

Seeing through your eyes: senses, emotions, science, and the plasticity of personhood in Tibetan Buddhism

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Introduction

In this paper, I discuss the manners in which one of the most paradigmatic relationships in Tibetan Buddhism, the guru-disciple relationship, is rooted in practices and ontologies that can directly influence and potentially transform one's sense of self, or personhood. Such transformative potential is expressed within Tibetan Buddhist traditions, for instance, in the transmission from guru to disciple of certain spiritual technologies that aim at awakening one to their own already fully-enlightened nature. The practice of deity yoga, in which the practitioner strives to become familiarized with this idea of a hidden enlightened nature through the systematic identification with fully-enlightened deities, is perhaps the case in point that most clearly conveys the malleability that notions of self and identity acquire within the context of the tantric practices of Tibetan Buddhism.

Despite their centrality and even direct relevance for the thesis I develop in this paper, these tantric practices will not be my main focus here. Instead I will investigate two different accounts in which it is possible to identify with the figure of the guru this potential to transform our perception of what constitutes the self. The first account discusses a trip undertaken by the seventeenth-century rNying ma master Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med (1597–1650) and his disciples to bKra shis sdings, the site considered to be the navel of Sikkim's sacred geography. It is Lha btsun himself who narrates the details of this trip in one of his numerous autobiographical works. The second account also has at its core important representatives of Tibetan Buddhism, but it takes place in a much later era, and involves advanced technologies and modern laboratories. In this account, the Tibetan master of Karma bKa' brgyud and rNying ma lineages Yongey

Mingyur Rinpoche¹ (b. 1975), and the French-born rNying ma monk Matthieu Ricard (b. 1946) are tested through different scientific procedures in laboratories while in meditative states.

Distant in time, and in nature, these accounts nevertheless have in common some significant structural elements. We can easily discern in both of them, for instance, certain dichotomies that are “resolved” by means of what could be termed “translation mechanisms”: the hidden versus the apparent; subjectivity versus objectivity; the private versus the public. The “translators,” identified as I discuss below with the figure of the shaman, are the gurus, but also the scientists. They are the figures mediating between these opposing poles, rendering the hidden apparent; subjectivity objective; and the private public. The senses figure in these accounts as mediators between these different extremes. However, these are not fixed entities. The senses, and also the emotions, constitute the ground for transformation that can lead to the expansion of the sense of self, or personhood, through means that range from the practice of informing the perception of the landscape with sacred imagery, to scientific scrutiny.

Hence, my aim in this paper will not be to identify particular cultural notions of personhood, but to focus on the fluidity of this category in contexts that involve the presence and activities of Tibetan masters. In this investigation, I will focus especially on the role played by the senses and emotions in the constitution of such fluidity. I call the dynamism involved in these processes of transformation the *plasticity of personhood*. The choice of the term *plasticity* is not a random one. The reference here is to the concept of *neuroplasticity*—“the capacity of neural connections to change and reorganize”—which could arguably be said to be one of the most important scientific discoveries of the last few decades. It was thanks to the development of the concept of neuroplasticity that a scientific interest emerged in the potentially beneficial effects of contemplative practices on the brain. The reference to neuroplasticity in the concept of the plasticity of personhood also has the purpose of connecting the two accounts that constitute the bulk of this paper, pointing at the same time to the potential embodied by these gurus to enhance human life, leading to systematized new avenues for human flourishing.

Before delving into these accounts, I would like to briefly discuss the connections between Buddhist ideas and recent developments in anthropology around the category of the person.

¹ Due to Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche being well-known by the phonetic rendition of his name and also due to the nature of the discussion in the second part of this essay, I chose not to render his name into Wylie.

² Presti 2016: xii.

The category of the person and Buddhism

With the publication of Marcel Mauss's essay "Une catégorie de l'esprit humain: la notion de personne, celle de 'moi'" ["A Category of the Human Mind: the notion of the person, the notion of the self"] in 1938,³ the notion of person, or personhood, became an important category in the social sciences.⁴ The tradition of Mauss, which would be taken up by Louis Dumont,⁵ and appear in the works of authors such as Clifford Geertz,⁶ considers notions of person to be native categories of thought, culturally variable constructs.

More recently, and I would highlight here research and analytical findings connected to Melanesian and Amazonian ethnographies, new developments in this domain have led to important critical reevaluations of well-established anthropological concepts, such as individual and society. It is this more recent kind of approach that interests me here. Marilyn Strathern's work is particularly relevant in this domain, constituting among other things an attempt to deconstruct Western notions of the 'individual' and 'individualism.' In *The Gender of the Gift*, Strathern argues that "Melanesian persons are as dividually as they are individually conceived. They contain a generalized sociality within. Indeed, persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them."⁷ The reference to the dividual quality of the person comes, as she directly declares, from McKim Marriot's remarks about South Asian theories of person. Marriot believes that persons are not construed in South Asia to be individual, or indivisible bounded entities. They are thought instead to be dividual, or divisible.⁸ Behind both approaches is the idea that persons forge their identity from their relationships with other persons, the spiritual world, objects, and lands—to mention just a few of the constituent factors of personhood and sociality according to these schemes.

