tulku*

Back in 2006, as I listened to devotees fantasize about how Ösel would return, use film to bring FPMT's messages to the Western masses, and lead them into the future, I would nod politely and dutifully write everything down. Personally, though, I sometimes felt that many of my informants were engaging in a communal case of wishful thinking about Ösel's future in FPMT. But I was wrong. Those FPMT devotees and sangha who believed Ösel would someday return to the fold have been rewarded for their constancy and faith: several years after my doctoral research on FPMT wrapped up in 2007, Ösel began to tentatively reengage with FPMT, attending board meetings and doing dharma talks. An open, public "Ösel Hita" page on Facebook, which appears to be managed primarily by Ösel himself, gained Ösel followers from the FPMT fold and beyond. I will

¹¹ Jenkins 2012.

¹² On the one hand, Ösel showed a kind of agnosticism about whether he is Lama Yeshe's reincarnation, saying, "I don't think I'm not, but I don't think I'm him." (Jenkins 2012). On the other hand, he seemed to "accept" his identification out of deference to those who recognized him, adding, "I accept it because the Dalai Lama says it" (Jenkins 2012).

return to a more robust discussion of the Facebook page later in this chapter.

In 2012, FPMT devotees' dream that Ösel would use his filmmaking skills for the benefit of the organization came true. FPMT funded Ösel's production of a documentary on FPMT's Buddhist-inspired pedagogy: "Being Your True Nature." Directed by Ösel and Matteo Passigato, narrated by Ösel, and produced by the Foundation for Developing Wisdom and Compassion (and FilmPRO),¹³ "Being Your True Nature" documents a gathering in France in August 2011 designed to promote the "Universal Wisdom Education" (UWE) educational platform.¹⁴ The documentary includes interviews with teachers from groups around the world, such as Connie Miller, Alison Murdoch, and Ana Colao, as they worked together to propagate a more streamlined and replicable UWE program. Lama Zopa Rinpoche, the honorary president of the Foundation for Developing Wisdom and Compassion, also offers words of wisdom in the film.

"Being Your True Nature" starts with Lama Yeshe's influence and story; Hita and Passigato also includes clips from Lama Yeshe's teaching in the past, and discusses how Lama Yeshe's teaching inspired the UWE program. In a clip from the archives, Lama Yeshe points out that the root problem is dissatisfaction. On-screen, Ösel offers further commentary in his own words, "So in the end, we're all trying to be satisfied. What is satisfaction? Where does it lie? I mean, unless we live in the moment, you can't really be satisfied—it's impossible. How many people are searching outside, in this materialistic world, you know, full of entertainment and distractions? They are suffering." The film works to define "Universal Wisdom Education" for its audiences. As the camera shows us the gathering participants laughing and smiling through the event, Ösel's voiceover narration explains, "What Universal Wisdom Education seeks is the language that speaks to universal human experience at its simplest and most profound." Teachers in the documentary also define it as ways to help people to find happiness, and finding harmony with themselves through understanding the truth of reality. Alison Murdoch, the director of The Foundation for Developing

¹³ According to the credits, "The Foundation for Developing Compassion and Wisdom was established in 2005 to take forward the vision of Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa" (Hita and Passigato 2012). The credits also note that, "The Foundation for Developing Compassion and Wisdom is institutionally affiliated with FPMT.

¹⁴ More recently, the language has changed again. The term "Universal Education for Compassion and Wisdom" replaced the term "Universal Wisdom Education."

Compassion, explicates how the “16 Guidelines for a Happy Life,” which provide the center point for UWE, are divided into three groups: how we think, how we act, and how we relate to others. Lama Zopa Rinpoche has the last word, sending the audience off with words of advice, and a peal his famous laughter. The film is a 17-minute long promotional video for Universal Wisdom Education.

