

Authenticating Buddhism in the Public Sphere: Moral Dialogues in Ladakh

Rohit Singh

University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Following the partition between India and Pakistan in 1947, the residents of Leh, Ladakh became citizens of the Indian nation-state. In response to the new political prospects in Ladakh, political leaders and religious reform groups have attempted to mobilize local Buddhists around a common core sense of Ladakhi Buddhist identity. These dynamics have engendered a variety of debates and dialogues in the public sphere over what it means to be a good Buddhist and what local practices and traditions constitute authentic Buddhism.

Keywords: modernity; reform Buddhism; secularity; authenticity; morality

On a cold December night, I drank warm butter tea with a local Ladakhi elder. We discussed the upcoming Losar (New Year) celebrations and how local traditions have changed over time. He recalled, for example, that in his younger days he would take a goat to the shrine of his clan's god (*pas lha*), cut open the goat's chest, and place the fresh heart on the shrine as an offering to his clan's god. For him, this animal sacrifice constituted a moral necessity; failure to do so would invoke the wrath of the god. He recalled ending this practice after a prominent Lama instructed him that Buddhists need no longer engage in such acts because these rituals did not constitute real or authentic Buddhism.

This article draws on historical and ethnographic research¹ in Ladakh as a way to examine dialogues over what makes Buddhism authentic—moral dialogues that have shaped Ladakh's public

¹ I draw on ethnographic data I gathered over the span of thirteen months when I lived in Leh, Ladakh, beginning in October 2012. This chapter draws primarily on English, Hindi-Urdu, and Ladakhi language interviews I conducted with key informants from various demographic groups. These individuals include both lay and monastic leaders. The article is especially informed by my analysis of interview content from different lay and monastic religious specialists: heads of monastic institutes, monks, lay priests, oracles, astrologers and members of religious reform groups including past and present members of the Ladakh Buddhist Association, the Ladakh Gompa Association, and former

sphere since the region joined the Indian nation-state. Within this data set, there is no clear, strong polarization between the moral frameworks of all individuals in one group versus another, as most Buddhists hold a diversity of views falling on a spectrum of ethical beliefs. However, for the sake of analysis and greater understanding of this spectrum, I abstract and contrast two visions of moral order and their corresponding traditions.

On one end of the spectrum, parties in the public sphere articulate a global moral order that is centered on the ideals of Buddhist intellectualism and model Buddhist citizenship within the Indian-nation state. The global aspects of this moral order have been shaped by internationally permeable dialogues on the influences of citizenship, religious authority, and what it means to be a model Buddhist within a global society. These influences directly and indirectly include post-colonial visions of development and progress, reform discourses from Tibetan Buddhist Diaspora leaders, debates evolving within international social media platforms, and encounters with foreign tourists and scholars engaging with Buddhism as practiced in Ladakh. Unweaving the strands of this global web is beyond the scope of this article; instead, I home in on a key theme underlying these moral dialogues: Buddhist authenticity. Authenticity—from this vantage—is legitimized through Buddhist scholastic practice and the citing of Buddhist scriptural authority. Within this perspective, what can be called “bad Buddhism” consists in practices and beliefs that run contrary to these ideals. Such bad Buddhism is often characterized as “blind faith” and superstition.

: “On the other end of the dialogic spectrum, a localized vision of moral order, which focuses on human relations with local spirit beings, is advanced.” Humans are morally obliged to perform rituals on time and engage in practices intended to purify the dwellings of chthonic gods. Authenticity in this moral framework draws on both the efficacy of ritual practices and the authority of Buddhist tantric discourses.² Bad Buddhism from this vantage is found in any perceived modern-day neglect of ritual duties and pollution of the abodes of spirit beings. My primary claim in this article is that as these moral paradigms become placed in dialogue with each other through Ladakh’s public sphere, and that Buddhists ultimately forge modern moral identities as they negotiate and navigate between different moral orders.

