Enduring Impermanence: Buddhism and Documentation in the Time Practices of Tibetan Migrants

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The world is essentially like paper. It is impermanent and alterable.
Real freedom exists in the mind, he tells me.
—Tsering Wangmo Dhompa[3]

Registering Impermanence

An outer world thin as paper and inscribed with the erasable ink of time allows for little freedom. Only the inner world of the mind has truly liberating potential as it offers space to see through impermanence. This is what an elderly uncle of a young Tibetan migrant tells her when she visits home. Their conversation concerns his request for her to interrogate the freedoms she enjoys on paper. She reflects that her migrant "aspirations are toward building structures of permanence." Yet she continues to be "surrounded by fear" while living abroad. "Fear precedes the way I plan for the future," writes Dhompa.[4]

The question addressed in this article is whether the contemplation of impermanence may help migrants cope with lacking documentation. It is based on over a year of ethnographic fieldwork with Tibetan migrants in Nepal and Switzerland. Freedom House[5] rated Tibet as the territory with the very lowest Global Freedom Score at the time of writing. Yet ruthless border control measures have not

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3 Dhompa 2016: 243.

4 Dhompa 2016: 244.

5 Freedom House 2021.

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prevented well over a hundred thousand Tibetans from fleeing across the Himalayas since the Chinese authorities intensified their violent occupation of Tibet in 1959. The most recent official survey among Tibetan exiles suggested that 94,000 of them were residing in India while Nepal was the country where about 13,500 people found themselves. [6] North America and to a lesser extent Europe have increasingly emerged as destinations of onward migration. Around 4,000 Tibetans were residing in Switzerland and Liechtenstein according to one relatively recent estimate.[7]

Their encounters with various documentation regimes often amount to senses of enduring impermanence. Tibetans in Nepal have been issued with documents known as "Refugee Cards" in ways that can at best be called erratic. A growing unwillingness on the part of the Nepal government to provide them with either residence or travel permits and its increasing repression of Tibetans have resulted in what Mikel Dunham calls "temporal entrapment." [8] Many people have nonetheless found ways to move beyond an impasse of time by migrating onward. But the reality of being faced with ever more rigid documentary regimes in countries like Switzerland has involved an all too familiar volatility.

"Our present is our future!" exclaimed a sporadically documented young Tibetan man called Samdrub [9] during my fieldwork in Switzerland. "Life is quite *egal* to us." My companion included the German expression for "not caring" about something in an otherwise English sentence. He then mentioned the importance of remembering the Buddhist teachings on *mi rtag pa* or "impermanence." I interpret the seemingly careless way of experiencing time described by him as a means to endure a volatile reality. Impermanence defines life to the extent that the present is as much marked by it as the future will be. It was as though Samdrub and his peers synchronized with its reality in order to temper their expectations of being granted papers. Their experiences have led me to suggest the concept of "documentary impermanence."

The meanings implicit in this term allude to the philosophical notion of impermanence itself. A helpful way of gaining insight into its significance is to consider the attempt at "engaging Buddhism" by the eclectic thinker Jay Garfield.[10] He explains that those adhering to any Buddhist philosophical system understand all phenomena as

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6 Central Tibetan Administration 2010.
7 Bentz and Dolkar 2010: 280.
8 Dunham 2011: 14.
9 I have replaced the names of my companions with pseudonyms to protect their identities.
10 Garfield 2015.

impermanent. They regard the whole of the phenomenal world as consisting in momentary appearances.[11] I myself engage with philosophical notions fundamental to the Buddhist world view throughout the present article. Samdrub as well as some other companions of mine often mentioned such concepts during my fieldwork. My own initial steps on the Buddhist path were certainly also instrumental in the decision to adapt the idea of impermanence into a central analytical lens.

A clarification of the view expressed in this foundationally important concept is needed here. The telling last words of Gautama Buddha immediately testify to its centrality in his teachings. "All formations are impermanent; work out your liberation with diligence." This instruction encapsulates the Buddhist emphasis on the "law of incessant change." Philip Novak compellingly describes impermanence as "an unspeakably intimate awareness of the temporality of all psychic and somatic events."[12] It represents the principal *mtshan nyid* or "mark of existence" and opens the way for gaining insight into the other two. This is to say that its contemplative perception ushers in meditations on both the "absence of self-subsistence" and the "lack of lasting satisfaction." There emerges a profound understanding involving nothing less than "a transformation of the human time-sense."[13] This allows a person to internalize the reality that all identity over time represents a fiction.[14]

These reflections help me to delineate the meanings of documentary impermanence. I propose this term to represent the phenomenological essence of the everyday experiences encountered by my companions. Selecting the pivotal mark of existence as a way to describe a specific matter may seem odd. The phenomenon that we call "documentation" is as much marked by impermanence as anything else. But I think its chimeric emergence as a literally paper-thin yet reportedly durable matter evokes the momentariness of appearances in particularly stark terms.

