

CAUGHT BETWEEN WORLDS:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF WESTERN TIBETAN BUDDHISTS IN TORONTO

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A Thesis  
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

McMaster University

August 2002

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (2002)  
(Anthropology)

McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Caught Between Worlds: An Ethnography of Western Tibetan Buddhists in Toronto

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NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 202

## ABSTRACT

The development of Buddhism in the West as a vital and viable religious path is currently in process. Buddhism has become increasingly visible in mainstream popular culture, and multiple images and conceptions of Buddhism and Buddhists are relatively common. As Buddhism becomes more personally, philosophically, and spiritually relevant to an increasing number of Westerners, to ask the question, "Who are Buddhists?" in the West elicits responses that may be complex, nuanced, and even contradictory. This research explores the ambiguities and the assumptions surrounding popular and scholastic understandings of "Western Buddhists" in Canada.

Focusing on narrative accounts of men and women practising Tibetan Buddhism in Toronto, this thesis will examine the reasons and motivations underlying the contemporary interest in Buddhism. Further, I argue that these reasons and motivations are themselves influenced and shaped by the representation of Buddhism in the West as a textually based, genderless, and timeless tradition. I propose that within any response to the question "Who are Buddhists?" is a matrix of meaning, underpinned by a number of dualities in dynamic tensions between male and female, monastic and lay, the individual and the communal, doctrine and social reality, religion and spirituality, and Buddhist and non-Buddhist.

My research will help explicate the emergence of new religious ideas in Canada, and will contribute to the understanding of an emerging "Western" form of Buddhism as the tradition struggles to become increasingly active in Western socio-cultural contexts. This thesis is one of the first ethnographic accounts of the everyday religious lives of "Western Buddhists" in which participants have an active voice in the research process. It is also one of the few accounts of Buddhism in the West to come out of Canada, and could provide the basis for more nuanced investigations of the emergence of a "Western Buddhism" in general.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my gratitude to my academic advisor, Dr. Petra Rethmann, and the members of my committee, Dr. Graeme MacQueen and Dr. Ellen Badone, for their support, encouragement, and constructive contributions. I thank them for helping me to shape my graduate experience into an enriching and enlightening experience, and for helping me to mold this thesis into something of which I am proud.

I also extend my gratitude to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Ontario Graduate Scholarship, and the Harry Lyman Hooker Senior Fellowship, without whose financial support this research would have not been possible.

I would especially like to acknowledge the women and men in Toronto who by their generosity and interest made this entire thesis a reality and my own life vastly more interesting. I also thank them for their friendship.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Shannon for helping me to clarify my thoughts on those long walks and talks with Kiva and Jake, Pierre for his unflinching confidence in me, and Dean, Dad, and Lydia for gently cheering me on when I needed it most. Thanks to everyone who, in their own small ways, made this thesis finally come together.

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## PART I LOCATING THE DIALOGUE

### A) Introduction

An acquaintance of mine works in a used bookstore outside of Toronto. One of the most popular sections of the store is “religion and spirituality.” One afternoon, the clerk struck up a conversation on Buddhism with a thirty-something woman. As she was looking at books like *Wherever You Go, There You Are* (1994), and *Awakening the Buddha Within* (1997), the clerk mentioned he knew someone doing research on Tibetan Buddhism in Toronto, specifically looking at the reasons why so many Westerners, including large numbers of women, are attracted to it. The woman paused in her page flipping, smiled, then looked at him and, as if it should be perfectly self-evident, answered: “Richard Gere.”

Of course, anecdotes such as this one are always amusing, seeming to point to nothing more than one famous actor’s intense interest and devotion to an exotic and colourful religion; one that has been highly visible in the popular media. Such an anecdote, however, also highlights much more beside the usual popular presentations of Buddhism in the West – it shows us that more information needs to be brought to bear on how Buddhism is actually experienced in Canada and the United States.

We have all been exposed to hundreds of images of robed figures sitting hunched and cross-legged, mumbling and clutching their long ropes of beads. Along with its practitioners, Buddhism itself has been associated with a number of popular images in the Western imagination. “Zen fountains,” designed to promote peace of mind and harmony with the environment through whispering streams of water trickling over stones, are readily available through mail order catalogues and can now be found in most import and home furnishing stores. In advertising, serene monks sagely cradle cellular phones, while chanting monks telepathically discuss the latest email and Internet software in television ads. Select teas are said to “reincarnate” and have been blended by the mumbled “chantings of certified tea shamans.” Popular comic book heroes receive mysterious forms of mental instruction while they are locked into coffins by even more



mysterious monks in Tibet. Statues of the Buddha, a "... large-bellied ... smiling man" (Davidson 1976: 30) are no longer limited to the entrance ways of Chinese food restaurants.

Given images such as these proliferating Western popular culture and the growing degree of comfort with more and more "Asian" concepts, it is no small wonder that interest in Buddhism is also taking hold in the Western imagination. In fact, until recently in North America, asking the question "Who are Buddhists?" appeared as a relatively straightforward and simple query. For example, posing the question to most North Americans throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries could very easily have brought to mind an image of an Asian person in long, flowing robes and a shaved head who also happened to live "far away" in a country on the other side of the world. Alternatively, perhaps, the question conjured an image of the "Chinatowns" of large urban centres, full of hectic activity, dazzling neon lights, barbequed ducks hanging in windows, and the mysterious and flowing scripts of "foreign" languages.

Well into the 1960s, the majority of Canadians associated Buddhism with these and other images of the exotic. According to McLellan, Buddhism as a practice or philosophy received little or no popular recognition or support prior to the 1960s, despite a relatively lengthy history in Canada and the United States (1999: 11, 35). Japanese Buddhists settled in British Columbia as early as 1887 (Takata 1983), and the beginning of the gold rush in the mid-1800s saw large numbers of Chinese and Japanese immigrants arriving along the western coast of the USA (Fields 1981: 70-82).

In the last three decades, the overall public awareness of Buddhism has grown throughout North America. In Canada, this awareness was fostered by the 1967 changes to Canadian immigration law and the adoption of the policy of multiculturalism in 1971. In the following years, Buddhists from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, Tibet, Nepal, mainland China, India, Korea, and Thailand began to immigrate to Canada. In the late 1970s, a large number of refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, along with continuing immigration in the 80s and 90s, all contributed to the growth of the Toronto Buddhist population (McLellan 1999: 11). In the United States, the Asian population is said to have doubled during the 1970s, following the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. This Act reversed previous Asian exclusionary

measures in the government books that date back to 1882 (Numrich 1996: xviii). In conjunction with the changes to immigration policy and laws in both Canada and the USA, prolonged political and ethnic turmoil in many Asian countries has resulted in a dramatic change in immigration patterns to both countries since the 1970s to the present.

Defining Buddhists in Canada and the United States however, no longer depends solely on ethnicity, and (if it ever did) no longer fits neatly into the little boxes on the census forms. McLellan writes that determining accurate census material on Asian Buddhists in Toronto is complicated by the fact that census data do not account for more than one category of religious identity. She writes that it is common for Chinese from Hong Kong and Vietnam to identify themselves as Confucian and Buddhist simultaneously. The same can be said of the many Asians who practice Christianity, but not to the exclusion of maintaining other religious identities and loyalties (1999: 13-14). Asking what has in the past appeared as relatively straightforward – “Who are Buddhists?” – now elicits responses that are no longer quite so simple, and currently brings to mind more complex, less stereotypical, and sometimes even contradictory images. The question itself shows a fundamental change in *where* Buddhism is perceived to be located. As Buddhism has become more visible in mainstream popular culture and more personally, philosophically, and spiritually relevant to more and more North Americans, the flavour of the question – and the response – changes with the question.

Regardless of how the question is posed – either as “Who are Western Buddhists?” or “Who are Buddhists in the West?” – defining who actually practices Buddhism in the West is not an easy task. Even the most cursory glance yields great variety and divergence. Since the mid-nineties, popular print media in the United States has featured a number of articles in this vein, and on the generalities and particularities of “American Buddhism.” Whether explicitly or implicitly, most such presentations concern themselves with labelling or categorizing the various types of what is called the “American Buddhist.” Celebrity forays into Buddhist practice are very popular, followed closely by the trendy and the trend-setters. Drawing from a 1994 issue of *New York Magazine*, Prebish writes there are the “Beat Buddhists” (including the likes of

Allen Ginsberg, Philip Whalen, and Gary Snyder), the “Art Buddhists” (such as Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, and Milton Glaser), and the “Celluloid Buddhists” (Oliver Stone, Willem Dafoe, and of course, Richard Gere) (Prebish 1998: 1).

Aside from these star-studded portrayals, some articles do concern themselves with identifying some aspects of Buddhism that are attractive to a Western audience. Some of these cast Buddhism as an antidote or a salve to the pressures of living in a fast-paced, materialistic society, suitable for those with a desire to “. . . tune out the late twentieth century’s frenzied multicasting . . .” (Van Biema 1997: 69). Buddhism is also popularly presented as a “way out” of the guilt and fear associated with Roman Catholicism, and the hopeful means by which sense can be made out of life (Van Biema 1997: 69; Tart 1991: 140, 143). Articles about the “twenty something” generation’s search for meaning through intensive meditation are increasingly commonplace within the pages of Canadian national newspapers,<sup>1</sup> and the topic of “What is Buddhism in North America?” has received attention from smaller, regional sources like the *Hamilton Spectator*<sup>2</sup> and *The Toronto Star*<sup>3</sup> in addition to the publications with a national scope.

Multiple and diverse images and conceptions of Buddhists in the West are relatively common. Buddhism is frequently portrayed as trendy and exotic, still something of an “other.” Buddhists themselves are in kind regarded as slightly quirky, eccentric, or “hippie-dippy” – but happy and peaceful individuals, always with a serene smile. These popularized images and conceptions are also very general. They provide us with “the surface” only; a postcard or snap-shot, frozen in time and space. As with all postcards, Buddhist snap-shots are themselves devoid of context – both historical and contemporary. They are also usually devoid of men and women with more than one dimension. Such postcards, unwittingly or not, project a great many more assumptions than actual information about Buddhism, about Buddhists, and

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<sup>1</sup> Salley Praskey, “Dharmas . . .”, *The Globe and Mail*, 15 December 1998, sec. C6.

<sup>2</sup> Casey Korstanje, “A Yen For Zen,” *The Hamilton Spectator*, 24 June 1998, sec. A8.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Spearin, “I Love You - Pass the Cheese,” *The Toronto Star*, 14 February 1999.

about what the “Buddhist world” is and how it should be. The point of this research, then, is to uncover and explore some of these buried assumptions that surround popular “understandings” of Buddhists in the West.

The question that underpins this study, and the one that sparked my initial interest in the topic, is “Who are Buddhists in Canada?” This appears to be a seemingly innocent and relatively straightforward question. As I delved into this question, I soon found that beneath its placid surface lurks a great deal of controversy, assumption, and ambiguity. Any answer – or more accurately, any response – quickly becomes anything but simplistic, straightforward, and unidimensional. Moving beyond a merely descriptive response, I propose that any reply to the question of “Who are Buddhists?” is in fact underpinned by a foundation of dualities in dynamic tension. These dualities illustrate the problematic nature of any identity or sense of self, religious or otherwise. Tensions exist between doctrine and social reality, male and female, monastic and lay, and between Buddhist and non-Buddhist. There is, I propose, a matrix of meaning hidden not only within the question of “Who are Buddhists?” but also its response.

One duality, for example, focuses on gender. It is frequently stated in scholastic and popular sources that Buddhist doctrine is gender neutral, suggesting that women in Buddhism enjoy greater levels of access, training, and accomplishment than their counterparts have historically in the monotheistic religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Photographs and interviews also seem to support this; women as well as men both appear as active participants, further reinforcing an attitude of gender inclusiveness in Western Buddhism. By exploring these assumptions of gender neutrality and openness, as they are experienced, constructed, and perceived by actual women and men involved in Buddhist practice, we discover that “gender” is the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Assumptions surrounding gender, men, and women are based upon, and in turn mutually supportive of, networks of other assumptions about what constitutes “Buddhism” and who practices it, in addition to its historical development and its development in the West.

The development of Buddhism in the West as a viable and vital religious path is currently in process. It is a religious and spiritual system that is in transition; an Eastern system of belief and behaviour

that is transforming itself in ways that are becoming meaningful for those in the West. As no religious system is in stasis for long (if ever), Buddhism is moving towards becoming a viable “Western” religious tradition. As we begin to explore some of the assumptions and dualities experienced by women and men in Toronto, we see that these individuals are also caught between two poles and live in the tension between their own dualities of male and female, doctrine and social reality, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, certainty and ambiguity, and expectation and experience.

In order to address the underlying question of “Who are Buddhists?” I turned to the personal narratives of Toronto Tibetan Buddhists. Thirty-four individuals participated in the formal aspect of this research project, which centred around semi-formal, recorded interviews. Where time, interest, and scheduling permitted, the great majority of the ten men and twenty-four women participated in two such interviews. While the format of the questions differed somewhat between women and men,<sup>4</sup> both were invited to respond to questions that focused on how their interest in Buddhism developed, and what factors and circumstances led them to actively engage with Buddhism. Further, participants were asked to discuss gender issues, spiritual practice, and Buddhist identity.

#### **B) What is Buddhism<sup>5</sup>?**

The Buddhist tradition has a long and diverse history. Beginning about 2,500 years ago in northeast India, the tradition spread over subsequent centuries throughout South and Southeast Asia, Central Asia and the Far East. The West began to pay attention to Buddhism in the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century western societies hosted increasing numbers of Buddhists (both through immigration and “conversion” or choice), as well as Buddhist institutions, texts, images and symbols. Because Buddhism has such a long history and a wide geographical diffusion, and because it has no central institution with the

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<sup>4</sup>See Appendix A for formal interview questions.

<sup>5</sup> This section was written as part of a dialogue between myself and Dr. Graeme Macqueen.

authority to make decisions for all Buddhists, the tradition is very diverse; but it may be useful to say a few words about some of the ideas that characterized the tradition in its early stages and that have remained for most Buddhist schools till the present.

From at least as early as the sixth century BCE, religious ideas and values were debated in north India between two religious groups, the *brahmins* and the *śrāmanas*. *Brahmins* were those who carried out priestly functions, mainly in home and temple, for the majority of the population in north India at the time. The religious system they helped sustain is generally referred to today as *brahmanism* and may be thought of as an early form of Hinduism. *Brahmins* constitute one of the four main social classes or groups<sup>6</sup> of traditional Indian society and have been, for well over two millennia, important repositories of sacred myth, ritual, and belief. *Śrāmanas* were individuals who had renounced their homes and most of the privileges (and restrictions) of social class. They came together to form bands of itinerant philosophers and religious practitioners, usually gathering around a charismatic leader and usually practising some degree of asceticism. *Brahmins*, upholding *brahmanical* teachings about gods and human beings, carried on active disputations in the historical Buddha's day with the *śrāmanas*, who challenged much of *brahmanical* teaching. Buddhism and Jainism both belonged to the *śrāmana* movement, and were the first mendicant orders in history to admit women fully into their communities (Horner 1930: 101; Hughes 1986: 59).

The founder of the Buddhist tradition, the historical Buddha Sakyamuni,<sup>7</sup> is traditionally said to have been a prince of the warrior (*ksatriya*) class and the Sakya tribe, who left a wealthy and privileged life to pursue spiritual awakening. He was born just north of what is today the Indian border, in Nepal, and spent most of his life teaching in towns and cities in the Gangetic plain, in what are today the states of Bihar

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<sup>6</sup> The four main groups are the *brahmins*, the warrior-leaders (*Ksatriya*), the cattle-rearers and cultivators (*Vaisya*), and the servants/labourers (*Śūdra*) (Harvey 1990: 10).

<sup>7</sup> Precise dates for the Buddha's lifetime are difficult to ascertain. Harvey notes that Indian culture was not as concerned with recording precise dates, in comparison to the Chinese or Graeco-Roman cultures. Most scholars, however, would agree that the historical Buddha lived eighty years, somewhere around 480-400 BCE (1990: 9).

and Uttar Pradesh. Traditional accounts say that he led the life of a wandering *śrāmana* for six years before achieving full enlightenment (becoming a buddha or “enlightened one”) around the age of thirty-five.

One of the most important formulations of the Buddha’s teaching (the *Dharma*<sup>8</sup>), the Four Noble Truths (Sanskrit, *catur ārya-satya*), may be taken as representative of early Buddhist doctrine. According to this formulation, which is often said to resemble a diagnostic model (identification of the illness, identification of the cause of illness, determining a cure through the removal of the causes of illness, and outlining a course of treatment), all worldly existence is characterized by suffering. This suffering (Sanskrit, *dukkha*<sup>9</sup>) is dependent for its existence on craving or thirst (Sanskrit, *trṣṇa*), which causes us to cling to that which is impermanent. The Four Noble Truths affirm that craving can be removed and *dukkha* left behind. The Eight-fold Path (Sanskrit, *astāngika-mārga*), which summarizes the necessary components in the progress toward enlightenment and nirvana, sets out the methods of eliminating suffering through the avoidance of negative and harmful (to oneself and others) speech, behaviour, and thought. These basic principles are said to apply to all human beings who wish to achieve enlightenment, whether they be male or female, lay or monastic.

The Buddha is said to have taught for sixty-five years, and the collections of his discourses (originally preserved orally but later written down) are very extensive. They have been preserved chiefly in Pāli, a north Indian language closely related to Sanskrit.

Over the five centuries after the death of the Buddha numerous sectarian divisions took place in the Buddhist community. Sometime around the beginning of the Common Era, a particularly important school

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<sup>8</sup> The precise meaning of this term will be explored more fully in Part V.

<sup>9</sup> *Dukkha* is often translated as “suffering,” but more accurately refers to transience, and that suffering is necessarily involved in transience (Bowker 1997: 354). Suffering can be described and classified into three main types: first, there is mental and physical suffering, and the suffering of misery; second, there is the suffering of change; and third, that which is known as compositional suffering. This is the suffering that is endemic to cyclical existence, “. . . in which sentient beings are prone to dissatisfaction due to being under the influence of contaminated actions and afflictions” (Powers 2000: 72). This subject will be discussed in greater detail in a following section.

of Buddhism developed, known as Mahāyāna<sup>10</sup> (literally, the “Great Vehicle” or “Great Course”).

Mahāyāna accepted much of earlier Buddhism but promoted the idea of a great plurality of Buddhas, as well as *bodhisattvas* (beings who will one day become Buddhas), to whom one can orient one’s religious practice, whether this will be within a wisdom tradition or a faith tradition. Mahāyāna was a very creative religious development, which gave birth to huge numbers of new religious scriptures, philosophical ideas, and practices. Most of the major Buddhist schools of Tibet and the Far East are derived from Mahāyāna Buddhism.

### **Tibetan Buddhism**

Buddhism was introduced into Tibet in the eighth century CE by the Buddhist saint Padmasambhava, who is also known in the Tibetan tradition as Guru Rinpoche. Tibetan Buddhism, or Vajrayana Buddhism, is a combination of Mahāyāna and *Tantric* Buddhism, and the indigenous shamanic tradition of Tibet known as *Bon* (McLellan 1999: 15). The Tibetan tradition of Buddhism emphasizes the *Bodhisattva*<sup>11</sup> path and compassion for all beings (similar to the Mahāyāna). Its *Tantric* roots developed in the eighth to the twelfth centuries CE, as a reaction against powerful Buddhist monasteries and rigid religious hierarchies in India and Tibet (Edou 1996; Shaw 1994). *Tantra*’s earliest proponents were lay people who sought a system of religious and spiritual practice that was available to all members, of all levels of society, and not limited to those of monastic and/or celibate intent (Shaw 1994: 20-21).

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<sup>10</sup> This school uses the same basic doctrines as the older Theravādin tradition, although it emphasizes the idea that enlightenment is within the province of laypersons as well as monastics. The Theravādin tradition, by way of contrast, places more emphasis on the sangha or monastic community, and the divisions between lay and monastic roles are more strongly defined (McLellan 1999: 14). Furthermore, Mahāyāna more strongly emphasizes enlightenment for all beings, while Theravāda in general seeks the liberation of the individual (*arhat*) (Fischer-Schreiber, Ehrhard, and Diener 1991: 136).

<sup>11</sup> A being who seeks buddhahood or full enlightenment through the systematic practice of particular virtues known as the *Bodhisattva* Path. This being renounces complete enlightenment, however, until all other beings are enlightened. *Bodhisattvas* work towards relieving the suffering of all living beings (Fischer-Schreiber, Ehrhard, and Diener 1991: 24).



*Tantric* Buddhism attempts to cut through the delusions of ordinary awareness in order to reveal the clarity of enlightened awareness. The best places and spaces in which to do this sort of practice, adherents claim, is in the tumultuousness of family life and the everyday, social world (Shaw 1994: 25). *Tantra* was intended to be practiced in any setting, including a monastic one, but was not limited to it exclusively.

As a system of beliefs and practices that have been traditionally located in the geographic space of Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism has moved “outward” and into the West in the late 1950s, following the flight of Tibet’s spiritual and political leader, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, and thousands of Tibetan refugees into India. In Europe and North America, Tibetan Buddhism is often represented in the mainstream media through the smiling countenance of the Dalai Lama himself. The tradition is also commonly known by its extensive and colourful pantheon of deities, both male and female. Of the numerous deities in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, the female Buddha,<sup>12</sup> Tara, is one of the most venerated and beloved, and is commonly known as “the Mother of All Buddhas.”<sup>13</sup> On a spiritual level, Tara functions much like a worldly mother. She is turned to in times of need, comes swiftly to aid, protects from danger – both internal and external – and provides what is necessary for spiritual growth and training. In short, Tara is said to guide us along the spiritual path (Gyatso 1993: 3). Tara and other female *vidams* (meditation deities) such as Vajrayoginī,<sup>14</sup> along with strong symbolic images and egalitarian doctrines, effectively communicate powerful feminine images in Tibetan Buddhism.

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<sup>12</sup> While the deity Tara is in actuality a highly accomplished *bodhisattva* who is regarded as having worked for aeons to reduce the suffering of all beings, those in the Tibetan tradition “ . . . are now quite happy to refer to Tara as a fully enlightened female Buddha” (Williams 1989: 236). This is also the case among contemporary Toronto Tibetan Buddhists.

<sup>13</sup> Tara is the manifestation of “ultimate truth emptiness” or “wisdom realizing emptiness” and is called “the Mother of All Buddhas” owing to the fact that all Buddhas arise from this type of wisdom (Gyatso 1993).

<sup>14</sup> A wrathful female deity.

In light of Buddhist history, the time period within which the historical Buddha lived, some 2500 years ago, is widely held to have been a time of greater independence for women in India (Foley 1893; Horner 1930, 1963; Murcott 1991; Gross 1993; Fernandez 1986; Falk 1980). Buddhism, as it is often perceived in the West, is regarded as a religion that emphasizes compassion for all living beings and encourages and supports gender egalitarianism. To this end, many Westerners note that the historical Buddha himself is said to have stated that the *Dharma* is neither male nor female. This perception in no small way contributes to the “attractiveness” of Buddhism for many Westerners.<sup>15</sup>

### C) The History of “Buddhism” in the West

For many individuals in Western countries, Buddhism is still considered a “new” phenomenon – a relatively new and exotic alternative to the more mainstream and predominantly Judeo-Christian traditions of Western society. “New” in this sense often refers to the 1950s and later. Most North Americans and Westerners have traditionally experienced Buddhism as a topic of study in the classroom, often at universities and colleges, as the exotic and strange subject of a documentary on television, or as a special interest story in the glossy and colorful pages of *National Geographic*. Buddhism, its practice and its principles, remains for a great majority of Western individuals something that is removed, out there, and something that someone else is doing. In the everyday lives of many Westerners, Buddhism is a religious tradition that is just not a part of everyday experience

These perceptions of Buddhism – as something distant, removed, studied – are perceptions that are not new. These are perceptions that are historically contingent; they have been influenced by previous interactions between Buddhism and the West. These perceptions are, in many ways, products of these past interactions, and these interactions themselves have been occurring for far longer than is generally realized by the average Westerner.

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<sup>15</sup> The perception of gender in Tibetan Buddhism as experienced by Torontonians will be discussed in greater detail in Part III, Part IV, and Part V.

### Historical Relations

The influence of and interest in Buddhism has a very long history in the Western world; a history that is over 2000 years old (Almond 1986, 1988; Scott 1985, 1988; Lopez 1998; de Jong 1974, 1987). India, the birthplace of Buddhism, had been known to the Greek world since before the time of Alexander the Great. After Alexander's conquests (326-323 BCE) (de Jong 1974, 1987; Almond 1988; Lopez 1998), the envoy Megasthenes mentions the *śramanas* and *Brahmins* of India. The great Buddhist emperor of India, Asoka (third century BCE), recorded in various edicts the dispatch of royal envoys whose task was to spread the *Dharma* to surrounding kingdoms. These envoys journeyed to such kingdoms that included Sri Lanka, Syria, Egypt, and Macedonia (Ikeda 1977: 45). Five hundred years after Megasthenes, Clement of Alexandria wrote in 200 CE of the "Indians who follow the precept of Bouitta and venerate him as a god" (de Jong 1974: 58; 1987: 5). The West appears to have known about Buddhism for quite some time. Further direct information, however, about Buddhism in the West appears to have become more sporadic in the following centuries.

In the middle ages, Buddhism once again becomes visible in the West, although somewhat covertly. The Christian legend of the saints Barlaam and Iosophat is a testimony to the Buddhist tales and ideas that have "traveled" to the West. The tale itself is derived directly from the life-changing events said to have been experienced by the historical Buddha – Siddhartha Gautama – and the human suffering that propelled him towards a spiritual path. The tale of the medieval European saints also emphasize the pervasiveness of human suffering, the impermanent nature of human life, and the need for compassion towards all living beings. The story of Barlaam and Iosophat was quite popular throughout Europe in the Middle Ages, and was translated into Italian, French, German, Greek, Latin, Romanian, Spanish, and Dutch. When the legend of the historical Buddha became known in Europe centuries later, many Western scholars and travelers – including an unknown editor of Marco Polo's work – commented on the similarity between the two tales (de Jong 1974: 59-60). The actual Buddhist origins of the European version were not known until the mid-

nineteenth century (de Jong 1974). Subsequently, European translations have been traced to early Arabic texts on the Buddha and his life (1974: 60; 1987: 6-8; MacQueen 2001; Almond 1987; Hirsh 1986).

Other sources of Western information on the religions of the East were often the products of travelers and missionaries. A very descriptive and comprehensive account comes from the travels of Marco Polo in China between 1275 and 1291 CE. Translations of his account make mention of Tibetan Buddhism, although it is not referred to by this name. Instead, Marco Polo associates Tibetan Buddhism with the religion practiced by the Mongols and the Kalmyks.<sup>16</sup> J.W. de Jong notes that a chapter on Ceylon even provides a summary of the life of the Buddha (1974: 62).

For many hundreds of years, the Western world continued to collect information on the East and its religions through such first-hand accounts (Bishop 1993: 16; Scott 1985; Almond 1986). More often than not, these accounts were the works of Christian missionaries, monks, and priests, from Jesuits to Capuchins. At approximately the time that Marco Polo returned from China, Pope Nicholas IV dispatched Friar John of Monte Corvino (1297 – 1328 CE) to the Mongols as a papal envoy. He spent many years in China and was appointed archbishop of Peking (Khanbaliq). Papal envoys were sent to Asia until approximately 1339, when Pope Benedict XII sent the last to China (de Jong 1974: 62).

Missionaries were a valuable source of information on the East in the centuries following Marco Polo and the papal envoys. In the seventeenth century, the Portuguese Jesuit Antonio d'Andrade made his way over the mountainous boundaries that contain Tibet, and was followed in the early decades of the eighteenth century by Father Ippolito Desideri and Horace Della Penna. They represented only a few of the many Catholics who sought to reach the Tibetan city of Lhasa (Bishop 1993: 16, 22; de Jong 1987). Their texts

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<sup>16</sup> By writing on the Mongol (called Tartars) and Kalmyk religions, Lopez suggests that Marco Polo's knowledge was gained from other travelers to the region between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea in Russia, rather than from those who actually traveled to Tibet (1998: 21).

make reference to the now-more-than-ever-famous mantra, *Om Mani Padme Hum*<sup>17</sup> (Bishop 1993: 16; Lopez 1998: 116), as well as reference to other, more Tantric, esoteric, and “exotic” elements of religion in Tibet.

Tibet has a long history of encounters, or “near-encounters,” with European travellers, adventurers, and explorers. Adventurers from Russia, Sweden, France, and England attempted to reach the isolated and remote capital of Lhasa in the centuries following the missionary visits. But, according to Peter Bishop, only two French priests and an eccentric Englishman actually reached the city in the eighteenth century. Many others tried and were turned back. Some even perished on the journey (Bishop 1993: 22-23). One of the last to succeed was Alexandra David-Neel, an Englishwoman who, at the age of fifty-six in 1923, is said to have disguised herself as a beggar and traveled on foot from China to Tibet – a journey of approximately 2000 miles (Bishop 1993: 23; David-Neel 1970).

The “travel accounts” of these adventurers and explorers have served, in many cases, to effectively locate Tibet on a geographical and imaginary map in the West. Such documents can assume many forms, including novels, romances, memoirs, collages of diaries, essays, sermons, and official records. They are often intensely personal, highly descriptive, and all too often read literally. They can, in Bishop’s words, “. . . be followed on maps, located in definite towns and geographical regions; . . .” (Bishop 1993: 25). Travel writing remains a popular source of information, even today. Copies of Gary McCue’s *Trekking in Tibet: A Traveler’s Guide* (1991), complete with a glossary of commonly used Tibetan words, can be found on popular bookstore shelves next to Joe Simpson’s highly descriptive and intimate account of the perils of mountaineering in the Himalayas, *Dark Shadows Falling* (1997). It is often forgotten that these accounts do

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<sup>17</sup> According to Donald Lopez, this mantra has been known in the West for centuries, and its meaning debated for an equivalent length of time. It can be roughly and awkwardly glossed as “The Jewel in the Lotus” (Lopez 1998: 114). Western audiences have been known to debate its purpose and meaning since the 1800s, as it has been appropriated at various times by Western devotees of other spiritual systems (Lopez 1998: 116-127).

not only discover and describe regions and places, but also serve to *create* them (Bishop 1993: 25; Ortner 1999).

### The Nature of the Interactions

Beginning in the eighteenth century, the growing Western corpus of knowledge on the East was greatly aided by the processes of colonization and an increasing Western interest in the unusual and the exotic. According to Edward Said's very influential work on the subject, one of the major and defining characteristics of an "Orientalist"<sup>18</sup> discourse is the widespread acceptance of a *basic distinction* between the East and the West (Said 1978: 3). Acceptance of an essential difference can also act as a springboard and a "starting point" for an unequal and unbalanced relationship of power, domination, and authority (Said 1978: 3, 5). Orientalism is a way of "making sense" or "filtering" the Orient into ways that are understandable to the West. By so doing, the Orient becomes an object that is thoroughly *created*, or *imagined*, by complex processes in the West. In fact, Said posits that as such, Orientalism ". . . has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world" (1978: 12). The meaning "the East" holds for the West is constructed in the West (Carrier 1995: 3).

While Orientalism may seem a reasonably simple concept to grasp – when looked at in terms of a dominant West constructing the less powerful East in ways that make sense to the West – such a discourse exists for a variety of reasons and purposes. Orientalism is not an abstract idea or a strenuous mental exercise, it is a discourse that produces tangible results: the impacts of Orientalism are real and experienced in everyday life. Orientalism very actively, in the age of colonization and beyond, maintained the political, social, economic, and military superiority of the Western world over the East. Orientalism was used to justify government policy, to influence individual perspectives, and helped to shape very basic, everyday actions (Carrier 1995: 11). "Buddhism" and "the East" have been used to legitimize, validate, and enhance

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<sup>18</sup> Said's use of this term extends from the Mediterranean to China. I will use this term to signify Asian cultures and religious traditions.

Western science, morality, and colonial rule. But such perspectives have not remained in stasis. The East has not only been constructed and imagined in ways that mirror the value systems of the West; it has also been constructed as a reflection of what the Western world is *not*.

Late in the 1800s, much of the Western world was experiencing a spiritual and scientific crisis. In the United States, Tweed notes that Buddhism enjoyed a period of significant interest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Disillusionment, turmoil, and frustration characterized the decades following the American Civil War in economic, political, and social spheres (Tweed 1992: 80). Attempts to heal the growing rift between science and religion were concerned with presenting religion as a rational and scientific system. Connecting the science of the West and the Buddhism of the East was one such attempt (Bishop 1993: 78).

Of particular relevance to this essay is the role of *longing* and *desire* within Orientalist discourses. The Western imagination in the 1700s and 1800s (centuries that were characterized by industrialization, expansionistic policies, and advancing technologies), created and imagined the Buddhist East as a mirror reflection of the West and its values in that era. In this era, something of an “Oriental Renaissance” occurred in the West, whereby a wide variety of Western artists, politicians, and scholars became aware of and interested in Asian culture and religion. This awakened interest is in part owing to the discovery of texts in languages such as Arabic, Avestan, and Sanskrit. Textual discoveries of this sort helped to “modernize” Orientalism. Napoleon’s documentation of his Egyptian expedition in 1798 was, in a number of ways, “. . . the very model of a truly scientific appropriation of one culture by another” (Said 1978: 42). Napoleon’s “written” experience of Egypt set the stage for and contributed to the ways in which “Buddhism” as a scientific and scholastic effort was constructed and then appropriated by Western scholars.

The East has been firmly constructed in the Western mind set as an object of desire. Thomas Tweed notes that the language used to describe and discuss Buddhism in America was both exotic and enchanting. He writes that to “. . . live the Buddhist life was to abide in a remote land – a ‘fairylad’ – where inhabitants celebrated the absence of all that was familiar and dear” (Tweed 1992: 80). Henry David

Thoreau's experiences and activities are examples of this mind set. In 1844, Thoreau translated and published a small fragment of the *Lotus Sutra*, and his Walden experiment was heavily influenced by Asian or "Oriental" contemplations on self and nature. In 1879, Edwin Arnold published his poetic rendition of the life of the historical Buddha, with a special emphasis on the parallels between Jesus Christ and the Buddha. Speaking to an already present stream of public interest in Buddhism, *The Light of Asia* was an instant success. Arnold's poem received numerous enthusiastic reviews in both religious and secular journals and magazines, which, in turn, had a hand in stimulating widespread interest in Buddhism. Arnold's *The Light of Asia* is estimated at having sold between five hundred thousand and one million copies in the United States alone, with more than eighty American editions (Tweed 1992: 29, 46).

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steele Olcott, the founders of The Theosophical Society, were also influential in the Western construction of Buddhism as an exotic and desirable object in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Society, founded in 1875, enjoyed great popularity in America and Europe.<sup>19</sup> Its interests included forming a universal brotherhood, developing a scientific religion, and expounding a system of spiritual evolution. Founded at the height of European and American interest in the occult, a belief in spiritualism (the belief that the spirits of the dead could be contacted and engaged in conversation), was also encouraged by the Society. Blavatsky herself claimed to have been an adept of the occult, and also claimed to have spent seven years in Tibet as a disciple of a secret order of enlightened masters, and produced many volumes of highly popular books to this effect (Lopez 1998: 49-52; Tweed 1992: 30-31).

The construction of the East and Buddhism as objects of desire radically altered the perception of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism in the West. In the 1700s and 1800s the Tibetan religion was viewed as "tainted" and debased, even monstrous. The figure of the Dalai Lama was seen as repulsive and paradoxical by Western writers as they interpreted him as a "... living human being worshipped as a God..." (Lopez

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<sup>19</sup> The Society also enjoyed popularity in India, despite the fact that Madame Blavatsky was denounced in India as a fraud by the Society for Psychical Research (Lopez 1998: 51).



1998: 23). In these centuries, as previously noted, the Tibetan form of Buddhism did not even deserve the name of “Buddhism” according to Western observers. It was regarded as so inauthentic that it deserved only the name “Lamaism” (Lopez 1995: 7; Bishop 1993: 38).

Western missionaries also drew comparisons between Tibetan Buddhism and Roman Catholicism. Dominican and Jesuit missionaries in the 1600s observed similarities between Buddhist temples filled with icons, monks with red robes and great hats, intricate dances, and the solemn ceremonies and the institutions of Catholicism. The Tibetans and Catholic priests were also said to perform similar functions and duties: they married couples, sang in choirs, prayed for the ill, and observed penance and fasts<sup>20</sup> (Lopez 1998: 24-25). Protestant missionaries in the mid-eighteenth century were also observing and describing the same similarities, but they suggested that not only were the Tibetans guilty of idolatry, but so too were the Catholics (Lopez 1998: 29). Images of magic, sexuality, lust, and power appear frequently, and the responses of the Christian missionaries are often mixed. Western religious politics went a long way in constructing both “delightful” and “demonic” images of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism in the West.

A complex mixture of colonial influences, contempt, longing, imagination, and interpretation are readily seen in the changing images of Buddhism in the West. Yet the case of Tibet differs from other Buddhist countries. A characteristic feature of Orientalism is the construction of an object by Western hands, and also the *control* of it. Tibet, however, has *never* been colonized by a Western power.<sup>21</sup> Tibet has remained on the boundaries of Western imagination and was literally on the very frontier of British India for much of the last two centuries (Bishop 1993: 33). Romanticized as were the frontier struggles and

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<sup>20</sup> Lopez notes that these similarities between Roman Catholicism and Tibetan Buddhism were either sources of delight, as they were thought to have derived from a common historical past, or they were sources of anxiety, where any similarity between the Catholic Church and other religions was seen as a form of “demonic plagiarism” and a way of appropriating the Church’s purity (Lopez 1998: 27).

<sup>21</sup> Tibet suffered this fate in 1959 with the Chinese invasion and subsequent occupation.

expansion of the American West, Tibet remained protected behind a daunting mountain frontier.<sup>22</sup> Located between the known and the unknown, Tibet took on a sacred quality of timelessness and stasis (Bishop 1993: 34).

The geographical location of Tibet has provided much fuel for the Western imagination. In the Victorian era, mountains were symbols of virility and independence; qualities which were in turn bestowed upon the people who lived on the "roof of the world" (Bishop 1993: 31; Ortner 1978: 10, 1999: 56-89). From the 1920s onward, mountains became associated with aesthetic, unequivocal, and sublime experience. According to Bishop, Tibet has from this time onwards been increasingly associated with romantic images of the ancient, the mysterious, and the unchanging. Tibet is seen as possessing the qualities that are no longer seen in the Western world (1993: 39; Campbell 1996: 1). Accordingly,

... the view of Tibet as a closed society that had so fascinated and vexed European travelers in the colonial period now became a reason why Tibetan Buddhism was more authentic than any other. (Lopez 1998: 179)

Tibet is seen as having resisted all foreign influence until this century, and thus has retained its authenticity and purity. In an interesting twist, the current popularity of Tibetan Buddhism in the West after 1959 owes itself to these same factors that once labeled it as "degenerate" and "idolatrous."

#### **The Western Construction of "Buddhism"**

Even with such a variety of accumulated information on Buddhism in the West, Thomas Tweed reports that the predominant religious classification schemes in the scholastic world were not greatly effected. North American scholars of the late eighteenth century recognized only four religious traditions: that of the Christians, the Jews, the "Mohametans," and the "heathens" or "pagans" (Tweed 1992: xviii). The "Oriental" religions, Hinduism, Shintoism, Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and other Asian traditions

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<sup>22</sup> As noted earlier, Tibet has a long history of Western explorers and adventurers seeking to penetrate and overcome its mountainous boundaries, with many turning back or dying en route.

were all grouped together under the latter categorizations. A similar classification scheme existed in Europe in the late seventeenth century, which recognized the three Western “Religions of the Book” and termed all others “idolatry” (Lopez 1998: 21). By the early decades of the nineteenth century, the term “Buddhism” was used to define most religious phenomena throughout the greater part of Asia, although as Almond points out, there still existed a great deal of scholastic and popular confusion as to what actually accounted as “Buddhist” (Almond 1988: 10, 11).

The study of “Buddhism,” as an authentic and “worthwhile” subject, began in earnest around 1800, when European powers were interested in the conquest of Asia. Donald Lopez notes that the study of Buddhism, *by way of its texts*, did not begin to take hold in Europe until Brian Houghton Hodgson (1800-94), a colonial officer in Nepal, devoted much time to acquiring Sanskrit and Tibetan texts. In 1837, Hodgson delivered a package of 147 manuscripts to religious scholar Eugene Burnouf, who went on to write the still influential *Introduction à l’histoire du Bouddhisme indien* (Lopez 1995: 2, 3; de Jong 1987: 19, 20).

Another well-known figure in the Western creation of Buddhism as a solely textual endeavor was T.W. Rhys-Davids (1843-1922). In a series of lectures presented between 1884-95 at numerous American universities, Rhys-Davids is known to have stated that the most important facet of the study of Buddhism was the translation and publication of its texts, more so than any discussions on content: “What we want then is the texts themselves, not extracts or abstracts, but the whole texts” (T.W. Rhys-Davids 1907: 50-51). Rhys-Davids was responsible for producing a Pāli-English dictionary, translating various Pāli texts, founding the School of Oriental and African Studies and The Pali Text Society in 1881 (Hallisey 1995: 34). Texts selected and edited by the Society were relied upon almost exclusively by late Victorian scholars and interpreters (Lopez 1998: 31). With few exceptions, all Pāli texts published in Europe since 1881 have been published by the Pali Text Society (de Jong 1987: 24). Buddhist texts written in vernacular languages were not considered “properly historical”; they were seen as “literary” documents (Hallisey 1995: 35). By textualizing the study of Buddhism in the West, and removing any non-Western “voices” of interpretation,

the authority to define the essence of Buddhism had come to be located in the West as well. Such acts as this literally and symbolically located authority in the hands of Westerners. Lopez writes that such acts also served to create Buddhism as a vast world of texts, most of which were soon to be found in the libraries and archives of Europe<sup>23</sup> (1995: 5).

A driving factor in the Western world's interest in Buddhism was the search for "true" Buddhism. The "true" Buddhism was defined as highly rational and ethical. It was in keeping with the advances in Western science and technology – such as Darwin's theory of evolution – which occurred in this era. This "true" Buddhism was most thoroughly realized in Early Indian Buddhism.<sup>24</sup> The "recovered" aspects of this early Buddhism that were stressed in the West formed a reaction against the elaborate rituals and priestcraft of Brahmanism. Brahmanism (or Hinduism) was belittled as irrational and ineffective. Early Indian Buddhism was, in contrast, consistently portrayed as ritual-free, practical, moral, and pure.<sup>25</sup> The founder of the Pali Text Society, T.W. Rhys-Davids, was in fact well known for his portrayal of Buddhism as "ritual-free" (Hallisey 1995: 44; Lopez 1998: 3). Under these circumstances, the early centuries of Buddhism in India were deployed to evince the vitality of a classical civilization, a vitality that has long since vanished in India and lately considered to have manifested itself in Europe (Lopez 1995: 6; Hallisey 1995: 46). The conception of early Buddhism as "classical" in comparison with the Greek, Roman, and Egyptian civilizations so revered in the West, also served to justify colonial aims.

The impacts of the textual creation of Buddhism are twofold. It objectified "Buddhism" into a unitary concept for Western interest, and, as a hypostatized object, it was part and parcel of the very construction of

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<sup>23</sup> For an in-depth account of the textualization of Buddhism in Europe, see Philip C. Almond 1988.

<sup>24</sup> The era of Early Indian Buddhism began with the historical Buddha's enlightenment and subsequent teachings around 480-400 BCE.

<sup>25</sup> No mention was made of ordination ceremonies for monks and nuns, the celebration of the end of the rainy season, or communal confessions of infractions of the monastic code (Lopez 1998: 31).

what has come to be understood as “Buddhism”<sup>26</sup> in the Western world for centuries to come. Additionally, all other forms of Buddhism were compared and judged according to the “pure,” highly-textualized representation of early Indian Buddhism.