There are many doctrinal aspects of Buddhism that could be seen as being in harmony with this approach in anthropology. The most evident and, in a way, overarching of all is the doctrine of dependent origination, which proclaims that all entities, lacking inherent existence, come about through a relational nexus of causes and conditions. Any attempt to get to a notion of person in a Buddhist

³ Mauss 1938.

⁴ For a classic discussion on the notion of personhood in Buddhist societies see Collins 1982.

⁵ Dumont 1983.

⁶ Geertz 1973.

⁷ Strathern 1988: 13.

⁸ Ibid.: 348n7.

context will veer precisely towards this relationism/dividualism approach of anthropology.

Directly connected to the doctrine of dependent origination is the notion of non-self, another core doctrinal formulation of Buddhism. The notion of non-self holds that a sense of self as an unchanging, permanent entity is fundamentally flawed. What we experience in being a person should be more precisely defined as a process of becoming in permanent flow, in which no essence can be found. In Gethin's words, "Linguistic usage and no doubt certain emotional and psychological circumstances predispose us to an understanding of personal identity and selfhood in terms of an 'I' that exists as an autonomous individual and who has various experiences. In this way I assume—perhaps unconsciously—that although my experiences may vary there is something-me-that remains constant. In other words, it only makes sense to talk in terms of my having experiences if there is a constant 'I' that can somehow be considered apart from and separately from those experiences."⁹ Within the Buddhist doctrinal framework, this sense of 'I' is considered to be a mere illusion. The experiential sense of personal continuity we all have is explained then with reference to the specific manner in which the mental and physical phenomena that constitute a being are causally connected. Hence, causal processes are what gives rise to this sense of personal continuity.

This ever-changing, insubstantial quality of the self in Buddhism serves as the ground for change both in conceptual and actual terms. The senses and emotions play a constitutional role in the continuous emergence of this illusory self. And we will see in the two accounts discussed below how concepts of the person can be transformed precisely through controlling and enhancing the senses and emotions.

Part 1: Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med

The literary production of Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med lends itself well to the discussion I am proposing here. In Lha btsun's extensive literary corpus, there are numerous examples of texts that consistently interweave his mystical visions, their places of revelation, the esoteric teachings that ensued, and the wider social contexts of their revelation and dispensation, including sometimes particular audiences. This kind of visionary autobiographical work, through creating a sense of reality in the act of narration, can elucidate, I believe, the mechanisms through which notions of personhood and sociality are constructed in some Tibetan contexts. Further, it can show how notions of

⁹ Gethin 1998: 135.

personhood, especially in the paradigmatic case of the guru, cannot be fully apprehended without regard to relations with other persons, landscape, and textual production.

Lha btsun was renowned as one of the four pioneer Tibetan lamas to have opened, in the seventeenth century, the “hidden land” of Sikkim, or ‘Bras ljongs in Tibetan. He is perhaps more widely known in the general Tibetan Buddhist world for having discovered the *Ri bo bsang mchod*, which literally means “Mountain Smoke Offering” as part of his *gter ma* cycle *Rig ’dzin srog sgrub*, or *Accomplishing the Life-Force of the Vidyādhara*s. The twentieth-century rNying ma master bDud ’joms Rin po che would later compose an abbreviated version of the *Ri bo bsang mchod* for the purpose of daily practice—this is the version that is extensively practiced today in Tibetan communities and Dharma centers around the world. It is also important to highlight here the central role that pure visions played in the life and work of Lha btsun. Tulku Thondup Rinpoche in fact takes the example of the *Rig ’dzin srog sgrub* as paradigmatic of mind *gter mas* discovered in the form of Pure Vision Teachings. According to him, “Lha btsun discovered his teachings in the form of pure visions when he received the blessing of Vajravārāhī, and transcribed them as Pure Vision teachings.”¹⁰

In this section, I focus my efforts on a section of a travel memoir—this is how I am translating *lam yig* in this particular case—written by Lha btsun regarding his journey to Sikkim. The very long title in Tibetan could be translated as *The Travel Memoir of My Wide Open Magically Playful Wanderings through The Celestially Manifested Palace ‘Bras mo gshongs entitled A Thousand Lights of the Blazing Sun*.¹¹ Here, I refer to it simply as *Travel Memoir*. This is a work of approximately three hundred folio sides, which is found in the third volume of his *gSung ’bum*.

Two elements in his *Travel Memoir* seem to occupy strategic connecting points in the network of associations that are traced by him in the narrative. These are his mystical visions and the hidden land of Sikkim. As we shall see, in the narrative, both of these elements express the theme of the dichotomy between the apparent and the hidden. I believe that in the context of the visionary traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, this dichotomy should be highlighted as a theoretical framework that adds an additional layer to the opposition between individualism and dividualism that dominates classic and more recent

¹⁰ Tulku Thondup Rinpoche 1986: 90–91.

¹¹ *mKha’ spyod sprul pa’i pho brang ‘bras mo gshongs su har sangs sgyu ma’i rol rtsed nyul ba’i lam yig rab gsal nyin byed ‘bar ba’i ‘od stong zhes bya ba bzhuvs pa’i dbu phyogs lags so*

developments in anthropology regarding the concepts of personhood and sociality.