This is suggested by both the ethnographic findings of other anthropologists and my own. Note has been taken of the ambiguity surrounding the registration processes confronting Tibetans in Nepal[15] and India.[16] Jessica Falcone and Tsering Wangchuk[17] are among the scholars to critically examine how Tibetan migrants experience the

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11 Garfield 2015: 40.
12 Novak 1996: 269.
13 Novak 1996: 274.
14 Garfield 2015: 41.
15 Frechette 2004.
16 Bentz 2012; Falcone and Wangchuk 2008; Hess 2006; Lewis 2019; McConnell 2013.
17 Falcone and Wangchuk 2008.

"technologies of differentiation" employed by the Indian authorities and their own Central Tibetan Administration alike. One of the questions they ask remained with me throughout my doctoral research. "What, if anything, is lost if nationality, Tibetan or otherwise, is as thin as paper, if citizenship is for sale, and if they are all just documentation nations?"[18] My hope is for documentary impermanence to be a term useful in addressing this question.

Ethnographies of Time

Migrations extend not only across spaces inhabited and traversed. They equally stretch over times endured and anticipated. This is why it is necessary to review the scarce ethnographic work that has so far been done on Tibetan engagements with time. But a seminal anthropological outlook on time in general needs to be considered first of all. Johannes Fabian's[19] book *Time and the Other* makes an invaluable contribution to both the anthropology of time and the discipline in general by directing attention inward. He explains that "typological time" serves to bridge the gaps between socioculturally meaningful events. Its enactment is apparent in the unequal ascription of qualities like "modernity" to human populations.[20] An article by Claes Corlin[21] provides a textbook example of such ethnocentric approaches to time. The anthropologist describes the Tibet in which the first generations of migrants to Switzerland were born as "a static and technologically 'backward' society."[22] He speaks of a change in world view "from a mainly cyclical conception of time (the yearly cycle, life cycle, reincarnation cycle), to the mainly linear time dimension of the West, including the concept of progress."[23] The few other anthropologists whose work has included explorations of Tibetan engagements with time seem to have constructed less essentialist typologies.

Some of them emphasize cosmologies that they deem to be instrumental in time perceptions. A seminal work by Rebecca French[24] on the legal aspects of the Buddhist world view predominating in Tibet before 1950 includes noteworthy references to time. She describes the temporal framework prevalent in this context as one according to which each of myriad ever-present realms has its own time. It encompasses simultaneously existing sequences ranging from linear

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18 Falcone and Wangchuk 2008: 178.
19 Fabian 1983.
20 Fabian 1983: 23.
21 Corlin 1991.
22 Corlin 1991: 112.
23 Corlin 1991: 114.
24 French 1995.

time to spiral-cyclical time but also non-time or static time. So time has a diffuse and multivariant as well as an ambiguous quality. And the incorporation of manifold time dimensions means that linearity plays a peripheral role. All this entails an underemphasis on the question of when something happened in the Tibetan legal system described by French.[25]

A few other anthropologists shed light on how the cosmologies that are currently invoked in exile revolve around the distinction of different eras. Ana Lopes[26] addresses this question in a chapter of her book *Tibetan Buddhism in Diaspora*. She discusses the contemporary meanings accorded by Tibetan migrants to the Tantric Buddhist system known as *Kālacakra* or the "Wheel of Time." Some interpret the distress they have faced since the invasion of their homeland as a pointer to a degenerate period preceding a liberating era.[27] Lau[28] likewise mentions the invocation by Tibetan migrants of the Buddhist cosmological notion of *kalpa* or "aeon." His companions linked their current circumstances in India with "bad times" while relating the moral conditions of a bygone Tibet to "good times."[29] Bentz similarly describes how exiled Tibetan historians view the past as a reminder of nationhood to be used in securing a better future.[30] Lopes summarizes these migrant orientations to time in terms of a simultaneous engagement in "historical temporality" and "mythic atemporality."[31] She is inspired by Claude Lévi-Strauss[32] to suggest that *Kālacakra* opens the way for "the suspension of the 'normal' course of time."[33]

A shift in emphasis from cosmologies to practices of time is offered by other studies. Barbara Gerke's[34] ethnography on how Tibetans in the Darjeeling Hills of India orient themselves to the life-forces that affect longevity exemplifies such work. This anthropologist engages with a chapter by Martin Mills[35] on the ritually "fractured temporalities" afflicting Buddhist households in Ladakh. Its author suggests two related concerns with regard to the anthropology of time. One is about "the intellectual expression of a particular temporal ideology (cyclic, linear or whatever) as a generally valid way of