FPMT’s commitment to funding Ösel’s work is ongoing: devotees can donate directly to a \$24,000 per year “Big Love Fund,” which is used to bankroll Ösel’s creative and educational projects. “Being Your True Nature” is not just a film promoting Universal Wisdom Education; it is also a platform for Ösel’s filmmaking, and more importantly, it serves to authorize his spiritual voice once more within FPMT. In it, Ösel played many roles: director, narrator, and on-camera expert. In effect, the film confirms that central figures in FPMT have institutionally approved of this new Ösel as an FPMT teacher, something that could not necessarily have been assumed after his falling out. Although it is centrally a promotion of UWE, the film also serves as a vehicle for Ösel’s reaffirmation of FPMT, and FPMT’s reaffirmation of Ösel.

4. Big Love on the web: Ösel Hita’s social networks

Ösel Hita’s open Facebook page has been a fascinating stage upon which Ösel has constructed a public face and through which he has been able to interact with his devotees and well-wishers. The “Public Figure” page is set to allow people to “like” the page, and in doing so they receive Ösel’s updates and posts in their own newsfeed.¹⁵ On September 1, 2013, as I worked on an early draft of this contribution, he had 4,738 “likes,” and therefore his page posts at that point showed up in nearly 5000 newsfeeds (“Ösel Hita” 2013). By December 20, 2016, the page had grown to 19,209 “likes” (“Ösel Hita” 2016). Ösel Hita’s web presence is not limited to Facebook, the FPMT page or his Wikipedia page. Ösel also has a Twitter account with more than 1000 followers, which mostly seems to be a platform to re-tweet his Facebook updates.¹⁶

¹⁵ In 2013, Ösel did have a more personal Facebook page that required someone to send a “friend request” before gaining access (“OzOne” 2013). In 2016, this personal page listed him as “Executive Public Relations Consultant” to FPMT, and an ambassador to Revive Nepal, a non-FPMT-affiliated Spanish non-profit working to help Nepalis after the earthquake in April 2015 (“OzOne” 2016).

¹⁶ “Ösel Hita @OselHita” 2016.

It is unclear whether Ösel built the initial page or whether he took it over from the FPMT organization, but it is evident that by 2013, at least, he had taken over as the main person managing posts and comments.¹⁷ In fact, in August 2013, a subscriber questioned (chided?) Ösel, saying “Ösel, are you reallllly connected to facebook 10 times a day (sorry my question but I receive so much news from your site). Greetings from Germany” (“Osel Hita” 2013). To which, Ösel replied several hours later, “haha, maybe once a day?”

In late 2013, the “About” section listed Ösel as an “actor/director” and a “tulku” who would someday take over FPMT (“Osel Hita” 2013). By late 2016, the “About” section introduced him to fans thusly:

Tenzin Ösel Hita (born 12 February 1985 in Bubion, Granada) is a Tibetan Buddhist tulku and aspiring cinematographer from Spain. Ösel was designated soon after his birth as the reincarnation of Lama Thubten Yeshe—making him one of only a handful of Western tulkus—and renamed Tenzin Ösel Rinpoche. Ösel is playing an increasingly important role within the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), the organization founded by Lama Yeshe, as a Board member. Ösel is continuing to study and gain experience with the aim of eventually taking a leading role within FPMT in the future.¹⁸

In December 2016, the “About” tab on his Facebook page also included a discussion of his film training, his subsequent interest in cooking, and an effort to start an EcoVillage in Ibiza had been “postponed due to financial difficulties.”¹⁹

Ösel’s posts on Facebook are sometimes personal tales of his current travels or old photos. When he posts pictures of where he is and what he is doing, he captions them in the first person. The posted pictures run the gamut from recent portraits taken in FPMT centers to baby pictures with Lama Zopa Rinpoche to pictures of Ösel playing the drum.

¹⁷ In late 2013, there were two administrators listed: a FPMT admin and Ösel himself (“Osel Hita” 2013), but by 2016 the FPMT administrator’s name had been removed from the page (“Osel Hita” 2016). Throughout, posts to this “Public Figure” page were invariably in the first person, which served to create a sense of intimacy with Ösel; therefore, it would come as a huge shock to his followers if he is not actually the one managing his public page.