The section of the *Travel Memoir* discussed here corresponds to a trip undertaken in 1647 by Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med and some of his disciples to bKra shis sdings. This section corresponds to 55 folio sides of the *Travel Memoir*. This trip happened, according the Lha btsun just after his coronation of the first king of Sikkim, Chos rgyal Phun tshogs rnam rgyal.¹² Even though in his book *Opening the Hidden Land*, Saul Mullard calls attention to the fact that the coronation date for the first king of Sikkim remains elusive due to numerous contradictory dates that are proposed by different authors,¹³ it nonetheless seems reasonable to believe that Lha btsun performed at least a second coronation of the king in 1647, since the first one is recorded in some documents to have occurred sometime in 1644.

The relevant passage starts with Lha btsun discussing the characteristics of bKra shis sdings with his party, which included the king himself and his entourage. At that time, Lha btsun tells us, he had an intense yearning to outwardly relate in full the histories concerning the external shape of the place and where its inner and outer door face, and so forth. Internally, he says, he carefully consulted the *gnas yigs*, which Guru Rinpoche intended for future beings. Finally, secretly, he supplicated the assembly of the three roots and the pledge-bound protectors and requested some kind of prognostication about the place—from the text we understand that they were trying to identify the land called bKra shis sdings, as described in the travel guides.

It is interesting to note here the three levels in which Lha btsun expresses himself in relation to his quest for bKra shis sdings: the outer, inner, and secret levels. This triad is also present in the typology of subgenres of Tibetan autobiographies, which seems to indicate that these three levels represent an important paradigm in notions of what might constitute a person according to Tibetan Buddhist ideas. The guru or lama represents the ideal for Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, having at least in theory actualized the potentials of body, speech, and mind. One of his or her characteristics is the ability to mediate between the outer, inner, and secret modes of being.

Having this idea in mind, I would like to draw a comparison here between the guru and the shaman in some Amerindian societies in the Amazon. Brazilian anthropologist Manuela Carneiro da Cunha has taken up the issue of shamanism as a mode of translation. She argues

¹² I would like to thank James Gentry for his invaluable assistance in the translation of the passages reproduced in this paper.

¹³ Mullard 2011: 133–136.

that shamans are translators in the Benjaminian sense of the term¹⁴ insofar as their goal is to “establish harmonies or resonances between worlds or planes that are seen from different perspectives.”¹⁵ A similar idea was also explored in a similar way by Geoffrey Samuel in his *Civilized Shamans* (1993). The first idea I want to retain from this comparison is the conscious and intentional access to different levels of reality as a feature intrinsic to the tantric master.

As we will see, the role Lha btsun plays for his audience in the opening of the hidden land of Sikkim is close to that of the shaman described as translator. Such an act of translation happens through different means that nevertheless work in conjunction with each other. I would like to single out here three of these means of translation, or articulations of perspectives in relation to the hidden land: ritual, enhancing the perception of the landscape, and mystical visions. I will go through these items in the order they appear in the selected passage.

1.1 Ritual

Firstly, there is the instance of ritual.

Lha btsun and his party conducted a series of more than five hundred rituals in order to “open” the land. As he narrates,

Then, just as taught by the great Vidyādhara Padmasambhava, we performed 108 smoke offering rituals, 108 burnt offering rituals, 108 purification rituals, 100 feast offering rituals, and 100 reparation rituals. We recited out loud the *dhāraṇī sūtras* and the *bKa' thang* literature. And we proclaimed the previous commands along with the pledges. Then in consultation with the intention of the pilgrimage guides, we measured in detail the lines of the earth, sky, and water.¹⁶

The *bKa' thang* literature refers to the life stories of Padmasambhava. Padmasambhava is, of course, a constant presence throughout Lha btsun's narrative. In this sense, it should be noted from the outset that Padmasambhava acts as an invisible counterpart to Lha btsun, functioning as the paradigmatic exemplar of the tantric guru as mediator between multiple planes of existence.

¹⁴ Benjamin 1968.

¹⁵ Carneiro da Cunha. 1999.

¹⁶ Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med 1974, 562.6–563.2: *de'i tshe rig 'dzin chen po padma 'byung gnas de nyid kyi ji ltar gsungs pa'i lha bsang brgya rtsa/ sbyin sreg brgya rtsa/ khrus gsol brgya rtsa/ tshogs brgya/ bskang brgya/ mdo gzungs bka' thang sgrogs pa/ bka' nan rab brjid/ dam bsgrag dang bcas zhib par grub ste/ slar yang gnas yig rnam kyi dgongs pa dang bstun te/ sa thig/ gnam thig/ chu thig rnam legs bar gzhal ba las/*

Without going into the details of the rituals performed on this occasion, it is possible to say at the very least that one of their effects was to create through performance an imaginative display for his disciples of the hidden aspects of the land, which include both invisible aspects of the land itself, and its invisible inhabitants. Since Lha btsun does not reveal in his text the titles of these rituals, I will refer here as an illustration to the *Ri bo bsang mchod*, which is, as I mentioned above, the most well-known work associated with Lha btsun. Anyone who has performed or witnessed the performance of the *Ri bo bsang mchod* has probably taken notice of the profusion of invisible beings described in it. It is to these beings that smoke offering is directed.