Himalayan Dialogues in the Modern Public Sphere

Debates over authentic Buddhism in Ladakh transpire in a Buddhist society shaped by various religious and pragmatic concerns. Ladakhis turn to Buddhism and Buddhist religious specialists—monks, tantrikas, oracles, and astrologers—to address their concerns and meet their religious and pragmatic needs. Melvin Spiro’s work on Burmese Buddhism presents parallel social dynamics in Burma, which can help us understand how and why Buddhists in Ladakh seek different religious goals and turn to diverse systems of practice and authority (Spiro, 1982). Spiro divides religious orientations in Burmese society into three main categories: nibbanic, kammatic, and apotropaic. The

members of the Lamdon Dramatic Club. I thank the American Institute of Indian Studies for supporting my fieldwork through its Junior Fellowship.

² For an insightful case study of tantra and monastic authority in Ladakh, see Martin Mills, *Identity, Ritual and State in Tibetan Buddhism: The Foundations of Authority in Gelukpa Monasticism*. (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

first orientation constitutes the soteriological pursuits of a select few, whereas most Buddhists turn to the other two orientations. They aspire for karmic merit, primarily through acts of generosity (*dāna*). Finally, they turn to the sangha for apotropaic services to ward off evil and misfortune. Spiro's tripartite division underscores how Buddhists follow a diversity of aims and pursuits. Buddhism in these societies addresses the different needs and interests of Buddhists by providing rituals, narratives, and doctrines that form a sense of moral order in which nibbanic, kammatic, and apotropaic traditions find a moral worth and social significance.

Although Spiro's work focuses on Theravada Buddhist societies, in regions such as Ladakh, where Vajrayana is predominant, Buddhists likewise turn to religious specialists and authorities to address their diverse concerns. Geoffrey Samuels divides the moral orientations in Vajrayana into: 1) a Bodhi orientation with the main goal of enlightenment; 2) a karmic orientation geared to the accumulation of karmic merit; and 3) a pragmatic orientation which turns to the authority and perceived efficacy of shamanic specialists to address prosaic concerns for health, economic prosperity, and safety. Samuel observes that the, "specific form that Buddhism has taken in Tibet is bound up with nexus between the pursuit of enlightenment by a minority and the desire for shamanic services by the majority" (Samuel, 1995: 9). Vajrayana societies comprise shamans and monastic clerics. While Samuel points out that the categories of shamanic and clerical Buddhism remain porous, the shamanic and clerical aspects are, nevertheless, "rooted in fundamentally different orientations towards the world and towards human experience and behavior" (Samuel 1995, 10). In both Theravada and Vajrayana societies, then, diverse religious motives and orientations shape religious life and understandings of what makes Buddhism good or bad, authentic or inauthentic. Historically, these all exist relatively harmoniously in that the three aims are considered good or authentic depending upon the population which follows them. However, the contemporary public sphere—in places such as Ladakh—hosts new debates among Buddhist groups as to which orientations, motivations, and practices constitute real Buddhism and which traditions practiced by Buddhists harm or benefit the public good.

Dialogue over the moral value of religious traditions and what constitutes authentic Buddhism is not unique to Ladakh, but rather reflective of broader trends taking place in Himalayan societies. In his seminal work, *Himalayan Dialogue*, Stan Mumford explores how various cultural layers, historical narratives, and ritual traditions intersect within a dialogic framework in which Gurung Shamans and Tibetan Lamas in Nepal compete for patronage from members of a lay society seeking their religious services. Mumford's research illuminates how layers of cultural and religious dialogues engender competing visions of the moral good, rival ritual regimes, and conflicting choices for laity in the modern Himalayas. Building on Bakhtin's theories of dialogue (1981), Mumford cogently argues that competition between rival regimes, such as the shamans and the lamas, creates a sphere of "betweenness" spurring "an ongoing dialogue over time between older and newer layers of tradition" (Mumford, 1989: 13). It is the clients of both religious regimes who are caught in between, seeking the services of both lamas and shamans, while variously situating themselves within cultural layers associated with both groups. As we will see in Ladakh, the laity confront the

issue of good and bad Buddhism in terms of a dialogue between moral frameworks with their own respective claims to serving the public good and being authentically Buddhist.