¹⁸ “Osel Hita” 2016.

¹⁹ “Osel Hita” 2016.

In the past several years that I have been watching Ösel's public Facebook page, roughly 2012 to 2016, the majority of posts on the page have been memes and videos that are re-posted from other sites; the content is usually spiritual (sometimes Buddhist, but also sourced from other traditions) and/or other inspirational quotes and news ("Osel Hita" 2013 & 2016). He re-posts liberally from various other sites, such as "the Mind Unleashed," "Conscious Life News," and the "spiritualist," to name a few, which promoted left-leaning politics, eclectic quotes and thoughts about the cosmos, nutritional cooking and achieving happiness. For example, in December 2016, as I finished work on this section, Ösel re-posted an inspirational quote that had been circulating elsewhere on the web that read: "People are not addicted to alcohol or drugs, they are addicted to escaping reality."²⁰ Within a few days the quote was liked by more than 300 people and shared by more than 100. Many of the dozen comments, at that point, voiced agreement, but some cautioned against a potentially judgmental message that could be read as insensitive to those people actually trapped in a physical addiction.

The content does seem to matter to fans. Most posts, especially the more personal ones, will get several dozen comments from followers. In 2013, pictures of Ösel from his childhood would garner upwards of two or three hundred "likes."²¹ Generic inspirational posts usually get about half as many "likes" as most of Ösel's personal photos; for example, Ösel's repost of the quote, "Peace is the result of retraining your mind to process life as it is, rather than as you think it should be," received 109 "likes" from his Facebook followers. More outlying spiritual posts, especially those that could be easily interpreted to run counter to FPMT teachings tend to get very few "likes" and comments. For example, in August 2013 Ösel re-posted an image, entitled, "The Secret Religion," from "The Universe Explorers" Facebook page, which was about a unified proto-religion; the post, which included some arguably spurious claims and problematic dates for many world religions, was a dud, as only 11 people from Ösel's page "liked" the post.

In 2013, pictures of Ösel teaching at FPMT centers often inspired overwhelming expressions of joy from many breathless commenters. For example, in response to one picture of him teaching, more than two hundred people "liked" the post. Commenters said: "at last"; "more more more"; "is that Osel Rinpoche teaching again? That would be great news for all." Another tulku, Gomo Tulku, replied to

²⁰ "Osel Hita" 2016.

²¹ "Osel Hita" 2013.

that photo, “you got some crazy likes on this one bro!” An excited commenter wrote under a different picture of Ösel teaching, “you look like Jesus.” Yet another effusive comment from a Facebook fan: “he is a bodhisattva.” Comments are overwhelmingly positive, but Ösel does occasionally get some negative push back. He shared a post on his page that reported on Atlantis and pyramids in the Bermuda triangle, and received far fewer “likes” than usual; one commenter even linked to a “Snopes” fact-checking site to say that the information had been discredited. In reply to a picture posted of Ösel and his then-girlfriend posing on a motorcycle, two commenters chided him for not wearing a helmet.²²

While Ösel rarely communicates in the comments section with his interlocutors, he does do so occasionally. He will occasionally answer questions posed in comments or thank people for their wishes. Sometimes he will directly engage with particular comments, for example, he joined another commenter in scolding a homophobic interlocutor who suggested that Ösel’s behavior in a picture (holding other men’s hands) was “kinda gay”. Ösel smartly replied: “Love is universal, holding hands is just another way of connecting and sharing.”²³

Despite noting in 2012 that he did not self-identify as Buddhist (Jenkins 2012), Ösel’s Facebook activity seems to indicate a gradual gravitation back towards an acceptance of Buddhist philosophy and practice, albeit within an eclectic, big tent spiritual framework that is staunchly inclusive of other traditions as well. In 2013, Ösel posted pictures and comments on his Facebook page about a trip back to India, which included a short stint in his old monastery. He posted a quote by Phyllis Theroux, “Mistakes are the usual bridge between inexperience and wisdom” and discussed his trip to Sera Monastery, suggesting to his readers that it had been a mistake for him to leave, or that some of his ambivalence about Buddhism has been a mistake. He captioned the photo thusly:

“These days im at Sera Monastery studying with my dear Genla (Teacher) Geshé Gendun Choephel. It is being so wonderful to hear the Dharma in such simple and clear terms, while clearing so many doubts i’ve had during a long time of my life. Understanding the teachings without having to clarify with anybody but myself. Its been 10 magical days here, and another week to go!! i’m so grateful for the understanding and

²² “Osel Hita” 2013.