The Western conceptualization of Zen is a striking example of this sort of textual and Orientalist endeavor. Zen is often presented in the West as the purest form of experience, uncontaminated by social, cultural, and historical conditions. As Gustavo Benavides so aptly phrases it, Western understandings of the East (and vice versa) were in many cases, an “ . . . uncertain combination of . . . contempt and . . . longing” (1995: 162). In this vein, Zen is conceptualized as:

. . . the ultimate source of all authentic religious teaching . . . [and] . . . is no more Buddhist than it is Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, and as such it is preeminently suited to serve as the foundation for interfaith dialogue. (Sharf 1995: 107)

Yet this conception of Zen, with its emphasis on universality and pure experience, is currently felt to have stemmed primarily from the influences and predilections of the Japanese Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki and his Western disciples in the early decades of the twentieth century. Their conception of Zen also ignored the social, cultural, and historical evidence to the contrary (Ellwood and Partin 1988: 233). Suzuki and his Japanese contemporaries who were most responsible for outlining the solely intellectual framework of Zen in the West were largely lay practitioners. Classical Zen itself is one of the most ritualistic forms of Buddhist monasticism (Sharf 1995: 107). The personal training that Suzuki and his contemporaries received on weekend and holiday retreats can be strongly linked to Japanese nationalism, and a move to make Zen more socially and intellectually acceptable in Japan. Further, the group was responding to – and reacting against – the Western Enlightenment values of secular philosophy and scientific/technological process; similar to what Schleiermacher, Otto, and James had done in the West. Suzuki and his cohort were inclined

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<sup>26</sup> Buddhist studies has continued to follow this highly textual established tradition established in the nineteenth century by creating a “pure” and essentialized notion of Buddhism that more-or-less coincides with contemporary popular interpretations. For more detailed discussions on this and related topics, see Lopez 1995, Prebish 1994, Bishop 1993, and Sharf 1995. See Spencer 1995 for a discussion of the lack of curiosity about the apparent similarity between academic and popular thought.

to delineate a Zen “essence,” which was “. . . a private veridical, ineffable experience inaccessible to empirical scientific analysis” (Sharf 1995: 135). As such, Western understandings of Zen are also the results of a decidedly Occidental perspective.

The concept of Zen in the West, even though laid by Japanese practitioners like Suzuki, was still heavily influenced by the predominant Western concerns of the time. Contemporary scholars feel Suzuki in his efforts to bring “Oriental” enlightenment to the spiritually and culturally weak West, was not only reacting against Enlightenment values, but was also reacting strongly against Western cultural imperialism and arrogance (Sharf 1995: 131).

The above sections have dealt with some of the ways in which Buddhism has been historically constructed as an attractive religious and spiritual option for contemporary Westerners. The discussion of how many of these ways are themselves constructions of the Western imagination illustrates how many contemporary views are the continuing products of a long history of interaction.

#### D) “Religion” and “Spirituality”

The formal study of religion, in various forms and guises, has occupied social scientists since the 1800s. Religion is considered to be a truly universal phenomenon, and much scholarship has sought to explore the constitution and origin of “religion” around the world (Malinowski 1948; Lang [1898] 1900; Radcliffe-Brown [1952] 1961; Durkheim 1915; Weber [1922] 1963). For the purposes of this project, the question is not “where does religion come from?” or “how does it come into being?” but, rather, what do we study when we study religion?

In response, much research in religion has been devoted to exploring the *purpose* of religion. Religions are often described as useful; that is, they are seen to serve many functions in society and culture. As such, some explanations and discussions of religion focus on the “functionality” of religion. French sociologist Emile Durkheim postulated in the early decades of the twentieth century that religion is a manifestation of collective beliefs and social solidarity (1915). Later, anthropologist Melford Spiro maintained that the main

function of religion is to satisfy basic human desires (1966). Thus, it is useful to look at religion not only as a method of understanding, but also as to what it *means* and what it *does*. Things “religious” are commonly encountered by almost everyone throughout the course of the human life cycle. Religion, whether or not one overtly identifies with and practices a tradition, is inextricably bound with important events such as birth, coming of age or entering adulthood, marriage, and death. While not limited to these occurrences, religion frequently appears, or is strongly associated with, those activities that are considered meaningful, “sacred,” valuable, and of ultimate concern to ourselves.

Typically, religious beliefs and behaviours attempt to provide satisfactory and satisfying answers to questions about life, the world, and about our lives in this world. By providing us with a worldview, or “ . . . the basic, often unconscious presuppositions its followers hold about the nature of the world . . .” (Gross 1996: 9; Haddad and Findly 1985: xv), religions often give us a sense of moral and social order. They serve to inform our individual and societal views about what is “right” or “wrong,” “good” or “evil.” Our notions of humanity itself often stem from religion. Many of our individual passions and hopes, our deep-seated societal and personal values, and our “reasons for being” (Sered 1994: 4; Eck and Jain 1986: 3) are often rooted in the religious. As experiences and behaviours are frequently influenced by religion, its ideas and ideals, so too are social groups and institutions. By providing followers with some sense of a shared belief or value structure, religion defines communities both locally and globally.

Accordingly, a common perception of “religion” in Western societies is associated with more “official,” institutional definitions. A formal conception of religion is very much concerned with boundaries, organizations, and hierarchies, all of which serve to establish and support claims to universal truth and authority (A. King 1996: 349-350).

In general, religion and religious organizations in a “secularized” Western context are privatized; that is, religion is functionally differentiated from the public sphere. According to Voyé, this differentiation means that institutional religion has lost its capacity to influence public affairs in a significant fashion. Further, Voyé states that the privatization of religion also implies that religion itself is largely considered to

be a matter of personal choice (Voyé 1999: 275, see also Beyer 1999: 298). This state of affairs, particularly as it concerns the Christian religious tradition in the West, is often credited with the decline of “personal religious practice,” referring to religious beliefs, church practice, and moral attitudes (see, for example, Aquaviva 1979). Even in the so-called “secular” societies of the West, religion is still influential. It structures our work week, impacts on what times our shopping centres are open, dictates our days of leisure and holidays, and even influences what foods we often can or cannot eat.

Recently, a number of scholars in the field have questioned the assumption that the privatization or the secularization of religion automatically means an abandonment of individual religious belief and practise (Hay and Morisy 1985; Luckmann 1990; Voyé 1995; Beyer 1999). Such an assertion, they say, is far too simple. Hay and Morisy, for example, maintain that a secularized society does not necessarily imply a secularized consciousness (1985: 220). Swatos Jr. and Christiano put forth two astute and important observations about secularization and religion. The first is that any definition of “the secular” is always relative to some kind of definition of “religion.” The second observation is that the “truth claims” of secularization and the “decline of personal religious practice” are always historically contingent. Accordingly, they note that when we assume that we are “less religious” contemporaneously than in the past, we have made the following two assumptions: that we somehow know the extent to which people were “religious,” and that we know this according to some currently held conception of “religion” itself (Swatos Jr. and Christiano 1999: 213).

Less formally and more commonly, “religion” in the West can also refer to specific areas of experience, those that are the “supernatural,” the “transcendent,” and those that carry the “ultimate meanings of life.” In this vein, “religion” can signify that which is considered valuable, important, or sacred – what anthropologist Clifford Geertz has called the “really real” (1973: 112). As Luckmann notes,

... no matter into how many different parts one divides human life, it constitutes a single trajectory between birth and death, a trajectory which *normally* has a certain elementary, pre-reflective, taken-for-granted unity of meaning, an identity. (emphasis in original)(1990: 128, see also Geertz 1973; Bellah 1970; Hay and Morisy 1985; Roof 1999)



In a similar vein, historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith suggested another means of looking at the study of “religion” in the mid 1960s. He proposed that instead of trying to identify, differentiate, and label “religions” and those things considered “religious,” a more fruitful and productive inquiry might instead look at the actual Western practice of assigning names and labels. Without a degree of self-critical analysis, Smith warns us that this process of naming and labelling so-called distinctive entities can become “taken-for-granted” and eventually leads to distortions. There is a danger, he states, in making any definitive or distinctive correspondence between “the real world” and the *linguistic constructs* that are used to describe it (Smith 1964: 20, 21).

In the instance of Buddhism, Smith notes that the actual word “Buddhism” (“Boudism”) did not appear in the West before 1801 (Smith 1964: 59). Further, Carter notes that the actual term is a Western formulation, and that “Buddhism” itself is a term that does not occur in the languages of the Buddhist tradition (Carter 1993: 10; Smith 1964: 15). By the nineteenth century, Smith notes that the meaning of “religion” in the West moved away from a personal orientation to signify instead an “. . . overt, observable institution . . .” (1964: 73). To label or name something a “religion,” such as “Christianity,” began to designate some *thing* with a history (Smith 1964: 73). When the concepts “religion” and “Buddhism” are used to refer to *something* external, they become static and reified. Used in such a way, Carter suggests that terms like “religion” and “Buddhism” tend to refer to “. . . some entity, something that can be analyzed, studied, something . . . about which we can talk, argue, disagree, or agree” (1993: 3; Smith 1964: 25).

When speaking of “the study of religion,” Smith asks us to attempt a degree of precision, between the “reified” concept or the “cumulative” tradition, and “faith,” or what that which men and women cherish, value, and above all, *live*. The premise of Smith’s work is that there is a profound and striking difference between studying a “religion” and studying what it means to someone to *live* religiously or spiritually. By cumulative tradition, Smith is referring to “. . . the entire mass of overt objective data . . .” (1964: 141), and that which constitutes “religious history.” This includes texts, doctrines, rites and rituals, institutions, art, songs, chants – in effect, all things external and observable. Faith, on the other hand, is much more

problematic in terms of identification. As a result, Smith does not attempt to provide any hard and fast definitions of the concept, but rather notes some salient elements of faith. Faith is what lies at the heart of the cumulative tradition; it is its essence. The external component of religion is the mundane manifestation of this essence, or the “point” that the tradition attempts to represent (Carter 1993: 4). This is one of the problematic elements of Smith’s conceptualization of faith; faith is much more difficult to identify and study. Smith himself notes that, “The observer sees the [religious] movement; the participant sees what it signifies” (1964: 118; Carter 1993: 5). This is, in fact, a telling statement, and carries within it a salient element of Smith’s conceptualization of faith: the role played by the participant. For Smith, faith is highly personal; so much so that he consistently maintains, “. . . the locus of faith is persons” (1976: 163). Although there may be some commonality in the expressions of faith between members of a particular tradition (and also perhaps between members of different traditions as well), faith is a fluid concept, varying from person to person (and even for a particular individual) on a daily basis (Oxtoby 1976: xix).

According to Smith, faith is not something that can be acquired in a fixed and completed form. It is instead a process, the quality and experience of living religiously on a daily basis. Smith maintains that a “. . . religious life is a kind of *life*” (emphasis in original) (1964: 123), and by extension, to study the faith of a person is to study his or her life. In this vein, Smith writes that faith is not simply compartmentalized in a person’s life, nor is it one identifiable and separate factor within a life. He states that once faith arises in one’s personal life, “. . . it embraces, and colours, all. It is not one element in the total pattern of that person’s life; rather it is the pattern that the other elements form” (emphasis in original) (1976: 72). Faith not only impacts how someone regards the world and his or her lifestyle, but it also constructs the world and someone’s place in it.

Another term relevant to this discussion of faith is “spirituality.” Similar to “religion,” there is also much confusion and ambiguity surrounding the term “spirituality.” Or, as Burton-Christie and Paulsell write, the precise meaning of the term “. . . remains maddeningly elusive” (2001: viii). Once again, we can uncover and infer both more formal and more general understandings of the term. Outside of its sometimes

synonymous usage with the term “religion” itself, Anna S. King writes that spirituality for some represents an emphasis on personal experience and subjectivities, or, on “. . . the soul rather than the form of religion” (A. King 1996: 343). For others, spirituality is entirely detached from religion, and is instead conceptualized as a way of “getting in touch” with one’s inner self or the “transcendent dimension,” or an awareness of and compassion for other living beings (Burton-Christie and Paulsell 2001: viii; James 1998: 4; Roof 1999: 33-34). Spirituality can also be derived somewhat more formally, as a devotional path, discipline, a moral and ethical commitment, a way of life, religious practice, or the transcendence of the self (A. King 1996: 343; Rose 2001; MacQueen 1999). Other descriptions differ, and can even overlap and intertwine. “Spirituality” in general, is commonly assumed to be something that can be felt and experienced in religious institutions, but is not limited to them (James 1998: 5). As MacQueen phrases it, spirituality “. . . has become a term for those elements of religion that are vital, unifying, grounded, and courageous” (1999: 352).

While not speaking of spirituality directly, Luckmann’s work on transcendence and religion in contemporary society is relevant here. He suggests that religion has not declined in modern society due to secularization; rather, it is changing its *location*, from the “great” otherworldly transcendences such as birth and death – traditionally the realm of the religious organization – to the “little” transcendences of self-expression, self-realization, and personal autonomy (Luckmann 1990).

Even with such diverse understandings and applications of the term “spirituality,” two major elements emerge: practice and connection. Stuart Rose’s recent survey on spirituality in England, derived from the thoughtful responses of religious leaders in both the Eastern and Western traditions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), speaks strongly to these elements. Rose reports that when these leaders were asked to consider what would be involved and necessary for someone to lead a spiritual life, either “practice” or “worship” were the most frequently stated responses (Rose 2001: 200).

The second element to emerge, connection, can also be variously understood. It can be regarded as a form of relationship to the Divine, to Nature, to others, or as a type of awareness of the Divine and its

presence within the world, or as an awareness of one's position and purpose in the world (Rose 2001: 200; A. King 1996: 343, 345). As will be demonstrated, connection and relationship are also strongly apparent within the personal narratives of many Toronto Buddhists. What is especially relevant to this discussion is the emphasis that is both implicitly and explicitly made on *experience* itself, as the experiential is cited by many Toronto Buddhists as important and necessary in their daily lives. Drawing upon Zen Buddhist commentator Masao Abe, Gregory Spearritt sums up the general agreement concerning the feeling and conceptualization of spirituality seen in the personal narratives of Toronto Buddhists and in other scholastic accounts: "... religious truth is something to be experienced, not merely discussed" (Spearritt 1995: 361). As such, we are not so much concerned with defining "spirituality," but rather how men and women practising Buddhism in Toronto use this term and invest it with their own understanding and meaning.

Elements such as practice, connection, and experience obviously find resonance in discussions of the contemporary engagement with Buddhism in North America, and also within the larger social, cultural, and religious milieu in which these narratives are embedded. Indeed, it can be argued that were these emphases on connection, practice, and experience not found within the larger social and cultural context, such interest in Buddhism would not, and perhaps could not (at least in its present incarnation<sup>27</sup>), occur. As the following discussion will illustrate, personal narratives such as those presented here are not shaped and articulated in isolation; they are acted upon by larger social and cultural trends, and act upon them in turn.

#### **E) The Spiritual and Religious Landscape of North America**

One movement in particular in which these themes of connection, practice, and experiential knowledge are visible is that of the New Age phenomenon. The term "New Age" itself encompasses truly diverse beliefs, practices, and movements. Some significant commonalities between the emergence of Buddhism in

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<sup>27</sup> For further discussion on the various incarnations, time periods, and social contexts in which Buddhism has been influential in the West, particularly the United States, see Tweed's *The American Encounter With Buddhism 1844-1912* (1992), and "Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures: Sympathizers, Adherents, and the Study of Religion" (1999), and Stephen Batchelor's *The Awakening of the West: the Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture* (1994).

the West and the New Age movement can be traced back to the influences of Theosophy<sup>28</sup> and New Thought<sup>29</sup> in the nineteenth century, which in themselves were influenced by the work of Swedenborg<sup>30</sup> and Mesmer.<sup>31</sup> According to Mears and Ellison, their work on comparative religion and “universal brotherhood” in turn influenced the human potential movement of the 1950s and 1960s (in conjunction with Maslow’s research on “self-actualizing individuals”) and transpersonal psychology (2000: 290-291). Mears and Ellison go on to report that these movements were combined with elements of Eastern religious traditions, such as yoga and Tantra, in the New Age movements of the 1970s and 1980s. The overall thrust of the New Age movement is centred around the transformation of the self through these above activities, as well as through “channeling” (communicating with the spirits of the deceased), astrology, crystals, body work, and so on (Mears and Ellison 2000: 291).

In spite of the diversity and syncretism found under the general heading of “New Age” in North America, the movement does share significant commonality with contemporary Western constructions of Buddhism, in that both are highly practice-oriented. While Mears and Ellison outline some basic beliefs common to the New Age and Western Buddhism, including the general belief that “we” (as Western society and culture) are on the verge of a radical cultural, ecological, and spiritual transformation, they report that common and widespread practices include adopting an ethic of self-empowerment (spiritually and in wider

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<sup>28</sup> The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steele Olcott, who were themselves influential in introducing Buddhism to the West. The Society’s main interests included forming a universal brotherhood, developing a scientific religion, and expounding a system of spiritual evolution. Spiritualism, or channeling, was also encouraged (Lopez 1998: 49-52; Tweed 1992: 30-31).

<sup>29</sup> A movement in the USA in the late 1800s, strongly influenced by Phineas Parkhurst Quimby. The movement included a wide variety of occult, metaphysical, and healing sects and groups. Parkhurst Quimby himself practiced “mesmeric healing,” used spirit mediums, and championed the idea that “positive” or “right” thinking is a means by which one can realize one’s highest ideals here and now (Bowker 1997: 695).

<sup>30</sup> An eighteenth century religious reformer and visionary, whose ideas were based upon his personal, Neo-Platonic understanding of Christianity (Bowker 1997: 933).

<sup>31</sup> An American physician (1733-1815) who experimented with hypnotism and magnetism, and believed that a person in a hypnotic state was enveloped in a magnetic field formed by waves of energy.

society), developing the spiritual potential of each individual, and the embrace of a wide variety of healing practices and therapies (2000: 291-292; Luckmann 1990: 136).

New Age, with its lack of canonized dogma, “official” rituals, hierarchy, and disciplinary systems, appears to fulfill an increasingly expressed need for less rigid, less “institutionalized” religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, or a lack of structure altogether (Roof 1996: 154; Luckmann 1990; Mears and Ellison 2000).

While Buddhism does have codified religious doctrine and recognizes its importance, Buddhism is popularly perceived as less rigid and more individually defined than the Western religious traditions (Spearritt 1995: 362, 367). This perspective itself has doctrinal support, especially in light of the Buddha’s famous admonition in the *Kalama Sutta* (*Anguttara Nikaya* III: 65) to “be a light unto yourself” and take absolutely nothing on faith or goodwill alone (trans. Thera 1992: 175-176). In terms of Buddhism’s popular presentation in Western societies, this particular aspect has been highly visible and often cited in both popular and scholastic sources.

Whether referring to Buddhism or to the New Age movement, popular literature seems to focus more and more on the individual and individual experience. Religious institutions are no longer perceived by growing numbers of people as the dominant or exclusive source of knowledge and authority on religion and/or spirituality. An individual’s “sacred cosmos,” Luckmann writes, may not, to varying degrees, match the “official” representation, and even further, it may not be the only one (1990: 138). Emma Layman wrote in the mid 1970s that Western Buddhists are prone to “picking and choosing” elements of Buddhism that suit them best (1976: 203). The literal “self-help” approach to religion and spirituality, Roof suggests, appears not to be limited to those interested in Buddhism alone. Roof has speculated that Americans (and I believe this applies also to Canadians) pick and choose their own personal traditions, in a pastiche mode (1993), without apparent concern for any potential contradictions.

This very fluid state of affairs comes as no surprise to Nancy Ammerman, who writes that contradictions should not be unexpected in discussions of individual beliefs and practices. “We human

beings . . .” she writes, “. . . are much more capable of living with seeming incongruity than most sociologists and theologians are ever willing to admit” (1997: 207). She suggests that existing modes of religious commitment (and, I add, religious behaviour and membership) need to be rethought in a more dynamic and processual manner, rather than portraying “commitment” as a “once in a lifetime” event (Ammerman 1997: 206). We need to turn away from a focus on boundaries and stability, and turn instead towards viewpoints that recognize more processual and perhaps incongruous understandings of how people define and integrate “religious” and “spiritual” activities into their lives. By doing so, we move towards achieving a greater understanding of the spaces and relationships in which these activities occur. Contemporary North American society is full of constantly shifting and overlapping contexts of meaning, boundaries, and identities; it stands to reason that conceptualizations of the religious and the spiritual, as well as the multiple identities and senses of self that are bound up within these concepts and behaviours, can be constantly shifting as well.

#### **F) Methodological and Theoretical Considerations**

My intention throughout this research project, from the conceptualization stages, through twelve months of fieldwork, and during the writing process, is in keeping with the above discussion on faith and religion. Broadly, my goal is to explore the religious lives of Western Tibetan Buddhists in Toronto. In this project, I will draw from “feminist” research strategies that include a focus on diversity, standpoint, and personal experience in both theoretical orientations and methodology. I use personal narratives of both women and men as a way of achieving “feminist” means and ends; that is, to present a more comprehensive view of the lives of contemporary “Western” Buddhists in Toronto, a loosely-defined community of both men and women. The issues that I will explore within this study hold importance not just for women or for men, but for larger communities of *both* women and men. A generally accepted tenet in feminist theory is that what is lost, undeveloped, or ignored as a result of the privileging of one perspective to the exclusion of others is often of intrinsic value to humanity as a whole (Jasper 1999: 159). In effect, the focus is on the

more inclusive concept of *gender* and *gendered* issues, rather than specifically on women and women's issues. Thus, a study of women and women's experiences is necessarily incomplete without a corresponding study of men and their own experiences in similar contexts. As gender is a concern of feminist research in general, attention to gender issues can include discussions of men and a recognition of alternative points of view (Behar 1995: 6).

Another theoretical position which becomes relevant to my project comes from feminist research in religion. One particularly salient element drawn from feminist theory, that which I term "grounded spirituality" – which both supports and enriches Smith's conceptualization of "faith" – I will briefly raise here. Much of feminist work in religion challenges the emphasis on disembodiment and disconnection, and individualistic and transcendent ideas of spirituality found in many of the great religious traditions. Instead, the focus is on immanence, or the notion that the divine resides *within* rather than beyond; within one's relationship with the divine, and within one's relationship with others (Jasper 1999; Bednarowski 1999). Immanence or "grounded spirituality," however, is more commonly and frequently associated with women's spirituality, as something assumed to be of more interest to women, while the transcendent is assumed to be mostly the province of men (Eller 1999). Immanence may be a spiritual form that is in fact preferred by more women, but is also of importance to men as well (Gross 1999; Eller 1999; Bednarowski 1999). Within the personal narratives of Toronto Buddhists, men as well as women express their interest in and commitment to a grounded, practical conceptualization of spirituality. By so doing, spiritual practice also becomes less the province of the monastic community and more visibly located within the everyday.<sup>32</sup> Issues of practice, spirituality, and gender do not occur in a vacuum; they occur in the relationships between individuals and institutions, and between women and men. The overall importance of gender and spirituality

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<sup>32</sup> This point will be discussed in greater depth in a succeeding chapter on spiritual and religious practice.



in the everyday, lived reality of both women and men in Toronto effectively locates this research within a “feminist”<sup>33</sup> framework.

In spite of my recognition of the importance of both women’s and men’s voices within an ethnographic research project, I did, however, seek out women’s narratives and experiences more often than men’s (of the thirty-four individuals interviewed, twenty-four are women). My reasons are twofold. First, I asked more women than men to participate in order to help correct a significant and long-standing historical imbalance. Women and their spiritual and religious experiences have largely been ignored in both the study and practice of religion until the last thirty years or so. Previously, research on women’s religious lives was either viewed as non-existent or of limited importance to scholastic inquiry (Gross 1977; 1994; 1996; Neumaier-Dargay 1995; U. King 1993). The history of women in many religious traditions, including Judaism and Christianity, has been either lost or destroyed (Plaskow and Christ 1989: 17), and data on women in religion was simply hard to find (Gross 1994: 327). By way of illustration, Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ state that when they were compiling their groundbreaking anthology on women, religion, and spirituality, *Womanspirit Rising* (1979), they had to choose from a relatively small number of books and essays on the topic (1989: 1). As in many traditional knowledge systems – the social sciences and religion being two such systems – women have been largely excluded from establishing the values and norms that shape these systems; women and their activities have often been invisible to the mainstream.

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<sup>33</sup> It must be noted however, that many individuals who participated within this study – both women and men – did not themselves choose or agree with the term and label of “feminism,” and as such may be uncomfortable with the broader classifications of this research.

Since the beginning of the feminist movement in the West in the early 1970s,<sup>34</sup> critiques have been leveled against the existing patriarchal structures of the world religions of Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, and Judaism for largely excluding the experiences of women (Sered 1991; 1994; Carmody 1989; Gross 1977; Weissler 1995; Greenwood 1996; Heschel 1983; Smith 1985; Haddad and Findly 1985). Sered notes that women in many societies have active and involved religious lives, yet are rarely admitted into ecclesiastical hierarchies in many of the world religions. As a result, most official religious concepts are defined by and reflective of men's priorities and experiences, to the exclusion of women's (Sered 1994: 3; U. King 1993: 1). Although excluded from the "formal" and official religious spheres, feminist scholars contend that women's ways of being spiritual and taking part in religious activities that are meaningful *for them* are not absent (Roseneil 1996; El-Or 1993; Sered 1988; Robinson 1985; Wulff 1985). To illustrate the impact of such ways of thinking, Christ and Plaskow state that when compiling the follow-up anthology, *Weaving the Visions* (1989) in the late 1980s, they were confronted with literally hundreds of essays, books, and articles on the subject (1989: 1). Such an explosion of work on women and religion thus confirms that women *do* in fact lead religious lives, and have throughout history. My research will contribute to this body of work.

Second, the stories and experiences of Canadian women involved in Tibetan Buddhism are interesting to me on a very personal level. Throughout this research, I had the pleasure and advantage of conducting an in-depth investigation on a subject in which I am deeply interested scholastically, personally, and spiritually. I was able, in effect, to accomplish two tasks simultaneously, and as the saying goes, "to kill two

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<sup>34</sup> In Western countries, the feminist critique of religion came out of the political and social movements of the 1960s, although there are, in Western societies and elsewhere, other earlier precursors that sought to advance the role of women in religion and society. Such important women who valued and advocated women's spiritual experiences can include Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), the Grimké Sisters Angelina (1805-1879) and Sarah (1792-1873), Qurrat al'-Ayn (d. 1852), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), and many more notable women. For more information on historical women active in their religious traditions, see Gross 1996; U. King 1993; Young 1994; Plaskow and Christ 1989; Allione 1984; and Cahill 1996.

birds with one stone.”<sup>35</sup> The fieldwork process allowed me to explore, experience, and begin to practice a new spiritual tradition and lifestyle. As a Canadian woman of similar age, social, economic, and educational background, who was interested in a spiritual lifestyle, it seemed appropriate to speak with a greater number of women than men.

The majority of information in this text is drawn from the personal narratives of Toronto Tibetan Buddhists. Personal narratives are useful in that they can uncover and highlight not only diversity within specific religious communities, but also the diverse – and sometimes contradictory – viewpoints and perspectives that can exist within individuals themselves. The ideological, emotional, intellectual, and physical spaces women and men occupy between sometimes competing and contradictory discourses often remain ambiguous and sometimes unrecognized and unacknowledged. Individuals frequently find themselves in situations such as those described by anthropologist Renato Rosaldo:

When in doubt, people find out about their worlds by living with ambiguity, uncertainty, or simple knowledge until the day, if and when it arrives, that their life experiences clarify matters. In other words, we often improvise, learn by doing, and make things up as we go along. (R. Rosaldo 1993: 92)

Things are not always certain, nor are they clearly defined. Thus, a major theme in this project is to identify and highlight the ambiguities, the contradictions, and the “gaps” that exist within individual presentations of selfhood and gender, and orientations to each other and the world. By so doing, we begin to see the dynamism and humanity that create and encompass any formulations of religious and spiritual identity.

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<sup>35</sup> This is a rather inappropriate metaphor to employ when researching Buddhists, especially since a central tenet of the tradition forbids the taking of life. This very quickly became something of a joke between myself and some of the study participants, as I could not resist using this metaphor to sum up my scholastic and personal interests whenever I was asked.

## PART II ASSUMPTIONS OF IDENTITY AND INTENT

### A) The Perceptions of North American Buddhists

Popular Western presentations of Buddhism, and of the Western practitioners themselves, most commonly emphasize individualism, emotional detachment, and practicality. The Buddha Sakyamuni himself is said to have exhorted his followers to be self-reliant, and encouraged the examination and analysis of actual experience. In a famous passage of the *Kalama Sutta* (*Anguttara Nikaya* III: 65), the Buddha said to his followers:

Do not be satisfied with hearsay or with tradition or with legendary lore or with what has come down in scriptures or with conjecture or with logical inference or with weighing evidence or with liking for a view after pondering over it or with someone else's ability or with the thought 'The monk is our teacher.' When you know in yourselves: 'These things are wholesome, blameless, commended by the wise, and being adopted and put into effect they lead to welfare and happiness,' then you should practice and abide in them . . . (trans. Thera 1992: 175-176)

Buddhism (along with Hinduism and the "East" more generally) is also often seen through a "metaphor of scientificity," where the Eastern religions are popularly regarded as having anticipated such things as particle physics and quantum mechanics<sup>1</sup> (Bishop 1993: 84). These conceptualizations of Buddhism as scientific, rational, and self-reliant lend credence to the claim that it is also very practical. Practicality or usefulness is a topic of great concern for Westerners interested in Buddhism: how can Buddhism be used, lived, and practiced in everyday life (Kornfield 1988: xv)? One particular context where practicality is emphasized is in the health care and self-improvement fields.<sup>2</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder and

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<sup>1</sup> On a popular level, two of the more well-known examples include *The Tao of Health, Sex, and Longevity* (1989) and the *Dancing Wu Li Masters: an Overview of the New Physics* (1979).

<sup>2</sup> The practical aspects of Buddhism and other Eastern religious systems (as well as integrating "spirituality" into everyday life) are not limited solely to these areas. Bennet W. Goodspeed, for example, a former Wall Street broker, published a book on stock market investing that draws upon Taoism, entitled *The Tao Jones Averages: A Guide to Whole-Brained Investing* (1983). Also note the appearance of "Ethical Funds" in

director of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre, integrates “mindfulness meditation”<sup>3</sup> into his therapeutic programs to better understand what is meant by “health” and “well-being.” His form of behavioural medicine recognizes that mental and emotional factors have a significant influence upon physical health (Kabat-Zinn 1990: 2, 196). The interconnectedness of mind and body – the wholeness of the individual – is emphasized. Similarly, Joan Borysenko, medical doctor and director of the Mind/Body Clinic at New England Deaconess Hospital, uses mindfulness meditation as a healing technique, as a means of “peeling away” the layers of fear, perceptions, and past conditioning that conceal the wholeness of an individual (Borysenko 1987: 4; Kabat-Zinn 1990: 150). In a therapeutic context, mindfulness is a way of achieving personal control over stress, anxiety, and one’s capacity to heal.

Utilizing the late eighties and early nineties catchword – “stress” – Kabat-Zinn’s and Borysenko’s techniques are intended to transform “stress” into a positive energy for living, healing, and problem-solving. Regarded as “self-improvement,” this view of mindfulness meditation is not dependent upon a belief system or ideology (Kabat-Zinn 1990: 12; Borysenko 1987: 21, 24), and is designed to be fast, easy, and readily applicable to life outside the clinic.

With these emphases on practicality and usefulness, it is no surprise that by far the largest number of Western adherents of Buddhism fall in to the category of lay practitioners. According to Bishop, this group of Western Buddhists are what he considers the most “uniquely Western” (1993: 98). Juggling career and family schedules, practitioners in this category attend periodic retreats and maintain high levels of practice and learning. Some Western Buddhists try to integrate their spiritual beliefs and practices into their work and family obligations, while others are employed only to support their spiritual endeavors. The levels

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television ads that offer ethical and moral investment strategies.

<sup>3</sup> Mindfulness, or “right mindfulness” is an important aspect of any Buddhist meditation. The seventh step of the Buddhist Eightfold Path (right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration) is the constant control of the thoughts, and includes a “. . . keen awareness of mental and physical phenomena as they arise . . .” (Harvey 1990: 70; Humphreys 1997: 126-127).

of commitment and consistent practice are variable amongst Western lay practitioners, running the gamut from those who attend weekly meditation classes and/or practices, to others who attend very occasionally, and yet others who integrate hours of meditation practice into their lives on a day-to-day basis (Bishop 1993: 98).

From the rise of its profile in the sixties and seventies, Western Buddhism has moved towards a predominantly lay orientation in order to be more relevant to Westerners. Most Westerners – although there are growing numbers of exceptions to this “rule” – are largely uninterested in a monastic lifestyle. Instead of trying to replicate an Asian monastic model, both Asian and Western teachers have continued to focus on achieving and maintaining strong personal practices for their students while remaining firmly rooted in the frequent turmoil of the social world. Teachers like the late Chogyam Trungpa and the late Kalu Rinpoche in the Tibetan traditions, the roshis<sup>4</sup> Suzuki, Philip Kapleau, Robert Aitken, Jiyu Kennet (among others) of the Zen schools, and Goldstein, Salzburg, and Kornfield in Vipassana, have all assisted in forming this essential element of Western Buddhism.

This is not to say that intensive meditation retreats and training are not regarded as important. In the late eighties and nineties, according to Don Morreale, sociologist and editor of a comprehensive guide to Buddhist centres in Canada and the USA and himself a Buddhist practitioner, more and more people are attending in record numbers, while interest in meditation has also increased markedly (Morreale 1998: xvi). Even as early as the mid-seventies, the “worldly” orientation within Western Buddhism was clear; most Westerners simply expect to live within a social rather than a monastic setting, and were simultaneously “. . . encouraged to have at least a taste of the monastic life for spiritual enrichment” (Layman 1976: 18).

All this suggests that Buddhism, its teachers (Western and to a lesser extent, Asian), its concepts, and its practices, is highly accessible and available to Westerners. And yet this portrayal of Buddhism and

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<sup>4</sup> “Roshi” is the Japanese term for a Zen master.

its Westerners is in some ways unrealistic and simplistic. The popular presentation of Buddhism in the West is neither without its difficulties, nor its critics.

### Problems with the Popular

The Western emphasis on practicality and usefulness is cited by some contemporary Buddhist and scholastic thinkers as the potential cause of Buddhism's future downfall in the West. Helen Tworkov, long-time Buddhist and editor of the Buddhist journal/magazine *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, feels that there is a commonly held attitude that the *Dharma's* ability to be shaped to suit the needs of Westerners is potentially dangerous. Accordingly, she states, we, as Westerners, “. . . want the *dharma* to accommodate itself to us; we don't want to accommodate ourselves to the *dharma*. That's the American Way” (emphasis in original) (Tworkov 1998: 91; see also Kay 1997: 277-278).

Concern is similarly expressed over the tendency of many Westerners to “pick and choose” which “bits and pieces” of Buddhist practice, spirituality, and philosophy apply to themselves and discard the rest. Termed “Dharma hoppers” (Layman 1976: 203), Western Buddhists are regarded as continually trying out new and different types of Buddhist practice and philosophical elements, dropping them, and then moving on to the next. The rapid acceptance and abandonment of new practices, concepts, and beliefs is often attributed to the quest for a spiritual “quick fix”; with many individuals dropping out when “. . . they discover Buddhism is a ‘do-it-yourself-kick’” (Layman 1976: 203). Layman's observations, published almost thirty years ago, seem no less relevant in today's social climate. In this vein, Bishop adds a second dimension to this stance, contending that Western practitioners usually occupy one of two extremes: at the one end, he states, there seems to be an uncritical and naive adulation, while at the other end there is an “. . . arrogant picking and choosing of the bits that could prove useful” (Bishop 1993: 9). On the other side, there are those who feel that anything that has to do with nonviolence and compassion has to be beneficial, in whatever form and dosage (Van Biema 1997: 69).

The above discussion itself, however, serves to highlight another area of concern centering on popular presentations of "Western Buddhists" and "Buddhism." Both concepts are employed in the most general and usually uncritical fashion, paying very little attention, if any, to the great diversity found within all Buddhist schools of thought, and among Western practitioners themselves. Presented as a seamless, monolithic construction, "Buddhism" becomes a reified object, one that is capable of subsuming all sorts of practices, beliefs, philosophies, and assumptions under its umbrella.

Examples of this generalization abound in the popular media, and are not confined to American publications. For instance, an article on "Buddhism in the West" appeared in the local newspaper of the city of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.<sup>5</sup> It describes the growing interest in Buddhism throughout North America. The article described the now commonly cited celebrity interest in Buddhism, such as Richard Gere and the Beastie Boys' singer Adam Yauch, followed by a brief overview of the life of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. A brief discussion with an "actual Buddhist" living in Hamilton, Tim Coulson, concluded the article. An openly declared Buddhist, Mr. Coulson states his interest was piqued by the writings of Chogyam Trungpa and Timothy Leary. He currently teaches meditation at a holistic health centre in the city. The information given in the article is interesting and clearly presented, and appears to accurately "put its finger" on the pulse of Buddhism in North America. Reading between the proverbial lines, however, quickly reveals some of the common assumptions that are deeply rooted within popular presentations of Buddhism. A great deal of important information concerning beliefs and practices is simply left up to the imagination of the reader.

At no point in the article is it mentioned what kind of Buddhism it is that Coulson practices or teaches. It is also difficult, if not presumptuous altogether, to draw any such conclusions based on the names of a few popular authors. There is likewise no mention of what he actually *does* as a Buddhist, or what he actually teaches to others, with the sole exception that Coulson understands Buddhism to be

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<sup>5</sup> Casey Korstanje, "A Yen For Zen," *The Hamilton Spectator*, 24 June 1998, sec. A8.



“straightforward and rational.” The article’s title, “A Yen for Zen” seems to offer some definitive clues to these effects, yet nowhere else is Zen even mentioned. Even more confusing, Coulson himself is portrayed in a black and white photograph sitting cross-legged, yet he is also pictured holding Tibetan Buddhist bells (*tingsha*) that are used to mark the beginning and end of a Tibetan Buddhist meditation practice or ceremony. And if one looks closely, one can see Coulson wearing a necklace. That in itself does not seem odd; many men wear jewelry. But, if one actually knows what one is looking at, the necklace is revealed to be a knotted cord made of yarn which is acquired at Tibetan Buddhist empowerments or initiations to confer blessings and protection upon the wearer. After personal contact with Mr. Coulson, I know he in fact wears several such cords. He has also informed me that while he has been greatly influenced by his participation within the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, he mainly practices Vipassana,<sup>6</sup> a meditation technique found within the Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions.

“A Yen for Zen,” in sum, does a fine job of pointing to the contemporary and mainstream fascination with Buddhism, and even attempts to provide readers with some basic information about the religion, as well as a listing of “key” Buddhist centres in Ontario (correspondingly, with no explanation of what makes them “key,” or what they offer in the way of Buddhist teachings and programs, and what Buddhist traditions they represent). After more than a cursory read and some thought, the article (along with many others in this vein) in fact presents more questions than it answers, and gives rise to more ambiguities than it serves to dispel.

This brings us back to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, of defining who actually practices Buddhism in Canada, the United States, and Europe. It has been shown that such a question is not easily answered as it is embedded with a multiplicity of assumptions and generalizations that are firmly rooted within mainstream presentations of Buddhism and its Western practitioners. Just as popular interest

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<sup>6</sup> Vipassana is a meditative technique that centres on the analysis of a meditative object and aims at the direct realization of the final nature of that object, which is to perceive the object’s emptiness and lack of inherent existence (Powers 2000: 242).

in the shaping of “Western Buddhism” is growing, so too is this interest reflected within the academy. More and more academic literature has begun to appear in recent years on this topic and all related facets of this discussion. Scholastic inquiries have begun to deconstruct or “unpack” some of the key assumptions being made about Buddhism in North America, particularly as it concerns issues of ethnicity and class, and, to a lesser extent, of Buddhist practice itself.

### **The Academic Inquiry**

Relying upon the historical development of Buddhism in the West (but focused more specifically on the United States) as presented in Part I, Prebish rightly points out that the struggle of the Buddhist tradition to acculturate and accommodate itself to Western society and culture has been in the hands of two significant groups. The first group is comprised of those men and women of Asian descent, including those born in the USA and those who have immigrated from Asia. Members of this group can also consider Buddhism their native tradition. The composition of the second group is of (mostly) European descendants who, if not admitted converts, at least have been highly sympathetic to and interested in the practice and propagation of the Buddhist tradition in the West (Prebish 1998: 2).

Each of these two groups, quite understandably, can adhere to very different understandings of Buddhism. So much so, in fact, that scholars and critics of Buddhism in North America have spoken about the “dual development” of Western Buddhism (Fields 1998: 196). Most commonly however, only *one* is spoken of in terms of its influence on the West, often at the virtual exclusion of the other. This attitude, for example, was seen among the responses which greeted *Tricycle* editor Helen Tworok’s comments to this effect. In her editorial in a 1991 issue, Tworok stated that “. . . the spokespeople for Buddhism in America have been, almost exclusively, educated members of the white middle class,” and that so far, the Asian American Buddhist populations “. . . have not figured prominently in the development of something called American Buddhism . . .” (1991: 4).

At a glance, this statement rather sharply draws parallels between specific forms and understandings of Buddhism and ethnicity. However, ethnicity is not the only dynamic at work here. Charles Prebish's model, first postulated in 1979, helps to highlight the often differing value systems at play behind what he has termed "ethnic" Buddhism and "elite" Buddhism in the United States. Aside from the derogatory and hierarchical implications embedded within these terms, Prebish suggests that the Buddhism defined and practiced by Asian immigrants and their descendants plays a key role in *transmitting* and *preserving* cultural values and identity,<sup>7</sup> whereas the Buddhism defined and practiced by European-descended converts is more concerned with *transforming* American society (Prebish 1979). Indeed, this is the argument with which Tworkov responded to her critics' charges of racism: *transmitting* Buddhism onto Western soil does not go far enough; Buddhism must be *transformed* to suit Western society (Nattier 1998: 191).

The transformative dimension noted in this controversial statement is not itself unusual within Buddhist history. It is well-documented that Buddhism's successful spread out of India, the culture and society of its origin, is chiefly attributed to its ability to adapt to and incorporate itself into other cultural and social systems (Queen 1999: xviii). Just such an example of Buddhism's adaptation is found in the biography of Padmasambhava, who is attributed with the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet in the eight century CE. Previous missionaries to Tibet are said to have encountered demonic opposition, as the demons of Tibet were partial to the Bon tradition. Padmasambhava travelled throughout Tibet, subduing these demons and binding them to his will. He is said to have actually converted many of them to Buddhism, and some became powerful protectors of the newly introduced religion (Powers 1995: 325-326; Tsomo 1999: 176-177). Many practitioners and scholars of Buddhism alike would agree that while caution should be

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<sup>7</sup> Chandler notes that this characterization does not take into account the transformative aims that exist within many immigrant communities. Drawing from his own research in this area, he maintains that many Chinese American Buddhists actually "rediscover" their Buddhist heritage only after arriving in the United States, and many in fact seek to "purge" the tradition of "superstitions" and "cultural baggage" (Chandler 1998).

exercised, such a transformation is necessary if Buddhism is to survive as a viable religious and spiritual option within Western societies (Queen 1999).

### **B) Navigating the Buddhist Landscape**

There is obviously a marked difference in what is implied and assumed by the phrases “Western Buddhists” and “Buddhists in the West.” While approaches in recent years have sought to categorize and thus to understand and to clarify the trajectory of Buddhism in North America through a dualistic model, it has become apparent that such a model does not go far enough. Such approaches do not begin to address the diversity among Buddhist practitioners in North America and the West.