The post-colonial nation-state constitutes a significant historical inflection for Buddhist societies, presenting new conceptions of moral order for monastic and lay citizens. In some colonized Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka, Buddhist reform groups and anti-colonial movements crafted models of a “Protestant Buddhism”—a Buddhism informed by Protestant presuppositions of textual and doctrinal authority and personal belief—and designed as a response to critiques of Buddhism by Christian missionaries and so forth (See Obeyesekere, 1972). The rise of nationalist movements, further, has engendered sectarian schisms and competing visions of Buddhist orthodox authority within a given nation-state (see, for example, E. Michael Mendelson and John P. Ferguson, 1975). The plethora of religious movements and political parties operating within Buddhist nation-states have engendered what McMahan calls “Buddhist Modernism” as characterized by “the forms of Buddhism that have emerged out of an engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity” (McMahan, 2008: 6). Modernity, moreover, as demonstrated by Buddhist regions such as Ladakh, sparks new debates over authentic Buddhist identity as well as questions over the moral responsibilities of Buddhist citizens.

Scholarship on Ladakh has demonstrated how Buddhist identity in the region often manifests along communal fault lines, pitting a homogenized vision of a Buddhist society against a Muslim other (Van Beek, 2008). During its modern history, Buddhist reform groups and religious leaders, at times influenced by external Buddhist movements, have increasingly turned to Protestant conceptions of religious authority to define Ladakhi Buddhist identity (Bertelsen, 1997). The context for these debates over identity, authenticity, and moral authority take place in a border region whose subjects participate in ongoing debates over their religious and ethnic identities in relation to the Indian nation-state (Aggarwal, 2004). This chapter builds on current scholarship by further arguing that the expansion of the Ladakhi public sphere provides Buddhists with an arena in which to debate the morals, values, and ideals foundational to their religious identities.

After the partition, Buddhists in Ladakh became citizens of the Indian nation-state with new moral expectations to participate in the public sphere. Habermas conceptualized the public sphere as zones of contestation and debate in which public opinion is formed. In India, religious contestations remain intricately tied to the formation of public spheres (see Van Der Veer, 2001). Ladakhi Buddhists encountered the moral prospects and challenges of what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls political modernity: “rule by modern institutions bureaucracy, and capitalist enterprise ...” (Chakrabarty, 2000: 4). Modernity, as Charles Taylor argues in *Sources of the Self*, presents cultures with new ways to imagine the self and society in relation to pursuits and ideals valued as moral goods. Taylor views moral agency and modern identity in relation to a hierarchy of moral goods, with “hypergoods” defined as “goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about” (Taylor, 1989: 63). Comparable to how Taylor characterizes the sources of the modern self, I observe that Ladakhis live in a spectrum of moral orientations towards objects deemed good, orientations akin to what Samuel and Spiro identified as reflective in Buddhist societies. Within the public sphere, I argue these

orientations enter dialogue with one another, presenting Buddhists with competing visions of moral order, religious authenticity, and understandings of the public good. Modern moral identity for many Buddhists in Ladakh is constituted by attempts to navigate and negotiate within different moral imperatives.

Moral Order in Ladakh's Public Sphere

Since Ladakh became part of the Indian nation-state, the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) based in Leh, played an increasingly active role shaping and establishing Leh's public sphere that crystallized around religious reform and political activism. The LBA's stated goals are to "look after the Buddhist interest, bringing social reforms in Ladakhi society and to preserve its art, culture, language and traditions..." ("Ladakh Buddhist Association-Leh", date unknown: 2). The organization began in 1934 as the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), comprising a handful of Ladakhi men, mostly from aristocratic families, mentored by a group of Kashmir Hindu pundits who had converted to Buddhism. The early agenda of the YMBA and the neo-Buddhist Kashmiri pundits included demanding greater funding for the preservation of Buddhism in Ladakh, promoting population growth for Buddhists in Leh by eliminating polyandry (the practice of one woman marrying multiple men) and funding Bhoti (literary Tibetan) classes in schools (Bertlesen, 1997).