In a later passage in the *Travel Memoir*, when another ritual is performed, this idea is made even more explicit:

Later on during the full moon day, we brought the immeasurable outer and inner offering substances, which were actually present and mentally manifested, including the auspicious symbols and so forth. And we set up an immeasurable feast offering. When I was washing and consecrating the auspicious jewel box with an assembly of hundreds of fortunate ones, in the infinite direction surrounding the place, there was a rain of bouquets of divine flowers and the fragrance of incense pervaded the place—the entire environment. An assembly of kinnaras, gods, nāgas, kumbhāṇḍas, and so forth attracted to this, gathered like clouds. Instantaneously, in the great gathering assembled there, some sang songs, some danced, some played music [...].¹⁷

As this episode illustrates, through the performance of the ritual, a sense of the presence of these beings is directly created for the practitioners. In sum, the performance of ritual directly articulates the perspectives of what the audience is actually seeing, i.e. the bare landscape of bKra shis sdings, and the other dimensions of the landscape.

¹⁷ Ibid., 571.6–572.4: *nya yongs su gang ba'i nyin slar yang bkra shis rdzas rtags la sogs pa'i phyi nang gi mchod rdzas dngos 'byor yid sprul dpag tu med thogs shing tshogs kyi 'khor lo dpag tu med pa bshams te/ skal ldan gyi tshom bu brgya phrag mang po dang bcas bkra shis nor bu'i za ma tog dam pa de nyid la khros gsol mnga' dbul sogs bgyis skabs/ khor yug mi zad pa'i mtha' klas par lha yi me tog gi chun po'i char dang / dri zhim gan spos ki ngad legs par brdal pa la ji ltar rjes su chags pa'i mi'ang ci dang / lha dang / klu dang / grul bum gyi tshogs kyang sprin bzhin gtib pa las/ de'i mod la 'dus pa'i khrom chen rnam la la ni glu len/ la la ni shon rtse/ la la ni bro brdung/*

1.2 Enhancing the perception of the landscape

The second instance through which translation happens is the description of bKra shis sdings's qualities in accordance to *gnas yigs*, or pilgrimage guides. Just after performing the rituals to open the land, Lha btsun describes bKra shis sdings for the benefit of his disciples, articulating once more in this way (and even more directly) the many perspectives in relation to the landscape.

This same triad of outer, inner, and secret is evoked once more in the description of bKra shis sdings, based on the *gter ma* travel guide discovered by Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, *Yab sras kyi lam yig*. On the outer level, the physical landscape is described as being quite exceptional. The main mountain of the place resembles "a king on a throne;" the four surrounding mountains are like "silk curtains;" the "five mountains in the upper part of the valley look like a divine crown;" and there are "seven lakes that look like mirrors" and so on and so forth.¹⁸

Citing another work, the *Byang gter kha byang*, Lha btsun describes the so-called inner level. On this level, bKra shis sdings is the palace of the deity Vajrasattva; the sandalwood trees that grow in the four directions are the palaces of the four buddhas belonging to the so-called "buddha families;" the caves of the physical landscape are the residence of bodhisattvas, goddesses and so forth.

Finally, in this same text cited by Lha btsun, on the so-called secret level, the physical layout of the land, its glaciers, mountains, and waters are associated with the concept of the subtle body in tantric Buddhist yoga, being said to exist in the "manner of energy channels, *cakras*, and drops inside the body; the glaciers of the five treasury peaks," which corresponds to the mountain known today as Kanchenjunga peak, are said to exist in the "manner of a skull;" "the glacial waters, which are like a hanging white silk, are the flow of *bodhicitta*; the medicinal forest between the mountains and the valleys exists in the manner of the *cakra* of rapture in the throat; and in the center of all this is Brag dkar bKra shis sdings, which exists in the manner of the *chos kyi 'khor lo*—the heart *cakra*."¹⁹

There are, of course, many interesting connections that could be traced in these descriptions. I would like to highlight here only one of these: the homology on the secret level between the layout of the land seen as a subtle body and the human subtle body. This

¹⁸ Ibid., 563.

¹⁹ Ibid., 567.5–6: *gangs chu dar dkar phyar ba 'dra ba'i byang chub kyi sems 'bab pa/ ri dang lung pa'i mtshams na sman gyi nags tshal spungs pa/ mgrin pa longs spyong kyi 'khor lo'i tshul du yod pa/ 'bab chu'i drag dal shan phyed pa/ chu'i sgra skad tshangs pa'i gsung ltar sgrogs pa/ dbus na brag dkar bkra shis sding chos kyi 'khor lo'i tshul du yod pa/*

“individualization” of the land according to tantric Buddhist yoga suggests a subjectivity pertaining to the landscape itself. The land is in this view an actor. Indeed, in numerous instances in the passage selected, and in other works as well, the land directly acts upon Lha btsun, causing, among other things, visions to emerge.

2.3 Vision

The third and final means of translation I would like to discuss in this section relates to visionary experience, or *dag snang*. In the passage selected we have two instances in which mystical visions arise: a collective vision and a vision experienced only by the lama.