Jan Nattier seeks to provide a richer, more comprehensive framework to describe Western Buddhists by focusing on the ways in which different forms of Buddhism were transmitted to the United States: as “import,” “export,” or as “baggage” (Nattier 1997: 74). According to Nattier it is these three major means of transmission – not “. . . doctrine, practice, or national origin, . . .” (1997: 74) that are the most crucial to understanding the development of “American Buddhism.”

Import, or “elite” Buddhism, is “demand driven.” The “product” is deliberately sought out and brought home. This group, according to Nattier, has been predominantly characterized by Western individuals who have made the journey to Asian Buddhist countries in search of spiritual knowledge, who stay and train in the tradition, and then return to the West and begin to teach others. Socioeconomic position figures prominently in this mode of transmission, as it necessitates that the seekers possess particular resources: money and leisure time. Buddhist communities or centres that come into being around these individuals also attract a similar constituency, drawing members who are well-educated, financially comfortable, and almost overwhelmingly European in descent (Nattier 1997: 75).

Elite Buddhism is not solely defined by its method of transmission or economic privilege. Practice, and how it is subsequently defined, is also a key factor.<sup>8</sup> The Buddhist schools that fall in to this category are Tibetan Buddhism, Zen (Chinese, Korean, and Japanese forms), as well as centres which teach Vipassana meditation techniques. What is distinctive about these schools in the United States is their strong emphasis on meditation practice<sup>9</sup> over and above other elements found within Buddhism,<sup>10</sup> including those that have been described as more “devotional” activities<sup>11</sup> (Nattier 1997: 73, 75; 1998: 189).

In contrast, Nattier’s second form of transmission is “export” Buddhism, although it can also just as easily be labelled “evangelical” or “missionary” Buddhism. American converts to this form are not actively seeking Buddhism, but rather come into contact with the religion through energetic proselytizing (1997: 76; 1998: 189). Buddhist groups of this type, most strongly characterized by the Soka Gakkai International (SGI)<sup>12</sup>, can potentially appeal to a large audience (or none at all), since contact can be made through a missionary on a street corner or through pamphlets left in the subway. Practice within this organization focuses almost entirely on the recitation of a mantra,<sup>13</sup>(Japanese) “*namu myo-ho-ren-ge-kyo*”

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<sup>8</sup> The various definitions and valuations of Buddhist practice will be discussed further in a later section, particularly as it is experienced by members of the Toronto Tibetan Buddhist community.

<sup>9</sup> Nattier notes that the names “Vipassana” and “Zen” can be translated into “meditation” (Nattier 1997: 75) or “level of consciousness” (Powers 2000: 254).

<sup>10</sup> Nattier writes that until the financial mismanagement and “sexual misconduct” scandals arose in the 1980s in some American Tibetan Buddhist and Zen communities, most such communities paid relatively little attention to the ethical codes that have been pivotal in traditional Buddhist societies (1997: 75).

<sup>11</sup> “Devotional activities” can include offering small gifts of food or money to the Buddha, ancestor worship, community service, and reciting mantras with an attitude of faith.

<sup>12</sup> Soka Gakkai International is one of two contemporary groups which traces its origin to the thirteenth century Japanese Buddhist reformer Nichiren. In 1991, SGI was excommunicated by the High Priest of Nichiren Shoshu, Nikken Shonin, over the issue of lay versus priestly authority (Hurst 1998: 91; Powers 2000: 203).

<sup>13</sup> Hurst notes that there is some controversy surrounding this organization, as scholars have debated whether this is “real Buddhism,” as the organization seems to ignore the basic Buddhist doctrines of the Four Noble Truths, the Eight Fold Path, and any complex or intellectual meditative teachings (1998: 82).

(“homage to the Lotus Sutra”<sup>14</sup>) (Hurst 1998: 80). The mantra is believed to be powerful enough to bring about spiritual awareness and/or awakening, as well as improvements in economic and material circumstances<sup>15</sup> (Hurst 1998: 81; Nattier 1997: 76).

Where “elite” Buddhism attracts mostly those of European descent, “export” Buddhist organizations such as Soka Gakkai International attracts a more ethnically diverse following in the United States, including Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans (Hurst 1998: 89; Nattier 1998: 89).

Although the name is somewhat misleading, “Baggage” Buddhism refers to those who were “born into” Buddhism, for example, the children of families for whom Buddhism is the religious tradition.<sup>16</sup> Thus the terms “ethnic” Buddhism also applies. This form of Buddhism was brought to the United States by immigrating Asians, although immigration was not for religious purposes. Nattier notes that this label encompasses a great variety of Buddhist traditions – Mahāyāna, Theravāda, and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions – but at the outset these groups tend to be deliberately monoethnic (1997: 78). Buddhist temples of this sort may serve many functions, from providing a meeting place and community centre to meeting religious and spiritual needs. One of the most important mandates and functions of these religious meeting places is to preserve a distinctive cultural identity for its members, who find themselves in a new social, cultural, and religious environment (Nattier 1997: 78; 1998: 190).

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<sup>14</sup> *The Lotus Sutra* (Sanskrit: *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*) is an Indian Mahayana Buddhist text said to be a discourse given by the Buddha Sakyamuni to an audience on Vulture Peak. The text contains the notion that the many teachings and practices of the Buddha are all part of a single path. The sutra is important to both Japanese and Chinese schools of Buddhism (Powers 2000: 183; Fischer-Sreiber, Ehrhard, and Diener 1991: 129-130).

<sup>15</sup> Many people with whom I spoke – who can be construed as “elite” Buddhists in the Tibetan traditions – looked rather disdainfully upon the Soka Gakkai’s additional emphasis on material satisfaction. One man stated that he feels there is “just something wrong” with “praying for a BMW to appear in your driveway.”

<sup>16</sup> Nattier’s article does not include within this category Westerners who have “grown up” with Buddhism, as those individuals are part of a relatively recent phenomenon. For personal accounts of North Americans who were raised in Buddhist families, see Schrei 2001 and Ary 2001. Elijah Ary is, in fact, a Canadian who was recognized as the reincarnation of a Tibetan Buddhist monk (*tulku*) at the age of four.

### **Inadequacies of the Models**

The labels and categorizations of “elite” Buddhism, and “ethnic” or “baggage” Buddhism, and the ways in which the tradition itself was introduced to the United States, are useful in their own way. Buddhism has not yet “taken hold” in the West; it is in the process of becoming a new and viable religious tradition in North America and Europe. The labels introduced above serve to establish a framework in which to discuss the growth of Buddhism and the growing numbers of practitioners. Such a framework may also provide a foundation upon which to base more refined and sophisticated analyses of the various schools of Buddhism and their respective “audiences” in North America. It is this foundation upon which I seek to build. However, as with all models and frameworks, attention must first be called to some of the difficulties and assumptions that are embedded within.

The first such difficulty encountered is not a difficulty per se; it points more to how information is received and perceived by an audience rather than to a difficulty within the models themselves. All of the models presented above, the dual development model and Nattier’s typology of transmission, were researched and designed with the United States as a specific referent, to the exclusion of the larger geographical and conceptual area of North America or the West in general. While Canada and the USA share many things, such as long histories of immigration, long-standing trade relationships, geography, entertainment and news media, care should be taken before an American-based model is unproblematically superimposed onto Canadian cultural, religious, and social forms. Distinctly national flavours exist between the United States and Canada (and Europe) and should not be undervalued or misrepresented (*inter alia* Dunk 2000; Lipset 1990; Angus 1997; Moodley 1983). Likewise, the same models should not be seen as indicative and representative of “Western” Buddhism (or Buddhism in the “West”), but rather as more limited in scope, as per the intentions of the authors themselves. As such, these models can be fruitfully used to compare and contrast different constructions and manifestations of Buddhism in Western countries, and inform future research pursuits in these areas.

A second facet of the representational models that should not be misconstrued is that in a certain sense, they are also very broad in scope. What is of primary concern in these models is the definition and classification of *groups* as opposed to *individuals*. At this point it must be noted that the final aim of these models is to establish an initial framework in which a broadly based question like “Who is a Buddhist in America?” can be discussed. And in this sense, a broad framework in which individual variations are subsumed, is necessitated. This neglect of the individual, however, is most glaring when questions of motivation, desire, and value, arise. In other words, these models attempt to tell us something of *who* these people are, but not so much attention is given as to *why* they became Buddhists in the first place.

Granted, there are “hints” of this within the frameworks themselves, as can be seen in Prebish’s distinction between “elite” and “ethnic” Buddhists – both groups seek to fulfill a goal or serve a larger purpose, of preserving an identity or transforming society respectively (1998: 7). This hints at the forces which drive Buddhist groups and the individuals who attend or join them. Yet it also assumed these motivations are universally applicable and dangerously straightforward. Stuart Chandler’s research among ethnic Chinese Buddhists in the United States points out that many Chinese Americans are compelled to discover or “re-discover” their Buddhist religious heritage after immigrating to the United States, and that many desire to reform or transform their religious tradition (group characteristics usually associated with “elite” Buddhists), ridding it of cultural customs and accretions (Chandler 1998: 24). This obviously complicates the overarching distinctions made between “ethnic” and “elite” Buddhist groups and their orientations.

These frameworks have sought to place a great many individuals into single, sharply defined categories. Jan Nattier recognizes such limitations inherent in other classificatory endeavors, noting the earlier model of Stark and Bainbridge concerning “new religions.” To the traditional Weberian categories of “church” and “sect,” Stark and Bainbridge have added the category of “cult” – along with three subtypes of “audience,” “client,” and “cult movement” (see Nattier 1998: 185-186). Nattier contends that this model precludes individual variation in favour of group organizations and institutions. She states that a



reorientation of Stark and Bainbridge's model away from institutions towards the individual may allow for a "... more flexible and nuanced description of the dynamics of such groups" (Nattier 1998: 187). Even so, she fails to apply this critique to her own research to chart America's Buddhist landscape; in-depth individual orientations and self-identifications are subsumed in favour of broader, organizational types.

Most classificatory models also assume that a socioreligious label such as "Buddhist" is unproblematic, easily applied, and just as easily assumed. Do Western "Buddhists" actually accept this label and identity, and to what extent? More attention needs to be given to how "Buddhists" accept or deny this label and identity.<sup>17</sup> Do the individuals in question refer to themselves as "Buddhists" or "*Dharma* practitioners"? Or, as neither, though they may "do" all the things Buddhists are "supposed" to do? Existing frameworks are limited in that they easily allow us to assume we know certain things, such as *why* people in the West become Buddhist, and what it means to them. Is it a way of experiencing the world, a new way of thinking, of behaving? Is it a "spiritual" or "religious" endeavor, or is it more "worldly" in intent? For what reasons do men and women from a predominantly Judeo-Christian society and background assume a new religious identity? Does becoming a Buddhist represent a sharp break with a religious history, or is it conceived as more of a process; a continuation? Do men and women "join up" for different reasons? Further, broad categorizations do not account for individuals who may "blur" these artificial distinctions between ethnicity, class, and type of Buddhism. What position can we assign, for instance, to a Canadian woman of Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese descent who followed in her family's tradition of Seventh Day Adventism before discovering Tibetan Buddhism? The distinctions are further blurred in this young woman's case, as there is also a non-practicing Buddhist tradition present within her family, and she herself does not exclude the teachings of other religious traditions, such as Sufism and Christianity, in her spiritual life and practice. In another case, we can also ask what categories account for the background and experiences of a Buddhist nun with First Nations roots? A more fruitful – and less procrustean – avenue of

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<sup>17</sup> This question will in fact be explored in greater detail in Part IV – The Individual in Isolation.

inquiry may focus on individual narratives exploring these issues, rather than the organizations to which they may or may not consciously belong.

The case of the young woman mentioned above uncovers yet another assumption in the classificatory models. In both Nattier's and Prebish's models, there are very broad categorizations made of the different schools of Buddhism themselves. With the so-named "elite" schools of Buddhism – Tibetan Buddhism, Vipassana, and Zen – little variation is presented between these schools, and almost none is discussed within these traditions themselves. In doing so, there is a danger of assuming religious and spiritual solidarity where in fact there may be none, both between and within these schools. Take the case of a religious controversy that has had devastating and divisive repercussions within Tibetan Buddhism on both local and international levels. The dispute over the protector-deity practice of Dorje Shugden (Tibetan, *rDo rje shugs ldan*) centres around two primary and conflicting interpretations of this practice. The current Dalai Lama has rejected the practice on theological and political grounds, stating that the practice promotes sectarian disunity and harms the Tibetan cause for freedom from Chinese oppression. The other side in the dispute, in which the New Kadampa Tradition led by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso plays a significant role, considers the Dorje Shugden practice essential, as the "*Dharma* protector" is praised as an enlightened being, a Buddha. The Dalai Lama's position, conversely, sees Dorje Shugden as more "worldly" and thus an inappropriate object of worship and refuge (Kay 1997: 281).

The resulting conflict has led to accusations of human rights abuses and undemocratic actions directed at the Dalai Lama, and has seen the New Kadampa Tradition distance itself completely from the spiritual authority of the Dalai Lama. According to Kay, the controversy has had detrimental effects on the authority Western audiences and Buddhist communities attribute to the Dalai Lama, which may ultimately harm his international reputation and "play into the hands of the Chinese" (Kay 1997: 287).

On a more local level, the controversy and resulting tension has, according to some Toronto members of the New Kadampa Tradition, been responsible for a significant decrease in membership and a strong sense of isolation from other Tibetan Buddhist centres and communities in the Toronto area. The

debate has been especially painful for those who find themselves torn between two spiritual leaders, especially amongst those who have found a “spiritual home” within the New Kadampa Tradition, and who simultaneously admit to having been spiritually influenced by the teachings of the Dalai Lama as well.

Although in many cases sectarian differences within Tibetan Buddhism are not so passionately disputed and contested, there are other significant differences to be found within Tibetan Buddhist sects that can strongly influence the nature of each particular community. In Toronto, as is most likely the case with other large urban centres, a person interested in Tibetan Buddhism can encounter and choose from, on the one hand, a very traditional Tibetan Buddhist temple replete with an ethnic Tibetan lama who speaks little or no English. On the other, one can also learn about Tibetan Buddhism at a centre that holds classes in commercial office space in the bustling downtown core, with teachings given by a Canadian laywoman of European descent who teaches in English, believes in the power of humour, and integrates modern dance into her meditation teachings. Obviously, there exist great differences in form between these two centres that in some ways are indicative of those within Tibetan Buddhism and “elite” Buddhism on the whole. Yet broadly based organizational and group classifications leave it to the imagination as to what draws certain “elite” Buddhists to one Tibetan Buddhist centre as opposed to another.

At this point in our discussion of the difficulties involved when we speak of Western Buddhists, the issue of “practice” must be broached.<sup>18</sup> Classificatory models address Buddhist conceptions of practice either very vaguely, or indirectly and by implication. Nattier, for example, notes that “elite” Buddhists tend to focus on meditation while “ethnic Buddhists focus more on “devotional” activities. Further, Prebish’s argument maintains that “elite” Buddhists transform society while “ethnic” Buddhists seek to maintain an identity. Practice, we can extrapolate from these discussions, is what appears to be fundamental to the notion of how individuals in all these categories “make sense” of religiosity and/or spirituality. In the case

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<sup>18</sup> The issue of what constitutes “practice” is the subject of Part IV and Part V.

of those individuals from Judeo-Christian or non-Buddhist religious heritages, many women and men in Toronto maintain that it is often the very idea of “practice” that attracts them to Buddhism in the first place.

As noted earlier, different temples or centres in one school of Buddhism differ greatly in form, and may offer very different interpretations of practice. Variations can be attributed to sectarian differences, as with the Kagyu school in Tibetan Buddhism, which is noted for its strong emphasis on practice, while the Nyingma and Gelug schools favour more scholastic and intellectual activities.

The meaning of practice can also vary considerably between teachers. Where and how the teachers themselves have received spiritual training are important considerations, in addition to ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as lay versus monastic orientations. Age has become a key element in interpretations of Buddhist practice, especially in light of the twentieth century’s intense exposure of traditional Asian teachers to Western audiences (and vice versa). To focus on Asian teachers, an ethnic Tibetan lama in his sixties living and teaching in Toronto has most likely experienced traditional Tibetan monasticism and Chinese invasion and occupation and subsequent exile. As a result of these experiences, this lama’s exposure to and familiarity with Western culture and the cultural idiosyncrasies of Western students has been under difficult and tragic circumstances later in life. A younger ethnic Tibetan lama, perhaps in his twenties, has most likely had much more exposure to Western culture and society, and may more easily be able to interpret Buddhist teachings in ways that better address the needs of a Western audience. Each teacher’s concept of effective practice is strongly shaped by their own experiences and familiarity with Western culture. To talk about categories of Buddhism with little or no reference to the many distinctive forms of practice presents a limited, seamless, and unidimensional view of “Buddhism in North America.”

### **C) The Toronto Tibetan Buddhist Landscape**

#### **Four Tibetan Buddhist Centres**

Of the more than sixty Buddhist organizations, temples, and meditation centres found in the greater Toronto area, eleven of them are Tibetan Buddhist. I conducted anthropological fieldwork at four primary

Tibetan Buddhist locations over the course of twelve months in 1999-2000, Riwoche Pemavajra Temple, Gaden Choling Mahayana Buddhist Meditation Centre, a New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) Buddhist Centre, and Friends of the Heart (FOH) Meditation and Healing Centre.<sup>19</sup> Of these centres, Riwoche and Gaden Choling are guided by ethnic Tibetan lamas, while the NKT centre and FOH are guided by Western converts to Buddhism. All these centres are found within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, but all represent very different methods and styles of teaching, atmosphere, location, and students. When we begin to look at individual centres within a Buddhist tradition, we find a great deal of variation between schools of thought and lineage. Even though these four centres are most obviously discerned from each other on the basis of their teachers – ethnic Tibetans versus Westerners – they reflect not so much of a sharp delineation but rather points along a continuum between what we can call “traditional Tibetan” and “contemporary Western” interpretations of Buddhist philosophy, ritual space, and practice.

All of the above temples and centres, including those with ethnic Tibetan teachers, have been termed “non-Asian” Tibetan Buddhist centres (McLellan 1999), as they are predominantly utilized by non-Tibetan practitioners and communities. McLellan’s research with Asian Buddhists in Toronto reveals that ethnic Tibetans do not have a formal Buddhist temple of their own, nor do they affiliate themselves with one specific lama. Instead, Tibetan Buddhist temples in Toronto are used by ethnic Tibetans for monthly social and religious gatherings, or both resident and visiting Tibetan lamas are invited to individual homes for ceremonies and ritual activities (McLellan 1999: 28). This situation is in accordance with what Paul Numrich (1996) has called “parallel congregations.” Non-Asian Buddhists and ethnic Tibetans may utilize the same temples to gather and worship, but only infrequently do they meet simultaneously. Further, these two groups do not merge to form a single, long-standing congregation.

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<sup>19</sup> This study does not include discussion on Shambhala International, which is a significant and popular Vajrayana centre for Western Buddhists in North America. I decided not to include this organization in this research as it is a complex mixture of both Western and Asian forms and practices, and is already the subject of an extensive body of both popular and scholastic literature.

Riwoche Pemavajra Temple was established in the west end of Toronto in the late 1980s under the spiritual guidance of Khenpo Sonam Tobgyal Rinpoche, who arrived in Canada in 1988. The Riwoche temple has had several physical locations, from a house to its current reincarnation in an old community centre or hall. Major renovations have been undertaken in order to supply the temple with a traditional Tibetan shrine room (*gompa*), which includes several large (around six feet tall), painted and bejewelled statues of the Buddha Sakyamuni, Padmasambhava, and the female Buddha Tara, along with other smaller statues representing various important teachers in the Nyingma lineage. The walls are hung with colorful blue, green, gold, and red Tibetan *thangkas*<sup>20</sup> of various Buddhas and *Dharma* protectors. Shelves full of traditional Buddhist texts are lined up on the walls, and there is a Tibetan throne for the teacher (about three feet high) at the front of the hall. It is usually decorated with fresh flowers, a large uncarved crystal, a statue of the lama's own teacher, and is draped with saffron and red cloth. Next to it is a smaller and lower throne (roughly half as tall) that is used by the lama's translator. The shrine room used to hold one hundred small hand-lit oil lamps, but due to the smoke generated by burning oil, the lamps are now lit with coconut oil. A respectful distance away from the lama's throne is a stereo system that is used to record his teachings. Occupying the centre of the shrine room are rows of meditation cushions and prayer benches (or *sūtra* tables) for students and other participants.

The students themselves derive from a predominantly non-Asian background. Ethnic Tibetans are closely affiliated with the temple, sponsoring feasts and financially supporting it, but the weekly meditations, practices, and public teachings are almost entirely filled with non-Asian faces. A donation between seven and ten dollars is suggested for the regular meditation practices and feast offerings, and all participants are welcome to attend, while members support the temple with a monthly donation. Special and more advanced teachings and practices are held for those (usually members) who wish to pursue a more intensive practice and a deeper relationship with the lama and the temple.

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<sup>20</sup> A religious scroll or painting framed in silk that often depict Buddhas, revered teachers, and artistic motifs. *Thangkas* are used in conjunction with *tantric* initiations and practices, as a visual aid.

The Riwoche temple in Toronto has its place in the long history of the Nyingma and Taklung Kagyu lineages, of which the latter was founded in the twelfth century by Taklung Tungpa. The original Riwoche temple and monastery, built some 800 years ago in the Riwoche region of Kham in eastern Tibet, housed over 1,000 monks and was well-known for its excellence in teaching and practice. The original monastery was destroyed by the Chinese invasion in 1959. The Riwoche temple in Toronto is one of the eight lesser schools of the Kagyu lineage,<sup>21</sup> and the lineage is currently represented by His Holiness Phamchok Rinpoche in Nepal, the seventh incarnation of the Phamchok *tulkus*.

The Nyingma lineage “. . . has the longest established history of transmission of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism” (Powers 1995: 319), as the name “Nyingma” actually means “Old School.” The Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism relies on the old translations of Indian Buddhist texts, particularly the *tantric* texts. These older translations by realized spiritual masters are considered to more closely capture the “spirit” of the teachings themselves. New translations, in contrast, are felt to lack this spirit of enlightened experience attributed to the composers of the texts themselves, paying more attention instead to technical accuracy (Powers 1995: 319).

The Nyingma lineage is associated with the “primordial Buddha” Samantabhadra, who embodies the essence of the enlightened mind of all Buddhas. All teachings in the Nyingma lineage are said to originate with Samantabhadra. In terms of a lineage of human teachers, the Nyingmapas identify strongly with Padmasambhava, who, as was mentioned earlier, is credited with introducing and transmitting Buddhism into Tibet in the eight century CE. Padmasambhava is viewed as one of the most important and influential figures of the Nyingma lineage, traditionally regarded as a great missionary and scholar prior to his arrival in Tibet. When he did make his journey to Tibet, he is said to have been faced with powerful

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<sup>21</sup> There are four great and eight lesser schools in the Kagyu tradition. The four great schools are: the Karma Kagyu (or Karma Kamsang), Tselpa Kagyu, Baram Kagyu, and Pakmo Kagyu. Of the eight lesser schools, (Drikung, Taklung, Tropu, Drupa, Mar, Yerpa, Shuksep, and Yamsang), only the Drukpa, Drikung, and Taklung survive in addition to the newer lineages of Shangpa Kagyu and Ugyen Nyendrup (Powers 1995: 349).

demonic opposition. As the following quotation illustrates, the demons of Tibet were known to be partial to the “pre-Buddhist”<sup>22</sup> tradition of Bon (Powers 1995: 326), but were conquered by Guru Rinpoche:

None [of the demons] were able to withstand his power and many became powerful protectors of the new religion. They took solemn and lasting vows never to work against the dharma and to do their utmost to ensure its propagation. (Powers 1995: 326)

The Nyingma lineage is currently guided by His Holiness the Third Drupwang Pema Norbu (Penor) Rinpoche, the Supreme Head of the Nyingma Tradition, the Eleventh throne-holder of the Palyul Monastery. In 1988, His Holiness recognized the first Western woman, Brooklyn-born Catharine Burroughs, as a reincarnate lama (*tulku*) now known as Jetsunma Ahkon Norbu Lhamo. His Holiness also recognized Hollywood action-star Steven Seagal as a “*terton*” (“treasure discoverer”),<sup>23</sup> or one who will uncover sacred texts, instructions, and images (*terma*) that were hidden by the school’s early spiritual masters to fulfill a future need for a certain teaching (Powers 1995: 330). Owing to the fact that the Nyingma lineage remained somewhat aloof from the political arena throughout its long history, the school at times was in danger of insularity and detachment from current events and developments. One of the ways in which to reverse this occurrence and infuse the school with new energy was through the discovery of new texts and instructions, the *terma*.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The Bon tradition is most commonly thought to be an indigenous religious system of Tibet. It was a system of animistic and shamanistic practices performed by priests who were called *bon po* or *shen*. According to Powers, historical evidence appears to support the hypothesis that Bon developed as a self-conscious religious system only under the influence of Buddhism itself (1995: 431).

<sup>23</sup> *Tertons* are considered in the Nyingma tradition to be *bodhisattvas* who are imbued with special qualities that enables them to find the appropriate *terma* at the appropriate time. *Tertons* also have the special abilities required to explain and transmit the newly discovered spiritual treasures.

<sup>24</sup> The *terma/terton* system has been able to infuse the Nyingma tradition with new energy while maintaining a link with the school’s origins. Additionally, monastic institutions were sometimes established to preserve and transmit the treasures, and such institutionalization in turn served to provide the school with structures that would help to ensure its survival in the future (Powers 1995: 331).



A second Tibetan Buddhist centre that has an ethnic Tibetan lama as the resident spiritual teacher and advisor is Gaden Choling Mahayana Buddhist Meditation Centre. This Gelug centre is also located in the west end of Toronto, and is located in a remodeled three story house with a shrine room or *gompa*, and a private residence for the spiritual advisor when he teaches in Toronto. The small shrine room has a traditional altar with images of the lineage teachers; statues of the Buddha Sakyamuni; the *bodhisattva* of compassion, Chenrezig; the female Buddha, Tara, and other deities, as well as images of venerable teachers such as Je Tsong Khapa of the Gelug lineage. The spiritual advisor sits in front of the altar on a small throne during teachings. Pillows and mats are stacked in a back corner for use during teachings or empowerments, and chairs are available for those who find sitting cross-legged for long periods of time uncomfortable or physically difficult. A small library is found at the back of the shrine room, along with a glass case containing a small selection of books, *malas* (Buddhist rosaries), and other ritual implements for sale. The centre also has two resident cats, Mala and Bala, who especially seem to enjoy curling up on the crossed legs of students during teachings and practices.

Gaden Choling's spiritual advisor is an ethnic Tibetan reincarnate lama, Zasep Tulku Rinpoche, the thirteenth reincarnation of the renowned Kargyupa teacher Lama Chabdak. This renowned lama was the contemporary of Je Tsong Khapa, the founder of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism in the fourteenth century. Je Tsong Khapa was also a great reformer of Tibetan Buddhism, and stressed strict adherence to monastic codes and rules, comprehensive study of Buddhist philosophy, and intensive *tantric* practice (Powers 1995: 406).

The shift from the Kargyupa to the Gelug system came in with the eleventh incarnation of Lama Chabdak, a great Kargyupa lama known as Lama Konchog Tenzin, who was born in 1871. Through contact with a Gelug scholar in his mid-life, Lama Konchog Tenzin became deeply and profoundly interested in the Gelug teachings and felt an awakening of faith in Je Tsong Khapa. He then encouraged his own students to study more Gelug teachings in order to receive the root philosophies of the Buddha. Lama Konchog Tenzin is said to have prayed that he would also receive more Gelug teachings in his next life. The current

reincarnation, Zasep Tulku Rinpoche, was born in 1948 and installed within a monastery at age five. He was eleven when he escaped from the Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet in 1959.

As he has been traveling extensively in the West since the mid 1970s, teaching widely in Australia and establishing meditation centres, Zasep Rinpoche is a very proficient speaker of English and does not require the services of a translator. In early 1980, he was invited by students and relatives to come to Canada. In response to the requests of students in Toronto, His Holiness Ling Rinpoche gave his permission and blessing to create a Gelug order in Toronto. His Holiness named the centre “Gaden Choling Mahayana Buddhist Meditation Centre” and appointed Zasep Rinpoche as the resident teacher. Since 1980, four other centres in British Columbia and Ontario have been founded, along with centres in Idaho and Michigan.

Teachings at Gaden Choling have included the topics of death, rebirth, and the intermediate state; *Mahāmudrā*,<sup>25</sup> *Ngondro*,<sup>26</sup> and a wide variety of *tantric* initiations. Meditation retreats are also held when Zasep Rinpoche is in Toronto, and such retreats are designed to address the needs of students who live in a large urban centre and have a variety of job-related and family responsibilities. Instead of overnight and sometimes lengthy retreats held in some isolated locale in “the country,” retreats are held at Gaden Choling on the weekends, starting in the morning and lasting until late afternoon or early evening. Students can then return to their daily lives and responsibilities, and then return to the retreat the following morning. Private teachings are also available, conducted both formally and informally. Individual interviews with the rinpoche can be held in person, but very commonly take place over the telephone or via electronic mail.

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<sup>25</sup> A meditation system found in Tibetan Buddhism, and is particularly associated with the Kargyupa school. It is described as aiming for the direct and personal realization of the emptiness and luminosity of the nature of mind (Powers 2000: 131; Fischer-Screiber, Ehrhard, and Diener 1991: 135).

<sup>26</sup> The “preliminary practices” in Tibetan Buddhism that are to be performed before one receives *tantric* empowerments. Each practice is to be completed 100,000 times. The practices are: taking refuge and manifesting *bodhicitta* (the aspiration of enlightenment for the welfare and benefit of all), prostrations, recitation of the 100 syllable mantra of Vajrasattva, mandala offerings, and guru yoga (Powers 1995: 256; 2000: 203; Tromge 1995: 1-3).

As Zasep Rinpoche is usually in residence for only six weeks in the fall and spring – he travels extensively teaching at his other centres in Canada, the United States, and Australia – the senior students and members of the board conduct study groups, guided meditations, *pujas* (ceremony or service), and feasts (*tsok*). They are also responsible for newsletters, providing one-on-one counseling, and offering support for anyone in the community who finds it useful to talk to peers about applying the *Dharma* to personal problems and issues, or about questions pertaining to practice. Chenrezig (also known as Avalokitesvara, the embodiment of compassion) *pujas* are also offered for the benefit of those who are dying or for those recently deceased. Students of the centre also engage with international foreign aid efforts by providing financial aid and organizing fund-raising for Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal, and by making regular contributions of medicine and money for hospitals in Dharamsala. Financial aid and other donations are sent to four nunneries, and students can sponsor young monks, nuns, and Tibetan children in India and Nepal.

In November of 1997, all of Zasep Rinpoche’s centres in Canada, the United States, and Australia were brought together as the “Ganden Umbrella,” an international organization working to bring the Gelug lineage to the West. The goal of this organization is to transmit to the West the essence of the Buddha’s teachings, and this essence transcends temporal and cultural differences. Thus, the teachings of the Buddha, of Tibetan Buddhism, need to be adapted to a “Western” way of explanation and thought. Two areas in particular need to be addressed, gender biases and an overwhelming emphasis on monastic practice. In a March 2000 community newsletter, Zasep Tulku Rinpoche wrote:

... the Buddha himself said that his teachings should be adapted according to the place, the time, and the society. Buddha said if we don’t adapt the teachings, then the teachings might degenerate or even die. Times change, people change, societies change. Sometimes the old way of teaching doesn’t work on the mind of people today. That’s why certain cultural or religious traditions are dying, because they are out-dated, and people have a hard time understanding them. (Tushita Newsletter March 2000 Vol. 3, No.1)

One light-hearted example of Zasep Rinpoche’s adaptation of the teachings to Western ways of understanding occurred during a teaching he gave on the nature of the mind. Drawing on popular Canadian

metaphors of the “Great White North,” he was able to employ humour as a means of relating to his Canadian students, implicitly illustrating his understanding of the social and cultural contexts within which he and his students co-exist. Zasep Rinpoche was describing what is commonly called “mad monkey mind” in Buddhist circles, referring to the mind’s constant and instantaneous movement from topic to topic, all while simultaneously offering a steady stream of dialogue and commentary. He paused, laughed to himself, and then added that for Canadians, this could more accurately be termed “mad moose mind.” Zasep Rinpoche also has on his teaching throne a large bowl of specially blessed *M&Ms* to hand out after a *Tantric* empowerment or initiation, much to the delight of the children who are sometimes present, and always a delight to the adults.

One of the two centres studied with a Western teacher is the New Kadampa Buddhist Centre’s Toronto location. The tradition was established by its spiritual director, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, in response to repeated requests by Canadian students for spiritual training and guidance. The most recent location of the centre in Toronto’s west end (indeed, walking distance from the Riwoche Pemavajra Temple) offers a teaching and residential centre in a large refurbished house. The centre provides a place to learn Kadam Buddhism with courses ranging from beginner meditation classes to more in-depth and structured Buddhist philosophy courses and devotional practices. Everyone who participates is encouraged to approach the teachings and meditations at whatever level is appropriate and comfortable for them. Participants range from those seeking stress and anxiety reduction and new coping techniques, to those who desire a spiritual lifestyle and path. The current Toronto teacher – who is now an ordained monk – has informed me that his own initial interest in the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) was for stress reduction. He had, he states, no interest whatsoever in a spiritual path other than his own tradition of Roman Catholicism.

The broad approach to Buddhism and Buddhist practice illustrates the NKT’s declared purpose to make the teachings of the Buddha accessible and applicable for all people – regardless of religious or spiritual intent – and to incorporate the teachings of the Buddha into daily life. Many of the course titles reflect this “daily living” and “practical” approach. Previously held classes include: “Understanding Illness

and Health,” “Happiness From a Different Source,” “Urban Strangers and Other Myths,” and an entire series taught in the fall of 2000 on “Love, Desire, and Attachment.”

Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, as spiritual head of the New Kadampa Tradition, has made it his mission to introduce and integrate the *Dharma* in the West. Along with seventeen books he has published in English with the aid of senior Western *Dharma* students, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso has spent the last thirty years translating Buddhist teachings, texts, rituals, and devotional practices into English. Other than mantras which are written in Sanskrit, all rituals, meditations, and devotions have all been translated from the Tibetan into English. Many of the chants and songs used in NKT rituals and practices have also been rewritten, moving away from “cultural” Tibetan instruments, rhythms, and harmonies towards an incorporation of Western musical instruments and styles.

The New Kadampa Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism originates with Atisa, an Indian Buddhist spiritual master who was invited to teach in Tibet in the tenth century CE, and draws upon some of the same roots and lineages as the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism. As the name “New Kadampa” illustrates, the tradition considers itself a legitimate continuation of the lineage and teachings of Atisa and Je Tsong Khapa (Powers 2000: 149). Atisa specially organized the Buddha’s teachings, paying attention to and clarifying how to enter into, progress, and complete the Buddhist path to enlightenment. This path is known as “*lamrim*,” which in Tibetan means “Stages of the Path to Enlightenment.” Later, in the fourteenth century, Je Tsong Khapa further clarified Atisa’s teachings and reestablished them as the New Kadampa Tradition. Je Tsong Khapa’s teachings and reformulations of Atisa’s work provided an integration of *sūtra* and *tantra*, analytical reasoning and yogic meditation (Powers 1995: 402). As has been noted previously, the New Kadampa Tradition has been at odds with the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile over the NKT’s continuation of the propitiation and worship of the protector deity Dorje Shugden.

Most, if not all, of the senior *Dharma* students and spiritual teachers currently within the NKT lineage are Westerners themselves, and commonly teach the *Dharma* within the contexts of their own communities and even the urban centres within which they have been raised. As a result people who attend

Buddhist meditation and philosophy classes at the NKT often find an always interesting and sometimes odd mixture of traditional Tibetan imagery and Western objects, and Buddhist religious objects that have been reinterpreted through a Western lens. One finds traditional *thangkas*, statues, and of course the resident monastic men and women – all of whom are “Westerners” – with shaven heads in yellow and maroon robes. Students sit in chairs before a traditional lama’s throne, and offerings placed before the shrine include the traditional bowls of clear water (symbolizing the emptiness of all things), jars of jam and the occasional bowl of *Smarties* or other candy. An electric kettle usually steams and whistles in the background, providing the herbal tea that is given out – along with a wide variety of cookies – during breaks. The squeal and rumble of the streetcars and traffic can always be heard outside (especially during guided meditations), further juxtaposing Canadian culture and Tibetan religious forms. Since both teachers and students often share the same sociocultural background and familiarity with contemporary Canadian culture, teachings often draw examples, jokes, and metaphors from popular television sitcoms or the feature film industry, and popular culture in general. At the Toronto centre, the teacher can often be seen to pause almost without realizing it when a particularly noisy streetcar rolls past outside.

Further along the continuum, away from the more traditional Tibetan Buddhist temples, we find another centre with a Western teacher. This centre differs from the NKT centre and the others in two significant ways: Friends of the Heart (FOH) Meditation and Healing Centre offers a program of meditation that is given *by* and *for* lay people; the senior teacher and the rest of the teaching faculty are all lay people. Secondly, the meditation teachings and program offered are not limited to Tibetan Buddhism. The centre’s stated purpose is to actively pursue philosophical teachings of both Eastern and Western religions, all the while maintaining ordinary and active lives within the community. As a course catalogue states,

As householders, parents, and people leading average lives, we believe it is possible to live within society and bring compassion and awareness into our lives. We believe that meditation studies can help us develop wholesome and happy lives.

Study programs include different forms of meditation, creative movement and yoga, intellectual study and discussion, visual art work, and story telling.

Catherine Rathbun, around whom the centre was created and organized, is the senior teacher at Friends of the Heart. She is a Canadian woman who began studying Buddhism in 1969 in Toronto. She has studied over the years with His Holiness the XVI Karmapa, the late head of the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, along with other preeminent individuals such as Kalu Rinpoche, Karma Thinley Rinpoche, and Namgyal Rinpoche. In 1976, she was given permission to teach, and has students in Canada, the United States, and New Zealand. From 1989 to 1997, she taught courses on meditation at York University in Toronto. With a background in ballet and modern dance, Catherine also incorporates dance and creative movement exercises into meditations, as a way, she states, “. . . to bypass the tight hold that the Western intellect has on one’s development.”

Since the early 1980s, Catherine has taught students from her own home, relying on a very old method of teaching that relies primarily on word of mouth and those who specifically request teachings. Seven years ago, a small group of students offered permanent spaces in their homes for Catherine’s use. In 1999, she consented to become even more public through the establishment of a permanent meditation centre in downtown Toronto. Her teachings, according to the centre’s program and statement of intent, are felt to speak to the need in the West for certain kinds of voices to be heard: the voice of the wisdom mind of a woman and the wisdom teachings inherent in parenting. Catherine also believes strongly in providing spiritual teachings that are unencumbered by guru worship or religious belief. Most of her long-term students in fact do not call themselves “Buddhist,” even though many have taken refuge vows in the Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Sangha* and continue to do so on a daily basis. A commonly held sentiment is that using the label of “Buddhist” is inherently limiting as it implicitly excludes other spiritual and religious teachings.

The centre itself is located in commercial office space on a major Toronto street, and, in keeping with these “modern” surroundings, decoration is minimal and devoted to efficiency. Upon entry, one

encounters the centre of the operation, a desk with a fax machine and phone, course lists, information pamphlets, and phone numbers of students and other centres. The centre's shrine room and meditation area (essentially the entire room) is almost entirely bare of ornamentation. Large windows run the length of one wall, a small library fills another, and the other walls are almost bare. Meditation cushions are stacked on low shelves, and the shrine itself has a small arrangement of statues, the Buddha Sakyamuni, the female Buddha Tara, and a few small pictures of eminent spiritual teachers. The back of the room is sectioned off, where a small room functions as storage, the refreshment area (with kettle, cups, and an assortment of tea), and chairs to accommodate private interviews between Catherine and her students.

These four temples in Toronto illustrate the great diversity that can be subsumed under the label of "elite Buddhism" and "Tibetan Buddhist." Any one of these centres could easily be the referent in the discussions on "elite Buddhism" that have appeared in academic and mainstream sources. While there is obviously great diversity between these temples themselves, it is necessary to briefly discuss the women and men that participate in Buddhist organizations. Most such individuals have affiliated themselves with one particular temple and teacher, and yet occasionally attend other centres for special teachings or empowerments. Attending special or rarely-given ceremonies and initiations is not uncommon in itself, and the teachers of Gaden Choling, Riwoche, and Friends of the Heart take a strong and guiding role in the spiritual progress of their students, recommending certain outside teachings and practices while discouraging others. As a result, most practicing non-Asian Tibetan Buddhists in Toronto have visited and received teachings at a variety of Tibetan Buddhist temples. There is in effect something of a "who's who" social network amongst long-term practitioners. The NKT differs slightly in this situation however. While longer-term members can and do participate in the social network of Toronto Buddhism, most members who have strong spiritual bonds and commitments to Geshe Kelsang Gyatso and the NKT lineage tend to remain within the NKT fold for spiritual teachings and guidance. At least two reasons can be put forward for this situation. One is that the complete English translation of the tradition's teachings are easily accessible, and the second is that the NKT has a strong international foundation. Special teachings and



empowerments in the NKT are held in the spring and summer in both North America and England, and often have the feeling of a holiday or a festival, providing members with the opportunity to take advanced spiritual teachings within the NKT lineage and to forge new social relationships, all while “getting away from it all.”

The students of FOH, the NKT Centre, Gaden Choling, and Riwoche all fit into Nattier’s categorizations of “elite” Buddhists. Most if not all students come from upper-middle class backgrounds, and have some exposure to post-secondary education. While the majority of students are from European backgrounds – further confirming Nattier’s hypotheses – there are a few individuals from Asian backgrounds, who have been Canadian citizens from birth. These individuals, as with other students, are from Jewish or Christian backgrounds and view their contact and engagement with Buddhism as a break from family tradition.

Twenty-four women and ten men participated in the research process, and in most cases, completed two in-depth, structured interviews, as well as engaged in both casual and informal conversations over electronic mail, telephone, and in person. Most of these individuals affiliate themselves with the temples already described – Riwoche Pemavajra, Friends of the Heart, the NKT Buddhist centre, and Gaden Choling, although a small number of women – five – also attend other Tibetan Buddhist organizations located in the greater Toronto area. A large number of these men and women were contacted and made aware of my research project at the temples themselves, by way of informal conversations and introductions while I attended and participated in Buddhist teachings and classes, meditation sessions, and other events. An equally large number of women and men were approached on my behalf by more personal referrals. In effect, about half of the women and men who were active participants in the research process became involved due to the power of these personal referrals and social networks, as well as their own intense interest in a project on Buddhism, gender, and women in Toronto. These personal referrals proved invaluable during the research process. Even though the great majority of teachings and meditation practices were well attended by both women and men, it was often difficult to form casual social

relationships. As McLellan has noticed in her own research, many non-Asians join groups and go to the centres and temples to meditate and learn, *not* to socialize (1999: 24). It is not an uncommon occurrence for people at the end of a meditation practice or teaching to put away their chairs or cushions and simply leave.

The great majority of dedicated, long-term Buddhist practitioners were found to be in their late thirties to their mid-fifties, which is somewhat contrary to the reports on American Buddhism, which hold the average age to be somewhere between the late forties and early sixties (Coleman 1999: 94; Queen 1999: xiv; Levine 2000: 74). This is the case for both Toronto women and men, although the numbers of women interviewed were greater than those of the men, in fact twenty-four to ten. Among long-term practitioners, there are those men and women in their fifties and sixties, most of whom have been engaged with Buddhism since the late 1960s or 70s. It must be noted here that all of the above Buddhist centres and temples accommodate and welcome new students of any age and interest, and new practitioners of almost any age can be found.