As Ladakhis entered an era of political modernity through involvement in political debates, participation in elections, and various forms of political mobilization—protests, strikes, rallies, and so forth—they viewed themselves as a backwards and marginalized people on the borderlands of the Indian nation-state in dire need of political organization and religious reform (see Aggarwal, 2004). Reform discourses portrayed Ladakh's unique Buddhist culture and religion as threatened by degenerate religious practices within, typically described by Ladakhi leaders as "blind faith," cultural traditions not aligned with teachings of the Buddha, or commonly "*Bön chos*" (Bön religion), a catch-all term referring to pre-Buddhist religions in Ladakh believed to have been mixed with the Buddha's authentic teachings. Reform leaders, including the heads of local monasteries such as the nineteenth Bakula Rinpoche, monastic members of the Ladakh Gompa Association, and lay members of the Ladakh Buddhist Association, endeavored to promote public standards of what it meant to be a good Buddhist. This led to critiques of various vernacular traditions characterized as inauthentic cultural accretions which held back the modern development of a Buddhist Ladakh. These traditions included the consumption of alcohol, polyandry, and rituals connected to local deity cults. Surveying the perspectives of reform leaders and their critiques of local ritual traditions provides insights into how issues of authenticity undergird debates and dialogues pertaining to Buddhism and modernity in the public sphere.

In 1957, Geshe Yeshe Dhundrup (Dge bshes Ye shes don grub, 1897–1980), a monastic scholar from Leh's Spituk Gompa, became president of the Ladakh Buddhist Association. Geshe Dhundrup was among the most revered Ladakhi scholars of his generation, authoring numerous scholastic works. He was also a prolific playwright who directed public performances designed to educate Ladakhis about social evils (see Shakspo, 2010: 235). Under his leadership, LBA became the central

organization for mobilizing Buddhists in Leh through fostering a sense of Buddhist identity compatible with modern social and political ideals such as public education, political representation, and economic development. Accepting this Buddhist modernity necessitated that Ladakhis reevaluate past traditions in light of an intellectually-oriented Buddhism. Reform leaders deemed existing practices like animal sacrifices to local deities, alcohol and tobacco consumption, and polyandry as “social evils” that kept Ladakhi Buddhists in a dark past, incapable of being real Buddhists and hindering future economic and political development within the Indian nation-state.

In 1969, Geshe Dhundrup helped form the Lamdon Dramatic Club, which later became known as the Lamdon Society. This theatrical group put on plays to educate the public about Ladakh’s “social evils.” I conducted multiple interviews with two of Lamdon’s founding members: Morup Namgyal, a lay Buddhist whom many describe as the most popular and talented Ladakhi musician of his generation, and Lama Thupstan Paldan, a Gelugpa monastic scholar from Spituk monastery.

The activities of the Lamdon Society show the importance of theater and orality in the formation of Ladakh’s public sphere. Morup Namgyal recalled that from 1969 to 1980, the Lamdon troupe visited most Buddhist villages in Ladakh, often traveling on foot or by horse because many villages lacked accessible roads. According to Morup Namgyal, the typical format for an evening performance had three parts: first, the theatrical performance, often with accompanying songs and dance; second, an intermission in which a Lama would deliver a moral sermon; and then finally, a continuation of the performances. The scripts for all performances didactically promoted Buddhist values and condemned perceived “social evils.” As Morup Namgyal described to me, “We would tell them through song and dance that all brothers were equal [thus having equal rights to inheritance], each brother should have their own wife, send your kids to school, don’t sacrifice animals at the *lha tho* [shrines believed to house local spirits].” Whereas much scholarship on religion and the public sphere emphasizes the significance of print media, the case of the Lamdon Society demonstrates how performance and theatrics were used to shape the moral opinions in Ladakh that gave rise to the public sphere.