²³ “Osel Hita” 2013.

help i have received. Thank you for the time to find myself, thank you for the patience and dedication dearest Genla. You are like my Father and Mother, and will always be in my heart.”

While his Facebook fans can only guess at what he is specifically saying was a past mistake, they were thrilled that his trajectory back into Buddhist practice was apparently leading him back towards “wisdom.”²⁴

In August 2013, on his Facebook page, Ösel promoted his new company, Gomosel, an ethical/charitable business venture. Ösel had started the company with another unconventional, dis-robed Tibetan Buddhist tulku, Gomo Tulku, who is better known for his nascent hip-hop career. In the “About” section of the Gomosel website, Ösel’s biographical sketch explicitly linked his future to FPMT:

“In the last years Ösel is also showing an ever increasing interest in the activities of **Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition** attending its Board meeting as a member, and visiting a lot of **FPMT** centers all over the world. Ösel keeps studying and gaining experience with the aim of taking a leading role within **FPMT** in the future” (bold in the original).²⁵

If this language sounds familiar, it should, the “About” section on Facebook in 2016 quoted above read in a similar manner.²⁶ As of September 1, 2013, the company sold jewelry (earrings and necklaces) on-line, and then offered 20% of the profits to the Maya Daya Clinic.²⁷ The company also promoted a link with “Mindfulnet Project,” which would donate money on Gomosel’s behalf to the Clinic if the site brought them new consumers. The joint venture was not officially linked with FPMT, but the primary beneficiary, the Maya Daya Clinic is an FPMT offshoot. The jewelry business was on hiatus in 2016; in December 2016, the link to www.gomosel.com was broken, although the Facebook page specifically dedicated to the joint venture was still extant and being updated with pics of the tulkus periodically even into spring 2016.²⁸ The failed Gomosel business venture shows that

²⁴ “Osel Hita” 2013.

²⁵ “Osel Hita, About” 2013.

²⁶ “Osel Hita” 2016.

²⁷ “Maya Daya Clinic” 2013.

²⁸ “Gomosel” 2016.

even after returning to the FPMT fold, Ösel aspired to utilize social media to cast a wider transnational Buddhist net.

5. Skepticism as a stage on the path

Faith, and the lack thereof, is at the heart of Ösel's story—both Ösel's faith in FPMT (and Buddhism) and FPMTers' faith in Ösel. Faith and skepticism here go hand in hand to the extent that they even feed upon each other for their own benefit. As an anthropologist studying guru devotion and faith in FPMT, I was often struck by how frequently skepticism itself served as a means towards burgeoning faith.

As an institution, FPMT is so diffuse, de-centralized, and transnational that there is an incredible diversity of opinion, belief, and practice within the organization. Skepticism is not only common, it is considered prudent; it is judicious only up to a point, however, and then it is considered an obstacle. There are FPMT students who are cynical about everything and others who are only doubtful or ambivalent about certain notions, such as guru devotion, reincarnation, or karma. Others have worked through doubt and skepticism and now consider themselves full believers, or devotees, with total (or aspirationally total) faith in the FPMT program and its gurus. In Tibetan Buddhism, faith is a part of advanced practice. As Lama Sherab Dorje put it, "Faith and devotion, like analysis, help you cut through your old way of seeing things."²⁹

Lama Yeshe taught that whether one is Buddhist or not, one should be committed to questioning and checking up on one's religious beliefs and practices. He wrote:

...blind faith in any religion can never solve your problems. Many people are lackadaisical about their spiritual practice. 'It's easy. I go to church every week. That's enough for me.' That's not the answer. What's the purpose of your religion? Are you getting the answers you need or is your practice simply a joke? You have to check.³⁰

This is generally how FPMTers are supposed to proceed in practice: skepticism is encouraged and actively vocalized and solicited by teachers in the Introduction courses, but after someone commits and

²⁹ Sherab Dorje 1998, 50.