Many Buddhist practitioners and commentators feel that while there are committed individuals practicing the *Dharma* in their twenties and thirties, such people represent a generational minority (Levine 2000: 74). In the USA in the 60s and 70s, many Buddhist teachers (both Asian and Western) like Sharon Salzberg, Chogyam Trungpa, Ram Dass, and others, were the same age and generation as their students. According to Noah Levine, a self-confessed, twenty-something “*Dharma Punk*” and Buddhist teacher, the *sangha* now appears to be almost “overwhelmingly gray.” For those older practitioners, he notes:

It was not cross-generational teaching like it is now. It is a much different experience when a nineteen-year old comes into the dharma scene now and their teacher is sixty and this [other] teacher is wearing a tie and driving a new car . . . Other than some young reincarnated lamas, there are no people of my generation teaching the dharma. As the teachers have aged, so too has the sangha. (Levine 2000: 74)

Although not quite contrary to these reports, the age range of Toronto Buddhists seems more diverse and not limited to those forty years of age and older. Among both the men and women who participated in this project (and among those I have observed at meditation sessions, teachings, and other

events), there can be found individuals in their mid to late twenties and thirties, most of whom have been practitioners between four and ten years. While not in the majority, their presence is most definitely visible. Among those interviewed, there were three “thirty something” women who were “new” to organized Buddhism and encountering its teachings and meditations for the first time.

In terms of ethnicity and economic, social, and educational status, the women and men around whom this project is based almost overwhelmingly coincide with the categorizations of “elite Buddhists” in the United States. With few exceptions, the thirty-four individuals interviewed were all born in Canada or immigrated to Canada with their families (most usually in their childhoods) from Europe, England, and Scotland. Two women were also born in the United States and have spent long periods of time in Canada. One woman is a dual citizen and the other had become a Canadian citizen in her youth. The backgrounds of those interviewed include English, Scottish, German, Irish, Italian, Swedish, Danish, Hungarian, Romanian, and Belgian, and three individuals who identified themselves as culturally Jewish. Two women who were involved in the formal interviewing process were exceptions in terms of their backgrounds: one woman is ethnically Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese; and the other describes her ethnic heritage as “United Nations,” with ancestry that includes Irish, English, Scots, Mohawk, and Afro-Cuban roots.

A predominantly European background is, however, also reflected in the overall attendance and participation at these four Toronto centres, even though there are a very small number of individuals (mostly women) whose background is Asian, African and/or Caribbean, and South/Central American.

Toronto Tibetan Buddhists also conform to Nattier’s categorizations of the Buddhist “elite” in terms of economic and educational status. All thirty-four individuals could, either by virtue of their familial background or present occupation and lifestyle, be categorized as “middle” and “upper-middle class” members of Canadian society. Some of the career paths of this loose grouping of Toronto Tibetan Buddhists include: documentary film makers, physical therapists, professional artists, economics professors, medical doctors, physicists, computer engineers, psychotherapists, and small business owners. Educational levels are also correspondingly high; with the exception of three individuals, all women and men have had

some exposure to post-secondary or university education and many have completed advanced graduate degrees (see also Coleman 1999: 95).

High educational levels and the obvious location within a privileged social and economic class are in some senses important requisites for interacting and participating with Tibetan Buddhist centres and practices in Toronto. As Nattier has noted, money and leisure time are crucial resources (1997: 75). Time commitments can be quite considerable, and can easily involve one or two evenings per week, weekends, and retreats that can run a week in duration to many months. Suggested donations for evening teachings and meditation sessions are most commonly between seven and ten dollars (Cdn), while meditation classes at some centres offer five classes for over a hundred dollars, or a single class for around thirty dollars. Costs for longer retreats (seven to ten days) can range between six hundred and seven hundred dollars for accommodations and teachings, and may or may not include the "suggested teacher donations" which can run into the hundreds of dollars. International courses and retreats are also available, and one can encounter information about them at the centres themselves, in Buddhist and "spiritual" magazines such as *Tricycle: the Buddhist Review*, *the Shambhala Sun*, *Ascent*, and *What is Enlightenment?*, as well as through a large variety of Internet sites. Retreats offered in the United Kingdom, South America, India, Nepal, and other locations can, on average, cost around \$2500.00 (US) for a ten week course, and ten day teachings by renowned Buddhist lamas can be attended for \$800.00 (US).

In the areas of class, ethnicity and education, the thirty-four women and men with whom I worked appear to conform to the "elite" Buddhist characteristics outlined by Nattier (1997; 1998; see also Prebish 1979; 1998). This is not to say, however, that this conception of the Buddhist "elite" is completely accurate. Again, while a classificatory model in general can define some general group characteristics, it does not allow enough "space" to adequately address the realities and experiences of the individual Buddhist practitioner in Toronto. Broad characterizations of all "types" of Buddhists including the so-called "elites," most commonly presents an image of a group of people who are financially stable, intellectually and spiritually driven, and intensely involved in their pursuit of Buddhist study and meditation. In short, the

image of the “elite” Buddhist very strongly supports and legitimates the media representations of “Western Buddhism.”

The image, however, is just that: an illusion. It is ultimately flat and unidimensional. Variable levels of intensity and involvement in spiritual endeavors are not made visible. None of the richness, depth, emotional intensity, and tribulations that are regularly experienced are noted, or, for the most part, even acknowledged. And it is these very experiences that may be especially pronounced for individuals attempting to learn, understand, and come to terms with a new “Eastern” religious system, belief structure, and world view into their lives within contemporary Canadian society. Such lives can frequently include the responsibilities, of children and family, economic uncertainty, and the general frustrations of life within a large urban centre.

Of all the elements of identity discussed above, such as ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status, gender is the one particular element that has consistently received little or no treatment in mainstream classificatory frameworks, as well as in mainstream popular discussions of Buddhism and the West. An explicit assumption exists in a great deal of published work, that in speaking of “Buddhism and the West,” *all* individuals from all types of backgrounds and orientations are supposed to recognize themselves in these accounts. To illustrate this, we can take Nattier’s 1997 article on the types of Buddhism where she astutely recognizes the importance that methods of transmission, ethnicity, and socioeconomic backgrounds hold in reference to discussions of American Buddhism, yet does not even mention gender as a potentially salient element in such discussions. Yet ironically, gender is indeed present in some of the photographs included with her article. One such picture shows members of a regular gathering of Soka Gakkai in Philadelphia (1997: 77). The group is seated in a semi-circle, and of those visible within the shot, it is shown that women easily outnumber the men at this meeting. Not counting the unrecognizable pair of hands or the nose at the edges of the photograph, there are easily nine women to be seen, as opposed to only four men.

Another example comes from the introduction to a recent scholastic publication, *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship* (1999). Drawing on the findings of research

presented in the volume on how “American Buddhism” looks, the author and editor states: “The typical convert to Buddhism . . . is a 46-year-old white female . . .” (Queen 1999: xiv). Other than a passing reference to “the feminization of Buddhism” and some statistics on the large numbers of American women involved in Buddhism, nowhere else is gender mentioned or dealt with. All the contributors, with the one exception, are male, and women and/or gender is not a direct topic of inquiry throughout the volume. Even with statistical evidence illustrating women’s obviously strong presence in Western Buddhism, very little attention is given as to why *this* is the case in the first place. The implicit message in these works is that the Western audience of Buddhism is primarily male. More than that, this maleness is also encoded as upper-middle class, especially when the topic of discussion are the so-called “elite” schools of Buddhism.

The gender disparity in classificatory schemes is reflected in much of the current literature on Buddhism and the West, both scholastic and popular. Granted, there is and continues to be a growing body of excellent articles, anthologies, and books on women and gender by Western Buddhist women, including the monastics Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Pema Chödrön, and Thubten Chödrön, and by other influential women writers who often blur the boundaries between academic and popular inquiry. Women who write in this vein include Anne C. Klein, Rita Gross, Miranda Shaw, and Sally Boucher. Many notable works have specifically addressed the issues of gender, spirituality, and Buddhist practice in the West, among which are *Buddhist Women on the Edge: Contemporary Perspectives from the Western Frontier* (1996), *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self* (1995), *Turning the Wheel* (1988), and *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (1993). In spite of such works, one can still venture into a local bookstore and select from the shelves books with such topics as “Buddhism and the West,” “Western Buddhist Practice,” and “Buddhism for Westerners,” and find no mention whatsoever of gender or its impact upon spiritual practice.

While the *Dharma* is often said to speak to the *human* experience, it may in fact be speaking more strongly to the *male* experience (Gross 1986b: 65). A long-time Tibetan Buddhist practitioner, as well as both a Buddhist and feminist scholar, Rita Gross (among others) feels that the confluence of Buddhism and

western feminism offers a unique chance to combine spirituality with fully egalitarian access (1987: 89). She also adds a caveat here, one drawn from her own experience as a Buddhist and a feminist. Few senior Buddhist practitioners, she says, actually perceive the need for egalitarianism in addition to establishing Buddhism in the West in a non-sexist manner (1987: 89). To the contrary, many Buddhist practitioners believe that egalitarianism is already the case.

Paying attention to the impact of gender on Buddhist identity urges us to ask a number of important questions. Are men and women interested in, attracted to, and represented in certain schools of Buddhism in the same way and for the same reasons? Do men and women from a predominantly Judeo-Christian background have the same reasons and motivations for seeking out this new avenue of religious and spiritual practice? Further, paying closer attention to the impacts of gender will shed light on the ways in which men and women define and assign value to a Buddhist identity, as well as how gender issues influence the transmission of Buddhism into the West. With these points in mind, Part III explores more directly the personal narratives of the Toronto women and men who attend Tibetan Buddhist centres, and those individuals who participated in this research project.

**Part III**  
**NARRATIVES OF THE PATH: ATTRACTION AND AVERSION**

**A) Narrative Spaces**

As has already been discussed, there is a growing body of literature devoted to classifying different types of Buddhists (particularly in the USA), based upon gender, ethnicity, social class, and educational status. But still relatively little attention is paid to “why” a seemingly large number of women and men turn to Buddhism in the first place. An answer to why men and women in a predominantly Judeo-Christian society are turning away from their own familial religious heritages is infrequently brought to bear upon the rise of serious and committed interest in Buddhism. For example, in Sandy Boucher’s anthology of influential American Buddhist women, *Turning the Wheel* (1988), the focus is most strongly upon what many of these long-term Buddhist women identify and perceive as gender inequalities. Composed of one-on-one interviews between the author and other American Buddhist women, the dialogue most frequently begins at the point where most of the interviewees have already been Buddhist for a significant number of years, rather than on any underlying motivations for their own interest in and turn towards Buddhism in the first place. In conjunction with this, much of the literature on classifying Western and American Buddhists does not make any clear-cut distinction (other than the most general) between and within the many schools of the Buddhist tradition. It appears that many discussions concerning Buddhists in the West take place in a vacuum. It is most often left to the reader to fill in the social, religious, and personal contexts of meaning, extrapolated from often indirect and vague references and statements.

Before turning directly to the personal narratives of men and women in Toronto, it is necessary to briefly explore the meaning of narrative *itself*, especially as it is used here: as a story, or a telling, of something that has already happened (Roth 1988: 1). Another useful way of looking at narrative is to see it



as a story that someone tells about him- or herself. Narratives can also be classified into life histories<sup>1</sup> and autobiographies. Narratives, autobiographies, and life histories in general have come to be seen as more than just interesting stories or supplemental research in the social sciences; they can also construct our worlds and our lives. Philosophically, the constructivist approach, unconcerned with this type of “world construction,” takes it as a central premise that world-making is a principal function of the mind. Such a view assumes that stories “happen” inside people’s heads, not outside in the “real” world. This approach, when applied to autobiography, and I believe other forms of narrative as well, raises a version of the “truth versus fiction” argument. Are autobiographies, life histories, and personal narratives a “real,” authentic record of events, or are they continual interpretations and reinterpretations of our experience? In response, Ricoeur maintains that there is simply no such thing as an “historical reality” already in existence, somehow apart from us; he maintains it is *always* a reconstruction (1984: 97). This topic has received considerable attention, particularly when it relates to historical (or scientific) explanations.<sup>2</sup> According to historian Paul Roth, emphasizing a narrative structure in historical practice is frequently unsettling, as it is commonly perceived as “. . . too close to the writing of fiction” (1988: 2).

Such an issue has become for many contemporary social researchers less and less a matter of central importance. Much of current anthropological interest in narrative forms, for example, focuses at least as much interest on the *processes* by which narrative accounts are constructed as in the finished product (Cruikshank 1990: 2). What is of lesser importance is the “truth versus fiction” debate; what is of greater import and interest is *how* individuals *use* their interpretations and reinterpretations. According to

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<sup>1</sup> A life history is most usually conceptualized as a social, rather than a solitary, activity. It involves an investigator who interacts with the subject on some kind of collaborative project (Cruikshank 1990: x). This form of narrative also raises the question of what is intended by a “life” (Linde 1993: 20), and whether or not this designation appears cross-culturally. It also, along with autobiography, implicitly assumes that only certain types of people are “worthy” of having their lives investigated and recorded in oral or written forms. Such assumptions are usually rooted in issues of ethnicity, class, and gender.

<sup>2</sup> For further readings, see Ricoeur 1981, 1984; Tonkin 1992; Lorenz 1998. For a feminist analysis, see Reinharz 1992, and Weedon 1987.

Cruikshank, attention to the ways in which individuals interpret their experiences and describe them in narrative form “. . . may add a different perspective to debates about cultural persistence and cultural change” (1990: 12), foregoing any absolute questions (or answers) of “truth” and “fact” (Linde 1993: 16).

Attention is given instead to the *meanings* found and produced in narrative processes. Increasingly, narrative is regarded as the “embodiment of our understandings of the world, of experience, and ultimately of ourselves” (Kerby 1991: 3; Braid 1996: 5). Narrative has the ability to reveal, display, and transmit what is valuable and moral, and ultimately, what is “really real” in our experiences (Geertz 1973: 112; Kerby 1991: 3; Ochs and Capps 1996: 23). In another vein, narrative can be seen as a means of socialization, or an interface, between the individual and society: “Through narrative we come to know what it means to be a human being” (Ochs and Capps 1996: 31; Tonkin 1992: 1; Kerby 1991: 62-63; Linde 1993: 3; Csordas 1994: vii). It is through narrative that individuals come to know cultural, social, and communal senses of the human passions, virtues, relationships, other people, themselves, normative actions, ideas, morality, and aesthetics. Narrative also allows us – as both narrators and listeners – to create a sense of coherence and stability out of everyday, lived experience. It allows us to bridge the gaps between multiple pasts, presents, and potential futures. In a specific sense, narratives are stories that portray a series of temporal events in ways that are *meaningful* to the tellers (Kerby 1991: 39).

To illustrate this point, I have termed the portions of the narratives on men’s and women’s burgeoning interest and involvement with Buddhism over the years as “the path.” Such a term is in fact what many individuals themselves have come to use to describe their own personal experiences; it also illustrates how these narratives are individual attempts to also construct a coherent, ordered, and understandable sequence of events, as well as meaningful ones. Such stories often encompass significant time spans: five, ten, even twenty years or more. Necessarily, events and experiences have been omitted in the interests of personal relevance, as well as the duration of the interviews themselves. The women and men involved within this research project have thus constructed their own narratives, their own “stories,” using experiences and events that have come to be interpreted as somehow “meaningful” and “important.”

A discussion of *why* these individuals turn towards Buddhism initially, and *what* they are actually seeking may also shed more light as to *who* in fact identifies themselves as a Buddhist in contemporary Canadian society, and what meaning the term actually holds for them in daily life.

## **B) Narrative Themes**

### **Attraction and Aversion**

Two major themes, of attraction and aversion, can be discerned in the personal narratives of Toronto Tibetan Buddhists. Under these broad categories, a variety of related experiences can be subsumed. Broadly characterized, there are first those elements of Buddhism that are “attractive” to North American audiences, and second, there are those elements found within the Western religious traditions which are held in “aversion.” Viewed together, these two elements subsequently influence a turn towards Buddhism.

Elements of attraction and aversion are reflected within the literature on the subject as well as the personal narratives of the men and women who participated in this research project. All participants were invited to share their personal backgrounds, framed generally around their family backgrounds, which included their family size and structure, social and economic status, their own occupational and educational status as well as that of their parents and their siblings. As well, the religious orientations of both parents were investigated, and how much or how little an impact this orientation had upon him or her as a child in their parent’s household. Participants were also invited to talk freely and at length about these particular topics, or any other topics, issues, or events that were considered personally memorable, influential, and noteworthy. Most participants made clear connections with their personal and familial circumstances and their interest in and eventual contact with Buddhism. Participants were asked, if they had not done so already, to respond to the following types of questions: “How did your interest in Buddhism develop?”, “What led you to Buddhism?”, and “How did you become involved with Buddhism?”.

### Secularization and Personal Religious Practice

When reading academic literature on the topic of religion, spirituality, and the sacred in industrial societies, a commonly seen theme has been the “disappearance” of the sacred, or, to phrase it differently, the “secularization” of society. Patterns of decline in church attendance have been discussed and demonstrated over the last thirty years – and throughout the twentieth century – in most Western countries<sup>3</sup> (Parsons 1966; Martin 1978; Roof and Hoge 1980; Bibby 1987; Finke and Stark 1988; Lyon 1985; Parker G. 1998; Demerath 1995; O’Toole 1996; Swatos, Jr. and Christiano 1999; Beyer 1999). Hay and Morisy write that even though the decline in religious practice – or the public and social manifestations of the sacred – can be well-documented, it is wrong to assume that this automatically corresponds to a decline in personal religious practice. They suggest that “. . . a secularised society, with all its power of constructing reality for the individual, does not imply a secularised consciousness” (Hay and Morisy 1985: 220).

In at least one sense, we can see Hay and Morisy’s postulation at work in the narrative of Linsey McPhee, a thirty-something Toronto woman who is exploring her own interest in and attraction to Buddhist meditation and philosophy, particularly in terms of what she perceives as its lack of a “formal religiosity.” Linsey describes her religious and cultural background as Scots Presbyterian. She was born in Scotland and immigrated to Canada with her family as a young child. Both her parents were raised in the Scots Presbyterian tradition, but did not actively participate as adults. Linsey and her younger siblings all went to Sunday School but did not attend regularly. She states that any religious involvement within her family was neither practiced nor particularly supported. Overall, she says, “. . . the overriding attitude towards religion in my family was that religion was a form of social control. And so [while growing up], I had no sense of the reality of a spiritual life.”

According to Linsey, her interest in Buddhism began in 1997, soon after the death of her mother. She can trace her interest to a particular moment and experience in a Toronto bookstore, where she had just

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<sup>3</sup> Most if not all of this type of research is concerned with the decline of religiosity in Christian denominations. It is not known if similar rates of institutional decline are present in other Western religious traditions in industrialized societies.

picked up and started thumbing through a copy of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Of this experience, she says,

As I was looking at it, it all of the sudden became an incredibly personal moment. And it was the first time that the . . . a sort of cathartic grief experience was triggered after her [her mother's] death. And I had to leave the store, and I rode [a bike] home. And the tears were pouring down my face, and I got in the house and I just turned around to close the door and I collapsed against the door and I just . . . I just cried. My nose was bleeding, I was . . . it was completely cathartic because I felt that this . . . the thing that triggered it was what I was reading on the back of the book, that it was a guide for living, but also a guide for . . . also a guide for grieving. And I felt like somehow my mother had led me there. Led me to this thing that could heal me. And I felt such love for her and such gratitude and then that triggered the grief. So I thought it was a pretty powerful experience, and I don't know whether I was being too literal or too concrete in wanting to pursue Tibetan Buddhism, because it had been triggered – this grief had been triggered within that context. But anyway, I did.

Linsey notes that this experience was not only cathartic for her, but had also managed to awaken in her some kind of “recognition,” of the validity of “spiritual matters” and “spiritual life” in her personal affairs. After this experience, Linsey purchased a number of books on Buddhist meditation and began actively searching out Buddhist centres and temples in the Toronto area. At the time of our meeting in the fall of 1999, we were enrolled in a “Learning to Meditate” class offered for beginners at the Toronto centre of the New Kadampa Tradition.

While she acknowledges she is very much a “beginner at this,” she maintains that her interest in Buddhism is strongly influenced by her perception that it *lacks* certain features, features that she strongly associates with Christianity.

. . . it seems to me that there is less . . . it's less about social control and it is more about a personal voyage. I think all of these Eastern religions have that; they are more a philosophy, a design for living, than a rigid institution and social structure. And I think that appeals to me. And also what appeals to me as well, is that it's very . . . in social work, we call it 'client-focused.' But it starts where you are and goes from there. So in that way, I think of it as the path of least resistance; the path with the most beneficial result for individual growth, because it's taking you from where you are *by degrees* . . .

In Linsey's narrative, it is clear that she values personal autonomy and self-direction. Characteristics such as these, including individualism and self-reliance, are commonly noted by many other women and men who participated in this study, and are also considered to be indicative of certain class categorizations. Sherkat and Wilson report that while lower classes are more strongly socialized into preferring more conservative and stricter religious ideas, the upper classes, by way of contrast, are more strongly attracted to an intellectual religious ethos that emphasizes individual autonomy over respect for authority (1995: 994-995; Spearitt 1995: 361). Correspondingly, Nattier's discussion of "elite" Buddhists, an upper-middle class group which she states consists of mostly well-educated, European-descended participants, holds that certain Western values such as freedom of choice, personal fulfillment, and individualism are considered key elements that are not readily negotiable (Nattier 1997: 76). Linsey herself seems to have all of these criteria, as she has studied philosophy at a university level, and is now currently undertaking a degree program in social work in Toronto.

### **Individual and Social Malaise**

The emphasis on individualism, personal autonomy, and a perceived lack of authority and hierarchy, are indicative of an underlying set of characteristics in North American society in the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first. The Jewish and Christian religious and value systems are regarded by many as not having adequately and effectively addressed the ills of contemporary society (Emberley 2002; Doyle Driedger 2001; Dürckheim 1987). The present trends of unrestrained materialism, consumerism, and economic development, combined with human rights injustices, and political and social imbalances, are becoming increasingly prominent concerns for a growing number of people in Western societies (Hewage 1976: 12). In this vein, Bishop posits that this sense of malaise in the West, combined with economic recession, widespread poverty, social inequalities, repeated wars, and ecological destruction, has resulted in a cynicism towards "traditional" religio-political authority and guidance (1993: 53).

Societal and cultural malaise is a theme that is underscored in many contemporary discussions of Buddhism's growing popularity in Western industrialized countries. European philosopher and psychologist Karlfried Graf Dürckheim's writings on Zen and the Western interest is a case in point. He writes that the Western attraction to Zen is part fashion, part love of the exotic, and in part the awareness that there is, in his words, something "fundamentally wrong" with Western social values. Accordingly, Dürckheim maintains that Western ways of thinking and acting that are supposed to support our ability to cope with external pressures and demands are in fact detrimental, and have a high individual and societal cost. Speaking of "average" persons in Western society, he says that the vast majority have lost their belief systems, and this makes for a grave situation.

With no beliefs left to sustain them, they run from themselves, from this growing inner emptiness, and seek refuge in outside distractions. They lose contact with themselves, and their inner breathing falters. Feelings of guilt and fear take over. Bewildered and rudderless, they look around desperately for a way out. (1987: 3-4)

The answer, according to Dürckheim, is to be found in what he has labeled the "basic truths" of human life and the "universal significance" of Zen (1987: 8), and Buddhism in general (Ellwood and Partin 1988: 229).

The feeling of societal and cultural unease described in both popular and scholastic sources finds resonance with some Torontonians engaging with Buddhism. In many cases, this sense of "wrongness" was experienced at an early age, and provided a sort of "meta-theme" for their lives. Answers or solutions to their own malaise and discontent were sought throughout their lives, and are identified as responsible for having placed them on a "spiritual quest" or, more directly, on the path towards Buddhism itself.

Born in Chatham, Ontario, in 1960, Ani Jamyang is currently a nun in the Nyingma lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. She put on the robes in the mid 1990s, and is working her way through the traditional ordination stages. As a child, she moved with her mother and stepfather to the United States. She feels that

living in New York City during the 1960s was very influential and served to crystallize a number of themes that would remain prominent throughout her life.

I've always had a strong interest in the suffering of other beings. And when I grew up, in New York City, on the lower East Side, it was a very dark time. And as a child, I saw a lot of suffering and it really made a strong impact on me . . . my mother was not well, and she was on welfare and she suffered from depression. So I saw her suffering a lot, but also generally, in the populace. We lived in an area that was, I guess, you would call it 'the Puerto Rican slums.' So there was a lot of poverty. It was the 60s and there was a lot of experimental drug use, and I saw a lot of kids die young in New York . . . the Vietnam War issue was happening; the 'Beats' were being beaten up by construction workers daily; Angela Davis was there with the Black Panthers movement. You had the drug problem, the Hell's Angels were up the street from us. There was the Martin Luther King and the civil rights issue. There were women wanting feminist issues that were burning their bras in the park. It was very intense.

So as a kid, I saw all of this stuff. And it left a real impression on me. And I kind of made a vow as a child that, you know, if I ever kind of got out of this stuff . . . I don't know what you would call it, 'human suffering' I guess. I made a vow that if I ever got out, I would do something about it. I didn't know what, but I looked around and I saw people living a life where they were kind of 'stuck.' And they . . . just were in a situation where they couldn't get out of whatever it was they were in, whether it was because of poverty or lack of intelligence, or race, or lack of motivation . . . And so I would say that that time in New York, although it was kind of not the nicest time, really, really, affected my character for the later years.

### **The Rational and the Scientific**

It has been noted earlier that Buddhism is often perceived in the West as having a strong rational and scientific appeal (Bishop 1993; Thurman 1995; Anderson 1980). According to this modern, Western perspective, Buddhism does not require its followers to adhere to or accept any system of belief, value, or action. Rather, it encourages its followers to question and seek answers for themselves, as opposed to relying upon the experiences and teachings of others (Thera 1992). In keeping with this perspective, one of the main objectives of Buddhist meditation is to enable the mind to see the world clearly, developing the ability to apprehend the world, oneself, and others as they really are: impermanent and interdependent. Developing such clarity, in a Buddhist perspective, is the only possible means of overcoming the suffering that pervades life and existence (Zim 1977: 190). For Philip Starkman, a sixty-two year old psychotherapist living and working in Toronto, it is precisely this "scientific" characterization of Buddhism that he finds very appealing.



Well, I can say for myself, it's a commitment to the technology. There's a commitment to a Buddhist way of life which involves ethics, which involves a philosophy, which involves a life view that I'm always looking at and evaluating and re-evaluating. There's some aspects that I, from time to time, will question. At other times, I just do it for the technology; it is a science of the mind.

Born in Toronto in 1939, Philip was from what he describes as a "culturally" Jewish family, where Judaism was celebrated only on holidays. Even today, his two older brothers and parents are still what he feels to be "non-religious." Philip's family is Eastern European in background, and while his mother was born in Canada, his father immigrated from Poland at sixteen. Like many of their generation, Philip notes, his parents could not afford to go to school, and each received only a grade eight education. He attributes the lack of any religious influence in his family to this point, as he recalls that there was not a great deal of interest in and support for religious learning, history, or philosophy.

Consciously, Philip remembers that he was around ten or twelve when he began a sort of "spiritual quest," in part influenced by reading the biography of Mahatma Gandhi. Some time after high school, in 1959, he left Canada to travel abroad. It is at this point in his life, he says,

... when the search began, and I had lots of questions about life, reality and why we're born, live for a short time, why we die, and what happens after that. These questions weren't being answered here [in Toronto], and I didn't even care to have them answered here because I wanted to participate in 'the Great Adventure.'

Later on in the late 1960s and early 1970s, after practising as a social worker in California, Philip's marriage failed and he left for India to continue his spiritual search. There he became intensely involved with different forms of yoga. In 1981, Philip went on a long-term Theravadin Buddhist retreat in Burma, to learn certain breathing techniques that he planned to incorporate into his therapy practice. This retreat, he says, was his real introduction to Buddhism, and was also a significant turning point in his spiritual life.

All along I had been fighting in the Hindu tradition, as well as with the Jewish tradition, and the Buddhist tradition, against taking on 'the religion.' I wasn't interested in 'religion.' I just listened

to the lectures that were given once a week in Burma at the centre where I was, and it was really epistemology; it was extraordinary psychology. The insight into human behaviour and motivation seemed so profound to me that it was irresistible. I was touched . . . entirely!

Philip spent six months in silent meditation retreat in Burma, and then journeyed to Japan to study and practise Zen for three years. He became involved with Tibetan Buddhism when the New Kadampa Tradition was establishing its Toronto centre in the early 1990s, and did approximately six years of intensive study with that tradition. After the Dorje Shugden issue in the late 1990s, he felt it was necessary to examine his belief system and views, and eventually came to the conclusion that it was time for him to “be on his own.” While he does occasionally attend teachings and empowerments at various Buddhist centres and temples around the city, he says, “I’m very comfortable being on the periphery, rather than the inside . . . for now, although that may change.”

### Universality

Another element of rationality and scientificity that appears within the personal narratives coincides with the discussion on the perceived “universal” applicability of Buddhism. That is, that much of Buddhism’s appeal to the West lies in its perceived capacity to move beyond “religion” and address the differing spiritual needs of individuals. For Kelsang Zopa, a forty-three year old Italian Catholic born and raised in Hamilton, Ontario, what is most appealing about Buddhism is its emphasis on practicality, especially on the efficacy of meditation in daily life situations. Now an ordained monk in the New Kadampa Tradition, and the current spiritual director of that tradition’s meditation centre in Toronto, Zopa estimates that his contact with Buddhism began in his mid-thirties, almost a decade ago. Asked when his involvement with Buddhism began, he replied,

Well, I never had an interest in *Buddhism* at all. I must have been in my thirties. I was at a point in my life where I had pretty much everything I ever wanted. I had a good job, a nice partner. I had a house, two cats, very good friends. I had good health. Just about everything one aspires to. But I felt kind of insecure, despite all those things. I became aware of this when an elderly friend of mine, a woman who . . . her husband died after a long illness, and I was quite amazed at how she dealt with her husband’s death. She was very peaceful and calm and by no stretch of the

imagination did she feel her own life had come to an end she was ready to continue and have an interest in life and engage life. So I was impressed with her peacefulness and her inner strength. I knew that this came from her spiritual practice. Now, she herself wasn't a Buddhist but she had been following her own religious tradition for some time. So I realized that *that* was what was missing from my life. Despite everything . . . *material* that I had, I felt very insecure. I felt that if anything were to go wrong, if I were to lose my job, lose my house, I wouldn't have the inner strength to kind of carry me through. So I remember very clearly making a decision that I wanted to have what she had . . . Well, a short time after that, I saw a brochure advertising evening meditation classes for stress reduction. So of course, at this point, I had absolutely no interest in joining a new spiritual tradition, but for some reason the idea of meditating for stress reduction appealed to me.

So I began to try a little bit with the meditation, mostly breathing meditation, and found that they worked! That it really, actually *did* decrease stress. I was able to commute to work without arriving fuming mad . . . so I thought, 'Gee, there's something to this meditation; maybe it really works.'

Like Philip, Zopa states he struggled with the issue of "religion," or rather, with the issue of taking on or becoming a member of a new religious system. He maintains that he never had any intention of taking on a new system of beliefs, and very clearly remembers the anxiety he experienced about whether or not he should embrace Buddhism and become a "card-carrying" member. At a winter retreat, Zopa's anxieties were relieved after a discussion with a long-term practitioner who encouraged him to focus on the practice itself over and above the issues of religious identity. Zopa's decision to enter into a monastic lifestyle, he says, is in accordance with the emphasis he places on *practice* over and above *identity*.

The ordination again wasn't so much about calling myself a Buddhist; it was more about wanting to live a particular way. I wanted to live a life of moral discipline. This is something that very much appealed to me, the idea of living a moral life. A life where all our actions are considered in terms of whether they bring benefit or harm to myself and to others, and this really appealed to me. And I felt that ordaining was just a method or a step towards accomplishing this.

### Disillusionment and the Western Experience

Another significant theme that is reflected within the personal narratives of the women and men involved in this study, as well as within the corpus of literature on Buddhism and the West in general, concerns a feeling and experience of disappointment or disillusionment with the Western religious traditions, primarily Judaism and Christianity. Published in the mid 1970s, Emma Layman's observations

on the apparent “failure” of the Judeo-Christian religious traditions and organizations to meet the needs of the individual or of society (1976: 234), seem no less relevant now, almost thirty years later. She notes that those in the United States who leave Judaism or Christianity for Buddhism do so often as a result of the perceived failure of these traditions rather than from any particular preference for Buddhism. Most Americans, she says, feel a need for a religious and a spiritual system which appears to be scientifically sound and intellectually acceptable (Layman 1976: 266).

At this point, it becomes clear that disappointment with the Western religious traditions intersects in many cases with a perception of Buddhism as universally applicable and rational, and capable of addressing social issues. Indeed, it appears to be difficult to speak of one of these elements while excluding the others. These three intertwined factors are all significant in the narratives of Tara Green and Ron Cook respectively.

Tara, a thirty-nine year old artist, wife, and mother of four children, was born and raised in the Toronto area. She and her husband, a physician, have both been involved with Buddhism since the early to mid 1990s, although she acknowledges that she had “some exposure” to the “Eastern traditions” and ideas while growing up, mainly through books and the influence of friends. While she grew up believing in the existence of God, Heaven, and Hell, her exposure to organized Christianity was very limited.

Ron is forty-two years old, currently single, and was brought up in Alberta before he moved to Toronto in the late 1980s. He is a licensed plumber and has worked intermittently in the construction industry. Unlike Tara, Ron went to a Catholic school until he was in high school, and regularly attended religious services with his family until he was around ten years old. Tara, raised in a single parent household, grew up Anglican and went to Sunday School, but maintains that religion was not a strong or influential component in her childhood and her household. She feels, in fact, that she was often sent alone to Church on Sundays so that her mother could have some “peace and quiet.”

In spite of their disparate levels of exposure to religious knowledge and involvement, both Ron and Tara speak of their inability to find answers to or make sense of social problems and injustices

throughout their own lives. Strikingly, both individuals speak of very similar experiences in this respect.

According to Tara,

I grew up with the Christian idea of God, and Heaven, and I used to pray and talk to Jesus -- 'Please help me get through my exams! Just give me an eighty percent!' (She laughs). But I couldn't understand why children were being killed, why a baby was being raped. 'Why?' I just couldn't understand it; 'Why am I here in Toronto, with so much food, and so much *stuff*?' . . . And the worst was when I would hear [in the news] about children being killed and raped and I just . . . I just couldn't fathom it. I *couldn't get* the answer! And Christianity? . . . I just didn't *get* it.

Ron speaks of a similar experience:

I remember specifically . . . a number of times where I spent a lot of time alone; my marriage dissolved, I had no friends. I didn't do anything socially for eight years. I sort of isolated myself. I would think a lot about it [his life experiences and circumstances] and couldn't come to terms with it. I would read things in the paper. I can remember that this child was murdered. A very young child, maybe three, four years old. I couldn't come to terms with it. Why did this happen? Why? Why? *Why?* I remember specifically thinking, 'Well, if there's a God, how could He allow this to happen?'

Owing to the similarity of their experiences and the subsequent questions each raised about the meaning of their lives and the purpose of suffering, it is no surprise that both Ron and Tara found the Eastern concept of karma<sup>4</sup> to be a source of satisfaction and relief. Within the concept of karma, both found not only a means by which to "make sense" out of the hardships and disappointments in their own lives, but also a way in which to come to terms with and find meaning in the "suffering" taking place on national and global scales (Keyes 1983: 3).

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<sup>4</sup> In Sanskrit and Pāli, karma translates as "action" or "deed," and is often called the "universal" law of cause and effect. This law of actions and their consequences (in this life or a future one), is the driving force behind the cycle of rebirth and reincarnation in Asian religions, and is not limited solely to Buddhism. Karma is not strictly conceived of as "reward and punishment," but rather that morally wholesome acts will create the conditions for positive consequences, and vice versa. Although the theory of karma may appear deterministic, it is frequently stressed that while karma is responsible for the situation, the response to the given situation, whether positive or negative, is a result of the deliberate and volitional choice of the individual (Bowker 1997:535-536; Fischer-Schreiber, Ehrhard, and Diener 1991: 112; Powers 2000:116).

Knowledge of the concept of karma did more for Ron and Tara than provide them with a framework of meaning in which to interpret life events. Utilizing karma – or simply “cause and effect” – as an explanatory tool also provides a sense of location, or place. Both Ron and Tara use the concept of karma to achieve a more personally coherent understanding of themselves, and of themselves in relation to their life narratives as they unfold over time. Karma helped them to meaningfully position their own personal narratives within events on a broader scale. Further, karma’s explanatory capability locates both Ron and Tara in relation to other people, both interpersonally and locally.

### **The Impact of Gender**

In general, the disappointment that is expressed in the Western religious traditions is commonly felt by both men and women. Both maintain that they have difficulties with what they perceive as a lack of rationality, universality, and practicality within the Western traditions in which they were raised, and that these specific needs were felt to be more strongly addressed in their personal understandings of Buddhism. The perspectives of both men and women are similar in this respect, in that there is a commonly expressed sentiment, that in the traditions in which they were raised, they did not find a personally and spiritually fulfilling lifestyle, belief system, and interpretive framework.

Not surprisingly, there is a divergence in viewpoints and experiences between women and men when issues of gender and gender exclusion arise. Again, not surprisingly, most of the men who participated in the interviews did not report any gender-based personal difficulties or obstacles, whereas a significant number of women<sup>5</sup> who were interviewed related personal difficulties that they attribute to gender. The majority of women, with few exceptions, were able to recall a definitive “moment of understanding,”

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<sup>5</sup> Of those women who did not or could not recall a specific incident of gender discrimination, around three quarters were nevertheless concerned about issues of gender exclusion and access in religious traditions and organizations. A small number of women (five) also did not consider gender a salient topic or issue, and even felt that it was something of a non-issue. The experiences of some of these women for whom gendered religious discourse and practice is unproblematic will be discussed in greater detail in a later section.

usually tied to a specific situation or experience, in which they felt no longer able to participate to some degree with the religious tradition in which they were raised.

Eleanor Thornton's account shows how issues concerning gender in Christianity, such as access and exclusion, status and roles, have always been prominent in her own religious and spiritual life. At fifty-seven, she has been heavily involved with Tibetan Buddhism since the early 1990s. Born in England during the second World War, she and her family left for Canada in 1952. Her father had been a High Anglican and was quite devout before he "dropped away" from the Church, for reasons quite unknown to Eleanor. Her mother was herself brought up in the Church of Scotland, but was not what Eleanor would call "observant," although she does recall fondly that her mother had a comprehensive repertoire of Church of Scotland hymns, which she sang while doing housework. Even though her mother was non-practicing, Eleanor remembers that her mother was what she calls a "pure Calvinist," that in her mother's conception, God was a "punishing God."

Both parents strongly encouraged Eleanor and her younger sister to be self-sufficient financially and otherwise, and "independent thinkers" when it came to religion. Eleanor and her sister were brought up Agnostic, but she acknowledges that in terms of any sort of "religious upbringing," she says, "there was none." Even so, she states:

I was always interested – I was interested in, but leery of, religion. I think that is because . . . I think I was born a feminist. And although I couldn't articulate it at the time, I was aware that the Church was an instrument in the oppression of women.

After her first marriage ended in divorce in the late 1960s, Eleanor found herself in a difficult situation as a single parent. For a period of almost a year, she took instruction in the Catholic faith, as she says, ". . . it seemed to be offering the kind of peace that I was looking for." She soon drifted away from Catholicism, in part because of all the ". . . terrible blame and guilt."

Eleanor feels that Buddhism was always of interest to her, ever since she was a small child. Her direct involvement however, she feels very strongly did not occur until the timing was right, or until the

“necessary . . . karma was ripening.” The “proper karma” unfolded in the early 1990s, while she was coping with the dissolution of a second, abusive marriage, and had been diagnosed with and was being treated for breast cancer, all while she was in the process of completing her doctorate in sociology.

Eleanor attributes her initial attraction to Buddhism to the prominent position and role of women in the tradition. She says she was – and still is – strongly attracted to powerful, wise, and compassionate female figures and deities such as the spiritually accomplished Machig Labdrön,<sup>6</sup> Yeshe Tsogyel,<sup>7</sup> and the female Buddha Tara.<sup>8</sup> Such images, for her, were “antidotes” to the misogyny she feels exists within the Christian Church. She states:

I find the images of female Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism very empowering, . . . I mean, just *wonderfully!* Because they legitimate me as a spiritual person, in a way that Christianity never did. And [in] Christianity, I felt . . . I felt I was never quite good enough because I had a woman’s body.

Eleanor’s sentiments about women’s roles in both Christianity and Buddhism are echoed by other women attracted to Tibetan Buddhism. One woman, who has chosen to be known by the name “Isis,” further elaborates on the connection between embodiment, spirituality, and women’s roles. Isis was raised, by her own account, in a “devout” Irish-Italian Catholic family. She and her three siblings were “. . . encouraged

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<sup>6</sup> Machig Labdrön is popularly perceived in Tibetan Buddhism as both a deity and a *dākinī*, an embodiment of the wisdom of the Buddhas (*prajñāpāramitā*). Historically, Machig was a contemporary of the teacher and saint Milarepa. She was a spiritual adept, mother, and the founder of the Chöd tradition of Mahāmudrā (Edou 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Considered a highly accomplished *yoginī* (female *Tantric* practitioner) and *dākinī*. She was considered an intimate companion and spiritual consort of Padmasambhava, who brought Buddhism to Tibet. She is considered by the tradition to have been the first Tibetan to have attained Buddhahood within a single lifetime (Gross 1987: 14-15; Powers 2000: 250; Fischer-Sreiber, Ehrhard, and Diener 1991: 253).

<sup>8</sup> Tara is often cited as Tibet’s most important deity. She is the manifestation of “ultimate truth emptiness” or “wisdom realizing emptiness.” Tara is called the “Mother of All Buddhas” owing to the fact that all Buddhas arise from this type of wisdom, the wisdom that directly realizes emptiness (Gyatso 1993). She is considered a *bodhisattva* who has for many Tibetan Buddhists already realized Buddhahood, and has vowed never to relinquish her female form, even and especially after she was advised of the spiritual advantages that are assumed to accompany male rebirth (Bowker 1997: 954).



to be in contact with God as much as possible through prayers and rosaries . . .” The entire family regularly attended Church services and recognized other religious events, such as feast and fasting days.

Growing up with Catholicism and a devout family, Isis states that she was not satisfied with Christianity’s treatment of women. She describes her sentiments towards Catholicism and its attitude towards women as follows:

I felt oppressed by it . . . particularly around issues of sexuality. I felt that Catholicism was really responsible for imbuing me with a sense of body hatred and guilt around my sexual passions and processes, and that this feeling was imparted when I was a child . . . It was almost part of Catholic doctrine, that the women were on their hands and knees washing the floors of the Churches and frying up – making these little cakes for the devoted, for the devotees, for the practitioners, for the congregation. And, at the same time, their bodies were being destroyed by childbirth after childbirth . . . it’s cruel. It’s cruel and heinous and I didn’t want to be involved with it specifically because of its desexualizing, nasty relationship with women.

As an adult, Isis has been intensely involved with neo-Paganism for twenty-five years. Her interests in that spiritual tradition centred specifically on the movement’s emphases on living in harmony with the Earth, a strong female emphasis, and peace activism. A desire to learn to meditate, a search for a stronger sense of community, and the non-gendered nature of the Buddha, led Isis to become a practicing member of a Tibetan Buddhist temple approximately four years ago.