The first one happens as soon as Lha btsun finishes describing the landscape to his audience:

Then, from the peak of the burst-open wheel of the blue mansion—the gem-like five-fold treasury of jewel glacial mountains, stainless and white—the collective form of the compassion of all the buddhas, Padmasambhava, in order to cut through the net of my doubts, amidst a sphere of swirling rainbow light, excellently laid down a drop/line of immutable wisdom. The Chos rgyal Phun tshogs rnam rgyal and all the other fortunate people gathered there encountered that and everyone became intoxicated with joy.²⁰

The account of this collective vision is without a doubt the high point in the passage from the *Travel Memoir* that I am analyzing here. This vision seals together the processes of informing, and thereby transforming the perception of the landscape that I discussed in the previous sections. Further, it enacts the well-diffused doctrinal idea in Tibetan Buddhism that there is a continuity between the mind of the guru and the mind of the disciple, which could be seen as meaning that they are the *same person*. The concept of *maṇḍala*, which permeates both the ideas of the individual and community in Tibetan Buddhism, is also an important reference here.²¹ In this regard, it should be noted that in the passage quoted above there is a play on words in the expression “drop/line of immutable wisdom”—‘*gyur med ye shes kyi thig*. It means the wisdom essence of sentient beings, and the “line of a *maṇḍala*” drawing, as in *thig btab*, which means to trace the lines of a

²⁰ Ibid., 569.1–3: *de'i tshe dri med rab tu dkar pa'i gangs ri rin po che mdzod lnga nor bu'i khang bzang sngo sangs kyi 'khor lo rtol ba'i rtse nas rgyal ba kun gyi thugs rje'i spyi gzugs dam pa padma 'byung gnas gang gis bdag blo'i the tshom gi drwa bcod phyir 'ja' 'od kyi zer klong 'khrug ba'i klong nas 'gyur med ye shes kyi thig legs bar btab pas chos kyi rgyal po phun tshogs rnam rgyal la sogs der 'dus pa'i skal ldan gyi skyes bu kun gyis mjal te thams cad kyang dga' bas rab tu myos bar gyur/*

²¹ Gray 2006.

mandala in preparation for its construction. But more pointedly in the present context, it also refers to the identification of geomantic features of the locale, which, as we saw above, Lha btsun and his disciples were attempting to decipher based on the pilgrimage guides. In both metaphorical and concrete ways, the vision thus described encapsulates the idea of the fluidity between person, sociality, and landscape. This dynamic points to the notion proposed by Marilyn Strathern for the Melanesian context, namely, that persons can contain a generalized sociality within.

Finally, I would like to cite here one last passage. It refers to a vision that Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med had of bKra shis sdings at the end of his journey. In this we have an even more direct connection being traced between the guru and the land. As he says:

At that time, I saw the three big valleys, the 125 minor valleys, the 104 great lakes, the five treasury glaciers at the top end of the valleys, and the jewel bowl at the bottom end of the valleys—all of the places surrounding the navel of bKra shis sdings I saw directly with my eyes. At that time, I had the ecstasy of thinking that I was experiencing my own luminosity. And reflecting on the kindness of Padmasambhava, I fervently recollected Padmasambhava and supplicated him at that sacred place with longing.²²

The visual sense enhanced by the description of the environment provided by the lama, which gave rise to the collective vision, seems to be the point of inflection here, at once multiplying reality and making explicit the connections between the various bodies—of guru and disciples—and the landscape—in particular, when it is described as being homologous to the human body on the secret level. Through vision the body of the guru becomes the place where a relationship is established with the hidden land. If the land has a potentially transformative effect on him and his disciples, the land itself is also transformed through the guru's activities, be they actual performances of rituals that open the land and connect guru and disciples with it, or his action of narrativizing its invisible qualities. Hence, in the process of revealing the hidden land (and also through visionary activity), Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med potentially impacts the sense of self of his disciples, creating at the same time a new sense of reality and sociality for them.

²² Ibid., 612.6–613.3: *de'i tshe lung chen gsum/ lung phran brgya dang nyer lnga/ mtsho chen brgya dang bzhi/ phu gangs chen mazod lnga/ mda' rin chen gshong / lte ba bkra shis brag gi 'khor yug gi gnas rnams mig gis mngon sum du mthong stel slar yang rang gi 'od myong bsam pa'i dga' spro dang / padma 'byung gnas ki bka' drin la bsam pas o rgyan rje nyid bzod blag med par dran tel gnas der gdung bas gsol ba btob pa ni/*

Part 2. Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche and Matthieu Ricard

In this section of the paper, I go forward more than 350 years in time to focus my discussion on four different laboratory experiments with advanced meditators. I believe the investigation of these experiments can shed light on the ways that the guru expands our understanding of ourselves, and general notions of what it means to be human. As we shall see, in contrast with Lha btsun's narrative, which was presented as directly connected to a particular land and to particular disciples, these experiments have more of a universalistic proclivity. This is explained by different factors. The first one I would like to highlight here is the direct role of the Dalai Lama in fostering these experiments.