³⁰ Lama Yeshe 2003, 42.

spends years in the organization, there is an expectation that faith will gradually outstrip skepticism.

In the FPMT courses that I attended in 1997, 2000, and 2005-7, there was a constant give and take, in which faith is slowly solicited through the performance of skepticism. During Question and Answer sessions, students and devotees ask challenging personal, philosophical, and theological questions, such as, "What is emptiness and is it the same as nirvana?" and "Can I still consider myself a Buddhist if I don't believe in reincarnation?" Instructors, who are sometimes monastics, answer the questions as best they can, often by referring students to Buddhist narratives from sutras, lessons learned from the co-founding lamas, or to their own personal stories and analogies. Often Buddhist monks and nuns at FPMT will respond to these persistent questions by retelling their own stories of skepticism, and how and why it eventually gave way to faith.

FPMT sangha and teachers often recall and paraphrase a statement attributed to the historical Buddha: "Do not accept my Dharma merely out of respect for me, but analyze and check it the way a goldsmith analyzes gold, by rubbing, cutting and melting it."³¹ The verse essentially serves to demonstrate that the Buddha himself prescribes skepticism and questioning as part of the path. When I asked FPMT students and devotees to describe their early days in the organization to me, many of them explicitly referred to the notion that the Buddha (and their Buddhist teachers in FPMT) defer from asking for faith, and instead encourage students to see for themselves. Faith is often derided by newcomers who say that it is the blind faith required by their childhood religions that made it less than attractive in the first place; to these FPMTers, Buddhism was initially appealing because it is a "practice," "meditation," "philosophy," and "way of being," all of which could be empirically tested and tried out. Yet, in the cultural milieu of FPMT, at some point, if a student wants to advance in the organization, skepticism ought to give way to full faith and trust in one's guru.

A final, and oft-expressed, explanation of skepticism in FPMT hinged on the notion of karma: if one is lucky and has good karma, then ultimately one will have faith. According to karma, the Buddhist law of cosmic cause and effect, one's current situation is a result of one's past actions, and one's future actions will be determined by the quality of one's present actions. Doubts and skepticism are often interpreted as a sign of the negative karma and obstacles that are blocking one's way along the path toward enlightenment. For example, Georgianna, a Scottish woman volunteering at the Tushita

³¹ Berzin 2000.

Dharamsala center in 2006, noted that karma plays a very central role in the fact that she does not feel connected to statues. This is a very crucial point to understand about the cultural logics of skepticism in all but the most introductory phases of the FPMT subculture: if you do not believe, then it is your own fault, since your past actions must have caused the impasse. One must then work to burn off negative karmas in order to improve one's situation (and capacity for faith) in the present and future. This explanation is also invoked to explain people's belief in the legitimacy and authenticity of FPMT's gurus and teachers. If someone questioned the infallibility of Ösel or Lama Zopa Rinpoche, then many of my informants would blame the bad karma of the questioner. Devotees believed that their teachers were infallible, and that any failings could be attributed to misunderstanding and/or bad karma on the part of the students and devotees themselves.