Both Isis and Eleanor, among others, state that they were strongly attracted to the feminine elements, deities, and practices found within Tibetan Buddhism. Many of the Toronto women practising Buddhism hold fast to the idea of the genderless nature or reality in Buddhism, and claim they feel freed from sexist doctrines and rituals to practise and attain spiritual fulfillment as empowered individuals. The recognition and legitimation of women’s spiritual abilities finds significant support in a statement attributed to the Buddhist saint Padmasambhava. Also known as Guru Rinpoche, Padmasambhava noted:

The human body is the basis of  
the accomplishment of wisdom  
And the gross bodies of men and women are  
equally suited.  
But if a woman has strong aspiration,  
she has higher potential. (Dowman 1984: 86)

According to Eleanor, powerful female symbols and statements such as these are a significant source of attraction and interest, and strongly influence her own meditation practice. As she has noted above, these female symbols are very empowering because they legitimate her spirituality.

The emphasis on the female, when combined with seemingly egalitarian doctrine, enables many Canadian women who have had negative and discriminatory experiences within the Christian traditions to re-approach a religious system and spiritual lifestyle with a renewed sense of hope, inclusion, and fulfillment. For some women like Eleanor and Isis, their personal misgivings about Christianity – and their subsequent spiritual search – have been strongly shaped by gender. As noted above, both these women claim that they were seeking a spiritual tradition or path in which they could be recognized and empowered *as women*.

A spiritual tradition that recognizes and acknowledges enlightened and empowered women addresses specific needs for many women. A Canadian Tibetan Buddhist nun reiterates this point, stating that she feels that the powerful and positive images of the feminine found in Tibetan Buddhism respond to “. . . the horrible confusion that women have about who they are and what their position is in life.”

### **Crisis Points and Gender**

While the narratives presented here are by no means representative of all the men and women who were involved in the research process, or of the larger Buddhist population in Toronto and North America, it is still possible to extrapolate a number of themes and shed light upon why Canadians and others in the West are coming to Buddhism, and by so doing, clarify what particular motivations and elements are making Buddhism become a viable religious alternative in Canada and the West. As these personal narratives have revealed, Tibetan Buddhism is largely perceived as a complex of beliefs and practices, as well as an ideology, philosophy, and worldview. Within this matrix, answers to personal and social malaise are actively being sought. More specifically, Buddhism is regarded as a means of healing some of the wounds that many felt have been inflicted by Christianity, consumerism, and materialism.

Certain themes arise in the narratives concerning gender and motivation. The great majority of the individuals involved maintained that they were interested in “spirituality” and “spiritual issues” from early childhood, and grew up in family environments that often encouraged independence, personal inquiry, and open-mindedness both within Christianity and in terms of other traditions, regardless of how religiously observant the family. Isis remembers that although her mother was a devout Irish Catholic, she also read Tarot cards. Isis’ mother, in fact, presented her with her first deck of Tarot cards, and encouraged their use. Similarly, Eleanor remembers having serious discussions with her father on the nature of God, who encouraged her to think for herself and voice any doubts. Even in Linsey’s non-observant household, she remembers seeing a stature of the Buddha on the mantle while growing up. She does not remember where it came from, or how it arrived, but she remembers a respectful and interested attitude within her immediate family towards non-Christian traditions.

Even with such positive reinforcement and support as children, at some point in their lives, all twenty-four women experienced what can be described as a “crisis of faith” – experiencing certain events which served as the motivation for transforming spiritual interest into a more committed spiritual search. Each woman identifies a specific moment, incidence, or experience in her life which can be described as a crisis point. Some, like Linsey, connect their spiritual search with the strong and painful emotions surrounding the death of a loved one. Tara Green, for example, can vividly recall the exact moment in a television newscast in which she began to question and repudiate her understanding of God and how He was supposed to be present within the world.

Catherine Rathbun, a mother of three adult children in her late 50s who teaches Buddhist and other meditation practices in Toronto, can also identify a definite moment in which her faith and trust in institutional Christianity, and her position in relation to it, was deeply shaken. Catherine remembers that as a child, she and her family were what she calls “nominal Anglicans,” maintaining a level of “polite involvement” with the Church, mainly on major holidays such as Christmas and Easter. As with all the other

women's narratives, Catherine acknowledges a childhood interest in spirituality and religion. Her own crisis of faith came when she was attending university in the 1960s, while taking a course on Christianity.

I had a real 'come uppance' at Trinity College with Christianity. I had a real confrontation of belief over the way Christ is perceived to have lived. I had a professor who was very open-minded – I thought – and we were having a discussion about the Resurrection . . . so we were having this discussion about Mary Magdalene and the Resurrection, and I suggested that perhaps in the light of modern psychology, Mary Magdalene might have had a hallucination and what did it matter? It had affirmed her faith and enabled her to go ahead and put into practice the teachings that Jesus had given her. And at that point, the professor slammed his fist down on the table and said, 'No, that's *not* it! If you don't believe in the actual, physical Resurrection of Jesus Christ, then you can't call yourself a Christian!' I remember just being horribly shocked about that, and feeling quite lost . . . quite bereft, like I had been spat out somehow.

For still other women, the disillusionment, crisis point, and subsequent search was the result of a number of elements combined. As noted earlier, Erika Chan was greatly disillusioned with Christianity and her Seventh Day Adventist upbringing. Her sense of disillusionment, combined with the realization that her life was spiralling out of control through drug and alcohol abuse, led her to study Buddhism intensively in the early 1990s.

Basically, I decided since I cannot go back to a Church, I have to try something. And I had experimented with Judaism, Mormonism, Islam, make-believe. I had gone to all the different kinds of religions I could think of, and none of them were satisfying because they were all about rule and ritual; they were all about . . . rules! Just like the Christian Church! And I thought, 'I want something *real*, where I don't have to prove anything to anybody, except myself.'

The great majority of women's narratives contain elements of these dramatic shifts, or a crisis of belief, in their personal and spiritual lives. Most were able to recount specific instances, such as the death of a loved one, sexual abuse, becoming more aware of suffering in the world, gender discrimination, or institutional dogmatism, where their conception of and belief in the religious tradition in which they were exposed to as children, were shaken. Such events are framed as pivotal in the redefinition of their lives and their sense of spirituality.

Women's and men's narratives differ significantly in this sense. Take, for example, the instances where Ron and Tara became profoundly aware of the suffering in the world. Both narratives discuss strikingly similar circumstances where both were affected by television or radio news broadcasts on widespread famine, ecological disaster, and human tragedies around the world. Their accounts differ in the way in which these events are framed in relation to their larger personal and spiritual narratives. Tara's framing of the event positions it in such a way that it represents not only a clear movement *away* from her religious background, but also the first steps in her search *towards* a new spiritual tradition. For Ron, his experience is interpreted and framed only as marking a movement towards a new spiritual tradition and lifestyle. Even though Ron states at some level as a child he had an interest in religion, he feels it was not very strong, and that in his high school years, he just "lost interest."

This was sort of the mid 60s, late 60s. Everything began to change. It went from . . . the whole Catholic Church tried to 'get with it' [following the reforms of Vatican II]. Everything switched from Latin to English, and the 'orthodoxy' was sort of removed. Then you had people strumming guitars and stuff like that. That, and being influenced by my friends at the time, I think that sort of led to my losing interest. There seemed to be much more important things to do on a Sunday morning, like getting into trouble with your friends, playing, being able to ride your bike.

Ron's narrative does illustrate some very specific instances, particularly the reforms of Vatican II, that influenced his movement away from Catholicism. His narrative differs from Tara's in that he does not associate these particular events with any sort of personal crisis or stressful event. According to Ron's accounts, the time period between his "fading away" from religion in his high school years and the pivotal events that shifted his life towards Buddhism is almost twenty years.

Similarly, other men who participated in the interview process also did not recount any particular moment or event in their lives that could be termed a crisis of faith. Gary Schankula, for example, a thirty-seven year old from a German-Catholic background, remembers that as a child he felt "fairly religious," going to Catholic mass regularly, praying, believing in God, and taking the sacraments of communion and confession. He knows some doubts concerning Catholicism arose when he began to learn more about its

history, but cannot frame them around a particular incident or time. Continuing in this vein, he says that when he began to explore Eastern philosophy in university, he remembers that his greatest doubts about his faith in Catholicism began to arise. Even so, the growing distance between himself and Catholicism appears to be something of a “non-event,” as shown in his following statement: “I’m not sure whether I completely stopped believing in God or not. It’s possible I did, actually.”

A similar state of affairs is expressed by another man. A fifty-two year old Torontonion of Swedish and Danish descent (who, with a wide grin, wanted his pseudonym to be “Dharma Tiger”), recalled that the death of his father when he was eighteen did not really instigate a crisis of faith. Even though he was deeply involved with his United Church youth group, and was “religiously shipped off” to Church on Sundays by his parents (who themselves did not attend), he feels he was not interested in spirituality at the time. His interest, he maintains, was primarily social. After the death of his father, Dharma Tiger felt shy and somewhat uncomfortable about going back to his youth group. He was uncomfortable, he says, with the idea of “being confronted” by people’s condolences and sympathy, so he consciously “dropped away” from the group. This set of circumstances, in conjunction with some already present doubts about Christianity, led to his formal resignation from the United Church sometime later.

This section has sought, through the narratives of women and men in Toronto, to “get behind” and explore the experiences of those who are engaging with Buddhist practice in the West. It has also sought to identify and explore the motivations that lie behind this engagement with and interest in Buddhism, by asking the questions of “why?” and “what?” In general, both women and men frame their personal experiences and structure their personal narratives around two primary and dynamic themes: attraction and aversion. In the broadest sense, all involved feel to greater or lesser degrees, an *attraction* to what they perceive as “Buddhism” and an *aversion* to their perceptions of the Western traditions in which they were raised, based on personal experience or observations. For some, the attraction of Buddhism revolves around concepts such as “practice” and “experience,” while turning away from the concepts of “belief” and “faith.” For others, the attraction is couched in terms such as “rationality,” “methodology,” and “technology,” while

yet others speak more strongly of the day-to-day applications. Pervasive in these stories is the general sense of malaise, with Western society, themselves, gender roles, and “traditional” religion.

While men and women both speak of the themes discussed above, the issue of gender as a force of both attraction and aversion, is solely the province of women. Feelings of restriction, repression, and abandonment are commonly expressed by women when they relate their experiences with Christianity in particular. Gender exclusion, both observed and experienced personally, is cited by the overwhelming majority of women as a significant factor in their movement away from Christianity. Simultaneously, gender is also cited by the same women as a significant component in their attraction to Buddhism.

Perhaps most importantly, these narratives clearly document the great diversity found in the experiences and backgrounds of those who engage with Tibetan Buddhism. It is likely that diversity is not only a feature of Buddhism in Toronto, but is characteristic of the development and growth of Buddhism in other industrialized countries in the West, as well as in its more “traditional” contexts in the East. Simultaneously, the narratives quoted in this chapter also illustrate that in spite of all this diversity there are a number of shared features, especially concerning broader themes, such as the reasoning that underlies attraction and aversion. While this cross-section of Toronto individuals is by no means meant to be representative of the entire North American Buddhist population, it does illustrate a tendency that appears to agree with Nattier’s discussion of “elite” Buddhists: the majority of individuals whose narratives have been presented here are for the most part easily defined or labeled as “upper-middle class,” “university educated,” and predominantly “European” in descent. This correspondence, however, only goes so far. Other factors, such as religious heritage, family influences, and gender, as these personal stories have shown, are also salient elements that must be addressed in order more accurately to respond to questions of “why?” and “what?” in the emergent Buddhist populations in Western industrialized societies. Further, the *meaning* that these men and women ascribe, infer, and embed within their narratives does much to convey the richness, depth, and multivalence of the individual experience with Tibetan Buddhism and Buddhist practice.

It must be recognized that narrative forms unquestionably do enhance and deepen our knowledge of contemporary Western Buddhists and their activities and motivations. However, they are also in themselves selected and constructed, and are presented in certain ways for certain purposes. It is thus a simple thing to forget that the telling of personal experience is *always* selective and partial. Personal narratives are not only making public that which is privately known and understood; narration is a reconfiguration of experience itself. Personal experience is reconfigured in a way that is sure to arrive at a particular point or conclusion. Or, in the case of the narratives of Toronto Buddhists, to recognize and acknowledge that they have been traveling along, in their perspective, a more or less clearly discernable spiritual path. Their tellings of their paths include hardship, happiness, and suffering, but they also speak more of coherence than they do of dissonance, compressing months, years, and decades into a tale that is often told in a few hours. Narrating experience then, is a highly selective undertaking, as it “. . . both excludes certain phenomena and dwells on others; . . .” (Kerby 1991: 47; Krishenblatt-Gimblett 1989: 126-127; Braid 1996: 8). As a result, the narration evokes only certain concerns, expectations, and memories, while excluding others (Ochs and Capps 1996: 22).

Looking beyond the coherence, we find that renditions of the “path” are not as seamless as they initially appear. Most Toronto men and women, for example, express deep dissatisfaction with and mistrust of the various traditions of Christianity in which they were raised. The feelings of disillusionment with Christianity, as will be demonstrated, are very apparent within their narratives. What is less apparent, however, is that the great majority of men and women, sometimes by their own admission, possess very little in-depth knowledge of Christianity itself, in terms of doctrine, ideology, and ritual. McGhee makes a similar observation in an article addressing the advent of Buddhism in the West. He maintains that Western interest is in part a response to the processes of secularization, and that Western Buddhists “. . . are more or less sceptical, ignorant of or alienated from the various Christian traditions . . .” and that “. . . their rejection of Christianity is often associated with miscomprehension and distortion . . .” (McGhee 1995: 69).



With little exception, both the women and men in Toronto who affiliate with Buddhist organizations and temples have described their religious upbringing as, at best, “sporadic,” with many receiving little or no religious learning or guidance in the family home, and attendance at religious rituals and/or functions limited to the more mainstream holidays such as Easter and Christmas. While the reality of this situation speaks to the larger social, cultural, and religious trends in Canada and North America, the point I wish to highlight here is the constructed and highly selective nature of the stories of “the path” towards Buddhism. While this realization does not detract from the validity and authenticity of their narratives, it does illustrate the necessity of looking beyond the coherence and seamlessness of their narratives, here and in general, to look for the dissonance, the tension, and the contradictions – in short, for the reality – of the experiences of the everyday. Simply put, we need to problematize individual narratives in order to move beneath the surface – beyond the initial, seemingly unproblematic responses to questions like “why?” and “what?” to seek further multivocality and layering of meaning.

Further analysis of any “holes” or discrepancies very likely has the potential to highlight other areas that may not be as unproblematic as they appear initially. The point of the following chapters is to explore these areas of discrepancy and dissonance. Tension and conflict may arise when individual perceptions, preconceptions, idealizations, and expectations of Tibetan Buddhism come into contact with long-standing Tibetan Buddhist history, doctrine, institutions, roles, and rituals, in addition to the social reality of life in a non-Buddhist, predominantly Christian society. The following sections will explore how tensions and conflicts are played out in “the real world,” and in many cases, in the spaces between traditions and institutions, selves and others.

PART IV  
THE INDIVIDUAL IN ISOLATION

**A) Buddhist Identity: A Buddhist By Any Other Name?**

When we talk about a “Buddhist” or “Buddhists” in Canada and the United States, what exactly is our referent - a label or category, an identity, or perhaps something more? Is the term “Buddhist” signifying a reified object (or subject?), one that subsumes all sorts of practices, beliefs, philosophies, and preconceptions under its umbrella? Or can the term be used to signify choice, personal commitment, motivation, partiality, and perhaps even struggle? We have a great many labels and categorizations of the differences among and between Buddhists, but can we really assume that the term “Buddhist” itself is unproblematic? Calling someone a Buddhist in the West, or “naming” them as such, appears initially and on the surface a fairly straightforward undertaking. And yet, the very act of naming itself is a composite of assumptions and expectations. In much of the anthropological literature on initiation rituals, the act of naming has been construed as more-or-less a societal quest for order and control of the individual. Naming marks who is “in” and who is “out.” Being named is an important marker of social identity, socialness, and social belonging (*inter alia*, Jacquemet 1992; Jell-Bahlsen 1989; Cohen 1994).

W.C. Smith wrote in the 1960s that by calling something a “religion” names it and firmly fixes it in our minds (1964: 19–20). Can the same argument not be extended to the labelling of individuals as a “Christian” or “Buddhist”? Using such labels also fix certain ideas and assumptions in our minds. Should the questions then, focus not so much on defining *who* or *what* is a Buddhist in North America, but rather, what does it *mean* to be a Buddhist in North America? By so doing, we may begin to move away from the illusion of wholeness that such questions inevitably imply.

What *does* it mean to call someone a Buddhist? Does it mean that he or she is a Buddhist in behaviour (whatever that is), outlook, worldview, ideology? Is taking refuge vows in the Three Jewels (the Buddha, the *Dharma*, and the *Sangha*) a “once in a lifetime” event – one is now a Buddhist forevermore? Is

the term, like a mantle, laid about the shoulders, easily assumed and unproblematically worn, integrated into one's social, cultural, and religious wardrobe and easily forgotten? In contemporary scholastic discussions of this nature, the schools of affiliation may change -- from Tibetan to Zen and so on -- and so too does the discussion of the types of Buddhists; but the label of "Buddhist" itself seems fixed and static in much academic and mainstream discourse. This assumption of stability seems, paradoxically, to fly in the face of much Buddhist doctrine on the impermanent nature of reality, where the only thing permanent is change itself. Can we, then, so easily assume that the label of "Buddhist" refers to something, someone, or some particular way of being that is permanent, pervasive, and unchallenged?

Through narrative, we can begin to uncover what "Buddhist" as a label and as an identity actually means to people, and by so doing, we also discover that the meanings of "Buddhist" labels and identities are very much problematic, partial, and contested. When we direct our questions to those involved, we see that the descriptive terms and classifications so frequently invoked are half-measures at best, and do not begin to speak to individual experience. Turning to personal narratives not only grounds questions of identity and self-representation in experience, but it also allows "real-life" individuals the opportunity to speculate, interpret, and articulate their own viewpoints on what it "really means" to be a contemporary Buddhist in Toronto.

Of all the interview questions I posed to the men and women<sup>1</sup> involved with this research, which included which included their thoughts on the future of Buddhism in the West, gendered roles, Buddhist practice, and their own introduction to and on-going involvement with Buddhism itself, the question "Would you describe yourself as a Buddhist?" was often the most challenging. This was the question that most often elicited a penetrating and thoughtful stare, a deep sigh, and some lengthy moments of silence as the question -- and the answer -- was considered. The actual question posed somewhat playfully, attempted

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<sup>1</sup> Four women declined to answer the questions on Buddhist identity, as they felt that their own involvement -- in the case of one woman, only a few weeks -- was too soon for them to be in comfortable position in which to speculate upon such matters.

to cover all the proverbial bases – description, function, label, identity:

Would you describe yourself as a Buddhist? Why or why not? Upon what factors or characteristics is this dependent? Would I or anyone else be able to ‘spot’ a Buddhist on the street? If you were taking part in a census or questionnaire on religion in Canada, would you put a check in the box next to the term ‘Buddhist’?

Out of the thirty individuals who were asked to respond to this question, only five responded in ways that could be construed as “negative.” Two women outright refused to respond to the question, choosing instead to simply avoid or ignore the question altogether (both actually sighed, clamped their mouths shut, and rolled their eyes skyward). Two other women and one man responded that they were “definitely not” Buddhists and would not describe themselves as such.

Given these five “negative” responses, it would stand only to reason that the remaining twenty-five individuals responded that they were indeed “self-described Buddhists.” At first glance, this appears to be the case, but the responses to this question were, in fact, much less definite, categorical, and stable.

Currently a Buddhist nun in the New Kadampa Tradition, Kelsang Chenma smiled and gave a cheerful “yes” when the question of being an admitted Buddhist or not was posed. At first glance, one would think that posing such a question to someone who so obviously looks the part, especially someone sporting a shaven head and saffron and orange robes, was altogether absurd. Even for a Buddhist nun, however, there is more to it than a simple “yes.” Chenma made it clear that for her, labelling herself as a Buddhist was definitely a process.

I do now. I’ve become more relaxed, because over time I think through the practice you don’t really care so much about what anyone thinks. There’s so much you just have to ignore for the sake of simplicity. Well, the way I’m dressing [pointing to her robes], I am a ‘card-carrying member.’ And you’re supposed to always wear the robes, because it’s supposed to be the only real form of advertising. It’s important to be wearing the robes, because people see them and it effects them.

Chenma’s first few words indicate that her own self-conception as a Buddhist was not always so obvious and straightforward as it *appears to have become* after taking on monastic robes and vows. Reflecting on her early involvement with Tibetan Buddhism, she acknowledges that being a Buddhist and calling herself

one used to be more problematic, especially in light of “outside” or external factors that were taking place within the larger Buddhist community, both in Toronto and internationally. The situation to which Chenma is referring is the controversy surrounding the Dalai Lama and Geshe Kelsang Gyatso (the spiritual head of the New Kadampa Tradition) over Tibetan Buddhist protector deity/figure, Dorje Shugden. This controversy in the early 1990s, over the status and worthiness of Dorje Shugden as an object of worship, was a divisive and difficult issue for many Tibetan Buddhists regardless of sect the world over. In Toronto, many followers of the NKT and its continued worship of Dorje Shugden found themselves sometimes ostracized from the larger Canadian Tibetan Buddhist community. During these troubled years, she speaks both of her own experience and what she observed in others:

There were a lot of people who would not call themselves Buddhists; they would call themselves ‘followers of Buddhadharma,’ because they didn’t want to be affiliated or associated with ‘card-carrying members’ – those sectarian organizations. So when I heard somebody explain that, I thought, ‘Oh yeah, I would make that distinction; I’m a follower of Buddhadharma,’ because I’ve had so many bad experiences with sectarian Buddhists. I mean, even now, in the last few years, I’ve cringed at being identified as Tibetan Buddhist. So you kind of want to make that distinction, because the Buddhist religion is so full of sectarian crap, just like every religion.

Chenma’s comfort with referring to herself as a Buddhist, as a “card-carrying member” of a religious organization, evolved gradually over a number of years. She currently wears monastic robes on most occasions, wearing only “plain clothes” when she is working as a child caregiver. Even without her robes, she attempts to maintain some sense of continuity by keeping a wardrobe of clothes in the colours of maroon and saffron. In spite of this, Chenma’s experience with “being a Buddhist” is highly situational and context-dependent.

I don’t feel like much of a Buddhist when I am a mummy-nanny. I can’t do all the practices as prescribed by the Buddhist religion. I honestly can’t. It can be agony for me, because I am not wise enough [she laughs] or competent enough to *not* feel that I am failing in some way. That I am inadequate, undisciplined, somehow flawed, because the practices are prescribed in a certain way and I can’t do them when I am care-giving, when I am actually looking after children, which is a lot of the time. Now, within the doctrine, there are instructions, for me when I am mummy-nanny . . . but they’re not the instructions that are emphasized in the organization.

Even for a Buddhist nun, someone who for all intents and purposes is assumed *not* to have any difficulty with her religious identity, the issue is less than clear-cut. Recall the statement of Kelsang Zopa, a former Italian-Catholic who is now himself an ordained Buddhist monk: “I remember thinking to myself, ‘Gee, I don’t want to become a Buddhist; I just like what we’re doing . . .’” As with the other individual responses to be presented, there exists within Chenma’s narrative an emphasis on the processual nature of her religious and spiritual identity in addition to her own speculations on its context-dependent aspects.<sup>2</sup>

### What’s In A Name?

One way we can begin to problematize the concept of “Buddhist” is to move beyond it as a label or categorization, to regard it instead as an identity, or perhaps even as a form of self-representation. Names or identities come with their own set of implicit and not-so-implicit obligations and expectations (Cohen 1993: 63; Zonabend 1980: 7, 15, Campbell 1964: 186; Jell-Bahlsen 1989: 199), and individuals bestowed with names, labels, and identities are expected to act and behave in certain ways. This is especially clear in the literature on Buddhists in North America. Depending on who has defined the term “Buddhist,” individuals so bestowed are expected to practice meditation regularly, not to practice meditation regularly, to join Buddhist or meditation centres, or not to join such centres, and so forth. But, with rare exception (see, for a recent example, Samuels 2001), there are no subjects and no voices involved in a great deal of the literature on naming, including those accounts concerned with contemporary Buddhists in the West.

In a recent essay on Buddhist and religious identity, Tweed notes that historically, most Western scholars have regarded religious identity as singular and fixed, and more or less straightforward. Further, even while acknowledging and exploring the difficulties of defining “who is” and “who is not,” many discussions of religious identity focus on only two categories: the adherent and the non-adherent (Tweed 1999: 71; Coleman 1999; Marty and Appleby 1992; Marty 1995; Pelikan 1990; Raphael 1984; Bulka

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<sup>2</sup> Chenma’s narrative here point towards other underlying issues that will be discussed in Part V, including the monastic versus the lay view of Buddhist practice, and how gendered roles can potentially restrict access to religious institutions.

1983). Tweed calls this way of defining religious identity as normative or essentialist, and outlines three standard strategies associated with this approach: applying norms, observing attendance, or counting numbers. Tweed contends that this method ignores the hybridity that is present in all religious traditions, as pristine beginnings or essences are usually difficult – if not impossible – to locate (1999: 72-73).

For all Tweed's apparent concern with the hybridity and complexity of religious identity in general, in Buddhist discussions he remains on safe ground and proposes yet another category of Buddhist in North America: the sympathizer. Tweed begins his discussion with what the term does *not* mean. A Buddhist sympathizer is *not* someone who self-consciously identifies with Buddhism, nor does a sympathizer undertake any type of meditation practice regularly (Tweed 1999: 74). "Sympathizer" instead refers to those individuals " . . . who have some sympathy for a religion but do not embrace it exclusively or fully" (1999: 74). These individuals would identify with another tradition other than Buddhism, but Tweed maintains if one were " . . . to visit their homes and observe their daily routine . . ." (1999: 74), we would see signs of a Buddhist interest and influence. Homes of sympathizers have Buddhist artifacts, paraphernalia, and books. Sympathizers themselves may attend Buddhist lectures, classes, subscribe to Buddhist journals and magazines, and surf on the Internet for all things classified as "Buddhist."

Sympathizers, along with the "*Dharma* hoppers" coined by Layman (1976) and "night-stand" Buddhists (Tweed 1999) have the potential, as categorizations, to highlight the diversity and hybridity in Western forms of Buddhism. Additionally, they serve to enrich our understanding of Buddhism's ongoing appeal and history<sup>3</sup> in North America and the West, by acknowledging the presence of hybridity alongside of and between the standard typology of "adherent" and "non-adherent."

Irrespective of these categories, Tweed feels that the best way to ascertain religious identity is through self-identification. He acknowledges this approach itself is problematic in certain respects. For

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<sup>3</sup> For a more thorough treatment of Buddhism's history in North America, see Tweed 1992; Fields 1986; Layman 1976; and Prebish 1979. For Buddhism's history in the United Kingdom, Philip C. Almond (1988) offers a thorough account, and Batchelor provides a readable version of Buddhism's encounter with Western cultures throughout Western history (1994).

instance, it is broad and may often be construed as uncritical, as it provides no standards of evaluation and comparison. In response, some scholars have suggested that instead of asking “Are you a Buddhist?” and getting a yes/no answer that potentially ignores multiple and overlapping sources of religious identity and affiliation, it may be more useful to ask if someone has taken the Three Refuges (Prebish 1979: 43-44; Tweed 1999: 80). This in itself seems straightforward, but it also has the potential to be greatly misleading. During my fieldwork in Toronto, I discovered that almost any Tibetan Buddhist meditation practice, ritual, or teaching, begins with taking refuge in the Three Jewels, along with voicing the desire to generate *bodhicitta* (the mind of enlightenment). Anyone who walks in the door of most temples, centres, and organizations and stays a while has most likely taken refuge vows.

In spite of this obvious drawback, self-identification can in fact reveal much about significant religious trends and cultural patterns (Tweed 1999: 79, 81), and may allow for more variability in our discussions of Western Buddhism. For example, self-identified Buddhists may choose the label to be fashionable, or as an act of rebellion against one’s familial religious history and affiliation. Self-identification, in this vein, may also provide a way around the issues of authenticity that invariably arise with essentialist or normative approaches. Instead of trying to discern who is a “true” Buddhist (and by extension, who is *not*), attention can be more usefully focused on ascertaining the *meaning* of Buddhism and Buddhist self-identification for a wide variety of individuals.

Meaning-centred approaches on the person and identity – and thus indirectly, the processes and consequences of naming – have been of considerable interest in studies of religion. Geertz defines one aspect of religion as a system of symbols, which has the ability to formulate “. . . conceptions of a general order of existence . . .” (1973: 90). This perspective has been particularly influential in studies of religious meaning and identity. However, while such meaning-centred approaches in religion have been – and continue to be – fruitful, Neitz and Spickard point out at least two limitations that are relevant here. First, religious identities (and all cultural identities) are simply assumed; that is, they are taken as a given (Laitlin 1986). Second, meaning-centred approaches “. . . cannot explain why specific identities are taken up and



gain specific form in concrete circumstances” (Neitz and Spickard 1990: 16). These drawbacks are clearly visible within the many contemporary discussions on Buddhism and Buddhists in North America and Europe. To illustrate, we can return to Tweed’s article on “night-stand” Buddhists (1999). Here, he maintains that religious identity is complex, compiled from multiple sources, which even includes “. . . the tradition they rejected when they joined the Buddhist *sangha*” (italics in original)(1999: 73). While he acknowledges the hybridity of religious identity, he assumes simultaneously that “religious identity” is singular, fixed, uncontested. This assumption is also apparent in the language he uses when discussing the “convert” Buddhist, someone who has *chosen* one tradition while rejecting another (1999: 73, 84). The terms Tweed employs suggests that religious identities are consciously assumed, mutually exclusive, pervasive, and stable. One is, in this reading, either a Buddhist or something else; it appears one cannot be both.

Even though by all intents and purposes the discussions on the multitude of different groups of Buddhists in North America appear to be more concerned with individual Buddhists, we still find an implicit discussion of collective identity. The actual individual is not only obscured in discussions and formulations of this sort, but, as Kondo asserts, so-called “collective” identities inevitably suppress contradictions, differences, and tensions (1990: 10). The negotiated and ambiguous processes of the everyday, the shifts in power, authority, and context are downplayed or ignored. By extension, to assume that identities are fixed is also to assume they are “closed” or complete, rather than open-ended and mutable. The very imprecision of the words, the names, and of the language used, to adequately address the continually changing reality towards which they refer, is, according to Burrows, a fact of common experience (1993: 38; Samuels 2001: 281).

Another example of the ambiguity that sometimes surrounds Buddhist identity, again concerning a supposedly “definitive” response, comes from Joyce. In her late forties, Joyce has been practicing Buddhist meditation since the late 1970s and is currently involved in teaching meditation at the meditation centre where she is herself an active member. When asked if she referred to herself as a Buddhist, she replied:

Not really. In the sense that I feel like when I start to apply one label, we start to exclude everything else. And I'm not interested in narrowing down the field of investigation.

Recently, I was about ready to call myself a Buddhist, because it seemed like I was going to have difficulty getting time off [from work] for the winter retreat. I debated, because here I had avoided the label for so long! Am I going to be an opportunist and grab onto . . . [the label] . . . when it suits me?<sup>4</sup>

And you know what the texts say, that a person who takes refuge is a Buddhist. So in that sense, technically yes, I am a Buddhist. And they [the texts] also make clear that when you take refuge you don't stop being anything else; it's not like an exclusive citizenship type of thing. So yeah, I do it [take refuge] every day, several times a day sometimes. Well, for me you see, it's not like it's a formal . . . you know, like the credo in the Catholic Church or whatever that other one is that the Anglicans do. It's not that. It is simply aligning oneself with a search for truth and aligning oneself with the transcendent. It's a very pragmatic thing.

The boundaries of membership, of belonging, of defining who is "in" and who is not, are especially difficult to set. As seen in the previous discussions on who *is* or *is not* a Buddhist in the West (Tweed 1992, 1999; Nattier 1997, 1998; Tworkov 1991, Prebish 1979, 1993), agreement upon criteria that discriminates between belonging and loose affiliation is frequently elusive. Such knowledge depends upon local contexts, shifting meanings, power-laden relationships, and interactions that constantly alter binary oppositions of "us" and "them" (see Kondo 1990; Jacquemet 1992). The need for order and resolution is apparent in accounts of the naming and categorization, including accounts of Buddhists in North America. Samuels writes that even while many literary and cultural analysts acknowledge indeterminacy and ambiguity, they are often guilty of raising " . . . the idea of order and resolution to the level of an almost biological imperative . . ." (2001: 281). Indeterminacy, in structuralist approaches to language and poetics, either mistrusts ambiguity, or focuses on its perceived efficacy for attaining closure in narrative (Samuels 2001: 281). On a quotidian level, closure is not often the end result, nor is it always desired. Renaissance historian Luca Grata acknowledges that at certain times in cultural and social history, the "fragility of access" to fixed meanings in social discourse is in itself fruitful, as it can point towards a richness of representation (Grata 1997: 19). In certain circumstances and times, ambiguity can become " . . . a social

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<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, she did not call herself a Buddhist and got time off work anyway.

and political means of constituting signification and community” (Samuels 2001: 282).

Such social and cultural instances of ambiguity do highlight, as noted earlier, the imprecision of language, words, and names. These instances, however, also indicate not only the dynamic nature of lived experience, but also the dynamism of language as it evolves to address new and particular realities and perceptions (Burrows 1993: 39).

Among other elements, the responses of Joyce and Chenma are similar in that they both reiterate that whether or not they self-describe as Buddhists depends very strongly upon the social circumstances in which they find themselves. More directly, their Buddhist identification depends on who they are engaged with at a given time, in a given space. Importantly, their Buddhist identification is heavily dependent upon their own assessments and interpretations of the social circumstances, the motivations of themselves and others, as well as their perceptions of what is considered a desired or beneficial progression of events. In effect, Buddhist identity is a conscious and often analytical choice. Their statements also seriously challenge Tweed’s discussion of Buddhist sympathizers (1999), or those individuals who do not label themselves as Buddhist *per se*, but who also engage in meditation practice as a more or less solitary, self-directed phenomenon. Within their narratives, Joyce and Chenma illustrate that their “spiritual” practice – thus not limited to Buddhist forms of meditation or constrained by them – also includes a definite social dimension. All are active participants within their temples and centres, both take spiritual instruction from individual teachers, and yet are unsure as to whether or not they are in fact Buddhists. They also reiterate that the decision to assume the label of “Buddhist” is made (or not made) in particular social is very conscious.

Joyce and Chenma also challenge Tweed’s conception of a Buddhist convert. All have taken refuge vows and have been given a Buddhist or *Dharma* name by their respective teachers, often more than one. One woman, Pema, has received at least three different *Dharma* names as a result of her attendance at and completion of various retreats and Tantric empowerments. They have chosen to take formal refuge, to practice and to learn, but these excerpts from their narratives as they respond to the question, “Are you a

Buddhist?” obviously indicate that the choice to self-identify is clearly made more than once. In fact, they speak of confusion about their own religious “status” or position in the world, the public perception of themselves, as well as their own personal feelings on the matter. They feel they have consciously chosen to live their lives in a manner that emphasizes spirituality, but whether or not that choice is singularly Buddhist – and whether they choose to label both their selves and their lifestyles as such – is a choice that is constantly being questioned, reevaluated, and reinterpreted. The narratives of Joyce and Chenma on the question of Buddhist identity clearly show the insufficiency of currently existent labels and categories, which relegate the meaning such labels may or may not possess to the background, if not ignoring it altogether.

## **B) To Be or Not to Be: Buddhist Selves**

### **Making Sense, Making Selves**

As noted earlier, individual responses are frequently missing from discussions on names and labels, and so too is the “self” (Cohen 1993: 58). We hear very little of the experiences and personal interpretations of contemporary Western Buddhists, their own understandings of the various terms applied to them, and the meaning (or lack thereof) such terms hold for them. Such presentations very effectively, states Cohen, deny people their own *selves*. At the very least, we are often guilty of “. . . assuming that there is no dissonance between *our* construction of their selves, and *their* sense of their selves” (emphasis in original)(Cohen 1993: 68). As the personal narratives of “Toronto Buddhists” demonstrate, expected appearances and behaviours are not always what they seem. It is therefore appropriate to continue to explore their narratives and their meaning as these individuals engage with Buddhist ideals, practice, and history. By exploring “Buddhist” as an identity or self-representation, we can problematize the construction of “Buddhist” as a category or label, seeing it instead as a multidimensional matrix of meaning.

### The Buddhist “Self”

When we are talking about Buddhists – people who by all intents and purposes have no permanent selves – do these arguments apply? The idea of a self that exists as a permanent and unchanging entity, or as an intrinsic reality or identity, is rejected by the many schools of Buddhism, Theravada, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayana alike. How then can we speak of a Buddhist self? To begin this discussion, it may be a great deal easier to clarify what the Buddhist concept of “the self” is *not*, rather than what it *is*.

Although there is great variation between the many sects and traditions within Buddhism, the teaching of “not-self” (Pāli, *anattā*) remains a central tenet. As noted above, the self in Buddhism is not permanent or unchanging. As the quotation from the story of the *Bodhisattva* Vimalakirti suggests: “This body is inert, like the earth; selfless . . . It is a void, not existing as self or as self-possession” (trans. Thurman 1976: 22). To speak of a “true self,” or the “real me” – the underlying part that is assumed to remain unchanged through life – is to speak of a delusion (Harvey 1990: 51; Ho 1995: 121). There is nothing permanent except change itself.

A second key concept of “not-self” is the doctrine of Dependent Origination or Conditioned Arising (Sanskrit, *pratītya-samutpāda*). This doctrine states that all mental and physical things arise and exist as a result of the presence of certain conditions (Harvey 1990: 54). All such things will thus cease once these conditions are removed. In the words of Ho, “. . . nothing exists independently of anything else” (1995: 122). To regard the self in any other way is to be caught within an illusion, and it is this illusion of a unified, essential self that is regarded by Buddhists as the source of suffering and attachment.

The Buddha himself dissolved away the unity of the human being, or person, into an ever-changing series of physical matter, sensations, conceptions, further mental contents such as volitions and so on, and consciousness. Thus there is dissolved away any real Self, any essence or unchanging referent for the name, the word ‘I.’ To understand this deeply and directly is to see things the way they really are . . . (Williams 1989: 3)

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<sup>5</sup> The eighth century Buddhist monk Shantideva illustrated this concept through the metaphor of a tree trunk that is split into sections. The essence of the “tree” cannot be located within any single section (Batchelor 1979: 158).

It is said that to realize interdependent relativity and continual change is to realize Ultimate Reality (Ho 1995: 121).

Fortunately, Buddhist doctrine also offers a way of conceptualizing the self in much less abstract ways. Buddhist doctrine makes a distinction between two senses of the self: the conventional and the ultimate. Terms like “myself” and “yourself” are recognized as convenient to use in everyday situations and interactions, but within this conventional sense of self, one should realize that no substantial or permanent self actually exists (the ultimate sense) (Harvey 1990: 51).

It is the conventional sense of self in Buddhism that can allow us to speak of a “Buddhist self” in at least one important way. The conventional understanding provides us with a means of exploring and focusing on the everyday, lived experience of Buddhist men and women, their interactions within their social worlds, and their relationships with others, rather than focusing attention on the abstract religious ideal of “Ultimate Enlightenment” that is the eventual goal of many Buddhists. To illustrate this point, we can turn to a telling experience anthropologist Melford Spiro recorded while conducting research in Buddhist Burma. The Buddhist villagers within whom he lived and worked, he writes, did not internalize the religious and cultural conceptions of the self (or the “not-self”), as it did not “. . . correspond to their personal experience” (1993: 119). This appears to correspond with Kornfield’s observation that traditionally in Buddhist Asia, the great majority of the laity did not meditate or practice,<sup>6</sup> but were instead devoted supporters of the monastic community (1988: xiii). The majority of the Buddhist laity may not have been interested in – or had the time – to have become involved in realizing the abstract concept of “not-self”; it may not have addressed them or their lives on an experiential or pragmatic level.

The distinction between the ultimate self and the conventional self, when in conjunction with the understanding of what is intended by “not-self,” provides a way of speaking about a “self” in contemporary Buddhism, so long as it is located on an experiential and everyday level.

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<sup>6</sup> The issue of Buddhist practice will be discussed in Part Five: the Individual in Relation.

The men and women in Toronto *make* their own meaning, their own identities, their own selves. As Kondo recognizes, identities are more than just assigned names, more than just *social* identities. They also entail a great deal of *self*-construction as well (1990: 43; Hervieu-Léger 1998: 218). Individuals are actively involved in interpreting their own social, cultural, religious, and personal identities. Individuals construct “. . . the terms of their membership, establish the meanings of self hood and society to them, [and] rehearse their rights to their selves” (Cohen 1993: 71).

Take, for example, the statement of one woman in her late thirties who chooses to be recognized in this study by her Buddhist name, Pema Chönyid. She has been practising Tibetan Buddhism for almost ten years. Pema has a shrine in her home, makes daily offerings, and meditates daily for at least a half an hour. She has also taken refuge vows on many occasions. Additionally, Pema is an active member and treasurer of her Tibetan Buddhist temple, attends meditation retreats, and works to be involved with her Buddhist community through fund-raising activities. Pema fulfills all the requirements for “Buddhist membership” raised elsewhere, and in fact responded that yes, she does describe in fact herself as a Buddhist. Even so, her response is not so uncomplicated. To more fully appreciate the nuances within Pema’s response, we must look at what came before and directly after her affirmation of Buddhist identity. Pema did in fact hesitate and took a few moments to deeply consider her response. After a few more moments in thought, she continues speaking in a way that brings to light the instability and processual nature of Buddhist self-identification: she adds a very clear “but” to her original response of “yes.” She says,

I would now [describe myself as a Buddhist], yes. I would now say . . . well, I am a Buddhist for the sake of people wanting to know what I identify with. I don’t know if I always feel like ‘I am a Buddhist.’ I am also a human being, and I am a Rolfer [a type of physical therapist], you know? Often times I like to say – instead of saying, ‘I am a Buddhist,’ – I like to say, ‘I practice Buddhism’ . . . because it’s not . . . I don’t know if it *is* what I am. Maybe in a relative sense it is, but in an absolute sense, it’s not. Originally I didn’t . . . because I didn’t feel like I deserved to give myself that label. Like I didn’t feel . . . before I took refuge, I didn’t feel like I was a Buddhist because I hadn’t taken refuge, and I hadn’t met a teacher yet. I felt like I was still learning about it. Like I felt I was preparing to do that [take refuge vows], but I didn’t see myself as a Buddhist yet although I felt that I identified with it really strongly. And even after I took refuge . . . I don’t know why I struggled with that, with saying, ‘I am a Buddhist.’ Maybe it is just a personal struggle with saying, ‘I am *something*.’ But now, for the sake of ease, oh yeah! When you’re talking with

someone, you know, . . . I can say, 'I am a Buddhist' like I can say, 'I am a Rolfer.' But I still don't think about that, and I feel like I don't know if I *am* a Buddhist, but I do practice it. And if that – in a relative sense – makes sense to people, then I say I am.

Pema's response is indicative of the confusion and struggle with which so many others responded. While the majority said "yes," they also very clearly felt it was necessary to explain how and why they responded as they did. In short, she is concerned with articulating what *meaning* being a Buddhist holds for her.