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25 French 1995: 72-73.
26 Lopes 2015.
27 Lopes 2015: 185.
28 Lau 2010.
29 Lau 2010: 976.
30 Bentz 2008: 66-67.
31 Lopes 2015: 186.
32 Lévi-Strauss 1995.
33 Lopes 2015: 188.
34 Gerke 2012.
35 Mills 2005.

interpreting the world." [36] Another consideration deals with "*the embodied practices by which people do time*—how they orientate themselves towards particular temporal/calendrical ideologies, and thereby integrate themselves into wider ideologically-structured communities."[37]

The second of these concerns is the focus adopted in the ethnography mentioned above. Gerke specifically uses the term "practices of temporalization" to indicate the activities through which ritual specialists mediated between their clients and temporal frameworks.[38] She highlights how they drew on time markers derived from dominant physiological and cosmological ideas while interpreting them in their own ways.[39] Gerke makes the important proviso that none of these temporal frameworks "should be interpreted as a proof for the existence of a particular Tibetan variety of time, or as the base for an argument on the autonomy of 'cyclical time' compared to 'linear time.'" [40] Some scholars have conversely adopted a purist linearity by framing transnational dilemmas in line with the agenda of the Central Tibetan Administration. Emily Yeh and Kunga Lama write that this involves such questions as "Will Tibetan youth in the USA be able to 'preserve their culture'?" [41] Some anthropologists have recently come to explore time perceptions cultivated by Tibetan migrants in more innovative ways.

Two scholars leave preservation aside and instead focus on orientations to impermanence. Dawa Lokyitsang [42] draws on this notion to challenge the ways in which some of her fellow exiles assert cultural "purity." The anthropologist suggests that Tibetans do not need postmodern thought to realize the fictitiousness of this construct. She considers them to be capable of recognizing their histories as fluid and diverse since "impermanence in Buddhism argues against the existence of purity in the physical world." [43] Sara Lewis' [44] work suggests that Tibetan migrants also engage with this and related Buddhist views on time in the context of psychological trauma.

A process of familiarization with impermanence may be instrumental in dealing with a traumatic past. Lewis[45] worked with Tibetans living in Dharamsala who had encountered severe spatial and

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36 Mills 2005: 360.
37 Mills 2005: 350, emphasis in original.
38 Gerke 2012: 6.
39 Gerke 2012: 37.
40 Gerke 2012: 35.
41 Yeh and Lama 2006: 814.
42 Lokyitsang 2018.
43 Lokyitsang 2018: 207.
44 Lewis 2019; 2021.
45 Lewis 2019.

temporal uncertainties. Many of them eased their distress about experiences such as being refused permanent residency in India "by pointing out that *life itself* is insecure, unstable and impermanent."[46] Lewis tellingly describes their active cultivation of a capacity to alleviate suffering as "resisting chronicity." They endeavoured to abstain from solidifying their emotions into fixed narrative by recognizing them as changing and shifting but also illusory in nature.[47]

My own ethnography can be described as developing along converging trajectories of time and space. The various environments framing my encounters with Tibetan migrants were fluid constellations of intertwined temporal and spatial dynamics relating to two countries. Focal points in space were a neighbourhood centred around a monument skirting an urban area in Nepal and a Swiss city as a whole. My fieldwork revolved around cycles of walking and waiting along with my companions. The English word "cycle" is as evocative of these practices as its Tibetan equivalent *skor* since temporal and spatial meanings coalesce in both. Jo Lee and Tim Ingold have blazed a trail in recognizing ethnographic walking as "a practice of understanding."[48] They aptly suggest that "temporality in walking can be shifting and unsettled: thinking and perceiving the past, present and future, and combining them in references to routes."[49]

Fieldwork takes place and comes to pass through settings that are always already grounded in flux. The anthropologist Chris Vasantkumar[50] helpfully reminds us of the need to recognize just how thoroughly place is immersed in time. A long look at the area surrounding the Tibetan monastery of Labrang leads him to contemplate this impermanence. "The physical apparatuses of place, its materiality, if you like—mountains, buildings, infrastructure, habitual public habits—all of which appear lasting and even normative, are all in process."[51] This contemplation dovetails not only with my own experiences as an ethnographer but also with those of my companions themselves. The two ethnographic vignettes that now follow illustrate how they sought to both contemplate and cut through the impermanence they experienced as sporadically documented migrants.

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46 Lewis 2019: 97, emphasis in original.
47 Lewis 2019: 97.
48 Lee and Ingold 2006: 83.
49 Lee and Ingold 2006: 75.
50 Vasantkumar 2017.
51 Vasantkumar 2017: 80.