As I have shown in my previous work (2015) and as some of the evidence discussed below will reiterate, the nature of the Dalai Lama's activities tends to be comprehensive, going well beyond his own cultural sphere. Hence, his participation in these experiments carries with it this universalistic sense. A second factor consists in the laboratory and scientists acting as mediators. As Michel Callon states, laboratories perform a key function in our societies, having the potential to continuously rebuild them by introducing "unpredictable variations and new associations."²³ This creative power of the laboratories is in fact revolutionary in the sense that it can engender pervasive cultural changes. A case in point is the recent broad application of contemplative practices in contexts as diverse as medicine, psychology, education, business management, and so forth. As I will try to show below, the sense of self, or person that emerges from this "most sacred chamber of science"²⁴ has the potential to effectively change the general perception we have of ourselves as human beings.

The experiments I will discuss here directly derived from the VIIIth Mind and Life dialogue, which happened in Dharamsala in the year 2000. This particular Mind and Life dialogue had destructive emotions as its theme and represented an important turning point in the history of the Institute. Since the late 1980s Mind and Life has promoted the most important and perennial series of encounters between scientists and representatives of Buddhist traditions. The particular dialogue undertaken in Dharamsala in 2000 is a significant landmark in the history of this institute. It led to the development of lines of research that consequently would be carried out in scientific laboratories in the United States, taking the interaction between Buddhism and science to

²³ Callon 1986: 21.

²⁴ Baert and Rubio 2009: 72.

a whole new level. All the experiments discussed here happened within one or two years of this dialogue.

The idea to scientifically research destructive emotions is connected to a much broader project that the Dalai Lama holds as particularly important, namely, the promotion of ethical and spiritual values as a way to change the world. This is the subject matter of one of the Dalai Lama's bestselling books, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (1999). In this work, the Dalai Lama does not make explicit references to Buddhism. Instead, he frames basic Buddhist precepts in terms of secular ethics. It was Daniel Goleman, the celebrated author of the best-seller *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), who after reading a draft of *Ethics for the New Millennium* first foresaw the relevance of his then current research on emotions for the Dalai Lama's project. The Dalai Lama immediately endorsed Goleman's view and suggested that a scientific perspective on what Buddhists call the three poisons—hatred, craving, and delusion—should be developed. Goleman and the Dalai Lama agreed that here “the Western view would differ from the Buddhist perspective, but that those differences would themselves be informative.”²⁵

In my book,²⁶ I discuss the interactions between Tibetan Buddhist representatives and scientists in terms of what I call “dialogue zones.” These zones are specialized niches of activities related not only to scientific practices, but also to world peace, the environment, academic traditions, and so forth. In my work, I focused in particular on the possibility these zones represent for the expansion of Tibetan Buddhism beyond the religious sphere. Among other things, I proposed that activities in these dialogue zones helped ground Tibetan Buddhist traditions in a globalized world through the formation of new transnational networks that connect lamas, monks, disciples, political activists, religious personalities, university professors, and scientists, among others. The central position that the Dalai Lama occupies in the religious field of Tibetan Buddhism makes him a privileged agent both in the opening of new dialogue zones and in the exploration and expansion of zones previously opened by other lamas, or by practitioners of other Buddhist traditions. Even though the Dalai Lama is actively present in all the dialogue zones I examine in my book, his role as a cultural innovator is most pronounced in his activities with *Mind and Life*. The Dalai Lama has been playing a crucial role on all levels of this institute's activities—from promoting its visibility through his own charisma and political import to directly suggesting possible avenues of research in the scientific field. In what

²⁵ Goleman 2003: XIX.

²⁶ Lopes 2015.

follows I will briefly sketch some of the procedures and results of these experiments to then conclude with a comparison with the previous section.

2.1 Cultural translation

The first experiment that I will discuss took place in 2001 at the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience²⁷ on the Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin. The professor of psychology and psychiatry Richard Davidson, one of the participants in the 2000 Mind and Life dialogue and the head of this laboratory conducted a series of experiments on an advanced Western Tibetan Buddhist meditator as part of the preparation to pilot a series of brain tests to be used with advanced meditators the following year.

In the book *Destructive Emotions: A Scientific Dialogue with the Dalai Lama* (2003), Daniel Goleman narrates the 2000 encounter in Dharamsala. He introduces this meditator under the fictitious name of "Lama Öser." Later, Matthieu Ricard revealed in one of his books that he was Lama Öser, the first "guinea pig," in his words.²⁸ Davidson tested Ricard with the help of two different technologies: electroencephalograms, or EEG, that record changes in the brain's electrical patterns with a very accurate time resolution; and functional magnetic resonance imaging, or fMRI, which measures the blood flow in the brain.

This pioneering experiment was quite revolutionary. In *Destructive Emotions*, Daniel Goleman describes it as "the first scientific experiment with someone at Öser's level of training, using such sophisticated measures."²⁹

The protocol developed by Davidson and his team with the help of Matthieu Ricard proposed an alternation between neutral states of mind and specific states of meditation. Ricard himself explains that "among the various states that were initially tested, four were chosen as the objects of further research: the meditation on 'altruistic love and compassion,' on 'focused attention,' on 'open presence,' and on the 'visualization' of mental images."³⁰

The focus of the discussion in this chapter was the meditation on altruistic love and compassion. Goleman explains that the EEG analysis bore "particularly rich fruit in the comparison between Öser

²⁷ This laboratory has since been expanded to the Waisman Center. In 2008, the Center for Healthy Minds was founded at the Waisman Center.