Embodiment, experience, relationship, interpretation, and meaning are all important components of the narratives of Chenma, Pema, and Joyce. It is these components that make narrative a salient feature of their own conceptualizations of their selves. What their narrative excerpts clearly illustrate is that their own conscious presentations of their own selves are multiple, partial, and shifting. Since narration can be both a creative and interpretive act, as well as a receptive one, listeners and readers are presented with only fragments of an individual's selfhood at any particular telling, in a certain time and space. Such is the case with the "Buddhist selves" of Pema, Chenma, and Joyce. As a result, a new self is created with each specific time, telling, and space (Ochs and Capps 1996: 22). As narrative is a highly selective undertaking (Kerby 1991: 47; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989: 126-127; Braid 1996: 8), narratives thus evoke partial understandings only, and, I must add, partial understandings of partial selves. To continue in this vein, there may in fact be several types of Buddhist selves in this process. As Dorinne Kondo astutely recognizes, complexity and ambiguity are not only seen in shifting contexts, but also within an "individual" self (1990: 45). Through experimentation with multiple, shifting voices, she contends that studies on the self that emphasize on multiplicity, contextuality, and complexity may be built upon by asking how "selves in the plural" are variously constructed in various contexts (1990: 43; Ewing 1990: 251; DeMunck 1992).

Harry Flashman's own response indicates that not only are there are a great many "buts" and hesitations involved in the formulation of his own "Buddhist identity," but a great many contexts and presentations of self as well.

Would I describe myself as a Buddhist? On the outer level, I certainly look like one, with my shaven head, with my [prayer] beads in hand. I think on all external levels, yeah. I have a Buddhist



shrine in my household. But the only reason it is primarily a Buddhist shrine is . . . it is *easy*! I set it up [already] and because I have been a little lazy . . . I am not going to change it to match the tradition I am working with at any particular point!

I think too, it is not about a religion; it is about the principles. I mean, 'enlightenment' or 'awakening' is enlightenment or awakening whether you're working with Christianity, whether you're working with Islam, or within the Native North American traditions. It is really about the principles, and I recognize they are the same in all religions.

If it [the question] was blank and I had to fill it in? I don't know. I don't know, and that is simply because I do believe that religion has a place and a function. And it really does for a lot of people. I think the nature of my [spiritual] work, however, and my interest has been *not* the outer form of religion, but the *essence*. So to that end, I am not certain. I don't think that I have given myself to a religious tradition, in thinking of it as 'a religion.' Yes, I have taken refuge. And I have basically done all the things that would by definition make me a Buddhist. But by that token I guess I would also be a very bad Muslim, because I drink wine . . . but I have also done those things that technically define me as a Muslim. And in a lot of respects I still value the Catholic faith I grew up with as well. But again, it is the substance of the teachings and what is behind it, rather than the external forms. So I don't know if, for those reasons, I could actually say I am such and such . . . I really can't. I am a Christian when I need to be, and I speak in Christian terminology as necessary. If that is what is required to communicate the principles to the person I am dealing with. I am not above that.

The kinds of selves Pema, Harry, Chenma, and Joyce present, as Buddhists, as Buddhist practitioners, as compassionate individuals, and as members of a community, depends greatly on the social circumstances in which they find themselves, and with whom they are interacting. Each individual creates, embodies, and delineates a particular sense of self in the telling of their narratives. In a sense, their selves are the information that is told in the telling (Kerby 1991: 1; Perinbanayagam 1991: 5), and in the act of the telling itself. This conception of self, Kerby posits, is an *implied* self, ". . . implied, that is, from acts of expression – the self is a social and linguistic construct, a nexus of meaning rather than an unchanging entity" (1991: 34). Their "Buddhist selves," for the most part, are what Kerby means by an implied self. They consciously choose to present and define themselves as Buddhist – or, in the case of Joyce, what she chooses *not* to present and define – when it is most conducive to their interests, and what they perceive are the interests and expectations of others.

All speak of process. With the exception of Joyce, the others all speak of the confusion and struggle involved in coming to terms with and defining for themselves what could best be construed as a

“Buddhist self” – a self that is implicated in their individual relationships with others, in particular spaces and places. In other words, their senses of their selves are constructed in the telling of narrative itself; they do not exist before or after, or even independently of personal narration. These three women and one man each construct their own unique senses and presentations of a Buddhist self, drawing upon diverse symbolic resources and their own interpretations of the always changing diverse experiences and contexts with which they are involved. Speaking of socio-religious identities specifically, Hervieu-Léger calls this process a “trajectory of identification,” a process which is continually realized over the “long haul” (1998: 218). The following quotation seems particularly apt, as the self is:

... broadly understood to be an unfolding reflective awareness of being-in-the-world, including a sense of one’s past and future. We come to know ourselves as we use narrative to apprehend experience and navigate relationships with others. (Ochs and Capps 1996: 20-21; Csordas 1994: 6, 14)

Narrative, as noted earlier, can be regarded as an active process in constructing meaning, especially the meaning of the self. Csordas maintains that the processes of creating the meaning of the self are *orientational* processes: they orient the self in the world. Such processes are a combination of embodiment, reflexivity, cultural and social milieus, and the structuring structures of habitus (1994: 5). Self-awareness is not the starting point in such an analysis; rather, the central issue is how such self-awareness is produced. In other words, how the self actually *emerges* in the telling.

### C) Perceptions of Gender: Illusion and Obstacle

According to the personal narratives of women and men in Toronto, the term “Buddhist” often comes to represent more than a label or classificatory term. “Buddhist” can also be viewed as one means by which individuals construct and create a highly fluid and variable sense of their own selves, as those many selves are “in the world” and relating to others. In terms of what Buddhist doctrine identifies as a self or an “I,” five factors of personality are outlined (Sanskrit, *upādāna-skhandas*, or the five groups of grasping).

These categories are particularly relevant here, as they are all said to comprise a personality. The first is material shape or form (*rūpa*), and refers to either or both the outer world and the individual body. The second group of factors, translated as “feeling” (*vedanā*), refers to the “. . . hedonic tone or ‘taste’ of any experience . . .” (Harvey 1990: 49). Such “feeling” is comprised of bodily sensations and mental processes of happiness, indifference, or unhappiness. The processes that label and classify mental and sensory objects is the cognition, recognition, and interpretation (and misinterpretation) (*saññā*). The fourth factor, constructing activities (*sankhāra*), initiates action and gives shape to character. The fifth and final element of personality is essentially known as the “mind set” or discriminative consciousness (*viññāna*) (Harvey 1990: 49-50). As has been shown, this shifting and mutable sense of the Buddhist self (or of the “selves”) is very much in keeping with the notion of the self found in Buddhist doctrine.

These particular factors comprising personality, it would seem, directly influence how an individual perceives the world and his or her place in it. It would also seem that gender, as it also shapes individuals and their perceptions, would figure directly and significantly into the construction of the “I.” Since any permanent construction of the self in Buddhism is regarded as illusory, can we not, by extension, also make the same assumption about gender? After all, “gender” itself is a highly constructed collection of explicit and implicit assumptions and expectations about what makes “men” distinct from “women” and vice versa, and how they think, act, and feel. Indeed, much of feminist theory in recent decades has emphasized the salient role gender plays in the construction of perceived reality (*inter alia* Gross 1986a: 49-50; Butler 1990; Haraway 1990; Klein 1996; Greer 1971; Lamphere 1995; Lutz 1995; de Beauvoir 1953).

In spite of the apparent congruity between genderlessness and selflessness, Buddhist scholar and practitioner Rita Gross has remarked that Buddhist doctrine has in fact consistently ignored gender as a salient factor in the conventional construction of the self, or how the gendered aspect of the self supports and is supported by societal patterns, institutions, and pressures. Gross contends that it is these selfsame patterns, institutions, and pressures that “. . . make it far easier for men than women to pursue the spiritual

disciplines leading to egolessness” (1986a: 50; Boucher 1988: 4).

Based upon my readings in feminist research in the fields of religion and identity, and my own personal experiences with Orthodox Christianity and research with Orthodox Judaism, I was expecting – and assuming – that gender issues would be problematic for some Toronto Tibetan Buddhists. This expectation was further bolstered by my readings on Buddhism and women, which included both canonical and non-canonical sources as well as contemporary scholarship on the subject. While Tibetan Buddhism is often publically perceived as more gender equal, perhaps in part due to the significant presence of Western women practitioners in all Buddhist traditions, a closer look at Buddhist doctrine, literature, and history reveals that the position and status of women within the Buddhist tradition has been, and continues to be, much more complex, contradictory, and ambiguous. The following verse from the well-known and influential Tibetan text, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life (Bodhisattvacharyavatara)*, illustrates how sex is strongly suggested to be one of a woman’s primary purposes. The author of the text states it thus in an excerpt questioning the efficacy of worldly, material attachments:

As a child I am unable to increase my wealth,  
 And as a youth what can I do (being unable to afford a wife)?  
 At the end of my life *when I have the wealth*  
 Being an old man, *what good will sex be then?* (emphasis mine)(trans. Batchelor 1979: 114)

Women have also been frequently portrayed as “sexually indefatigable” (Johnston 1936: 26), and lustful by nature. Their oft-cited sole purpose is to ensnare men and tempt them off the spiritual path into the “hellish” world of sensual desires and pleasures (Murcott 1991: 126; Wilson 1996: 4). Other verses in the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* show how representations of women, as they are associated with things “worldly” and thus “profane,” have been used throughout Buddhist history to illustrate the impermanent nature of reality and the physical body. The following passages clearly assume that both the author and the audience are male:

- (41) I engage in fearful deeds for them  
and will even consume my wealth.  
But those (very bodies of theirs)  
That I greatly enjoy in the sexual  
embrace
- (42) Are nothing other than skeletons.  
They are not autonomous and are identityless.  
.....
- (45) (Previously) I completely protected (her body)  
when others cast their eyes upon it.  
Why, miser, do you protect it now  
While it is being devoured by these  
birds [in a charnel field]?
- (46) Since vultures and others are eating  
This pile of meat that I behold  
Why did I offer flower garlands, sandalwood  
and ornaments  
To that which is now the food of others?
- (52) If I am not attached to what is unclean,  
Then why do I copulate with the lower parts of  
others bodies  
Which are merely cages of bones tied together with muscles,  
Plastered over with the mud of flesh?  
(trans. Batchelor 1979: 108-110)

Dead, dying, and disfigured women's bodies are, in this text, used to illustrate the transience of the human condition and the folly of desire. In the first millennium of the Common Era, such images of women and women's bodies were also used in hagiographic literature as objects of meditation. According to Wilson, women's "... sole function in the narrative in which they appear is to lead to the edification of the male subjects who observe them" (1996: 3). Women themselves were instructed to contemplate only their own or other female bodies in stages of decay, *not* the deteriorating bodies of men (Wilson 1996: 5). Rarely, if ever, are female subjects given any degree of subjectivity or agency in this form of literature. Likewise in the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*; women are literally presented as "skeletal frames" (trans. Batchelor 1979: 108) which may occasionally be clothed with layers of male-defined meaning, such as "filthy bags of flesh" (trans. Batchelor 1979: 110) to illustrate the supposed nature of women and the transience of the body.

Given this background, before actually entering “the field” in Toronto, I designed questions in both sets of formal interviews that reflected this expectation. I asked participants – both male and female – to discuss how gender and women were regarded and treated in Tibetan Buddhism, if feminism was considered relevant to them and their daily lifestyles, and whether or not there existed any differences in the way men and women practised Buddhism. Additionally, I left the door open for them to discuss literature and history or to draw upon their own experiences, and better yet, some combination of the three. In light of this situation, it is necessary to turn to the personal narratives of Toronto Buddhist to more clearly ascertain whether the “genderless Buddhist” is, in practice, genderless. Does gendered religious doctrine directly impact the lived reality of men and women, and is the perception of gender as an illusion fully carried out in reality?

There can be seen a minimum of two interrelated views on gender in the narratives of Toronto women and men. The vast majority of individuals held at least one of these viewpoints, if not both. The first perspective finds that “gender” is frequently regarded as an illusion, a constructed facade that when analytically questioned, dissolves like so much smoke. To this effect, Anne C. Klein notes that many Western women and men can easily deny the idea of a permanent or essential self, and carry the idea over to fully acknowledge that gender is also illusory (1996: 39). It thus appears plausible that a contemporary Buddhist sense of self could indeed be “genderless.”

As NKT monk and teacher Zopa maintains, Buddhism and its doctrines are, for all intents and purposes, “genderless.” He states:

Everything I know of Buddhism has been taught to me by my own teacher, and so if I were to describe Buddhism in terms of male and female roles, in terms of how Buddhism is practised, in terms of aspirations, goals or attainments, role models, and the whole thing . . . the deities in Buddhism are both male and female. So I don't, . . . in my mind, think that there's a separation or a distinction. If one understands Buddhism, one understands that gender . . . any kind of worldly identity – ‘I'm a man,’ ‘I'm a woman,’ ‘I'm old,’ ‘I'm tall,’ ‘I'm short,’ ‘I'm skinny’ – all these things are imputations which are temporary. They have no ultimate meaning.

Zopa goes on to state that if any form of patriarchal hierarchy exists in Buddhism in the West, it is most likely a reflection of society, rather than Buddhist doctrine itself. Early scholars of women and Buddhism certainly argued that the role of the Buddhist monastic and renunciant was the actualization of a genderless ideal. Women and men in Buddhism were considered to be on equal footing in this role, as the renouncer was felt to be “an asexual rational being”(Foley 1893: 348). Women in early Buddhism, both lay and monastic, were often assumed to have been treated more equitably than was the case in early Hinduism (Wilson 1996: 6). As a religious system, Tibetan Buddhism appears to accord women equal status doctrinally, and recognizes with significant esteem women’s spiritual developments and attainments. Historically and socially, Buddhist women have also appeared to enjoy a position of high esteem and respect when compared with their counterparts in other world religions.

The “creation” story of the female Buddha Tara is particularly relevant to any discussion on women and Buddhism, and the illusory nature of gender itself. During the course of my research, I heard this story repeatedly during teachings, meditation classes, and *tantric* empowerments. In fact, when I was introduced to potential study participants and other class-goers as “someone doing research on gender and Buddhism,” I was more often than not asked if I was aware of this story.

One version relates that Tara originated from the tears of the male *Bodhisattva* of Compassion, Avalokitesvara,<sup>7</sup> who wept when he thought of the immense numbers of beings still left in the suffering of worldly existence (Gross 1993: 110). Another version of Tara’s creation speaks of her as an ordinary human being, one who practised *Dharma* for countless reincarnations before she first generated the mind of enlightenment (*bodhicitta*). When monks suggested to her that she should then pray to change into male form, a form thought to be more conducive to enlightenment, Tara refused to acknowledge any distinction

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<sup>7</sup> In East Asia, the *Bodhisattva* of Compassion takes the female form, known as Kuan-Yin.

between male and female.<sup>8</sup> She then made a vow to continue to take rebirth in a female form:

Those who wish to obtain supreme enlightenment in a man's body are many, but those who wish to serve the aims of beings in a woman's body are few indeed; therefore may I until this world is emptied out, serve the aim of beings with nothing but the body of a woman. (Allione 1984: 64)

While Tara's vow for continuous female embodiment reinforces and supports not only women's spirituality, but also women themselves, it also underscores the irrelevance of gender. It is a far cry from earlier Theravādin and Mahāyāna texts on the avoidance of female rebirth. For example, in a passage taken from the well-known Mahāyāna text, the *Lotus Sūtra* (Sanskrit, *Saddharmapundarikasūtra*),<sup>9</sup> the historical Buddha, the Shakyamuni Buddha, describes a "Buddha Land"<sup>10</sup> as follows:

The land will be filled with terraces and towers made of the seven treasures, and the heavenly palaces will be situated close by in the sky, so that human and heavenly beings can communicate and be within sight of each other. There will be no evil paths of existence there, nor will there be any women. (Watson 1993: 145)

In other words, the only way a woman can find herself within this Buddha Land or gain admittance to it is to first take rebirth in male form.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A similar refusal to acknowledge gender difference can be found in the Mahāyāna text, *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti*. An unnamed goddess demonstrates the illusory nature of gender to the monk Śāriputra by changing his body into that of a woman and asking him to identify an "essence" particular to a woman, which he cannot (trans. Thurman 1976: 61-63).

<sup>9</sup> An early *sūtra* which appeared between the first century BCE and the second century CE. It rendered many traditional beliefs in a new light, including the replacement of emphasis on personal salvation (*arahantship*) with the new ideal of the *bodhisattva*, and its emphasis on compassion towards all sentient beings (Bowker 1997: 587)

<sup>10</sup> Also known as a Buddha-field (Sanskrit, *Buddha-ksetra*). The sphere of activity and influence of a particular Buddha, or the domain of a particular Buddha (Bowker 1997: 170).

<sup>11</sup> According to Gross, this view is not misogynistic, but rather one of pity and compassion towards women in a male-dominated society (1993: 63).



Other lesser known<sup>12</sup> texts underscore the respected role and status of women, and attempt to reinforce the concept that gender should neither be seen as an impediment to spiritual practice nor viewed as such. Set down in the eleventh century CE by Sakya Pandita, the *Samaya* obligations and their opposites are taken by every *Tantric* practitioner, and must be upheld if the practitioner is to progress on the path of enlightenment. *Samaya* obligations are of unparalleled importance in Vajrayana Buddhism, and are forgotten with the risk of greatest peril to the practitioner (Gross 1993: 100). The Fourteenth Root Downfall concerns women:

If one disparages women who are of the nature of wisdom, that is the fourteenth root downfall. That is to say, women are the symbol of wisdom and Sunyata, showing both. It is therefore a root downfall to dispraise women in every possible way, saying that women are without spiritual merit and made of unclean things, not considering their good qualities. If one says a little against a woman, that can be purified. But if the woman disparaged is a Vajra sister, and one considers her as one's enemy, that is the third and heavier root downfall. If the woman is not actually a Vajra sister, to give up being friendly to her the fourth root downfall. (Willis 1972: 103)

Gary, a thirty-something originally from southwestern Ontario who practises Buddhism in the NKT tradition, reaffirms the position that doctrinally, Buddhism is equal for men as well as women. He makes note of the presence of very powerful female deities in Tibetan Buddhism such as Tara, Prajñāpāramitā,<sup>13</sup> and Vajrayoginī. He also notes that his main deity, his *yidam*,<sup>14</sup> is in fact a female deity, Vajrayoginī herself.

Ellen Goodbrand, a young woman in her mid twenties whose interest in and practice of Buddhism began a few years previously, concurs with Zopa's and Gary's viewpoints on gender. Speaking as a twenty-

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<sup>12</sup> It appears this particular text on the *Samaya* obligations is less well-known amongst Toronto Tibetan Buddhists, at least with the relatively small number of men and women with whom I spoke. Within the context of all the informal discussions and conversations and the taped interviews themselves, this root downfall was brought to my attention exactly twice.

<sup>13</sup> The Goddess of superior wisdom and transcendental intuition.

<sup>14</sup> A tutelary or meditation deity in Tibetan Buddhism, somewhat parallel to the "guardian angel" in the West. *Yidams* can be classified as either peaceful or wrathful, and are often considered to be aspects of primary *bodhisattvas* (Bowker 1997: 1057). The peaceful and nurturing Tara and the fierce and esoteric Vajrayoginī are two of the most significant female *yidams* in Tibetan Buddhism (Gross 1993: 109-110).

seven year old Canadian woman who has spent time living in NKT *Dharma* centres in England and Toronto, Ellen says that gender and gendered issues have not been a problem in her practice. While she acknowledges that she has little experience with or knowledge of how Buddhism was (and is) practised in traditional Buddhist societies, she feels that Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, the spiritual leader of the New Kadampa Tradition, has successfully presented Buddhism to the West as “. . . just the spirituality. Just that. No politics, no anything else, just spirituality . . . gender doesn’t seem to be a big issue.”

Ellen has been actively involved in some of the teacher-training programs offered at the Toronto NKT centre, and confides that she is exploring the *Dharma* as a potential “career path.” Within the particular context of the *Dharma* centre, she does not see gender as a problematic issue.

For me, the whole . . . I guess being amongst people who are genuinely trying to practise this spiritual path, there is this definite sense of equality that seems to come up. And I see men and women within this. I mean, I sort of see that *this* is my lifestyle, this is maybe my career, so this is like my office space and my working environment. So within this working environment, I see women and men upholding similar roles as principle teachers of centres, as administrative directors, as education coordinators. So those [gender] issues don’t seem to come up.

According to Ellen, the basic Buddhist denial of any distinction between self and other, and by extension, between male and female, is very much a part of her lived experience at her meditation centre. Many other women who were interviewed, like Pema, Joyce, and Erika, expressed little or no difficulty with gender in Tibetan Buddhism, either scripturally or in the context of their own lives. Most women, Isis included, believe that the Buddha’s teachings are not gender specific, and are available to everyone. Isis calls this “spaciousness,” in that the teachings themselves are much larger than gender.

So, ideologically, spaciousness may include both genders and ideologically, Buddhist compassion is not withheld from any particular sex. But in terms of cultural difficulties and how these things are made manifest in the real world then yeah, I think there are lots of them, things that have to be dealt with . . . in the East, I know that monks apparently get preferential treatment. A friend of mine tells a story about a friend of hers who was traveling . . . in Thailand, I believe, and in this particular monastery the monks were very close to the bathrooms. But the nuns were like miles and miles away from the bathroom. Even the older, and maybe even infirm nuns, had a great distance to go to get to this bathroom . . . and the monks also got to sit closer to the shrine and the nuns sat behind.

Issues of gender that do arise, according to Isis, are more the result of cultural and social perceptions, rather than based within Buddhist doctrine. To reinforce this position, Isis recounts her understanding of the story of women's admission into the monastic order:

Well, I understand in the teachings of the Buddha gender is not an issue. Two of the first people that the Buddha ordained were nuns, and women were encouraged. He said, 'Why should there be a difference? If somebody is genuinely interested and wants to pursue this particular path and is true, then why should gender be an issue?' and I think his disciple, Arjuna,<sup>15</sup> brought him two women. It was kind of a test situation where he said, 'Can all people come?' and the Buddha said, 'Of course.' And he opened the door and there were two women standing there and they were ordained.

Not recognizing that gender is an illusion is to allow gender to become an obstacle on the spiritual path. As noted elsewhere, basic Buddhist doctrine denies any separation or distinction between self and other, male and female. Focusing too much on gender, or "maleness" and "femaleness," "men" and "women," creates duality and only serves to highlight difference. In short, many women and men felt that anything that fostered difference and established a distinctive label was somewhat "dangerous." Labels can potentially distract an individual from the Buddhist notion of the essential non-duality of all things. Social constructs such as gender, states Ellen Goodbrand, are limiting and "... it is like we are defining ourselves ... we are boxing ourselves in, when Buddhism is totally about ... Buddhism is like [more focused on] understanding how our minds work."

This perception, concerning what are felt to be the misleading and potentially harmful results of labels and distinctions, is frequently expressed in the context of both formal interviews and personal interactions. In fact, when I asked if there are gender differences in Buddhist practice, one man informed me that he thought such a question was "... a little silly." While many agreed with Ellen's point, the question of gender is discussed and analyzed from a variety of different angles and perspectives. The response of Marco Frascetti, a thirty-something stay-at-home father, is one such example. Marco feels that the basic

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<sup>15</sup> The name of the Buddha's favorite disciple, to whom Isis is referring, is actually Ananda.

point of Buddhism means being able to transcend dualisms. In this vein, he feels that gender should be more properly regarded as a projection of one's own mind, a projection which is in itself strongly influenced by one's karma. Marco's views on the matter encapsulate similar sentiments held by many other individuals:

I think the whole point of the whole spiritual path involves transcending that [dualism], because you have to recognize that you and I are not different. I see you over there . . . I mean my natural tendency is to conceive you as a separate being altogether, and assert that. But I am trying to realize that you and I are not different. Actually, you are a projection of my mind. And what I see there is nothing more than my karmic tendencies to see. So it is actually a bastardization of what is there. Because it is tainted to my biases; it is tainted with my thoughts and so forth. And so that is true about everything . . . these labels we give to people and things, are actually huge obstacles. Huge! Because they assert dualism . . . the inherentness, that you are inherently a feminist, inherently a woman, different. The assertion of inherence, inherent existence, in any of its forms, is actually the worst thing you could do on a spiritual path – especially on one that emphasizes that things do not exist inherently!

Transcendence of gender, of dualisms in general, is a recurrent theme in the narratives of Toronto Buddhists. While gender is not explicitly identified by some as an obstacle on the path to enlightenment, many women and men hold the position that sooner or later, one needs to focus on *other, more important*, elements in their spiritual and daily lives. For Harry Flashman, gender dualism definitely needs to be transcended at some point, but rather than dismissing gender as illusory, he instead interprets the difference between maleness and femaleness in another way:

. . . especially in a tradition like Tibetan Buddhism where you have iconography that is male and female, and what you're talking about is *principles*. And that these principles, of male and female, exist within every person regardless of the gender of their physical body.

The next logical step, according to Harry, is that once these masculine and feminine elements that exist within each individual are acknowledged, a more "androgynous mindset" can arise, where the individual with his or her ". . . or 'its' own pattern of suffering and strengths, its own unique qualities . . ." can be perceived more directly.

Sarah Katherine, an artist and mother of two young children in her mid-thirties, also seeks to move beyond gender as a label that structures our perceptions and behaviours. A continuous goal for her is to live her life as a human being first, and then as a human being “on the woman side” second. She gives the following example to illustrate the manner in which she tries to live her life. Sarah says it is when people do not refer to each other as humans first, things get confusing. As a result,

. . . it doesn't matter to me if I am doing something that is . . . human. That comes first and that's what I do. It is a *human* thing to feed my baby from my breast, so I am doing that in almost any circumstance. I know it offends some people, but since it has already passed the first test of being a human thing to do . . .

Gender, then, is constructed by both men and women as a sort of secondary concern in the merging contexts of spirituality and daily life. Individuality, basic humanity, and non-dualistic thinking are conceptualized and presented as more primary and significant. Further discussion on topics of gender in Buddhism and society reveals that both women and men, in keeping with the above statements on non-duality and spiritual progress, overwhelmingly perceive the “goal” of their practice in similar – if not identical – ways: to decrease suffering and increase happiness. As Sarah Katherine puts it, gender does not make any difference to her when speaking of the motivations, goals, and results of spiritual practice: “We’re talking about compassion, we’re talking about goodness, and we’re talking about dignity.” These things, according to many others as well, have nothing to do with gender.

#### D) Gendered Roles, Gendered Practice

Buddhist scholar, practitioner, and feminist Rita Gross remarked in 1993 that many Western Buddhists are far better informed about historical, philosophical, and doctrinal components of their particular Buddhist sect than is typical of “rank and file” adherents in most other religious movements (1993: 25). This remark has been substantiated by a wide variety of Western Buddhist scholars and practitioners alike (*inter alia*, Kornfield 1988; Nattier 1997, 1998; Rapaport 1998; Coleman 1999). Such

also appears to be the case with Toronto Buddhists. By far the majority of Toronto Buddhists also tended to be relatively well-informed. Most attend teachings or classes with some regularity, as their work and family schedules permit, and all have reasonably well-stocked libraries of Buddhist literature. Collections run the full gamut, including works on Buddhist doctrine, personal biographies of historical and contemporary Buddhists, meditation practices, hagiographies, and various other “Buddhist” topics such as work and spirituality, family life, monasticism and renunciation, among others. And, according to the narrative excerpts, the identity of the “genderless Buddhist” does in fact appear to be genderless.

The majority of practitioners also, however, accord with Gross’ remarks concerning women. Most Western Buddhists, she states, are *much less* well-informed about women and Buddhist history. Most also assume that women have *always* participated in Buddhism to the same extent that is found in many contemporary Western centres (Gross 1993: 25). She maintains that “. . . the simple biggest difference between the practice of Buddhism in Asia and the practice of Buddhism in the West is the full and complete participation of women in Western Buddhism” (1993: 25). Again, to some degree, Gross’ statement is reflected in the personal narratives of women and men in Toronto. The narratives presented here on women and Buddhism all show that the situation has changed somewhat since the time of Gross’ writing. The statements of Isis reflects this oddly paradoxical situation. Isis spoke earlier of the preferential treatment that monks have historically received, and yet maintained that the creation of the nun’s order “set the stage” early on for women’s equal position in Buddhism. Isis was unaware of the “dark side” of the story of the creation of the nun’s order and the Eight Special Rules that restrict the activities of female renunciants.

The version of the creation of the nun’s order, to which Isis referred earlier, is found in a small section of the monastic *Book of Discipline* (Pāli, *Vinaya-pitaka*<sup>16</sup>), the *Cullavaga X*. This segment describes the creation of the women’s order during the historical Buddha’s lifetime. It was Prajapati, the Buddha’s aunt and foster-mother, who approached him and requested admission to the monastic order. After her

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<sup>16</sup> One of the “three baskets” (*Tripitaka*) of the Buddhist canon, which contains the regulations and rules of conduct for monks and nuns (Powers 2000: 241).

request was denied for the third time, Prajapati and a large group of noblewomen made a final show of determination, need, and sincerity: they are said to have exchanged their sumptuous clothing for the saffron robes of the monastic order, shaved their heads, and walked over a hundred miles to the Buddha's residence. On behalf of the women, the favourite disciple of the Buddha, Ananda, asked if women were able to attain enlightenment. To this, the Buddha responded affirmatively. Capitalizing on this point, Ananda then extolled the virtues of Prajapati, especially her great care and compassion as his foster-mother. Ananda eventually persuaded the Buddha to grant the women's request for admission to the monastic order (Horner 1963: 352-354). Unquestionably, the creation of the female mendicant order in Buddhism *did* offer women an alternative to the traditional roles of wife and mother (Horner 1930: 99-100, 114), and they *did* gain an important and liberating spiritual option in addition to a respectable centre of learning (Gross 1993: 17; Fernandez 1986: 40; Falk 1980: 208). In this respect, Isis is correct.

There is, however, a discriminatory undertone to the story that is frequently overlooked in many versions and interpretations. The events surrounding the creation of the nun's order and the ordination of Prajapati clearly place women in an ambiguous state. On the one hand, Prajapati is recognized as a woman of great wisdom and respect, and the Buddha does eventually allow her and her women to enter the renunciant order. Yet, on the other hand, the Buddha initially said "no" and had to be persuaded by his favorite disciple, Ananda. In addition, the Buddha is said to have remarked that the inclusion of women in the monastic order will ultimately shorten the projected thousand year life-span of the *Dharma* by half, and then compares women's admission to a disease that attacks a field of rice: in time, the crop will be destroyed (Horner 1963: 356).<sup>17</sup>

The entry of women into the monastic order was also contingent upon Prajapati's agreement to

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<sup>17</sup> The authenticity of this story has been questioned. There is speculation as to what degree this text has been "reworked" in later times by the monastic community, in whose hands rests the transmission of sacred literature. Nancy Falk maintains that it does not belong to the oldest stratum of Buddhist literature; regardless of its authenticity, presented as it has been as a founding narrative, its impact upon the nun's order has been significant (1980: 219).

take an additional eight monastic rules<sup>18</sup> (Horner 1963: 352-354; Murcott 1991: 197). These Eight Special Rules effectively placed the nun's order into a subservient position relative to the order of monks, and are often criticized for setting the foundation for women's subordination and constricted role within Buddhist institutions and hierarchies. These rules demonstrate the male control of the women's order. One such rule concerns ordination itself. After a woman has trained as a novice for two years, she then has the option of seeking full ordination. A nun's ordination however, must be confirmed and acknowledged by *both* the female and the male *sanghas* (Murcott 1991: 197). A quorum of ten fully ordained monks and ten fully ordained nuns must be present to ordain a nun, while there is no corresponding requirement for the ordination of a monk. The disappearance of the nun's order (and thus the unbroken religious lineage) in many Buddhist countries, such as Sri Lanka and Thailand, and the historical resistance of the male *sangha* to reestablishing the "broken" women's lineage (Bartholomeusz 1994: 15; Gross 1993: 86; Havnevik 1989; Tsomo 1988; 1995; Khema 1988; Wijayasundara 1999; Kabilsingh 1988), has prevented women from becoming fully ordained nuns. Women may be ordained, but only as novices.<sup>19</sup>

A second rule outlining the male control over the women's monastic order concerns the transmission of religious doctrine. This rule states that nuns must wait every half-month to receive, in addition to the date of a particular ceremony, "... the time the monks will come to give teaching" (Murcott 1991: 197). The explicit mention of monks transmitting doctrine and the unspoken denial of women's involvement with this function sent a powerful message to Buddhist women. It implicitly states that nuns are subordinate to monks,<sup>20</sup> and thus limits women's participation in the propagation of Buddhism itself. There

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<sup>18</sup> See Appendix B for the Eight Special Rules of the Nun's *Sangha*.

<sup>19</sup> In Tibet, there is no evidence that a full women's ordination lineage ever existed (Havnevik 1989: 50). According to American Tibetan Buddhist nun Karma Lekshe Tsomo, the only living lineage of full ordination for women is in the Chinese Dharmagupta lineage. Many women, herself included, from other Buddhist traditions take full ordination within this lineage (1995: 121)

<sup>20</sup> Other rules support this. One states that a nun is forbidden to admonish a monk, yet a monk is free to admonish nuns. Another orders a nun, even if she is well-learned, respected, and wise, even if she is "... of a hundred year's standing, shall respectfully greet, rise up in the presence of, bow down before, and perform



is mention of nuns teaching men in the *Therigatha*,<sup>21</sup> but not monastics. One of the few Buddhist texts composed by women about women, the *Therigatha* is full of poetry about accomplished women, nuns, female teachers, and disciples. Yet the spiritual and intellectual influences of these early Buddhist women seems to have been limited to teaching lay persons and other nuns (Wilson 1996: 147). While the female renunciant order did enable women in the sixth century BCE and beyond to pursue options other than their traditional roles, the rules were nevertheless in keeping with the times: women once again found themselves under the control of men – in this case, the monks.

The eight rules unique to female renunciants made it difficult, if not altogether impossible, for nuns to exist without the spiritual and institutional leadership, presence, and control of monks. This restrictive situation is believed to have contributed to the diminishment<sup>22</sup> and eventual disappearance<sup>23</sup> of the nun's order in many Buddhist countries. Unquestionably, the nun's order did provide women with greater opportunities for spiritual training and advancement, but it did not offer the same opportunities for institutional and scholarly leadership.

Even if unaware of the specifics, Toronto women and men are aware of some degree of the gender contradictions that exist in Buddhist literature and have existed in traditionally Buddhist countries through history. What is of more interest here, however, is how the status of women in Buddhism – and “gender

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all proper duties towards a monk even ordained a day” (Murcott 1991: 197).

<sup>21</sup> The enlightenment poetry of early Buddhist nuns. This text is thought to have originated during the lifetime of the historical Buddha, sometime in the sixth century BCE. There is some speculation as to whether it was transcribed during this period or was transmitted orally for centuries beforehand.

<sup>22</sup> To illustrate this point, Havenvik notes that the intellectually and economically inferior position of nuns in Tibetan society makes them easy targets for ridicule and scorn. Women who seek the renunciant path are seen as “unsuccessful women” – the old, the widowed, and the ugly. The moral character of Tibetan nuns is also more suspect than that of the monks. Stories of nuns breaking vows, becoming pregnant, and having inappropriate sexual relationships with their spiritual teachers, are common (1989: 148-155).

<sup>23</sup> Around the third century CE, the Buddhist monastic community was winning a high reputation for its scholarship, and many wealthy donors were interested in cultivating prestigious associations with the *sangha* (Falk 1980: 212; Gross 1994: 7). With few recognized female teachers, the nun's community captured less and less of the laity's social and economic support.

issues” – is conceptualized by contemporary Toronto Tibetan Buddhists. Two basic approaches towards women’s roles and representations in Buddhism emerge in the narratives. The first, one of anachronistic dismissal, occurs in one of the primary spaces where both women and men identify and recognize gender inequality and discrimination: within the more traditional Buddhist texts, including *sūtras*, *sādhana*s, and prayers.

To illustrate this point, one ethnographic moment is especially relevant. During one of the formal interviews, I was discussing the issue of gender discrimination with Pema Chönyid. In particular, I was telling her of some of the more disparaging verses concerning women I had found in the Tibetan text, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life (Bodhisattvacharyavataṛa)* by the monk Shantideva. In it, he describes women as “unclean,” and “cages of bones” lacking in identity and autonomy (trans. Batchelor 1979: 108-110). Pema’s response to these verses came with a burst of laughter:

Yeah, I find when I read stuff like that, I just laugh and go on. That’s somebody’s attitude, but it is not the Buddha’s *sūtras*. It is somebody’s interpretations. I don’t . . . I just don’t pay any attention to it. I mean, I am sure someone would read that and get really offended; they get hyper and angry about it, but I just don’t make a big deal about it. I just ignore it and go on. It is [trying to focus on] what is more important.

Similar sentiments are expressed by many other women and men in Toronto Tibetan Buddhist temples and centres. Disparaging or discriminatory practices and comments concerning women were primarily identified as “outdated,” and a product of a different time and place. While this does not reflect the views of all women and men, for most individuals concern over gendered language and gendered discourse were not components of their own personal practices. The issue, according to Philip Starkman,

. . . would come up from time to time because there were those practitioners, female practitioners, who complained about the materials; they’re patriarchal in their language and demeaning at times. Almost always it was people who had gone through a very tough psychological road in their life, usually abused and exploited and so forth – a little more than most, and therefore they’re sensitive. For the most part, most [women] didn’t care. They saw this as an anachronism and it was a term of language that reflected that anachronism and didn’t take it too seriously because the techniques were there and the practice was there and all they had to do was do the practice and get the result. They didn’t have to be involved with that.

Also present within the above responses is the assumption that those individuals (mostly women) who *do* take issue with sexist language are overreacting and overly sensitive. The general assumption concerning those who do not dismiss gender discrimination in the texts and the practices appears to be that they are somehow “missing the point.” It is stated time and again that the practice is more important.

A second predominant attitude towards women’s presence and role in Buddhism locates gender discrimination within the social and historical contexts in which Buddhism existed. While some of the personal narratives presented previously attribute instances of gender inequality or disparagement of women to cultural and social influences, it becomes necessary to take a closer look at *how* these cultural and social influences are perceived by Westerners, in addition to *where* these influences are located. As Isis maintains, gender inequalities are not inherent to Buddhism, but are instead culturally inherent. She continues in this vein:

So I think a lot of what we understand as ‘Tibetan Buddhism’ comes through the filter of Tibetan culture, meaning that whatever inequality or hierarchy or patriarchal focus there is in Tibetan society is . . . permeates Tibetan Buddhism.

All of the individuals who responded to questions on gender inequality and women’s roles in Buddhism were, for the most part, very much aware of the social, cultural, and historical contexts that have assuredly influenced how Buddhism was and is practised. With this perspective in mind, gender inequality and discrimination are taken with the proverbial “grain of salt.” Most women and men agreed that a society and/or culture that is patriarchal and hierarchical will very likely organize its religious institutions and practices in a similar fashion. In short, it was commonly felt that any gender issues which arise in Buddhism have roots in cultural practices.

What becomes especially interesting about this perspective, however, is that “the society” implicitly (and sometimes not so implicitly) fingered in these discussions is one that is substantially removed from the everyday realities of life in a major, metropolitan centre in Canada. With some exceptions, the majority of practitioners assume that the origins of gender issues within Buddhism come

from Tibetan society and other traditionally Buddhist, Asian societies. Gender problems in Buddhism are commonly assumed to be reflections of *Asian* societal structures, rather than Western or Canadian cultural and social structures. This response is particularly telling, since all men and women who participated in formal interviews responded unanimously to a question concerning the status of women and gender equality in Canadian and Western society.<sup>24</sup> Without exception, all responded that while progressive steps have been made to improve the status and roles of women, there remains much more work to be done in these areas.

When speaking of gender equality in Buddhism, Ellen Goodbrand attributes the unproblematic access she has experienced to *Western* social and cultural norms. She states:

I think there are equal opportunities [for women] where Tibetan Buddhism is being practiced by Westerners, because we have grown up with these standards . . . any example of Tibetan society I have seen is the usual sort of gender discrimination.

The influence of Western cultural forms (especially concerning gendered roles and the family) on the practice and propagation of Buddhism are not commonly recognized by many Western practitioners. Many Toronto Buddhists spoke of gender inequalities “from a distance,” not only in terms of societal influences, but also in terms of how gender itself is conceptualized.

For some single women such as Ellen Goodbrand, “gender” is a non-issue: “Buddhism is a spiritual thing, that can be practised within any context. By anyone, anywhere.” For other single women like Pema Chönyid, gender discrimination and androcentric language in Buddhism are anachronistic. “Gender problems” for these women are things that happen to someone else.

These perceptions are reflected in men’s personal narratives as well, although with one significant difference: “gender” is almost exclusively assumed to be synonymous with women. For many single men as well, “gender” is also something that happens to someone else. Even those individuals who recognize women’s less visible and active role historically within Buddhism remain unaware of the impacts gender

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<sup>24</sup> See Appendix A for a list of interview questions.

may have currently on access to the teachings of the Buddha, and even how these teachings are put into practice. Echoing Philip and others on this point, Harry Flashman downplays any gendered issues in Buddhism, choosing instead to focus in the primacy of Buddhist practice itself. While remaining sensitive to gender in other contexts, Harry appears outwardly dismissive in the following passage:

So I think yes, it is a patriarchal system. Yes, there is a patriarchal power structure, but ultimately it doesn't matter as long as the practitioners practise . . . ultimately the tradition also holds that any one practice, practised earnestly, and practised with enough commitment, with enough diligence, can carry the practitioner through the whole stages of spiritual growth. So in a way, I think that *that* is really the thing to remember.

Up to this point in this discussion, there appears to be among Toronto Buddhists a reluctance to recognize gender as a salient factor in Buddhist practice, both in the narratives and in Buddhist literature (canonical, non-canonical and popular sources). Gender is spoken about “from a distance,” both by single men and women, and its impact is considered limited. It is limited most of all, to “others:” to non-Westerners, to women in traditional Buddhist societies, and to women in traditional Buddhist institutions. As one man articulates his thoughts on gender issues, they *do* exist, but:

. . . gender issues are always related to the hierarchy and the way *religion* is – the structure of the religious organization, the institution. That is where male and female issues arise. But in the actual [meditation] practice, when it actually comes down to the *Dharma*, those [gender] distinctions disappear.

There is a pervasive and implicit belief among many Toronto Tibetan Buddhists that gender is not relevant at the level of the individual, at the level of personal meditation practice. Time and again, the *Dharma* is interpreted as transcending gender and gender distinctions. Gender problems arise when someone (usually a woman) encounters “Buddhism,” the religion, the institution, the hierarchy.<sup>25</sup> The tension between conceptions of “Buddhism” as opposed to “*Dharma*” become obvious. While most

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<sup>25</sup> This distinction will be explored in Part Five: The Individual in Relation.

individuals attempt to delineate the two, it is a difficult and challenging undertaking that often collapses under closer scrutiny.

It is highly probable that many Western Buddhist practitioners both male and female will have to confront at least two assumptions about gender, namely that gender itself is only an illusion in Buddhism, and that the West has already broken free of a patriarchal past (Tsomo 1995: 158; Gross 1986b: 73). The personal narrative of Sallie Jiko Tisdale, a long-time Zen Buddhist in the United States, poignantly illustrates the tension surrounding the concept of gender in contemporary Buddhist practice. Tisdale recalls noticing that gender did in fact make a difference while chanting the ancestral lineage – which is male – and encountering only “he” in Buddhist scriptures (1996: 13-14). She notes her confusion concerning the contradictory viewpoints she experienced:

The world tells me gender is destiny, inescapable; my daily experiences tells me that gender has much to do with the conditions in which I train. Yet, many men tell me that gender – and my experience of it – is only illusion. (1996: 14)

The sense of joy and connection Tisdale recalls when practising with a group of women is termed “un-Buddhist” and is told that she is “grasping” onto the conception that there is an intrinsic female nature (1996: 15). Tisdale also notices how her female body is “different” when she practises Zen sitting meditation. Ancient texts written by male Zen masters that describe “how to sit” are often different from her own experiences. She makes note of menstrual back pain, a different centre of gravity, and meditation that is turned “upside-down” during menopause. “Gender,” she says, “is not illusion. *Gender is karma*” (emphasis mine)(Tisdale 1996: 15).