Severance

One morning found me walking towards a magnificent symbol of awakening mind. This was the Buddhist monument around which my fieldwork in Nepal was centred. A young Tibetan man called Jinpa had proposed to have breakfast in a nearby eatery and then walk to his friend Sherab's house. Our final destination was relatively far and difficult to access from the centre of the neighbourhood. Jinpa explained that this would make it harder for the police to find Sherab. The first thing I did once we had arrived was to look around Sherab's room for a little while. I noticed that there were many images and statues of the eleventh-century Tibetan *yoginī* Machig Labdron. She was depicted performing her dance of empty bliss with one leg lifted and the other bent in motion. The *yoginī* is renowned for systematizing means of *gCod* or "severing" the afflictive tendency to grasp at a self. Sherab was a *gCod pa* or practitioner of these methods.

He was also an activist who wanted to show me photos and newspaper clippings first of all. Some of these related to his protests for human rights in Tibet while others concerned the times he had been detained. Sherab recalled how he and his fellow inmates had been unable to sleep because of being bitten by invasive insects. This was only one of the ways in which their bodies had been marked by persecution. And the fact that Sherab was among the few young Tibetans to have obtained a Refugee Card had not made any difference in terms of rights. A friend of his who had arranged for a counterfeit passport was now confronted with an even more difficult situation.

"When he came to the airport for his flight," recounted Sherab, "he was arrested." "He was in debt and in jail," added our companion. "And this is the kind of frustration of trying to escape. We don't have any legal process. Now they will try to do it illegally like that."

"You will see the smiles," Sherab went on to tell me. "Of course we have an internal, like some kind of Buddhist culture. And that means we can carry on suffering everything. You know, suffering is nothing. It's like, sometimes we meditate on emptiness."

"Do you actually draw on Buddhism?" I asked. "Do you draw strength from Buddhism in facing your situation?"

"You know what?" he responded. "Buddhism is not about the *religion* that we practice. It's about *practice*."

"Okay," continued Sherab, "'me,' 'I' is the biggest problem, right? 'I need this, I need that. This is my hand,' and like that. But if you come to reality, there is no 'I.' It's all flesh and blood. And one day, it will go."

"The only thing is your *rig pa*, mind," our companion elucidated. "Mind exists." "My mind is like the sky," he added. "You can say your mind is the sky."

"The only thing is your mind," Sherab reiterated. "Do you know that? And that mind should not be like attachment, attached to anything. It should be free like the sky, emptiness. And that mind comes to understand the kindness of those sentient beings who've once been your mother, once in a life. We had so many lives, like five hundred, four thousand, like that. So in all those lives, we were born and grew up in the care of a mother. So that love of a mother should be in you. And you should consider all sentient beings like your mother. And that is the practice."

"But how does your practice relate to the fact that you are undocumented," I asked, "that you are in a difficult situation here in Nepal?"

"So that's what I'm saying!" came a spirited response. "You know, there is nothing that exists. Like I said, this house and all these things, personally, for me, it's nothing. You know, I regularly do my practice. I do my *gCod* thing, you know?"

"And these small subjects like life and all these things," continued our companion, "they don't matter. And that makes your heart, that makes you very happy in the sense that your mind won't go through sufferings like that."

"And there is nothing permanent," Sherab went on to say. "So this will take you away from those sufferings."

"Suffering comes only from the mind," added our companion. "Like, 'I don't have an RC. Now I have to do something. I have to earn that. Now I don't have it.' If the mind is not happy, if your mind remains attached, then you are not happy at all. Like that. So through my practice, I have to leave all these things behind. The only things are emptiness and remembering your parents. If you have something with which you can help, you can help others. And that's it. But one sad thing is that in Nepal, we don't have the opportunity to serve others. Even though we have talent, we don't have rights to serve others properly."

"If I want to become a teacher in like monasteries and all these things," said Sherab by way of example, "we don't have rights, because we need an identity card and it's blocked."

"I have good things to eat," he described what his mindset nonetheless meant for himself. "If not today, tomorrow we can have good food. If not today, it's okay. It goes like that."

"And I do *pūjā*," our companion continued. "Sometimes people call me." "And they give some money. That's it. It goes like that."

"Hahahaha," laughed Sherab, "I'm a beggar and I'm proud of that, hahahaha!"

"And at present," I asked him, "what does an everyday day look like for you?"

"Hahaha! What a day looks like?" he laughingly responded. "From the morning, when I wake up, I do my own practice, I offer my whole body and I live in emptiness. You know emptiness?"

"There is a practice that I'm not different from Machig Labdron, this Yum Chenmo" our companion went on to tell me, "and my lama. And I have the whole *bodhicitta*. My mind is Machig Labdron. My body, my voice, and my heart, all are Machig Labdron. And I have the compassion of her. I have the power of her. And I have to act like that. And that is my life. I don't have day, I don't have night. It's all the same! Hahaha!"