²⁸ Ricard 2006: 189.

²⁹ Goleman 2003: 3.

³⁰ Ricard 2006: 189–190.

at rest and while meditating on compassion.”³¹ There was, in the words of Goleman, “a dramatic increase in key electrical activity known as gamma in the left middle frontal gyrus, a zone of the brain Davidson’s previous research had pinpointed as a locus for positive emotions.”³² As he explains, in previous research with almost two hundred people, Davidson had found that “when people have high levels of such brain activity in that specific site of the left prefrontal cortex, they simultaneously report feelings such as happiness, enthusiasm, joy, high energy and alertness.”³³

A year later it was Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche’s turn to be part of research conducted by Richard Davidson and Antoine Lutz, a neuroscientist trained by Francisco Varela, the co-founder of Mind and Life who passed away in 2001. Mingyur Rinpoche and seven other meditators’ brains were tested through similar procedures in Wisconsin. Daniel Goleman in his foreword to Mingyur Rinpoche’s book *Joy of Living: Unlocking the Secret and Science of Happiness* (2007) describes the “stunning” results yielded by the research on the meditation on compassion. Mingyur Rinpoche’s “neural activity in a key center in the brain’s system for happiness jumped by 700 to 800 percent! For ordinary subjects in the study, volunteers who had just begun to meditate, that same area increased its activity by a mere 10 to 15 percent.”³⁴ Even though claims like these are problematic in many respects, they are nevertheless emblematic of the rhetoric deployed in a more popular, non-scientific sphere, and this is the sphere that mainly concerns us here.

2.2 *The happiest person in the world*

The exceptional results of Matthieu Ricard granted him the curious title of “the happiest person in the world.”³⁵ Both Matthieu Ricard and Mingyur Rinpoche would later interpret further their own experience

³¹ Goleman 2003: 12.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Goleman 2007: viii.

³⁵ In his blog, Matthieu Ricard explains how he became known by the curious epithet “The Happiest Person of the World,” a “joke” he says he has a hard time freeing himself from. In his words, “Some years ago the Australian television network ABC made a documentary on happiness, in which I participated. At one point the commentator said, ‘here is perhaps the happiest person in the world.’ Things remained quiet for a while, but a few years later the English newspaper *The Independent* published a cover story entitled ‘The happiest person in the world.’ From then on, things went out of control.” “The happiest person in the world?” <https://www.matthieuricard.org/en/blog/posts/the-happiest-person-in-the-world>, last accessed March 1 2019.

in the laboratory with scientists in the format of two Dharma books that emphasize the connection between meditation and happiness. As in the case of the book *Destructive Emotions*, both books—*Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill* (2006) by Matthieu Ricard and *The Joy of Living* by Mingyur Rinpoche—translated into more accessible language the scientific results discovered in the laboratories and interpreted by scholars in papers published in scientific journals.

In a schematic and by no means exhaustive way, it is possible to detect in the sequence just described a series of translations. Mingyur Rinpoche and Matthieu Ricard's extensive meditative experience, which was more than once compared by Goleman to the levels of practice typical of Olympic athletes, was "captured" and "translated" through state-of-the-art technology into images that could be interpreted by scientists; on another level of translation, the scientific language that analyzed the results was encapsulated by the pop culture formula "the happiest person in the world;" finally, both Matthieu Ricard and Mingyur Rinpoche absorbed the scientific results and language and so forth into modern Dharma books.

These processes of translation have created a new understanding of Buddhism and meditation that has allowed for broader communication in contemporary societies. Among other things, it is possible to detect in these translations a movement from a more subjective apprehension and description of the experience of meditation to an objective apprehension of this experience. In other words, we see a shift from the traditional framework to a scientific explanatory model. Curiously, it was this process of turning to a more objective take on meditation that led to the highly "speculative" idea of a person that is the happiest in the world! A simple google search on the phrase "the happiest person in the world" brings images of Matthieu Ricard and sometimes also of Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche with electrodes all over their heads. These images, a perfect expression of the combination of subjectivity and objectivity involved in scientific experiments on the practice of meditation, point out the hybrid nature that these great meditation practitioners have acquired in the popular imagination. Not far removed from Donna Haraway's cyborgs,³⁶ they have become an unexpected combination of nature, culture, and technology.

Two other experiments have added supplementary layers to these hybrid images. Eminent psychologist Paul Ekman, one of the foremost experts on facial expression and another participant in the 2000 Mind and Life meeting in Dharamsala was responsible for these other two experiments. At the Human Interaction Laboratory of the University

³⁶ Haraway 1991.

of California in San Francisco, he tested the ability of Matthieu Ricard and another experienced Western practitioner of Tibetan Buddhist meditation traditions in recognizing what he calls “micro-expressions;” using a video that showed in very quick succession various facial expressions, he asked the two meditators to identify the emotions on display. Once more, in these experiments the findings were groundbreaking. Previously Ekman had tested five thousand subjects with the same video. These two meditators achieved results that were far better than all of them. In his words, “They do better than policemen, lawyers, psychiatrists, customs officials, judges – even Secret Service agents,”³⁷ the group that had proven before to be the most accurate.