#### E) Gender as Karma

As seen in these selected narrative excerpts, the role of gender appears to be downplayed in the minds of both women and men. While in some cases it is dismissed as a salient factor altogether, for most, gender is considered to be an *influence* only; gender is not regarded as a controlling factor in how people

relate to themselves and to others. Gender was viewed as only *one* aspect of a person or an individual. By far, the factor that is seen as the most profoundly influential is karma (or kamma, Pāli). Echoing a commonly held Mahāyāna Buddhist sentiment that maintains both women and men can attain enlightenment, Pema Chönyid flatly states that achieving enlightenment “. . . has nothing to do with gender; it has to do with your past motivations.” This sentiment, held by many others in addition to Pema, is in direct accord with much of the Tibetan Buddhist teachings on the genderless nature of the *Dharma* and the spiritual path. By focusing on karmic influences as the basic processes by which individuals are shaped and constituted, gender is subsumed in importance and perceived to be one lone factor that is incorporated, along with others, into the matrix of the individual. Tara Green, a lay practitioner and mother of three, feels that it is karmic influences that determine who you are as a person, and that gender is really a very small part of a person. Accordingly, she maintains:

It just happens to be that this lifetime, my karma says I get to be female. Karma really determines what you did in your past lives, the way I am currently, and even the way I look and what I have around me, my enjoyments, the people around me, who I come into contact with, what food I'm allowed to eat – everything is because of karma and my past practice.

In other narratives, such as that of Nyingma nun Ani Jamyang, gender is a way of ensuring that an individual deals with certain issues. While gender differences may account for different experiences, karma is thought to be the unifying factor between all people.

I think on the inside we all experience karma. We've all had male and female lives – that's the other thing. We're already going through gender balance! You look at reincarnation and we have the male body and we need to deal with those issues, and we have the female body and we need to deal with those issues . . . [gender] is not the issue; it is only a physical thing.

Karma has been identified by both women and men as a factor that supersedes gender, in terms of personality formation, perception of self and other, and purpose in the world. Tara Green's narrative is a case in point. In an earlier section, she spoke of how she became involved with Buddhism, and a pivotal

moment came when she began seeking an explanation for the suffering she saw around her. Karma provided a framework in which she could come to terms with human suffering, and discover her own role in her life and the world around her.

A discussion on karma can begin with reincarnation and rebirth. In Buddhist cosmology, the universe is “. . . a vast, interdependent system of beings located in one of the six realms” (Gross 1993: 129). While the *Dharma* can be practised by beings in *all* realms,<sup>26</sup> it can be practised *most* effectively by beings in the human realm. Human rebirth is regarded as very rare and precious. Only humans are seen as having a realistic chance of practising *Dharma* and gaining enlightenment. According to Harvey, humans have more freedom for *intentional* actions, in comparison with beings in other realms who mainly reap the results of previous good or bad actions (1990: 41; Gross 1997: 95; Thurman 1995: 118 ).

The human body is the best vehicle with which to seek spiritual realization, but some human bodies are considered better than others. Contradictory messages surrounding female rebirth can be found in canonical and non-canonical Buddhist literature, such as the famed *Bodhisattvabhūmi* by the philosopher Asanga. Composed in the fourth century CE, Asanga writes that a completely perfected Buddha is not found in a female body. He explains why *bodhisattvas* on the path to enlightenment must necessarily abandon the female form:

Ascending (hereafter) to the most excellent throne of enlightenment, he is never again reborn as a woman. All women are by nature full of defilement and of weak intelligence. And not by one who is by nature full of defilement and of weak intelligence, is completely perfected Buddhahood attained. (trans. Willis 1985: 69)

The very idea of “woman” itself has often been used disparagingly. The supposed “nature” of women in general has frequently been used to symbolize suffering (Sanskrit, *dukkha*) and the cyclical existence of continual rebirth (Sanskrit, *samsāra*). Since any rebirth starts within the womb, the womb itself has been

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<sup>26</sup> The realms of semi-divine beings (Sanskrit, *devas* and *asuras*), humans, animals, homeless and wandering spirits (*pretas*), and the various realms of hell.



described as a “ . . . filthy, hell-like pool . . .” (Johnston 1936: 207). A woman’s body is thus portrayed as the source of all suffering (Batchelor 1979: 111).

While there are Mahāyāna texts that dismiss gender distinctions, such as the *Prajñāpāramitā* or “Perfection of Wisdom”<sup>27</sup> texts, and Vajrayana texts that object to the disparagement of women, such the Fourteenth Root Downfall of the *Samaya* obligations and their opposites, the idea that female rebirth is unfortunate and less precious also finds resonance within Buddhist social circles. A common word for “woman” in Tibetan (*kyemin*), for example, means “low birth.” In Tibetan society, there are mixed opinions about women’s spiritual and intellectual capabilities, as well as question over whether or not a woman needs to be reborn as a man in order to attain spiritual realization<sup>28</sup> (Havnevik 1989: 163, 168-169; Gross 1993: 43, 64; 1997: 95).

Karma, the idea that the results of the past come to fruition – or “ripen” – in the present, is put forth as not only a framework for personal identity, but also as a means by which one is able to embed one’s personal narrative within social, cultural, and spiritual/religious networks of meaning. It is a concept that has become increasingly fixed within the Western lexicon, and it can be argued that it is now a “household term.” It is not unexpected to hear the term employed in everyday conversation, used to explain everything from forgetting to take one’s umbrella on a rainy day to winning five dollars in the lottery. In order to

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<sup>27</sup> This literature forming this body of material was composed between 100BCE to 100CE, with additions added for perhaps two centuries afterward. The Perfection of Wisdom literature advocated the *bodhisattva* ideal (the highest form of religious life) and emphasized the emptiness (Sanskrit, *śūnyatā*) and non-production of phenomena, and the use of skilful means (Bowker 1997: 745).

<sup>28</sup> According to Gross, this male bias can be cast in a less derogatory light. Religious leaders who encouraged women to seek male rebirth did so, she says, more out of compassion and pity than misogyny. In Tibet, many women are often married young, and without the benefit of birth control, go through a successive series of pregnancies, are uneducated, considered stupid, emotional, jealous, and have little spiritual capability (Gross 1993: 63). Societal conditions that objectively make women’s lives hard are echoed in the *Samyutta-Nikāya III* (“Connected Discourses”) of the Pāli Canon. Classified as the “Five Woes of Women,” this selection recognizes and sympathizes with the difficulties in the lives and roles of women: upon marriage, young women leave their own families and join the new and strange family of their husband; women experience menstruation, pregnancy, and labour; and must wait upon men (Dhammananda 1994: 250; Gross 1993: 43). See the personal account of Fran Tribe, an American Zen Buddhist practitioner, lay priest, and psychotherapist for a discussion of this view in an American context (1997).

uncover the convergence of karma and gender in the lives of contemporary Tibetan Buddhists in Toronto, it is necessary to briefly explore the conceptual underpinnings of the term “karma” itself.

Karma is a concept that can also be easily maneuvered into a rational and scientific framework. As noted earlier, karma was specifically mentioned by two individuals in Toronto who describe their interest in Buddhism as a means of explaining events and arriving at an understanding of themselves and others. In many cases, karmic processes are understood as cause and effect, and is commonly expressed as something similar to “what goes around comes around” and “one reaps what one sows.”

Many Western individuals, whether involved in Buddhism or not, are content to interpret karma in this basic way, and remain unaware that karma is but *one* of the universal laws or processes in Buddhist or Hindu cosmology that are in motion at any given time. Karma is commonly interpreted as the current conditions that have arisen as a result of past actions, and this interpretation is frequently devoid of contextual knowledge or understanding. Difficulties begin to arise when karma is unproblematically applied to more serious issues. As cause and effect, karma can be easily and satisfyingly applied to explain good fortune, good health, wealth, power, attractiveness, and privilege, but when used in the same uncomplicated manner to explain disability, congenital birth defects, life-threatening illness, HIV/AIDS, cancer, deadly car accidents, and the like, it becomes much more ethically problematic and “uncomfortable.” In effect, karma is often oversimplified and assumed to be at the root of every situation or event. Karma is employed in many cases by many individuals in the West to explain away and account for life’s little difficulties and life’s little bright spots.

Overused and oversimplified as it is in most Western contexts,<sup>29</sup> it is a relatively easy thing for a

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<sup>29</sup> Charles F. Keyes rightly points out that any such “. . . deviations from a fully rationalized and ethicized version of karma may reflect, to a certain extent, an inadequate acquaintance . . . with the theological subtleties of karmic theory” (1983: 20) are common among Buddhists everywhere; thus we can extrapolate that karmic inconsistencies and oversimplifications are not peculiar to Westerners alone. See Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentie Daniel’s edited volume, *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry* (1983) for ethnographic accounts on the meanings and workings of karma in Tibet, India, and Southeast Asia. See also Melford Spiro’s discussions on karma in *Buddhism and Society* (1982).

rhetoric of blame to insinuate itself into understandings of karma. Gender and gender-related issues are but one such area.

Karma, in its most simple and general sense, is the law of action and reaction, cause and effect. It is a deed or action “. . . by which we can determine our own future . . .” (Reichenbach 1990: 1; McDermott 1984: xiii; Matthews 1986: 126; Thakur 1990: 185). In the Buddhist tradition, the basic rule of lay ethics is to “. . . to perform good deeds and avoid evil ones . . .” (E. Dargyay 1986: 179).

While the actual action or behaviour is crucial to the concept of karma, the *motivation* underlying it is even more important in the Buddhist tradition. According to Matthews, the most significant change the historical Buddha brought to bear upon the existing Indian notion of karma was the concept of volition or will (Sanskrit, *cetanā*). The Buddha gave the concept of karma “. . . a moral, even providential force not seen before, indicating that there was a creative and saving possibility in every situation” (Matthews 1986: 125; E. Dargyay 1986: 179).

In these general terms, karma appears to be a relatively straightforward concept, something very much akin to the saying, “what one sows, one will reap.” By extension, it seems a well-suited concept with which to explain both good and bad fortune, by which the individual is held to be karmically responsible.

In the 1800s, karma was (and still is) referred to in the West as a moral, scientific, and universal law. This linear and near mechanical conception of karma was closely paired with Darwin’s theory of evolution from the late nineteenth century until World War II, when it gradually – but not entirely – became replaced by more subtle interpretations of context, time, and space (Bishop 1993: 81). Bishop writes of a “new” conceptualization of science in the twentieth century, one that seeks to conjoin explanation and experience (1993: 85). The effort to simplify one’s life, to downplay or eradicate the dualities, tensions, and “black-and-white-ness” of everyday existence in contemporary Toronto has been a predominant theme in many personal narratives. For some Toronto Buddhists, this “new” perspective carries with it an emphasis on fluidity, interdependence, and process.

Early in our discussions on Buddhism and gender, Greg, a thirty-something single man of

European descent, acknowledged the necessity for people in the West to recognize the societal and cultural contexts in which Buddhism arose. On this point, he turns to a discussion of women's roles within

**Buddhism:**

I think Tibetan Buddhism – I think *anything* – is always centred in society. It's difficult to pull it out of the society because society has certain norms . . . and Tibetan Buddhism is going to reflect that. Buddhists can only work with what we have to work with. For example, Buddha Shakyamuni, 2,500 years ago, he came into and was in that [particular] society; he had that to work with. So it may be possible that one would even see his teachings to be more chauvinistic, more discriminatory against women . . . whatever it ends up being. I think it's still all he had to work with, because that was [the] society [at that time].

Similar to Greg, Ani Jamyang makes note of how societal norms and expectations are intertwined within gender roles. In terms of what she has learned in Buddhism on universal compassion, she states:

. . . it's sort of like we've got it backwards. We seem to think that service is bad and glory is good . . . like I see the female as the representation or metaphor for the spiritual. In cultures that still have a strong family root, that still have roots in the land, the woman . . . it's a matriarchal society. Yes, the man sits in government, and the man hunts and has the big income . . . but when it comes to healing, providing nourishment, providing spiritual grounding, the anchor – that is the woman. And in this society, we look at that [as though] it's something to look down on and it's not the position that wrong; it's the view that's wrong. I think if people worshiped motherhood the way they should, and had a sacred attitude towards life the way they should, then those tasks would be revered, not looked down upon.

Again similar to Greg, Ani Jamyang's thoughts on gender and society involve conceptions of karma. Both appear to adhere to the Buddhist concept that all things, the individual and the society included, are interdependent. The same notion of interdependence also appears in their narratives when discussing gender and the workings of karma.

Greg maintains that the longer he practises Buddhism, the more he is aware of suffering and injustice in the world around him and within his own life. When he speaks of karma, Greg understands the role of the individual and one's intentional actions, both good and bad. This conception occupies a central position for him in his determination of future events. In a word, for Greg, the individual needs to take most of the responsibility for one's own situation. He says:

If I don't understand karma, then I will really believe . . . I will place a lot of the blame on society, for doing that to me . . . thinking that it is unfair, it's unjust, and it's criminal in what *they're* doing

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Following on this conceptualization of karma's workings, Greg begins to talk about feminism<sup>30</sup> and how it did or did not fit into his own life, his Buddhist practice, and his opinions on gender, karma, and society.

Earlier, we had spoken about the topic of sexual harassment in the workplace, and he continues with this example:

. . . feminism to me is a misunderstanding of the laws of nature, a misunderstanding of how karma works. That's the negative aspect of feminism for me: it is the aspect of blame. Where actually each woman that experiences something that is real, that is not imagined, some kind of injustice against her, *she needs to understand that she has created the cause herself*. . . and that society and men and that particular boss is not the one that's responsible directly for that. In fact, that boss needs to be really . . . you need the compassion towards that man because he's committing an action that he's going to experience a great deal of suffering in the future as a result of that. (emphasis mine)

Even though he supports gender equality movements and feels that the feminist movement has had a strong and positive influence and has increased the public awareness of gender inequality, Greg speaks of "gender" as a woman's issue, and as an "abstracted" issue. For Greg, gender itself is a direct result of karma.

Speaking as a nun, Ani Jamyang relates that most teachers in the monastic tradition of Tibetan Buddhism are male, and she finds that sometimes "gender" does become an issue. To illustrate, she describes a situation (hypothetical in terms of numbers) where she feels at times insecure and intimidated being a woman in a predominantly male community. She describes how she attempts to cope with a male lama treating her differently than monks:

. . . rather than sort of 'put it on the line,' and say, 'You told him to do that and told *me* not to do that,' I sort of look at it in terms of what *is* that? What is it [within me] that says to me that just

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<sup>30</sup> Each man and woman who participating in the formal and taped interviews was asked to speak about "feminism" in addition to specific questions on gender, men and women in Buddhism, and in Canada. Respondents were not presented with a definition of feminism but instead were invited to articulate and discuss their own personal conceptions of the term and how it did or did not impact upon their lives.

because there's five hundred monks over there in retreat that I can't do it also? Because it has never been a case of . . . the lama saying the boys can do it and the girls can't. But there is something I would say, *in me*, from my conditioning, from my mother's conditioning, from her mother's conditioning, that says that stuff is for the boys. But that is not something that's coming from Buddhism; that's something that's coming from women's low self-esteem of themselves. And when I look at society, and look at the problems in society, I blame women a lot. When I see them with their kids, they treat the boys different from the girls.

Even though both Ani Jamyang and Greg attempt to situate their understandings of karma and its workings within a broader and more interrelated context, karmic results or ripenings are implicitly viewed as the causal results or effects of an individual's actions. Returning to Buddhist literature, however, we see that karma is a concept that is intended to be understood in conjunction with other key concepts in the Buddhist tradition, and is not meant to be interpreted mechanistically as in the above terms.

One significant Buddhist doctrine with which karma is intimately linked is the doctrine of rebirth (*samsāra*). There are three basic "areas" or time spans where karma will come to fruition: in this lifetime, in the next lifetime, and in some future lifetime (Thakur 1990: 188; Pathak 1990: 170). As McDermott notes, ". . . there is a continual stream of renewed existences produced in accordance with the action of kamma . . . . Belief in the doctrine of kamma presupposes belief in *samsāra*" (1984: 4).

A richer and more nuanced reading of karma also takes into account relationships, between "things" (*dharmas/dhammas*), between individuals, and between the karma of individuals. The interrelationships noted here also conform to another relevant Buddhist doctrine, Dependent Origination<sup>31</sup> (*pratītya-samutpāda*), which states that all phenomena that constitute individual existence are interdependent and "mutually condition" one another (Fischer-Schreiber, Ehrhard, and Diener 1991: 172). Kenneth Ch'en describes this relationship between karmic results and the *dharmas* (and by extension, between the five factors that comprise personality) as follows:

The relations of things are treated in minute details to show that even in a single moment of consciousness there is involved a multiplicity of factors. A moment of consciousness is therefore considered in its relations with all its factors, functions, and energies, as well as its external

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<sup>31</sup> This term can also be translated as "causal nexus" (Fischer-Schreiber, Ehrhard, and Diener 1991: 172).

relations to other moments of consciousness . . . even in the briefest moment of consciousness there is an intricate network of relationships . . . (Ch'en 1968: 223)

While karma is generally expected to behave as a law of cause and effect, it is not meant to be viewed in isolation, nor is it recognized as the *only* cause of suffering (*dukkha*) and pleasure (*sukha*). Other causes can include biological and atmospheric laws, accident, or unexpected occurrences (Matthews 1986: 126; Fenn 1991: 21). Karma itself is a complicated process that works itself out over long periods of time; further, it is a process that is said to be *not fully comprehensible to anyone but a Buddha* (Matthews 1986: 126; Fenn 1991: 22). To illustrate the complexity of karmic issues – and often the sheer ambiguousness of them – anthropologist Richard Gombrich reports that the Sri Lankan monks he interviewed were themselves often divided on their interpretations of karmic processes and results (1991: 253).

The karma of an individual has consequences and results that impact beyond the individual. In order for a specific event or situation to exist or take place, “. . . the kamma of each individual involved must be in confluence with that of every other participant in that situation” (McDermott 1984: 13). These points put the above statements of Greg and Ani Jamyang in a completely different light. In regards to the sexual harassment scenario mentioned above, even though Greg initially appears to recognize that the karmic results of more than one individual is involved in this hypothetical situation, the “results” are still implicitly perceived as the “fault” of the woman being harassed. The same can be said of Ani Jamyang’s example of gendered discrimination, although in this excerpt she placed karmic responsibility firmly upon her own shoulders to the exclusion of those around her. As we have learned, it is difficult if not impossible to delineate and attribute specific karmic consequences with specific individuals. As McDermott states, the karma of an individual is not “. . . isolated, but rather is necessarily interwoven with the karmic threads of other individuals . . .”<sup>32</sup> (1984: 152).

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<sup>32</sup> This brings to the fore the notion of “group karma,” whereby one group or nation of people are regarded as the heirs to the results of past actions done by the same group. This is a potentially dangerous and highly controversial viewpoint, as it makes it easy to infer a one-to-one correspondence between a group of people in the past and in the present, especially considering the earlier discussion warning of the dangers of assuming a full knowledge and understanding of karmic processes. It is simply too difficult to ascertain who

The narrative of Tara Green also serves to illustrate this narrow, more individualistic (and potentially internalized) perception of karma at work. A married mother of four young children in her thirties, Tara contextualizes any discussion of her own Buddhist practice, gender, and karma within her everyday life. Her husband, a physician with a private practice, also does Buddhist meditation and occasionally teaches introductory courses on Buddhist thought and meditation. As an artist, Tara also teaches art at her children's school, in addition to maintaining the family home, and assisting her husband with reception and accounting at his office.

Being a stay-at-home mom is something with which she initially struggled, and is in fact an ongoing source of difficulty for her. She explains how the transition to motherhood and domesticity was hard for her:

I mean, with four kids, at home, all of a sudden, I *am a mom!* I want to do what I want to do! It was a big . . . I didn't know what marriage was all about. I didn't know what it was like when I had the first baby! Or the second, or the third! And diapering, and ironing, and ugh! This is not what I want to be doing!

She says in her "pre-*Dharma*" days, she used to resent her husband because he got up at five-thirty in the morning, ran with the dog, meditated peacefully for half an hour, and then went to work and "got to be with normal people" while she was "stuck at home with the kids."

Karma figures prominently into Tara's ability to function more effectively as a mother, and as the primary care-giver in her family. She maintains that knowledge of karma helped her to recognize that her tendency to "yell and scream" at her kids was the result of the conditioning she received at the hands of her own mother. Karma, she says, explains why she behaves as she does, and helps her to cope with her frustration and resentment. As she noted earlier, ". . . everything is because of karma and my past practice."

Contradictory threads of gender and karma discourses are apparent within the narratives of Ani

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is responsible for what karma.



Jamyang, Greg, and Tara Green. All three, at one level, recognize the interdependence of all phenomena – including karma – in accordance with Buddhist teachings, and yet, at another level, all implicitly attribute specific karmic results to specific individual actions. Both women state that women and women’s roles need to be more highly valued within Canadian society and beyond, and both express frustration with gender inequity along these lines. Both women, however, also internalize “gender as karma” and have, to a degree, accepted the subordinate roles in which they sometimes find themselves. Within their acceptance of the societal and religious status quo, all three in effect shift responsibility and agency from social and religious structures, as well as other people, onto themselves. Tara Green and Ani Jamyang have both taken it upon themselves to “come to terms” with their respective situations, thereby placing the onus and incentive to change upon their own shoulders. The issues of gender and karma become doubly difficult, however, as both women through the internalization of this discourse express greater feelings of peace and well-being, in addition to a heightened ability to cope with the stresses of their respective roles.

As the narratives of Tara, Ani Jamyang, and Greg reveal, the internalization of the “gender as karma” discourse is far from complete and unproblematic. Within their narratives on karma and gender, there are many often contradictory threads. On the one hand, all three support claims of gender equality, and yet on the other hand, they maintain that women have created their own karma and need to assume a degree of responsibility. Implicitly, this view of karma is insular and one-sided. The individual is regarded as experiencing the negative fruits of his or her past actions; there is no mention of the social world within which the individual is situated. It is not explained why the “situation” or the “social world” undervalues women and women’s roles.

Karma, for these individuals noted here, has become part of their personal explanatory framework, and how they interpret and perceive themselves, others, and the world around them. This discussion of karma also highlights how one concept, when seen as more-or-less isolated from other concepts and processes, can easily incorporate the idea of blame. Not only does the internalization of this discourse have the potential to legitimize and dismiss gender discrimination and the inequity of gendered roles in both

Buddhism and Canadian society, but it also does nothing to alter them. The response to a highly patriarchal and negative social situation appears to be generated only at the level of the individual. In some cases, the response is seen to be the sole responsibility of the individual.

Gender itself is an issue that, for the most part, "behaved" in a way that was completely unexpected. I found the almost total lack of concern for gender differences and problems (indeed, gender was not often conceptualized as a "problem" for many men and women), as they appear in Buddhist texts and history, Buddhist teachings in Toronto, and as they occur between women and men, to be very frustrating and perplexing. While gender was not intended to be the central focus of this research project, it *was* expected to be a significant component. Gender continued to puzzle and perplex until I found a new way of regarding it. For the individual who primarily defines him or herself and his or her roles *in isolation*, gender is essentially a non-issue in terms of everyday, lived experience and Buddhist practice. When individuals begin to define themselves *in relation*, however, in terms of roles that are more interdependent, gender can become a very real part of everyday, lived reality and practice.

PART V  
THE INDIVIDUAL IN RELATION

A) Living Buddhism, Living *Dharma*

The individuals who participated in this study responded that to a large extent, their initial interest in Buddhism was its presentation as a way in which to simplify their lives and transcend some of the basic dualities that exist in their lives in Canadian society – male/female, theory/practice, material/spiritual – but for many, their ongoing involvement with Buddhist practice often establishes its own set of related dualities. Most, in fact, find themselves somewhere “in the middle,” somewhere between “Buddhism” and “*Dharma*.” There is obviously some overlap and mutual influence between the terms “Buddhism” and “*Dharma*,” and this serves to emphasize rather than dismiss the distances that may exist between understandings of the “religion” and the “philosophy,” or the institution as opposed to the way of life and being. By framing their experiences between these dynamic poles, these two concepts and terms that exist in dynamic relation to each other, we are better able to uncover the process, the journey, the transformation, and the instability that often accompanies the individual turn towards Buddhism in the West. It is through a discussion of what is implied by these terms within the narratives that we can begin to see individual experiences, senses of the self and personal identity, and constructions of meaning.

A great deal rests on currently and commonly held definitions and assumptions of “religion,” and, by extension, what is currently and commonly meant by “spirituality.” Note that words and phrases such as “spirituality” and “ways of being spiritual” are common within men’s and women’s narratives, more so than “organized religion” and “religiosity.” Men and women also stressed that they were not interested in things “religious.” Instead, they spoke more strongly of “spirituality,” and of practice and experience. As with the term religion, there also exists much confusion about the precise definition and meaning of this term.

In 1967, sociologist Peter Berger wrote that definitions, as a result of their very nature, cannot be characterized as either ‘true’ or ‘false,’ only as more or less *useful* (1967: 175). The same can be applied to

two such terms and concepts used frequently in the preceding pages, “Buddhism” and “*Dharma*.” For those new to or unfamiliar with the Buddhist tradition, these terms initially appear to be very similar. Indeed, they are often used interchangeably in the mainstream media. In this discussion, “Buddhism” and “*Dharma*” will no longer be used synonymously. While brief definitions will be presented here, it is hoped that these terms will achieve greater depth, meaning, dimensionality, and resonance as a result of the experiences narrated by women and men in Toronto, people who are actively exploring these terms and concepts – and their “usefulness” – within the multiple contexts of their everyday lives.

“Buddhism” is most commonly referred to as an historical religion, a religious system, and/or a religious institution. The term also refers to the teachings of the historical Buddha. “Buddhism” may also be conceived of as a “technology” or an information system of the mind, and as a system of meditation practices. In a very Western sense, “Buddhism” refers to a series of texts (Almond 1988; de Jong 1974, 1987). This particular usage is most commonly encountered in colleges and universities where students can take a wide variety of courses on “Buddhism,” most of which are based on textual information and analysis. Owing to the academic interest in and presentation of Buddhism as a series of reified texts, this perspective has also found great resonance within wider public circles, as is evidenced by the proliferation of books and articles on all aspects of “Buddhism” in the mainstream media in recent decades. The word “Buddhism” itself is in fact a Western term (Bowker 1997: 171; Smith 1964: 22), and is not a word found in the languages of the Buddhist tradition itself, such as Pāli and Sanskrit (Carter 1993: 10). W.C. Smith further informs us that one of the earliest appearances in the West of the named tradition of “Boudism” occurred only in 1801 (1964: 59).

Drawing upon my earlier discussion outlining the dangers and ambiguities inherent in the reification of concepts like “religion,” “religions,” and “Buddhism,” it is thus not difficult to see how imprecise and vague the term “Buddhism” can become. According to religious studies scholar John Ross Carter, “Buddhism” has been used to signify everything from the instruction of the Buddha, to Buddhist tenets, doctrines, opinions, views, and teachings, and even generically “Buddhist thought” (1993: 11).

Carter illustrates one of the many terms found in the languages of the Buddhist tradition that attempt to act as a counterpart to the Western concept of “Buddhism.” Drawing from literary Sinhalese Theravādin sources, Carter discusses the term “*bauddha-samaya*.” He translates “*samaya*” as “coming together,” or through extension, as “convention.” By convention, Carter suggests that which is considered “customary” among Buddhists, including tenets, opinions, teachings, and so forth. He also suggests that “*samaya*” can be taken to represent a multitude, collectivity, or a community. Modified by the adjective “Buddhist” (*bauddha*), the complete term can then come to signify a Buddhist community. That done, Carter then draws our attention to the fact that there is substantial difference between concepts such as “Buddhist community,” “Buddhist tradition,” “Buddhist thought,” and “Buddhism” itself (1993: 11-13). Influenced by and drawing from the work of W.C. Smith (1964), Carter maintains that throughout history, Buddhist men and women “. . . had lived religiously, had gone about the process of living well, without conceptualizing that what they were doing was practicing Buddhism” (1993: 10).

“*Dharma*” is also a term that can be construed with varying levels of formality, complexity, and meaning. Most generally, it is used to refer to Buddhist doctrine and practice, as well as the teachings of the historical Buddha. Very simply, “*Dharma*” can be construed as the basic Buddhist tenet of living compassionately and acting for the benefit of others. In Buddhist literature, the term has several distinct meanings, including universal law and universal truth, in addition to being one of “. . . the basic building blocks of reality; . . .” (Powers 2000: 67; Fischer-Schreiber, Ehrhard, and Diener 1991: 54).

*Dharma* was translated as “the Law” as early as 1844 by Eugene Burnouf in his influential *Introduction à l’histoire du buddisme indien* (1844: 283). In 1877, T.W. Rhys Davids rendered the concept as “truth” or “righteousness” (1903: 45). In the following decades, *Dharma* had been variously translated as

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<sup>1</sup> The term “*Dharma*” is also found in what Westerners call “Hinduism.” Here, *Dharma* can refer to “. . . the order and custom which make life and a universe possible, and thus to the behaviours appropriate to the maintenance of that order” (Bowker 1997: 275). It can also refer to ritualistic and religious rules, ethics, and the ways appropriate to attaining the Absolute (Bowker 1997: 275). For the purposes of this study, however, the meanings applied to *Dharma* will be limited to those found in the Buddhist tradition.

“cosmic law” and “Norm” (C. Rhys Davids 1900: xxxiii) and as a higher form (or highest) spiritual essence (Beckh 1916: 20). In the 1920s, the Geigers translated *Dharma* as an expression “ . . . for the greatest and most comprehensive that there is, for the highest transcendental concept, for the absolute” (W. Geiger and M. Geiger 1920: 1). Whether *Dharma* is translated as an expression for that which is of ultimate concern, salvific truth (Carter 1978; 1993), authoritative teachings, or absolute attainment, it becomes obvious that many scholars have, to greater or lesser degrees, recognized the importance of *Dharma* as a central concept in the Buddhist tradition.

While undoubtedly *Dharma* is a profound concept in what is called “Buddhism,” W.C. Smith maintains that it is *not* equivalent to it (1964: 55). To clarify, the *Dharma* can also be conceptualized as a *living* concept, experience, or quality; *Dharma* in this sense is more in accordance with Smith’s own emphasis on the lived experience of what he calls “faith.” The following quotation from John Ross Carter also illustrates this dynamic quality, that *Dharma* is “ . . . to be mastered, pondered, followed, lived, attained, and realized” (Carter 1978: 178). The *Dharma*, Carter suggests (and this is a point on which I concur), is not an abstract or reified concept; it is fundamentally related to *persons* (Carter 1993: 47). In short, *Dharma* is a *way of life*, something that people *practise, experience, and do*.

In the following discussion, we will see how Buddhism and Dharma are conceptualized by and acted upon by Toronto women and men, in addition to other terms and concepts such as meditation and practice. By doing so, we begin to see how these concepts take meaning from one another. In effect, we begin to see how they inform, support, and resonate each within an intricate web or matrix of meaning.

The importance of uncovering the meanings behind these and other terms such as “belief” and “practice,” rather than simply making assumptions, became apparent during my first interview in June of 1999 with Erika Chan. At one point in our discussion, I was explaining to her the reasons behind my research project, that they were a mixture of personal and academic interests. On a personal level, I have always been intrigued by and deeply respectful of the strength of the spiritual foundations of certain men and women that I have known in my life. More specifically, it seemed to me that the individuals I knew who

had gone “to hell and back” and weathered their personal storms with dignity and grace were individuals who either “believed in *something*” and/or had a strong personal (and not necessarily “religious”) faith.

While Erika understood and agreed with the point I was trying to make, she objected strongly to the choice of words, namely “faith” and “belief.” It is precisely these words that Erika had found frustrating in regards to her own Seventh Day Adventist upbringing, in that she felt that there was little guidance in the tradition as to how to put those “beliefs” – about being a loving and compassionate person, and morally and ethically “good” – into action in her own life. On this point, she states, “They don’t teach you methodology; they only teach you beliefs.”

Coming from mainly Christian backgrounds, other individuals echoed Erika’s claim, that while Christianity proclaims love and compassion as essential components of a moral and ethical person, the tradition offers little guidance about how to achieve this in daily life. Erika herself recognizes that even though Seventh Day Adventists do actually possess distinctive religious observances, such as observing a Saturday Sabbath and practising vegetarianism, she found none of them satisfying. None of these – and other – practices, she states, were satisfactory because she always felt she was “going through the motions” for the benefit of someone else, not herself:

I want someone who is going to give me the tools to figure this out, and I don’t want someone to rule my life. I don’t want someone to brainwash me. I want to figure this out for myself. I don’t want to have to take a bunch of beliefs; I want to *know*! Knowledge is *not* the same as believing. Believing is, at some point, taking someone’s word for something . . . I don’t want to be told anything by anybody, and, at all costs, I want the *truth*.

I quickly found that “faith” and “belief” are often highly – and negatively – charged terms. Pema echoes Erika on this point, stating that many Christian groups with which she has had some degree of contact with in her life could neither justify their religious structure in her eyes, nor could they “put it into action.” She says she felt this was an attempt at control, and that such groups,

. . . tried to impose their beliefs on me, and I didn’t agree with all their religious beliefs. I didn’t like that they wanted me to believe what they believed; they didn’t give me a choice. It was like [they would say], ‘This is the Truth, and you need to believe it!’ And I’d say, ‘Well, why do I?’

The idea of a “spiritual practice” is very important to Toronto Buddhists. Many, like Erika, Pema, Philip and others, have noted that “practice” is what drew them to Buddhism in the first place. In spite of their differing descriptions of the events and circumstances that drew them away from the religious traditions of their childhood, one salient element does emerge for both men and women in terms of their motivation in turning towards Buddhism specifically: both men and women relate that this concept of practice is crucial to their understanding of Buddhism. This finding reveals a significant commonality with the “elite” Buddhism of the United States, as described by Nattier (1997; 1998). Its most characteristic feature, beyond an upper-middle class socio-economic background, is the intense interest in spiritual practice.

Take, for example, the experiences of Joyce Allen. In her early fifties, Joyce was raised in a non-practising Lutheran family. In her adult years, she became interested in Quakerism as a result of its emphasis on a moral and ethical way of life, and its view that each individual has direct access to God, without the need for a priest or other intermediary. In light of this “direct conduit,” Joyce describes Quaker prayer meetings in the following manner:

The Quaker meetings are basically held as ‘silent meditation.’ Out of the silence, people will speak, will witness what they feel is the ‘Spirit of God’ speaking to them. A whole meeting will pass in silence and you can also have a meeting where different people will simply stand up and speak what it is they feel they need to speak . . . So what I found I *didn’t* get out of the Quakers was how to meditate. Because they assume that everyone has this inner link to God, so you simply sit in silence and let that sort of ‘work’ in you. They don’t have meditation techniques, and, quite frankly, as I have learned over the years, there is an enormous amount of information involved in the ‘technology of consciousness,’ and this is what meditation is.

After this realization in the late 1970s, Joyce began practising Vipassana meditation, known for its analytical techniques to develop insight, understanding, and clarity. Joyce maintains that her interest in Buddhism – and Tibetan Buddhism – was not necessarily an interest in “Buddhism” *per se*; it was more a result of her interest in meditation techniques.

“Practice” is clearly a significant element in all three of the above narrative excerpts. Even so, these excerpts only hint at and do not explicitly reveal what defines a spiritual “practice.” An example of



the multiple and ambiguous meanings implied in the terms “meditation” and “practice” is seen in the following statement by Eleanor Thornton, who says that since becoming involved with Buddhism, she is a much happier person. The reason for her happiness, she states, is:

... because I do my best to practice the *Dharma*. I can see that I practice it and it is like a circle – I practice it because it makes a difference in my life. It makes a difference in my life because I practice it.

“Practice” for Eleanor is a number of meditations that she undertakes on a regular and almost daily basis. When the men and women who participated within this research were asked to define their own personal “practice,” most had in mind a specific idea: “meditation practice.”

In terms of definitions, it is noteworthy to state that the terms “practice” and “meditation” are often used synonymously and interchangeably in the West, by Westerners and Asians, both lay and monastic alike. It is also not uncommon to see these terms combined into a single phrase. With such terms used interchangeably, it is no small wonder that their meanings are often assumed, and remain blurred and ambiguous. To illustrate just this form of confusion, Williams notes there is at times a tendency amongst Westerners to assume “meditation” and “analysis” are oppositional activities, especially since analysis, or the “. . . investigation of the way things really are, . . .” (1989: 72), is a primary component of what is called “insight” meditation (*vipas̥yana*).

Some definitions of meditation practice combine two primary categories, in which meditation practice itself is, in general, regarded as the familiarization of the mind with the object that is under observation. The first type of meditative practice is commonly referred to as “stabilizing meditation” or “meditative absorption” (Sanskrit, Pāli, *samatha*, “tranquility,” “calming-down”), where the meditator learns to focus on an object of observation with concentration. The second type, analytical meditation (*vipas̥yanā*) is where the meditator analyzes the object of observation to ascertain its final mode of subsistence (Powers 2000: 35; Strong 1995: 117; Nhat Hanh 1998: 196; Gunaratana 1991: 3). It is also

widely held in many Buddhist traditions that both techniques combined are necessary to achieve enlightenment (Harvey 1990: 253-257).

In Mahāyāna traditions, meditation is an important part in the process towards the ultimate goal, the attainment of buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. Meditation itself is a general term that can encompass a wide variety of practices and goals, some of which “ . . . aim at pacifying the mind and quieting the mental confusion that afflicts ordinary beings . . . [while others] . . . are concerned with developing clear understanding of Buddhist tenets such as the four noble truths, impermanence, [and] selflessness, . . . ” (Powers 1995: 70). While it is considered to be a general “umbrella” term in certain respects, “meditation” is also employed in specific ways.

Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, spiritual head of the NKT, in his book on learning how to meditate, states simply that meditation means “concentration” (1998: 13). According to Powers, the Dalai Lama has stated that meditation is “ . . . familiarization of the mind ” with a particular object (1995: 70). In this vein, Powers writes that many “ . . . meditative practices aim at some form of cognitive restructuring. Since suffering arises from wrong ideas, the solution to the problem of suffering lies in changing these ideas, . . . ” (1995: 71), and these changes are accomplished through meditation.

These elements and forms of meditation practice are most often implied by the women and men in this study when they speak of their “practice.” In this manner, they also refer to a very old and traditional understanding of “practice” in Buddhist discourse. As with the many, “technical” discussions on the nature of Buddhist practice or meditation practice (Powers 2000; Harvey 1990; Gyatso 1998; Wangchen 1995; Das 1997; Hart 1987; Hopkins 1997; Gunaratana 1991; Fischer-Sreiber, Ehrhard, and Diener 1991), “practice” can also refer to very concrete rituals, activities, and behaviours. Very broadly, it can include chanting mantras, reciting prayers, meditating, doing *Tantric* rituals (*sādhanas*), visualizations, making monetary or other offerings (as part of a ritual or to individuals or organizations in need), devoting one’s time to social service activities, cleaning the temple or Buddhist centre, lighting ritual lamps, preparing ritual feasts, doing prostrations, reading *Dharma* books, trying not to yell at other drivers during rush hour

traffic, not losing one's temper with others, and so on. All of these behaviours and activities are frequently categorized by practitioners in Toronto as "part of their *Dharma* practice."

With this broad understanding of "practice," which encompasses and incorporates both "traditional" religious activities as well as the more mundane, it comes as no surprise that the largest number of Western adherents to Buddhism fall into the category of lay practitioners. Toronto Tibetan Buddhists strongly emphasize the importance of spiritual practice. Women and men both state they were attracted to Buddhism by a search for practical methods that would enable them to experience not only intellectual realizations, but also more experiential realizations. Both types, but particularly the latter, are sought after, as many women and men feel that such realizations are able to alter and transform behaviour, and one's perception of one's place and purpose in the world. As such, when asked about how they conceptualize their personal practice, Toronto Tibetan Buddhists commonly refer to meditation practice as the *core* or *foundation* of their spiritual practice, more so than other types of practice.

To illustrate, Philip Starkman recounts that meditation is the one element of Buddhism in particular that is profoundly attractive to him. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, he feels Buddhism and Buddhist meditation is a "science of the mind." His interest in and on-going involvement with Buddhism and meditation includes not only a commitment to a particular, ethical way of life, but also a commitment, as he phrases it, to the "technology."

As these excerpts indicate, Buddhism – and Buddhist meditation – is perceived as able to provide the practical methods that enables intellectual, spiritual, and emotional realizations. Further, Buddhism is also thought to provide highly practical methods that individuals can usefully and directly apply in their daily lives.

## **B) Problematizing Practice**

Despite the wide range of activities that can be considered to fall under the term "meditation" and the "in-the-world" nature of *Dharma* practice as described in a number of authoritative Buddhist texts, the

concept of “practice” remains a source of significant stress for Toronto Buddhists. Chances are great that if asked, “How often do you practice?” most Toronto Buddhists would respond with, “Not enough!” The concept of practice to which they are referring is the “formal” and somehow more “authentic” meditation practice, or “practice on the pillow.” Formal meditation practice is strongly linked to the monastic model in Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> It is most commonly conceptualized by Buddhist teachers and lay practitioners – both Asian and Western – as a solitary and silent activity, where one is seated (or slowly walking) by oneself, quietly breathing and drawing one’s awareness inwards. The idea of meditation itself often invokes a picture of a solitary monk with arms and legs folded up underneath loose robes, a serene look upon his face.

That this image is a relatively common among individuals and in the mainstream media illustrates just how attractive the idea of meditation is to Westerners. To greater or lesser degrees, Pema, Erika, Joyce, and Eleanor have all identified that “meditation” is a significant component of what they all call their own Buddhist or *Dharma* practice. By extension, if one does not meditate formally, on the pillow, on a regular basis, one is somehow considered *not* doing their practice. What these individuals reveal in their narratives is that meditation is a very concrete *thing* to do. This fits in well with current ideas of what constitutes any type of “practice” itself. If dictionaries are consulted, the origins of “practice” in both Latin and Greek are “to do” (Ayto 1990: 408; Skeat 1953: 469). Very basically, “practice” is generally considered to be “. . . the habit of doing anything” (Johnson 1967: np). The Oxford English Dictionary states further that to practice religion is “. . . to perform the religious duties which the Church requires of its members, . . .” (Simpson and Weiner 1989: 273). Implicitly and not so implicitly, “to practice” means to practice *something*, a something which can be defined and identified, marked in space and time, such as an activity or ritual of some sort.

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<sup>2</sup> As has been shown, what constitutes “meditation practice” can vary significantly. Some meditations/contemplations are themselves suited to lay life, and not all monastics are known to meditate (Strong 1995: 78).

For those who have grown up frustrated with Christianity or Judaism because of their perceived lack of concrete and definitive activities, meditation is considered a solid course of action. Further, meditation – whether one does it or not – is entirely up to the choice and discretion of the individual; the individual chooses where, when, and how long to meditate, in addition to what form the meditation takes.

Similar to other studies on Western Buddhists (Kornfield 1988; Bishop 1993; Nattier 1997), most women and men in Toronto – with the exception of two nuns and one monk – are members of the laity and are largely uninterested in a monastic lifestyle. As reflected throughout their personal narratives, many of these men and women did not regard gender as an impediment to formal meditation practice in their day to day lives. It has been noted by both women and men that the actual practice one undertakes is more important than gender. According to Harry Flashman, “. . . the teachings are open to both genders. If you are talking about lay practitioners, then a woman does have access to pretty much the same teachings that a male practitioner does.”