"If I've got time," Sherab returned to my question, "I go to retreats, go to cemeteries, do *pūjā* sincerely, offer the whole body, again visualize, and then come back with emptiness, without expectation. Doubt and expectation: the worst things. We have to get free from doubt and expectation. And that is the free mind. Freedom! Freedom! What is freedom? You don't have freedom without being free from these two."

The spatial severance to which our companion had resorted could not have been more symbolic. Persecution by the authorities of his reluctant host country had compelled him to remain cut off from central spaces. This displacement had coincided with an imposed rupture in time. Sherab was no longer able to manifest a spirit of solidarity with his oppressed compatriots back home. His overt activism had itself been broken off from the present and relegated to the past. Traces of it could nonetheless be found in discursive as well as affective memories. Both the press and the body had documented our companion's past moments of protest.

Such expressive practices mirrored tacit ones in desperately relying on paper transformations. Sherab had experienced first-hand that a Refugee Card did not offer any relief from insecurity when its owner refused to keep a low profile. He had previously managed to obtain this document and still found himself imprisoned for merely expressing his views. The plan made by a friend of his to evade the authorities in question had not yielded any security either. What he termed the "frustration of trying to escape" had involved both detention and indebtedness. All efforts appeared to be futile whether confrontational or evasive in nature.

It seemed to our companion that this predicament of time could be severed only by inner means. What he so tellingly described as the "internal culture" of Buddhism enabled Tibetan migrants to "carry on suffering everything" in his view. Such an approach revolves around practising rather than professing religion owing to a concern with the inside and not the outside of the mind. Sherab specifically devoted his

life to an inner practice called *bDud kyi gCod Yul* or the "Severance of Demonic Objects." Michael Sheehy[52] sheds further light on what is known simply as *gCod* in a perceptive account of its contemplative dynamics. The practice revolves around recognizing "that the 'demons' to be severed are one's own fixations upon reified perceptions of self and phenomena as intrinsic absolute realities." It encompasses methods for cultivating a more pliable mind by overturning the reactive tendency to bring about hope and fear in the face of inevitable adversity.[53]

Severance involves an inward turn that serves to shed light on the emptiness of phenomena. This interiorization is oriented to becoming aware of *rig pa* or what Sherab translated as "mind." It involves undoing attempts at *bdag 'dzin* or "self-grasping" along with the ways in which such habits contribute to perpetuating experiences of separateness and suffering.[54] Our companion emphasized the importance of meditating on emptiness as a means to unhook from reifying tendencies. He explained that mind is revealed to be "free like the sky" insofar ego and its sense of need are recognized as void in nature. The view of emptiness mentioned by him is the one found within the *Prajñāpāramitā* or "Perfection of Wisdom" literature. It can be summarized as the recognition that neither the self nor the world have an essence. Sherab sought "to discern and sever every inclination to reify self and objects" on this basis.[55]

The view that he put into practice allowed him to loosen the inner grip of outer constraints. Our companion directly applied his insights into emptiness and impermanence to the affective pressures of sporadic documentation. He felt that a sense of having "to do something" about lacking a Refugee Card was ultimately afflictive as it emerged from attachment. All suffering originates in the mind and equanimity towards impermanence represents the only lasting antidote to it. Sherab engaged in cultivating this attitude by not only contemplating emptiness but also recognizing all sentient beings as his mothers. The potential infinity of rebirths means that any living being may have nurtured us at a certain point in time. So there is a need to practice all-encompassing compassion and loving-kindness.[56] The young Tibetans with whom Sharapan[57] worked in Nepal referred to similar Buddhist principles and practices as did Sherab. A belief in *karma* and non-violence had led her companions "to apply gentle

52 Sheehy 2005.
53 Sheehy 2005: 38.
54 Sheehy 2005: 41.
55 Sheehy 2005: 38.
56 Adams 1998: 90.
57 Sharapan 2016.

moral pressure" when they were beaten or arrested by the police. They also meditated on impermanence and emptiness to "feel peaceful in the difficult circumstances" confronting them. One of them said "the spiritual" allowed some Tibetans to be "even happier than the local people" even though they experienced "no more freedom and so much pressure" in Nepal.[58]

Yet the documents that would be conducive to benefiting other people were in short supply. Sherab deplored the denial of the papers required for taking up helpful vocations like teaching in monasteries. His undocumented peers lacked the rights necessary "to serve others properly" and so their aspirations were blocked. Swank notes that such *zhabs zhu* or "service" to fellow Tibetans is a politicized phenomenon entailing an evaluation of worthiness in the exile community.[59] But our companion was largely concerned about the inner impact of restrictions on young people's ability to benefit others.