The willingness of FPMT teachers to take questions, acknowledge the doubts of new students, recount tales of emerging from skepticism towards faith, and model that path as an ideal one, all serve to shore up the faith of others. Faith is crucial in Tibetan Buddhism; in forms of Vajrayana Tibetan Buddhist practice, devotees are instructed to elevate the guru, the teacher, to the status of a transcendent holy being, so that he or she stands in as the contemporaneous face of the Buddha. This meditative refraction of gurus is a type of symbolic replication. As a practice, it compels the recognition of the replication of identity at the heart of the tulku institution; for believers it confers the emotional tonic of continuity. In some ways similar to the awakened/consecrated statue, which the Buddha embodies, or the multiple buddhas of the past, present, and future whose hagiographies read as copies—there is an affective constancy in the beliefs and practices that emphasize repetition and replication. Tulkus serve to enhance the prominence of the previous lama, and by extension, his and her followers. It can be seen as a form of social reproduction for monastics. In fact, I would argue that replication of faith and skepticism serve an important role in dialectically constituting a sangha, especially a transnational one like FPMT.³²

The importance of skepticism in FPMT can be understood by contrasting it with a classic example from anthropology. In his chapter entitled "Viscerality, Faith and Skepticism," Michael Taussig

³² The co-constitutive nature of skepticism and faith is not unique to non-heritage religious practitioners or communities, but I would posit that the performative nature of enacting skepticism in non-heritage religio-scapes is amplified in contrast to heritage contexts.

revisits Boas' collaboration with George Hunt (a.k.a. Giving-Potlatches-in-the-World), who was a Kwakiutl informant engaged in studying magicians and skepticism. Hunt described to Boas his own efforts to trick the tricksters, and how in his efforts to uncover the magic, he becomes a famous shaman himself. Hunt says that he desires to become a shaman in order to learn if shamans are real or just tricksters. His skepticism compels and feeds his investigation into the tricks of the trade, as it were. Taussig delights in playing with Hunt's stories of his own triumphs over other shamans, their desire for his secrets, and how they simultaneously reveal and confess their tricks to him, for the whole process reveals "the skilled revelation of skilled concealment" that forms the crux of his new theory of magic. Taussig writes,

This we might in truth call a 'nervous system,' in which shamanism thrives on a corrosive skepticism and in which skepticism and belief actively cannibalize one another so that continuous injections of recruits, such as Giving-Potlatches-in-the-World, who are full of questioning are required.³³

The teaching of shamanism in this context requires questioners and skeptics in order to provide opportunities for the continued skilled revelation of skilled concealments.³⁴ With this insight, Taussig gives us a framework for understanding the compelling and constant presence in the prayer halls of FPMT of doubt and skepticism about many topics, including reincarnation and the tulku institution: skepticism and belief actively (de)construct each other, so that the fresh faces of FPMT serve to reinvigorate the faith of believers. The multiple forums in FPMT that enact and enable guru devotion all allow for the active participation of skeptics, including the rituals of the Guru Puja, the back and forth of the Question and Answer session, and even the mandate to bow at the waist as lamas approach. This is not only designed to convert skeptics in the long term, but also to strengthen the faith of those who already profess their faith in gurus.

What is so anthropologically fascinating about Ösel's trajectory is that he is himself publicly modeling this method of skepticism so perfectly for FPMT devotees; from believer to skeptic back to believer, Ösel's own journey towards belief will invariably serve to feed the

³³ Taussig 2006, 138.

³⁴ Taussig takes the game one step further by noting that the real shaman in the picture is Boas himself, and his faith in the magic of his own rituals of anthropological theory and practice.

faith of some of those whom have embarked on FPMT's Buddhist path. Some FPMT devotees will likely interpret Ösel's long and winding path forward as a kind of manifestation of Lama Yeshe's unconventional pedagogy. To others it will seem that Ösel's replication of their own journeys speaks to the archetype of a Buddhist hero—the archetype of the searching mendicant (like the Buddha himself, perhaps) who actively seeks truth instead of passively receiving it. In the end, Ösel's transformations and many "lives" may capture the zeitgeist of transnational Buddhism better than if he had stayed at Sera Jé to complete his Geshé degree. By recounting Ösel's path thus far, and my FPMT informants' engagement with it, I have shown his central place in the landscape of FPMT's "imaginative horizons." Ösel remains, in effect, at the heart of FPMT's cultural "nervous system," which, like any social imaginary, both enables and ensnares with each new iteration, with each new repetition, and with each new beginning.

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