In a second experiment conducted at his colleague Robert Levenson’s psychophysiology laboratory at the University of California in Berkeley, machines measured the capacity of Matthieu Ricard to repress what is known as the startle reflex. The startle reflex is one of the most primitive of human reflexes. It is an unconscious defense response to sudden or threatening stimuli, like the firing of a gun. In such situations of perceived threat, *all* people involuntarily contract the same five facial muscles instantaneously, especially around the eyes.

Matthieu Ricard was tested for his bodily movements and physiological reactions to a powerful detonation like a gunshot going off just beside the ear. He was asked to try to neutralize the involuntary strong reaction. According to Ekman’s previous findings, no one had been able to suppress this reflex entirely. “Not even elite police sharpshooters, who fire guns every day, can stop themselves from flinching.”³⁸ But Ricard was able to repress this impulse, making it almost disappear while he was doing a meditation he called “open presence.” Ricard also was tested while practicing one-pointedness meditation. “During one-pointedness meditation, instead of the inevitable jump, there was a decrease in Öser’s heart rate, blood pressure, and so on. On the other hand, his facial muscles did reflect a bit of the typical startle pattern; the movements “were very small, but they were present,”³⁹ Ekman observed.

³⁷ Goleman 2003: 14.

³⁸ Ricard 2006: 197.

³⁹ Goleman 2003: 17.

Final Considerations

From all these experiments emerges the figure of a Buddhist super human, an expression of human potential for a happy, balanced, stress-free, empathic life through, among other things, the enhancement and control of the emotions and the senses. Goleman attributes Ricard's exceptional response to the startle reflex test to his remarkable level of emotional equanimity: "Just such equanimity has been claimed in ancient texts as one of the fruits of these meditation practices."⁴⁰ The same could be said in relation to the effects of the meditation on compassion on the brain of Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche. Furthermore, the test on the recognition of micro-expressions could also be seen as evidence that the visual sense together with attention have been improved through the practice of intensive meditation.

The development of better human beings is precisely what the Dalai Lama proposes with his idea of a secular ethics suitable for the world community. These experiments paved the way for expanding these ideas beyond the theoretical domain into a more practical, applied sphere. The discovery of these super humans by science also seems to be in tune with certain trends in psychology. As Richard Davidson reminds us in the book *Destructive Emotions*, "the American Psychological Association, which is the largest organization of psychologists in the world, about forty-five thousand psychologists, has launched an initiative called Positive Psychology to focus on human flourishing. They say that we have spent too much time focusing on negative traits and we now need to turn our attention to positive traits."⁴¹ The research on the effects of meditation seems to be a perfect response to at least some of the questions that this new trend in psychology might raise.

The exceptional results of these experiments echo the equally exceptional autobiographical account of Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med, since both of these instances challenge reified notions of the self by expanding its boundaries. As we have seen, the expansion of the boundaries of the sense of self happens in these contexts through translation mechanisms that reveal what was hidden, subjective, private. In the case of Lha btsun, he himself performed that role through the means of ritual, enhancing the perception of the landscape, and visions—both individual and collective—thereby expanding the sense of self for his disciples. The guru, the disciples, the land and its invisible inhabitants are connected in new form of sociality.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.: 230.

In the case of the experiments, I would argue that it is mainly the scientist who plays that role, which I associated earlier with that of the shaman. They and their highly-sophisticated machines are the ones behind the translation of subjective states of meditation into images, numeric data, and analysis. It could be argued also that in our societies the scientists occupy one of the most prestigious positions in society—their word certainly tends to carry great weight.

Through scientists' expert mediation, the outstanding abilities of Yongey Rinpoche and Matthieu Ricard become apparent and "scientifically proven," even if they were just meant to be done in preparation for a pilot test, as was the case with Matthieu Ricard at the University of Wisconsin's Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience. The subsequent publicizing of these experiments by means of the general media—through popular science books, Dharma books, magazines, newspapers, etc.—had the direct effect of rendering their experience universally accessible in more than one sense of the expression. The tone of these publications is indeed a prescriptive one. If these great meditators are super human beings, their "super powers" were acquired through training, in a regimen not very different from Olympic athletes, Goleman would say. So at least in theory, anyone could aim to be like them, that is, regular human beings who have striven in meditation. This kind of identification does not seem too far from the doctrinal idea I mention above regarding the continuity between the mind of the guru and the mind of the disciple. Indeed, I would argue that there is something of that idea that, once gone through the laboratories and anointed by the secular project of the Dalai Lama, still remains, but in a different format. The sense of identification between the guru and the disciple, or the "lama in the lab" and the reader, seems to be an essential basis for change both in the more traditional context, and in the contemporary one. The guru is your mirror, so his or her attainments are within reach. In that sense, the guru can be said to be a crucial catalyst in the concept of the *plasticity of personhood*.

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