In spite of this, practice – defined mostly as formal meditation practice by both men and women – can become a source of exclusion and isolation for certain types of lay practitioners. For these practitioners, however, the ability to “disengage” to practice formally, to practice “on the pillow,” depends strongly upon the roles within which one is framed. This ability, notes one single mother, is contingent upon “. . . having executive power over one’s own time.” Formal meditation practice hinges on the capacity to disengage from the stresses of daily routines, one’s family and one’s career, while possessing the economic and emotional resources to situate oneself in a clearly separate, distraction-free space. One must also be available for evening teachings and meditation practices at Buddhist centres and temples, as well as meditation retreats that can last, on average, from one day to one month. Additionally, the costs of maintaining a household, daycare, babysitting, and the costs of participation within meditation courses and retreats can be great and for some, prohibitive.

Those with children, and others acting as primary care-givers, often find disengaging from their myriad responsibilities difficult. One individual, a single, working mother who is also a Buddhist nun in the

NKT tradition, estimates that between her care-giving and work responsibilities, she has time to formally meditate perhaps once every two weeks. As a result of this situation, she says she feels “. . . inadequate, undisciplined, somehow flawed . . .” because she does not have the time to meditate the way the practices have been proscribed. Feelings of guilt, anger, frustration, and failure accompany her sporadic attempts to formally meditate and participate within her spiritual community. Hers is a common response among many individuals with children.

The sense of exclusion and isolation experienced by many women with children is very real and problematic. Even so, it appears as though issues of access and participation have moved beyond basic conceptions of gender. Single women and those women without children, for example, are in fact very visible and active participants within Buddhist centres and temples, and constitute a strong presence in Toronto. It can be estimated on average, well over half of the participants at Tibetan Buddhist centres in Toronto at any given time are women. This occurrence is common in other Buddhist centres throughout North America as well (Coleman 1999: 94). The issue of access then, is more strongly linked to *gendered roles*, in particular, those roles of “parent” and “primary care-giver” that have been traditionally and historically been associated with women. In North America, more and more men are choosing to become primary care-givers, becoming “stay-at-home dads” and single parents. This “role discrimination” can be experienced by any parent or care-giver, whether male or female.

Before the birth of his daughter, one married man was regularly attending courses and retreats, and was involved in the administrative functioning of his *Dharma* centre. After his decision to become a “stay-at-home dad,” he found himself in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, he was praised by the spiritual head of the centre for taking the opportunity to care for his daughter and practice love and compassion, and on the other, was quietly removed from his administrative duties and course requirements. The justification given for this turn of events was that he would need all of his time for his infant daughter. This justification strongly suggests that spiritual practice and care-giving are commonly framed as mutually exclusive undertakings.

Historically, issues of access and participation have been defined in terms of the feminine relationship to the (mostly) male monastic community. While the situation in Toronto indicates that such issues are no longer defined exclusively in terms of gender, it is necessary to explore how women and motherhood have historically, socially, and textually been cast in the Buddhist tradition. The issue here focuses more strongly on how roles themselves become gendered, and where these roles are positioned in relation to the traditional monastic structure.

Meditative practice has been highly valued in a great many of lineages and traditions within Buddhism. There are, however, meditation lineages that existed outside of monastic institutions and communities throughout Buddhist history and earlier (Shaw 1994; Edou 1996). Formal meditation practice has historically been almost exclusively the province of monastic orders – and monks – even in light of “wandering ascetic” traditions. The *Chöd* tradition and lineage of Machig Labdrön in Tibet are just such examples, where adherents often lived in cemeteries or wandered, living on the fringes of society (Edou 1996). As Edou reminds us, however, it is through the codification and preservation of teachings *by the monasteries* that results in the continued (although highly integrated and adapted) survival of many of these lineages (1996: 7-8).

The ambiguity and confusion surrounding the relationship between women in general and the monastic community in Buddhist textual sources are also clearly seen in social and cultural contexts, both historically and contemporaneously. The reasons for this ambiguity, according to Kathryn Blackstone, result from upset boundaries. Women, even nuns, are cast as “outsiders” in relation to the monastic community. For monks, defilement and impurity lie “outside” in the secular world (1995: 24). Note the many stories presented in previous chapters that attest to this: women are seen as sexual objects, motherhood is the source of worldly attachment, and the womb is a filthy place where the cycle of birth and rebirth is rooted. Purity, or the potential for it, does not lie within women; it lies *within* the male monastic. Such men can be “contaminated” by inherently impure women.

In light of this, motherhood is a role that is be viewed with some degree of ambiguity in Buddhist literature. In one perspective, motherly love and compassion can play a decidedly negative role in the cycle of rebirth. The following verse from the *Therigatha*, describing a mother's grief over the death of her son, illustrates how motherhood is also a common metaphor for attachment to the world of suffering:

Grief stricken for my son,  
Mad-minded, out of my senses,  
I was naked with wild hair  
And I wandered everywhere. (Murcott 1991: 84)

The woman described in this verse is so overcome with grief she is no longer able to recognize the ultimate transience of the self. As such, “worldly attachments” appear to go hand-in-hand with motherhood, and thus can lead a woman with children – and any man involved with them – farther away from the path of enlightenment.

Conversely, for nuns, purity and the potential for it lie within the rules and regulations of the *sangha*.<sup>3</sup> Nuns, because of their gender, even if fully ordained, “. . . will never be full participants . . .” (Blackstone 1995: 227). Female renunciants transgress the boundaries between inside/outside and worldly/monastic. As a result, nuns occupy the peculiar state somewhere in between. Blackstone's hypothesis explaining nuns' marginality and ambiguity certainly appears to garner support in reference to Buddhist literature. The presence and influence of nuns is either ignored or is absent altogether in many texts and historical contexts. One such text, *The Holy Teachings of Vimalakirti*, has a startling example of the totally inconsequential presence (or absence) of nuns. The *Bodhisattva Vimalakirti* takes it upon himself to invite many monks and saints to a banquet, along with a staggering ninety million *Bodhisattvas* from other Buddha-fields (Thurman 1976: 78-83). There is no mention of even a single nun. Women did

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<sup>3</sup> For further discussion on female impurity and male purity as they are linked to a social hierarchy, see Trainor 1993. Liz Wilson delivers a convincing argument along similar lines, noting that the physical body itself is representative of the social body, and physical boundaries are of the utmost importance in determining purity and access (1996).



eventually gain a position with the Buddhist monastic community, but their female gender defined that position as marginal in comparison to men, and even subordinate to them. Women's full participation within the monastic order was, and still is, far from being achieved (*inter alia* Blackstone 1995; Wilson 1996; Tsomo 1988, 1999; Havnevik 1989).

The social and religious realities for many contemporary women in Buddhist societies similarly reflects this ambiguity. Many Buddhist women in Sri Lanka and Thailand, for example, are encouraged to fulfill traditional role obligations as mothers, wives, and lay supporters of the *sangha*, but are denied an active role in Buddhist practice, ritual, and propagation (Bartholomeusz 1994; Keyes 1984). In Thailand, women are restricted from attending Buddhist schools, joining the monastic order, or even entering the central part of the temple (Handley 1991: 24). In Sri Lanka, women "... are expected to conform to the stereotype of the loving, selfless laywoman who worships, supports monks by offering alms, and acts as the foundation of the family" (Bartholomeusz 1994: 6). Women are "naturally" assumed to be compassionate and thus are in a special position to nurture others, along the Buddhist tradition itself (Keyes 1984: 226). An article in a Thai newspaper concerned with Thailand's "second-class" congregation reports that the poor have two choices of livelihood in which they can ensure their survival: men can join the monastic order and women can become prostitutes (Handley 1991: 24).

The very idea of practice itself is thus heavily gendered. As such, it comes as no surprise that practice is also a significant source of exclusion for some individuals in Toronto. The issue is one of boundaries and dividing lines more so than gender. If one has children, Kelsang Chenma notes, it makes it more difficult to be an active participant within one's centre or temple. It makes a lot of difference, she says, if one can:

... spend a lot of time in the building. So whether it's distance or children, anything that prevents you from actually being in the building prevents you from feeling you can fully participate in the religion. Because of the weight of history, it has this ... what do you call it? 'Unspoken message' that *within* the organization it is sacred, and *without* the organization it is *not* sacred. It doesn't have spiritual value.

Kelsang Chenma relates this boundary between inside/outside to a division of labour, a division between reproduction and production. Currently, she says, *Dharma* centres are all about production:

It's producing teachers. It's producing Buddhists. And it still is totally entrenched in that same basic pattern. When someone has a baby, they are now on the other side of the gender divide. Or someone [who] chooses to stay home with the children. Whether male or female, they have a very hard time participating within the organization. And like any religion, it reflects what is going on in society.

Marco, a stay-at-home dad with two young daughters, makes a similar observation of the division between "home" and "*Dharma* centre." He says that you ". . . either fit the mold, or you don't." Many parents and primary care-givers who do not want to make rigid delineations between home and centre do not, in fact, "fit."

Childcare is also not regularly offered with most Tibetan Buddhist centres in the Toronto area. Informal networks of parents willing to exchange babysitting duties do exist at the temples and centres, or parents find other, outside options for childcare. Either way, childcare receives little or no institutional support or acknowledgement, and the issue frequently remains solely in the hands of parents. In some instances, the presence of children during meditation practices or empowerments has been actively discouraged altogether. One particular woman, while attempting to attend a *Tantric* initiation with her child, was informed by the monastic teacher that her toddler was not welcome in the shrine room (Tibetan, *gompa*) during the ceremony. Her daughter, she was told, would cause distractions. As a result, this woman spent the entire ceremony in the basement of the temple with her child, feeling immensely alienated, excluded, and disappointed. Ironically, the *Tantric* initiation she was discouraged from attending was for "the Mother of all Buddhas" herself, Tara. Correspondingly, many women and men with children simply do not have a visible and vocal presence within their own spiritual communities.

### C) Redefining Practice: The Practice of Parenting

One of the ways in which to frame a possible negotiation between egalitarian doctrine and gendered practice is through a discussion of Buddhist *practice* itself. By redefining both the concept and experience of “practice” in ways that speak to contemporary Western understandings, it may be possible to create the spaces where gendered roles become less problematic within North American Buddhist communities. According to Buddhist nun Kelsang Chenma, herself a single mother, the issue of childcare and parenting within Buddhist communities is strongly influenced by conceptions of practice itself. “The issue,” she says, “hinges on whether or not experience *outside* the institutional context is given value or not.”

Positive images of motherhood and parenting in Buddhist literature can help to redefine and revalue “practice” that occurs outside of the “official,” monastic contexts. The role of the mother, as it is frequently presented in Buddhist literature, is one of the most highly respected and recognized roles attributed to women. The esteem given this role is elaborately described in the Tibetan version of the life of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, through the example set forth by his own mother, Mayadevi. The Buddha’s mother belonged to a royal lineage and was recognized as having been “flawless” in her previous reincarnation. Additionally, it was said that she had made a vow in her past lifetimes to give birth to a Buddha (Thurman 1995: 64-65; Johnston 1936: 354). Prajapati, the Buddha’s foster-mother, nurse, and aunt who cared for him following the death of his mother was also considered a woman worthy of great respect as a result of her care and compassion (Horner 1963: 354).

Motherhood is idealized as the epitome of selfless love and compassion, and symbolizes ideal spiritual behaviour. As such, motherhood and parenting are highly appropriate roles within which individuals can attempt to realize selfless love and compassion in the realm of everyday, childcare activities. The esteem directed towards motherhood is clearly discerned in the following passage:

Thinking how these pathetic beings were all my mothers,  
How over and over they kindly cared for me,

Bless me to conceive the genuine compassion  
That a loving mother feels for her precious babe!  
(Thurman 1995: 56)

A mother is respected and venerated in Buddhist literature. Emulating the behaviour of a caring and compassionate mother can also be extended to a more exalted spiritual level, one which encompasses all *sentient* beings. Acting in this manner towards other beings will go a long way in securing positive future rebirths, which contributes to the ultimate goal of exiting the cycle of birth and rebirth altogether.

*Tantric* history can also be drawn upon to encourage wider and deeper definitions of spiritual practice in contemporary Western settings. In Tibetan *Tantric* Buddhism, where female symbols represent ultimate reality and great wisdom, both male and female practitioners entered into “consort” relationships which were intended to be non-exploitive and developed *both* partners in their spirituality (Gross 1987: 14; Ray 1980: 234). While there were highly accomplished and well-known *yoginīs* (female spiritual adepts) such as Yeshe Tsogyel, Machig Labdrön, Jomo Menmo, and others who left their mark on religious history in Tibet, many *yoginīs* appear in the biographies of the male *yogins* as nameless and passive helpers.<sup>4</sup>

Many of *Tantric* Buddhism’s greatest adherents were in fact women who practiced while raising their families (Allione 1984; Edou 1996). These female spiritual adepts were highly skilled *Tantric* practitioners. They were not always closely associated with religious communities, nor were they necessarily celibate. They often wandered alone or in groups, stopping in isolated settings to engage in intensive meditation. While most of these women were not educated in orthodox religiosity, they were often sought as meditation teachers by both women and men, monastics and lay persons alike (Gross 1993: 87).

One such highly accomplished *yoginī* was Yeshe Tsogyel, the student of and spiritual consort to the Buddhist saint Padmasambhava, who is credited with the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet in the

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<sup>4</sup> Ray suggests that while these women act as spiritual “midwives” to men, the *yoginīs* would probably have had similar stories of male involvement (1980: 237). Such spiritually insightful and challenging stories, however, are most often told from the male point of view, and have been recorded more frequently than those of the *yoginīs* (Gross 1993: 91; Edou 1996: 4).

eighth century CE. Yeshe is said to have been highly accomplished and attained Buddhahood within a single lifetime (Gross 1987: 14-15; Willis 1999: 149). Another accomplished *yoginī*, Machig Labdrön, founded the *Chöd Mahāmudrā* lineage and, depending on which biography of her life is consulted, was also the mother of at least three children (Allione 1984: 172; Edou 1996: 114; Willis 1999: 149-150). While there are fewer known *yoginīs* in comparison to their male counterparts (*yogins*), those great women who *are* known are said to have possessed great meditation skill and power (Havnevik 1989: 75; Schuster 1985: 90; Ray 1980).

“Wordly” spiritual practice is engaged practice; it means taking the concepts learned in the meditation halls and applying them to one’s interactions and relationships. There is great interest in the integration of Buddhist practice into daily life, which turns the focus of spiritual practice away from a largely monastic model with its emphasis on solitude and isolation. Spiritual goals increasingly focus on more “worldly” and day-to-day attainments, from finding the patience to cope with crying children, demanding jobs, maintaining a household, and the other myriad stresses associated with life in a large urban centre. For example, when the exuberances and energies of three young children, a dog, a job, and a busy household get the better of her, one woman in her late thirties takes a deep breath, says a quick prayer to the female Buddha Tara (who is known for her capacity to act swiftly and compassionately), and then focuses on the Buddhist teaching of emptiness. This, she says, helps her to realize that everything eventually changes, and, since she has no permanent Self anyway, she should not take things personally. As she puts it, “. . . people aren’t doing ‘things’ to you; because there is no ‘you’ to do it to!”

“Practice” can also be commonly referred to as a sort of “spiritual imperative,” which can be taken to refer to the progress of an individual on the path to enlightenment. This perspective on practice can also be found in Buddhist literature. This more general usage often serves as an umbrella term for a great variety of meditative and other types of religious practices, all of which are designed to calm and clarify the mind of the practitioner and bring him or her to a state where “awakening,” “liberation,” or “enlightenment” can be experienced (Fischer-Schreiber, Ehrhard, and Diener 1991: 142).

According to much of the literature on meditation, meditation alone is not the only – or even the most crucial – factor in the progression towards enlightenment (Gunaratana 1991; Gyatso 1998; Strong 1995; Nhat Hanh 1998; Powers 1995). Indeed, there is a very long history of literature on “practice” of which many men and women are as of yet unaware. Meditation practice is only one component of *Dharma practice* in general. Geshe Kelsang Gyatso clarifies with the following statement:

It is important to remember that Dharma practice is not confined to our activities during the meditation session; it should permeate our whole life. We should not allow a gulf to develop between our meditation and our daily life, because the success of our meditation depends upon the purity of our conduct outside the meditation session. (1998: 14)

Intellectual understanding then, is not the entire point of one’s whole *practice*. Significant textual evidence exists to bolster this statement, and in fact form some of the tenets most basic to the Theravādin and Mahāyāna traditions.

For Theravādin Buddhists, the way of healing the mental and physical factors that cause dissatisfaction and suffering for ordinary beings, and the way that leads to eventual enlightenment, is known as the Path of Purification (*visudhimagga*). After being practised for centuries, the monk Buddhaghosa systematized the Path in the fifth century CE with the classic text *The Path of Purification (Visudhimagga)*. In it, Buddhaghosa describes a three-fold division of the Eightfold Path. The first division is “morality” (*sīla*), and encompasses right speech, action, and livelihood. The second division is called “concentration” (or “meditation”) (*samādhi*), and includes right mindfulness, effort, and concentration. The third is “wisdom” (*prajñā*) and encompasses right understanding and right thought (Mitchell 2002: 74; Gard 1961: 135-137; Dhammananda 1994: 56-57).

The clustering of meditation with other key elements of the path also occurs in the Mahāyāna. A central figure in Mahāyāna is the *bodhisattva*, someone who is progressing towards the enlightenment of a buddha and who works ceaselessly to end the suffering of all other living beings (Powers 1995: 91). The

career path or “training program” of the *bodhisattva* is called the “Six Perfections” or the *Six Pāramitās*.<sup>5</sup> These perfections are said to constitute the core of the enlightened personality of a buddha. They are: (1) generosity (or giving) (*dāna*); (2) ethics or morality (*sīla*); (3) patience or forbearance (*ksānti*); (4) effort or vigour (*vīrya*); (5) meditation<sup>6</sup> (*dhyāna*); and (6) wisdom (*prajñā*) (Powers 1995: 98; Mitchell 2002: 113-115; Das 1997; Saddhatissa 1970; trans. Guenther 1971).

Whether focusing on the Path of Purification or the Six Perfections, the emphasis in both Theravādin and Mahāyāna traditions is on wisdom. It is regarded as the highest stage of accomplishment or attainment, and is even viewed as the “door” to spiritual awakening (Mitchell 2002: 114). Perfecting wisdom is primary and acts as a foundation for the others. In a sense, wisdom is said to “lead” the others, “. . . as a man with eyes leads the blind” (Williams 1989: 44). Wisdom is the practice that is said to permeate all others and make them possible. As Strong writes, “. . . in these [other] practices that can proceed independently in developing their own aims, there is a commonality of purpose that wisdom instills throughout all of them . . .” (1995: 166).

Meditation or concentration, then, is neither viewed in isolation from the other primary practices – especially morality and wisdom – nor is meditation seen as the only or best way to progress along the path to eventual enlightenment. Meditation is a concept that can perhaps best be viewed as one element in a matrix of meaning: it is but one element within the more encompassing concept of *Dharma practice*. One meditates in addition to continually taking refuge in the Buddha, the *Dharma*, and the *Sangha*, and performs virtuous activities while avoiding the non-virtuous (Gyatso 1998: 4).

Meditation may thus be part of a matrix of meaning, and it is a matrix that is inherently *social* as well. An illustration of the “in-the-world” dimension of meditation can be seen in the following passage

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<sup>5</sup> The six perfections are often supplemented by a further four, where the seventh is skill in means, the eighth is aspiration, the ninth is power, and the tenth is exalted wisdom (Powers 1995: 98).

<sup>6</sup> This corresponds with the second of the Threefold Division, concentration or *samādhi*.

from the *Śikṣā Samuccaya*,<sup>7</sup> compiled by the Buddhist monk Shantideva in the eighth century CE. Here, Shantideva describes how an aspirant should contemplate (or meditate) on emotional feelings:

Whatever feeling he [sic] [the *bodhisattva*] has, it is permeated with great compassion. When he feels a pleasant feeling, he conceives a great pity for all beings who indulge passion, and rejects all inclination to passion in himself. When he has an unpleasant feeling he conceives great pity for all beings who indulge hatred . . . [and] . . . conceives great pity for all beings who are subject to delusion, . . . (trans. Bendall and Rouse 1922: 219)

This is a meditation that can be undertaken formally, in silence and alone, “on the pillow,” so to speak, but it is clear that it can (and perhaps should) also be practised at any time in daily life with the purpose of developing not only virtuous attitudes, but also virtuous *behaviours*. The primary focus in this passage is on relationships with others. This relational emphasis fits in well with the Mahāyāna ideal of the *bodhisattva*. The entire point of the *bodhisattva*’s path is for one to use his or her life and eventual enlightenment to assist others over and above any personal achievement or satisfaction (Strong 1995: 164; Powers 1995: 70). The following attests to this goal, and describes the lifestyle of one who is on the path of the *bodhisattva*:

In this world . . . the Bodhisattva renounces body and life, but he [sic] does not renounce the Good Law [the *Dharma*]. He bows before all creatures, and does not let his pride grow. He is compassionate to weak creatures, and does not dislike them. When any are hungry he gives them the best food. When any are frightened he gives them protection. When any are ill he exerts himself for their complete cure (trans. Bendall and Rouse 1922: 251-252).

Jack Kornfield, a well-known insight meditation teacher in the United States, has stated that the majority of lay persons throughout Buddhist history did not meditate, and instead focused on merit-producing activities to ensure better conditions now and in future rebirths while “meditation” was more properly the province of monastics (1988: xv). Through this discussion, it has become apparent that the word and concept of “meditation” in the West is often used in narrow and limited ways. As Strong argues,

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<sup>7</sup> A compendium of Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine on the codes of conduct for those aspiring to enlightenment.



*certain* forms of meditation do in fact demand the isolation and time that are usually more available to monastics, but there are also many different types of meditation. For example, one of the Six Perfections, giving (*dāna*), is an effective way of making merit, and through this activity, many lay persons in Buddhist history have sought to give food and other necessities to the *sangha* (Strong 1995: 79). It must be remembered, however, that “. . . meditation itself is a merit-making activity, and making merit can be viewed as a form of meditation” (Strong 1995: 78; Prebish 1993: 197).

“Practice” is often used to convey a meaning (or meanings) that can be quite different from “meditation.” Different meanings for both terms are clearly intended when we look once again at a quote from Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, where he cautions against the separation of meditation from one’s practice, and viewing daily life as somehow outside of *Dharma* practice (Gyatso 1998: 14; Strong 1995: 69). “Practice” is meant to encompass meditation, to put *Dharma* to use in everyday life as often as one is able, and to integrate the results and insights received from meditative techniques into one’s behaviour and lifestyle. Practice, in other words, can mean just that: *to practice* an activity repeatedly in the effort to “get it right.” Practice can mean making an effort, trying to change something, to do something new or different, or to do something regularly to develop certain attitudes and behaviours. Practice and meditation, then, are not necessarily mutually inclusive terms, and yet at the same time, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Kelsang Chenma redefines her own spiritual practice raising her pre-teen daughter and working as a nanny. She says even though she is not “officially” studying or practising concentration, she is still “practising.” Her care-giving involves constant attention and patience, and she adds that care-giving itself is a very powerful transformative tool: “You’re keeping a spiritual motivation. So you’re transforming ordinary life into your spiritual path.”

For Marco, the realities – and spiritual opportunities – he encountered when caring for his children helped him to see the spiritual path in a different light altogether. He maintains that his daughters have helped him to recognize just how idyllic and romantic his previous notions of spiritual practice have been. He notes he was very much attracted to the idea of spending hours in solitary meditation, and found the idea

of long-term, isolated, and silent meditation retreats “in a cave somewhere” very appealing. Now, Marco recognizes that spiritual practice is “. . . all internal, and every thing [else] is a reflection . . . everything is a projection anyway.” At home, he says he must dismiss all previous expectations and be selfless and compassionate to his children. This is now his spiritual practice.

The perceived efficacy of Buddhist practice is also reflected in the narratives of single individuals as well. Marco Mascarin, a thirty five year old whose spiritual search began in the mid 1980s, describes Buddhism as “ultimately pragmatic.” He gauges Buddhism’s *usefulness* for himself – and for the West – by its ability to address his everyday life:

Because it’s practical. We tend towards the flaky too, but its not about that. It’s such a practical . . . I would tend not to call it ‘religion’ but a real study of life and it’s pragmatic and useful in our day to day lives. And if it *doesn’t* reflect on how our relationship is with our lover and with our partner and with our family and friends and extended community, then where’s it at? . . . These are the kinds of practical questions that we have to think about.

These engaged practices, deemed so necessary to the spiritual and emotional lives of both men and women in Toronto, can form an avenue that can serve to validate and empower the spiritual experiences and endeavors of those women and men with children. Recognizing and forging a link to long-standing Buddhist and *Tantric* history not only has the potential to dispel the sense of isolation and guilt experienced by many contemporary women and men with children, but also can serve to legitimize their own “practice,” at both a spiritual and an emotional level. Drawing upon the authority of Buddhist history can also lend substantial weight to efforts that seek to alter existent programming at Buddhist centres to better accommodate the social realities and spiritual needs of parents and children. As more and more long-term practitioners in Canadian Tibetan Buddhist centres start families, the community structure itself will begin to shift away from predominantly single and childless individuals. This demographic change will require spiritual teachers to take active steps to address the changing needs and realities of their students, especially on such interrelated issues as practice and family life. In response, the Toronto branch of the NKT has begun to offer *Dharma* classes for children and babysitting during *Tantric* empowerments.

Seeking to accommodate these social realities and spiritual needs, some teachers are indeed drawing upon the authority of history. The Buddhist teachers at the four *Dharma* centres in question all emphasize (to greater or lesser degrees) a similar idea, articulated best by a Canadian Buddhist monk at the NKT centre. He states that “. . . childcare gives special opportunities for love, compassion, generosity, and patience.” In this vein, a Canadian lay teacher describes her own method of teaching as a type of “socially engaged Buddhism.” Spiritual growth or “unfoldment,” as she calls it, is not about how “holy” you can be. Rather, developing clarity and insight in the “real world” is more important:

It is what happens when you go down the road and someone in a flashy car cuts you off. Do you fly into ‘road rage’ and get out and thump on the back of his car, or do you develop the mind of compassion? *That* is the testing of compassion and clarity.

Even with the growing emphasis on lay practice versus “practice on a pillow” that is occurring in these centres, there are few, if any, childcare or children’s programs offered, regardless of whether the teacher is male or female, monastic or lay, traditional or “modern,” or even Western or Asian. Such programs are, for the most part, neither requested nor needed. Informal childcare and babysitting networks do exist among many parents, but are not located within the formal settings of the centres themselves. Further, most such Tibetan Buddhist centres are predominantly attended by individuals who are currently single and/or childless.

Another significant factor concerning the needs of parents and care-givers within Toronto Tibetan Buddhist communities is the very definition of the term “community” itself. Most Buddhist centres are primarily concerned with instituting, providing, and maintaining a location in which the *Dharma* can be offered and taught. Of the four centres associated with the participants of this research project, the NKT centre has taken the most proactive steps towards forming an institution that has a more family-oriented conception of community. As of 2000-2001, regular attendance rules at training programs have been waived for parents, and those with children are increasingly encouraged to “just come” whenever they can. The centre has sent out questionnaires regarding childcare and parenting and now offers daycare during *Tantric*

empowerments and *Dharma* classes for kids. According to one NKT member, in the past, “. . . if parents couldn’t meet the attendance requirements . . . they couldn’t come at all.” In the words of the current spiritual director of the centre:

. . . the future of Buddhism is definitely tied up with the lives of people living in families, with children, and so forth . . . You can’t have a viable community that excludes children. You can’t have a viable community that excludes parents. It doesn’t work.

In the future, he hopes that the NKT tradition in Toronto will be able to provide a “very open, public place” for the people in the neighborhood, a place that offers social services, day care, and schooling. In short, he hopes to provide a place that is similar in form and function to that which is found in many contemporary Christian and Jewish communities.

Gross has said that the manner in which the *Dharma* is transmitted into the West may speak more strongly to the male experience (1986b: 65). To further amend this statement, it appears that the *Dharma*, as it is currently practised and taught in many communities in the West, may be speaking more strongly to a *male* and *monastic* experience. The lived experience of many women and men with children is often contradictory to what is actually taught within Tibetan Buddhist centres and temples. Many Buddhist temples and centres in the West emphasize the practical benefits of meditation, such as stress reduction and an increased ability to live meaningfully in a high-pressure, fast-paced society. The difficulty, it seems, is that in order to uncover the *Tantric* emphasis on engaged and worldly spiritual practice, one is often required to participate within the formal structure of the Tibetan Buddhist centre itself. The concept of spiritual practice for many Buddhists in Toronto is no longer solely associated with a traditional male, monastic model, but rather with a model which values the lessons that can be learned in the everyday roles and practices, including care-giving and parenting.

Gendered practice is not problematic for all Tibetan Buddhist *Dharma* centres in the Toronto area, but it is possible that it may become so as these centres become more permanently established, with long-term, committed practitioners. At the NKT *Dharma* centre in Toronto, many long-term members have

gotten married and/or started their own families, thus changing the constitution of the community and its needs. Over time, as the frequency of family units increase, more and more children will become part of these Buddhist communities. Spiritual teachers may then be required to change the ways in which they define practice in order to address the changing lifestyles and needs of their students. Both men and women increasingly emphasize an “everyday” concept of practice, and this emphasis may create spaces where the role of care-giver and parent will become more recognized, supported, and included within the traditional, institutional structures of Tibetan Buddhism. It is possible that they may even alter those structures altogether.

**POSTSCRIPT:  
AN EVOLVING STORY**

Change and evolution, of ideas, feelings, practices, and ways of life, are the themes that unite all of the narratives discussed here. These themes are also what I believe to be perhaps most characteristic of both the presence and practice of the Buddhist tradition in the West.<sup>1</sup> Since the beginning of my fieldwork in June of 1999 to the end of the writing process approximately three years later, the narratives of the men and women involved - in keeping with these metathemes - have also changed and evolved. In some case, the changes have been substantial and significant. To present these individuals and their stories as “frozen” in time and completely fixed within a text is thus both insufficient and misleading. As such, to close this project with a “conclusion” is both inappropriate and inaccurate.

The narratives from the summer of 2002 of Kelsang Chenma, Erika Chan, Pema Chönyid, and Harry Flashman are particularly representative of continual process, change, and evolution. Kelsang Chenma’s thoughts on gender roles and Buddhist practice are a case in point. During our formal, taped interviews in 1999-2000, Chenma stated that gender roles and caregiving were under-recognized and intensely problematic within the NKT centre within which she practises. In the spring of 2001, Chenma excitedly related to me that her views on these issues had changed; gender roles and caregiving were beginning to be recognized and addressed at the NKT centre in Toronto. Primarily due to the leadership and attitude of a new spiritual director at the centre, Chenma felt optimistic that some degree of significant change was in the air. She describes it in the following e-mail message:

What *is* different is that the women and caregivers who do attend aren’t plagued with anxiety that because of their domestic responsibilities, their spiritual practice is impaired. [The director] . . . is *not* giving out the message that having children destroys one’s spiritual life, that once one has

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<sup>1</sup> Arguably, the same can be said of individuals involved in *any* spiritual and religious tradition.

bred, one has lost the opportunity for enlightenment. In fact, he is emphasizing the opposite: that childcare gives special opportunities for love, compassion, generosity, and patience . . . and my own experience is that this is true. If one makes a big effort to keep studying, to meditate as much as time allows, to get to the Dharma Centre at least once a week, to really discipline one's mind in the course of all activity . . . I have no sense that I am *not* making "progress"; quite the opposite! *Big* internal changes . . .

In the summer of 2002, as she and I discussed my intention to write a postscript rather than a formal conclusion to my thesis (an intention she fully supports), Chenma informed me that her perspective on gender and spiritual practice had once again evolved. She relates that while the children's *Dharma* programme and the childcare offered during classes and empowerments (which she directs and maintains) does allow more parents to come to the centre, the situation is still problematic and far from resolved for her personally and the NKT centre in general.

I was feeling a little sorry about being so effusive about the gender inequity [in the formal interviews in 1999-2000], because things did soften a great deal with [the current spiritual director] at the helm. Then, I was *not* sorry, because I remain unclear about the issue. You see, when I have a nose cold, the 'family program' seems to collapse at the Centre. The presence of children and their caregivers seems to depend on one old nun; it's not really part of the fabric of the tradition. It seems peculiar to me . . . to 'manoeuvre within a grid' that doesn't really include children and their caregivers. I persist because I absolutely cannot be in a spiritual community which excludes half the world. I have no sense, however, of comradeship in my mission. I have made wonderful friendships among the parents, but nothing seems to have changed much at the organization level.

Chenma's statement indicates how her own understanding of the issues involved have become deeper and more nuanced and yet, at the same time, even more ambiguous, confusing, and troubling.

In recent telephone conversation, Harry Flashman also recognizes that the structure and content of his own spiritual narrative has changed since our taped interviews. To illustrate, he states: "Wow! It has been three years . . . and I'm not even the same person I was six months ago!" In terms of his spiritual practice, Harry relates that he has currently withdrawn not only from the Buddhist centre he helped found

ig 1992, but also from his teacher of the last ten years. Harry explains the reasons underlying this both liberating and painful turn of events:

While Tibetan Buddhism was the primary framework of teaching that [the centre] offered, it wasn't [supposed to be] the only one. Even so, there became an increasing thrust toward Buddhism, and toward Tibetan Buddhism in particular. I also saw a change in my teacher. Here was this lay teacher, attained, and humble about it; then suddenly she [my teacher] demonstrated an increasing need for recognition within that tradition.<sup>2</sup> I questioned that change; it seemed born out of attachment to the vehicle within which the teacher had been working. I saw no need for my teacher to receive recognition in the [Tibetan Buddhist] tradition, when many of the high lamas that came to our centre would recognize the teaching done there . . . I'm not saying I've transcended my teacher; or any teacher. By that same token, I haven't felt a need to find another human teacher. Ever since I made my decision [to leave], I've been blessed by receiving teachings in many forms and from many sources.

Harry continues to practice the *Dharma* in his daily life, with a significant concentration on the Shaolin Arts of qigong and kungfu. As he suggests above, his conception of the *Dharma* and the forms in takes in his own spiritual practice have evolved, becoming both deeper and broader.

Pema Chönyid's practice has also evolved in a similar manner, for the ways in which she is involved with her Buddhist temple and the Buddhist tradition have also changed significantly. During the course of my fieldwork, Pema attended teachings approximately twice weekly, acted as the temple treasurer, and was an active participant in various centre activities and rituals. Presently, her personal and

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This aspect of Harry's narrative brings to light the tension surrounding recognition and acknowledgment, as well as the differing subject positions that may be involved. For many Western women in Buddhist traditions there is tension between practising and/or teaching in anonymity and on the margins and being recognized as full participants with the ability to shape a spiritual tradition. Harry's former teacher, a Western woman and lay teacher in a tradition that has historically been represented and disseminated by mostly male monastics, has herself acknowledged this issue in a taped interview in 1999. She states: "We need more women teachers; these voices need to be heard. I mean, the true tragedy to me with patriarchy is that for 3,500 years fifty percent of the wisdom knowledge of this planet has not been heard. That's the real tragedy." As a lay teacher with both husband and children, she also feels that the voices of Western practitioners, who practise from a Western perspective and interpretation, need to be heard. She says, ". . . the practice just can't be done exactly the way the Tibetans do it. This is a living teaching. You've got to understand it; its got to become a part and fabric of our lives." With this point of view in mind, she has felt it necessary to make her own teachings available to a wider audience in the West.



formal meditation practice has lessened considerably from an hour daily to once or twice a month, as has her involvement with her Buddhist temple. While she remains affiliated with the temple, she too has broadened her understanding of *Dharma* practice. Pema works at integrating what she has learned from the Buddhist tradition into her daily life and everyday interactions, and is currently exploring different avenues of spiritual and personal growth through a four-year psychotherapy training course in Toronto.

Another individual who reports significant changes since the taped interviews in 1999-2000 is Erika Chan. She frames these changes in accordance with what is, for her, a “spiritual baseline”: “It is my opinion that one of the requirements of enjoying a truly vibrant spiritual life is the willingness to acknowledge the fact that, at times, one needs to make big changes.” A “big change” is exactly what Erika has undergone. As of February 2002, Erika has taken what she calls an “indefinite leave of absence” from her spiritual teacher and the centre with which she has been affiliated for the last ten years.

Her decision to take a leave of absence from both centre and teacher is a direct result, she says, of the teachings she has received from her now-former teacher, such as the idea that one should strive to maintain what is called “beginner’s mind” (the idea that one should maintain an open mind and be receptive to spiritual direction and teaching in whatever form they assume), and the idea of choosing “the path of least resistance.” Putting these teachings into effect, Erika undertook a trip to Asia to seek a new treatment options for a particularly severe and painful form of endometriosis. Under the guidance of an Asian Grandmaster, Erika began to study in-depth the Shaolin Arts of qigong and kungfu. The consequence of this trip and her practice of these martial arts were startling and profound for Erika, and she states:

I realized that I had found a complete spiritual path that was not only powerful enough to cure me of my endometriosis (a so-called incurable disease), but also profound enough to take away the ‘effort’ I had always put out to do the former meditations I had learnt . . . I decided to take the simpler path and let go of all the other practices. Life is just simpler and each day gets better and better. I am happy and I am grateful to be alive without pain or discomfort anymore. And that’s it. This is where I am at today.

As W. C. Smith reminds us, the religious and the spiritual are what ordinary people cherish, value, and above all, *live*. It is the everyday lives of so-called “Western Tibetan Buddhists,” such as those in Toronto, that are at the heart of the multitude forms of practice, of the numerous sacred texts and doctrines, and emergent institutions, that fall under the broad and formal category of “Western Buddhism.” It is also within these everyday lives that we see how religious and spiritual practices and paths are anything but monolithic, exclusive, and straightforward. As Renato Rosaldo notes, people very often live their lives with both a constant and continually changing degree of uncertainty and ambiguity (1993: 92). This statement is, as we have seen, certainly characteristic of the spiritual lives of Toronto Tibetan Buddhists. Indeed, a degree of ambiguity and uncertainty is even uncovered in their religious and spiritual identities, with many questioning, refuting, and some even rejecting, the label of “Buddhist” altogether. The overwhelming interest of those who participated within this research process clearly lies in a *spiritual way of life*, rather than a *religious label*.

Much like the story of Buddhism in the West, or “Western Buddhism,” the individual stories presented here are incomplete and evolving. The men and women in Toronto demonstrate that the concept and practice of the Buddhist tradition is moving beyond the spiritual preference of a few scattered individuals, and is becoming part of the fabric of the everyday lives of individuals, of their families, and of burgeoning social networks. The Buddhist centres these men and women connect with, support, and attend are also evolving, becoming more and more stable and organized, and are themselves on their way to becoming a significant part of the social and spiritual fabric of the lives of their members, and perhaps of the individuals within the larger communities and centres in which they exist.

“Buddhism,” as a living and constantly evolving spiritual tradition with numerous forms and practices, is still a relatively recent phenomenon in the Western spiritual and religious lexicon. It is also, I believe, very much a tradition and a lifestyle that is in a growth stage, attempting to set down the roots that are necessary to flourish. As such, the ways in which the men and women in Toronto struggle, succeed, and

attempt to practise "Buddhism" is indicative of what may be occurring among other women and men, and other growing communities throughout North America and Europe.

## Appendix A

### Women's Interview # 1 – Questions.

1) Background Information

-full name (then choose a pseudonym)

-age, birth date, place of birth, where were you brought up?

-family background – religion of parents, religious up-bringing, occupation of parents, size of family.

-your education, occupation, marital status.

2) How did your interest in Tibetan Buddhism/Buddhism develop? What led you to Buddhism?

3) Would you describe yourself as a “Buddhist?” How? (commitment, practice, study, retreats, once a week or less, a lifestyle, etc.).

4) How do you see the status/experience of women in Canadian society? (are women treated as equals, “lip-service,” poorly)? How do you see yourself as a woman in Canada?

5) How would you describe the role and nature of women in Tibetan Buddhism? (Is this based on personal experience, textual sources, study, etc.).

6) Do you consider yourself a “feminist?” What does “feminism” mean to you? Do you have a “working definition”? Does “feminism” influence your everyday and religious practice – how?

7) Are there any issues to which you think I should pay particular attention?

**Men's Interview Questions #1**

- 1) Background information
  - full name (then choose a pseudonym)
  - age, date of birth, place of birth, where were you brought up?
  - family background – religion of parents, religious up-bringing, occupation of parents, size of family.
  - your education, occupation, marital status
- 2) How did your interest in Tibetan Buddhism develop? What lead you to Buddhism?
- 3) Would you describe yourself as a “Buddhist?” How? (does it involve commitments, vows, practice, study, retreats, once a week or less, a lifestyle, etc?).
- 4) Do you think men and women are treated equally in our society? Are there double standards, gendered roles (i.e., domestic work as “woman’s work”)?
- 5) Do men and women receive the same treatment and experience the same things in Tibetan Buddhism? Is your knowledge based on personal experience or textual sources?
- 6) What does “feminism” mean to you? Does “feminism” play a role in society and religion? Does “feminism” effect you in your everyday life and religious practice (personal beliefs, a friend, etc.)?
- 7) Are there any issues to which you think I should pay particular attention?

**Interview #2 (Men and Women)**

- 1) What factors do you think are important and necessary for Tibetan Buddhism to respond to the spiritual needs of North Americans? Is gender important to this process? Are concepts like “equality,” “participation,” and “involvement” also important to this process? If so, how?
- 2) How do you see the future development of Tibetan Buddhism (or Buddhism in general) in the West? Do you see it in “positive”/ “negative” terms? What will be gained/lost?
- 3) Are there differences in the way men and women approach practice? Do they want the same things out of practice? (Keeping in mind that “practice” can have multiple meanings and interpretations). If so, what are these based upon and what is emphasized/under-emphasized?  
-for example, physical/biological, mental, emotional, intellectual, relationships with others?
- 4) Are there any concepts in Buddhism that are difficult to reconcile with your everyday life, at work, at home, with other people? (for example, the concept of no permanent self?). If so, how did/do you “embody” this concept – take it from an abstract, theoretical level to “a matter of the heart,” the living of it?
- 5) Do you see any differences between “Western Buddhists” and those who are raised Buddhist in a Buddhist society?

## Appendix B

### The Eight Special Rules of the Nun's *Sangha* (monastic community)

The following is Susan Murcott's adaptation of I.B. Horner, tr. *The Book of Discipline. (Cullavaga)* Vol. 5. (London: Luzac and Co., 1952), p. 356 and F.L. Woodward *The Book of Gradual Sayings. (Anguttara-Nikaya)* Vol. IV. (London: Published for Pali Text Society by Oxford University Press, 1935), pp. 184-185.

- 1) A nun, even of a hundred years' standing, shall respectfully greet, rise up in the presence of, bow down before, and perform all proper duties towards a monk ordained even a day.
- 2) A nun is not to spend the rainy season in a district where there is no monk.
- 3) Every half-moon, a nun is to await two things from the order of monk – the date of the *Uposatha* ceremony and the time the monks will come to give teaching.
- 4) After the rains retreat, the nuns are to hold *Pavarana* [to inquire as to whether any faults have been committed] before both sanghas [monastic community], that of the monks and that of the nuns, in respect to what has been seen, what has been heard, and what has been suspected.
- 5) A nun who has been guilty of a serious offense must undergo the *manatta* discipline before both sanghas, that of the monks and that of the nuns.
- 6) When a novice has trained for two years in the six precepts [the first five precepts plus the precept of taking one meal a day before noon], she should seek ordination [the *Upasampada* initiation] from both sanghas.
- 7) A nun is not to revile or abuse a monk under any circumstances.
- 8) Admonition by nuns of monks is forbidden; admonition of nuns by monks is not forbidden. (Murcott 1991: 197)

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