It is important to note that he took the conventional reality of these constraints very seriously. An aloof modality of severing would have made his commitment as an activist impossible for one thing. And the ways in which he as a *gCod pa* engaged with the phenomenal world were themselves not aimed at "undermining the relative appearances of provocations." These practices instead revolved around "destabilizing their ultimate influence."[60] Sherab cultivated this inner disposition by generating a mindset within which he took on the persona of a disciplined beggar who lived from day to day.

A focus on emptiness emerged in structured time through practices of both body and mind. Our companion would perform the key ritual of offering his flesh on waking up in the morning. Sheehy explains that as the *gCod pa* "realizes emptiness through the practice of confronting death, and the compassionate expression of emptiness through offering one's body, the mind settles into natural equilibrium."[61] Sherab would also engage in identifying his mind with that of Machig Labdron. This *yoginī* is credited with turning the instructions she received from the Indian adept Padampa Sangye into a body of practices.[62] Machig is an emanation of Yum Chenmo or the "Great Mother" who personifies *Prajñāpāramitā*. Our companion felt that the temporal markers of day and night made no sense when embodying her timeless wisdom.

Moments and places of darkness at the same time served as avenues for transformation. Cemeteries were among the environments where

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58 Sharapan 2016: 10.
59 Swank 2014: 82.
60 Sheehy 2005: 44.
61 Sheehy 2005: 43.
62 Sheehy 2005: 40.

Sherab would go to cut through the demons of reactivity and fixity as a "roaming yogi." Entering such terrifying places represents a helpful step in the practice of *lam du khyer* or "taking as the path."[63] "To take adversity as the path" is also the motto with which a seminal text used for guidance on *gCod* summarizes "the teaching of the mother-lady" Machig.[64] But our companion above all seems to have aimed at letting doubt and expectation *rang sar grol* or "dissolve into themselves."[65] Living in emptiness allowed him to let go of these mental states and glimpse what he called "the free mind." Yet such moments of mental freedom did not prevent either minds or bodies from being afflicted by impermanence.

Lightning between Clouds

It was common for my companions to be in two minds about the places of their imagination. A young Tibetan man called Samdrub was among those who often expressed mixed feelings when walking with me through a Swiss city. He was a friend of Sherab's and had recently migrated from Nepal to Switzerland. Samdrub had been granted a preliminary residence permit. My companion cheerfully remarked that he liked the main station in which we had met up. The young people to be found there were "free-minded" in his view. Yet he soon proposed to leave the station and take the main street leading away from it. This was one of the most expensive and exclusive shopping avenues in the world. Both of us looked in awe at the extravagant commodities on display there.

"This lust has brought me here!" my companion suddenly exclaimed.

"What lust?" I asked.

"This lust for material happiness!" came an anguished reply. Samdrub then told me that his spiritually active senior friend Sherab had understood why he had wanted to migrate abroad. There were simply far too few opportunities for young Tibetans to make a living in Nepal. But Sherab had simultaneously urged Samdrub to act in accordance with "morality." Then my companion recalled that Sherab had recently started training another young Tibetan man in the practice of *gCod*.

"I would be his student if I were still in Nepal," he sighed.

We met again in the bustling main station of the city about a week after our walk along luxury. The two of us bought some provisions and

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[63] Sheehy 2005: 42.
[64] Sheehy 2005: 41.
[65] Sheehy 2005: 46.

strolled to a river boulevard. There we sat down on a public bench inviting passers-by to enjoy the serenity of a place secluded from trade and traffic. I wondered how my companion felt about his present life. It turned out his contentment with the support he received from the authorities did not prevent him from missing places of pilgrimage. He blamed his desire to earn money for his absence from such sanctuaries. Sherab regularly contacted him from Nepal with the advice to keep engaging in the practice of *gCod* while living his new life. But Samdrub remained "confused" about the many alternative options open to him. And yet my companion felt that his bewildering materialist experiences were themselves conducive to valuing the spiritual life he had left behind.

He later told me about his resolute ways of putting into practice the moral advice given him. Samdrub did sigh that his abilities to make comprehensive efforts in this regard were limited. His social position was far removed from that of those to whom he referred in Tibetan as *bla che mi che tshong che* or "the great lamas, the great people, and the great merchants." These elites certainly did not include provisionally documented migrants like himself. But he was still able to pursue morality in his interactions with young compatriots who lacked papers altogether. The minimal maintenance allowances they received covered only a fraction of their everyday expenses. This meant they were unable to afford the habit of travelling around the country that was so popular among young Tibetan migrants in Switzerland. Yet their inclusion could sometimes be secured through the generous solidarity of peers like Samdrub.

Differences in the fortunes of individual migrants turned out to be reason for reflection too. Samdrub came to talk about how he perceived the relative chances of obtaining documentation about a week later.

"Getting papers is also about *karma*," said my companion.

"Did you try to influence your *karma*?" I asked him.

It turned out he had actually used to offer prayers while still in the process of applying for asylum. Samdrub explained that Buddhists commonly prayed for all sentient beings. And yet what he referred to as a "hidden self-centredness" would appear in times of crisis. This led people to pray for themselves. My companion's own invocations had centred on both the Dalai Lama and meditation deities such as Jetsun Dolma or Arya Tara. One of the key prayers he had offered was *Bar chad Lam Sel*. This supplication to the enlightened being Guru Rinpoche or Padmasambhava is important in "Clearing the Obstacles of the Path." The way had actually been opened for Samdrub to be granted preliminary papers. Yet the benefits of this worldly attainment now struck him as quite limited in scope.

"I have seen so much material development," reflected my companion, "but this is not giving lasting happiness."

The sense of disillusionment he had come to develop re-emerged a few weeks later. Samdrub and I had sat down on a bench in a park as we often did. A long silence preceded a question that had just come to my mind. I wondered whether my companion ever felt bored. My companion replied he often did feel this way due to the small number of weekly language classes offered by the Swiss authorities. Opportunities for practising Buddhism were in even shorter supply.

"There's no *dharmic* friends here," sighed Samdrub. It seemed to him that fellow Buddhists were far and few between in Switzerland. All he could do was spend his days exchanging what he called "nonsense talk" with fellow Tibetans apathetic towards spiritual practice.

Such indifference had a bearing on the extent to which he felt there was solidarity with others. Samdrub used the German adjective *egal* while condemning what struck him as a tendency "not to care" about less fortunate migrants. He shared this criticism with me when we were waiting for a tram several weeks later.

"Some Tibetans with F or B papers are thinking about those with *shog bu nag po*," said my companion. "But others are *egal*." This Tibetan neologism translates as "black papers" and was used by Tibetans in Switzerland to describe negative asylum decisions.

"But you are concerned!" I objected.

"Yes, I am concerned," confirmed Samdrub, "but what can I do? I am *gsar 'byor*." This is the Tibetan word for "new arrival."

Then my companion told me about a friend of his still waiting to be interviewed by officials. He was doing his best to support her in preparing for an interrogation that had not yet been scheduled. I asked him whether his friend was feeling anxious.

"There is *saṃsāric* suffering," he indirectly answered my question. "And we are in it."

"The Lord of Mercy is looking at us and crying," added Samdrub. My companion was referring to Chenrezig or the "One who Sees."

Then he recited a passage about a woman severing her bonds with society to find liberation. The lines Samdrub shared with me came from a translation of a Tibetan drama about the eleventh-century *yoginī* Nangsa Obum:

Life is as brief as lightning between clouds.
Even if you friends do not want to practice the Dharma,
I am going.
Our life is like a drop of water on the grass,
Which can evaporate from little heat.

Even if you friends do not want to practice the Dharma,
I am going.[66]

Taking the mind off certain spaces of time served to recognize them as being solid only on paper. Samdrub contemplated how places having the air of being substantial were in fact subject to evaporation. His focus in this regard was on exclusive hotspots where sporadically documented migrants like himself were at best mere spectators. These contrasted starkly with relatively open areas such as the main station of the city. Moving among the "free-minded" strollers found there was quite unlike visiting the bourgeois shopping street that extended from it. And yet walking along this thoroughfare was conducive to my companion's meditations.

It served as an avenue for contemplating both the causes of and alternatives to the present. One step in this process involved Samdrub's reflection that what he called a "lust for material happiness" was the root of his current existence as a migrant. His here and now had originally resulted from the afflictive mental state referred to in Tibetan as *'dod chags* or "desire."[67] Vincanne Adams traces this concept to the Tantric Buddhist teaching that "the sense body is responsible for one's feelings of attraction to material forms."[68] Samdrub had felt drawn to the physical abundance located abroad. The paucity of opportunities for meeting even basic material needs in Nepal had been deemed an understandable push factor by his mentor Sherab.

Yet mental pictures of what could have been had he not migrated tormented my companion. His departure from Nepal now struck him as the tragic moment at which he had diverged from training on the *gCod* path with Sherab and encountered a spiritual impasse. Samdrub attributed both this missed opportunity and his absence from pilgrimage places to materialist desires. His quest for a lifeworld resembled the one pursued by Michael Jackson's migrant companions in suggesting "that a gap always exists between what is given and what is imagined."[69] Aspiring to a future in a desirable place which simultaneously represented *ou-topos* or "no-place" left him "haunted by the thought that utopia actually lies in the past."[70] And yet what he shared with me gives an inkling of a contemplative orientation to the present.

Making up his mind about bewildering spaces of time came down to taking them as the path. It was true that being reminded of *gCod* by

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66 Allione 2000: 264.
67 McRae 2015: 104.
68 Adams 1998: 85.
69 Jackson 2013: 219.
70 Jackson 2013: 221.

Sherab did not prevent Samdrub from being confused about which trail to follow. But I think it is at the same time crucial to recognize the significance of a particular reflection he shared with me. The contemplation in question revolved around how a spiritual void itself reminded him of an uplifting fullness that had ostensibly slipped his mind. And this is reminiscent of the engagement in *'dod chags lam khyer* or "taking desire as the path."[71]

Morality all the while remained an integral stepping stone on the path trod by my companion. This was the word he used to describe the ethical advice Sherab had given him in respect of his life abroad. Emily McRae explains that Buddhist teachings on morality revolve around "caring about the well-being of others" as well as cultivating "feelings of respect and benevolence."[72] Samdrub had resolved to put these instructions into practice despite his exclusion from the documented world of "the great people." His moral course of action manifested as a commitment to practical solidarity with those among his peers who lacked papers altogether.

This aim continued to be precarious unless fixation on a self had been cleared from the path. My companion had cherished what he called a "hidden self-centredness" by praying to be granted papers of his own. McRae notes in a similar vein that Buddhist teachers describe cultivating morality as first and foremost a process of removing emotional obstacles to caring for others.[73] Samdrub felt that "times of crisis" like the long periods in which migrants were forced to wait for an asylum decision kept people from cultivating altruistic aspirations. Both *karma* and devotion had nonetheless opened the way for him to be granted a preliminary document by "Clearing the Obstacles of the Path."

He had since realized that the only lasting way of dissolving barriers was to turn inward. Boredom and the absence of *chos grogs* or "Dharma friends" amounted to one level of outer obstruction in this process.[74] But Samdrub regarded the widespread failure of migrants to care about those less fortunate than themselves as the most entrenched obstacle. His own endeavour in life resembled that of someone training the mind "who has given up the idea of happiness in the cycle of *saṃsāra,* but remains attached to his or her own well-being." The prescribed remedy is to cultivate compassion and loving-kindness.[75] Samdrub engaged in this moral practice while contemplating life as lightning between clouds.

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71 McRae 2015: 119.
72 McRae 2015: 103.
73 McRae 2015: 103.
74 Cf. Kukuczka 2016.
75 Van Schaik 2016: 52-53.

Synchronization

Simultaneously inner and outer steps on the path went some way to cutting through documentary impermanence. It is worthwhile to recall that Novak tentatively defines impermanence as "an unspeakably intimate awareness of the temporality of all psychic and somatic events." [76] I specifically propose the term "documentary impermanence" to represent the phenomenological essence of my companions' everyday experiences. One of the meanings I ascribe to it concerns the ways in which papers are temporally conditioned. Another sense relates to the transience displayed by the very distinction between the permanence and impermanence of documents.

The ethnographic focus adopted in this article is on sensations of registering impermanence. My companions had such experiences in several senses of the verb "to register." Its most obvious significance entailed that their details were bureaucratically chronicled with or without the conferment of documents. But they themselves experienced paperwork in much more affective registers. Disconcerting situations such as being sent a letter announcing the eventual denial of a residence permit registered in their minds. They also registered their concern about such issues with trusted others like me.

Yet the affective resonances of oppressive impermanence registered above all on their bodies. Spinoza puts forward for consideration the compelling view that "no one has yet determined what the body can do." [77] So knowing it cannot but remain a matter of having yet to determine its affective capacities. [78] An esoteric system serves as a metaphorical language capturing the embodied practices through which my companions developed these faculties. *Kālacakra* or the "Wheel of Time" can be read as an analogy in which "time" signifies knowledge and the "wheel" the knowable.[79] Walking adds meaning to this metaphor by embodying mobility in its most primordial form.

Practices of both the body and the mind were vital in cutting through documentary impermanence. My companions performed *gCod* but also contemplated their situations by means of walking. These embodied practices helped them to release the mental grip of the impermanence with which they found themselves confronted while seeking the ephemeral documents needed for travel and settlement outside their homeland. They cultivated "not a retreat but an advance of the body-mind sensorium into the fundamental reality

[76] Novak 1996: 269.
[77] Spinoza 1994: 155.
[78] Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 3.
[79] Hammar 2005: 80.

of temporality, the utter impermanence and momentariness of every mental and physical phenomenon."[80] Their practices resembled those described in the quotation from Dhompa[81] with which this article opened. The compelling paradox is that they endeavoured to liberate their minds from an impermanent world whose foundations were literally made of paper by synchronizing their bodies with its reality.

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[80] Novak 1996: 277.
[81] Dhompa 2016: 243.

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