Lama Paldan recalls the purpose of the performances was twofold: to inculcate Ladakhi Buddhists with a greater sense of ethical responsibility and to promote a more intellectually informed Buddhist citizenry. Lamdon’s ethical vision was grounded in the five precepts (*bslab ba lnga*): (1) not killing, (2) not lying, (3) not stealing, (4) not taking intoxicants, and (5) not engaging in sexual misconduct. Lamdon’s campaigns against animal sacrifice, for example, extolled the importance of not committing the ethical violation of killing a sentient being. Some lay priests (*lha bdag*) performed sacrifices to appease local spirits during the Buddhist New Year, Losar. Reformists in Ladakh viewed animal sacrifices to violate principles of *bodhicitta* (*byang chub kyi sems*), according to which one should never harm other creatures but rather should seek Buddhahood out of compassion for them. In Buddhist thought, an individual has been born into countless lifetimes; therefore, each sentient being encountered could have been one’s mother in a previous life. Remembering and reflecting on the kindness of one’s current mother, one should then treat all other sentient beings with compassion, because they too have been one’s mother in a previous life. Sacrificing an animal, thereby, is tantamount to slaying one’s own mother. This line of reasoning has been used directly or

indirectly to justify contemporary vegetarian movements in Ladakh and other parts of the Tibetan cultural sphere. These arguments initially were not sufficient to sway Ladakhi Buddhists.

Morup Namgyal remembers that certain villagers were reluctant to end these sacrifices, fearing retribution from these spirits in the form of family misfortunes or damage to crops and livestock. Most Buddhists only agreed to end animal sacrifices after local rinpoches like Bakula Rinpoche and Togden Rinpoche promised to use their own spiritual powers to keep spirit beings in check. Here we can see a hierarchy of authority being invoked: the monastic heads as reincarnated Lamas command authority over local numina via the central role they play in the mandala which is imagined upon the local landscape.³

Buddhist reformers aimed to transform a Buddhist population they viewed as morally negligent and ignorant of authentic Buddhism. As Lama Paldan reflects:

We wanted to end the greatest social evil: blind faith. In Buddhism, blind faith is not permitted. Buddhism never says that just because I say something, you should then turn around and follow it. First you must listen, then think, then meditate...if you then agree, then follow the teaching. This is Buddhism...it never says that you should simply follow something because I said it. ...So many people at that time lived based on blind faith.

A number of Buddhists I spoke with in Leh shared Lama Paldan's deprecating vision of the Buddhist traditions in Ladakh's past. They recall that Ladakhi Buddhists were, for the most part, nominally Buddhist and blindly followed tradition. They ignored the intellectual foundations of the Buddha's teaching, resulting in the mixing of Buddhism with various inauthentic Buddhist traditions. This narrative mirrors discourses on Buddhism that emerged in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, according to which Buddhism was a philosophical system too advanced for the average residents in the "Orient." Indigenous traditions debased the Buddha's pure and pristine teachings (see Lopez, 1995).

For reformers like Lama Paldan, authentic Buddhism derives from the intellectual practices of hearing, thinking, and meditating upon the Buddha's teachings as found in canonical texts. Georges Dreyfus describes the practices of hearing, thinking, and meditating upon texts as the "three acumens" of Buddhist scholasticism that culminates in the "soteriological transformation sought by the tradition." (Dreyfus, 2003: 165–166) This emphasis on reasoning grounded in the Buddha's authentic teachings reflects an elite perspective in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist scholastic traditions. Though this model of Buddhism had traditionally belonged to an elite stratum, namely those few monks pursuing text-based religious learning, Buddhist reform groups in Ladakh, like Lamdon, promoted Buddhist intellectualism as a moral paradigm for all Buddhists.

Proponents of this moral order will at times critique the older religious traditions centered on the veneration of local deities, called *lha*, and the importance some Buddhists placed on the shrines where they reside, the *lhatho* (*lha tho*). For some Ladakhis, *lhatho* traditions reflect pre-Buddhist elements of Ladakhi society or simply reflect blind faith in spirits who are not found in authentic

³ See Mills 2003 for more on monastic authority in Ladakh.

Buddhist sources. When I asked one monk about the *lhatho*-s in Ladakh, he told me: “All of these *lha*-s and *lhatho*-s... this is not Buddhism; this is *Bön Chos*.” His response was echoed by multiple informants who claimed local deity cults constitute remnants of pre-Buddhist religion subsumed under the broad, nebulous category of *Bön Chos*. *Bön*—commonly pronounced outside Ladakh as *Bön*—is usually associated with the indigenous traditions existing in Himalayan cultures prior to the introduction of Buddhism.

Along with this emphasis on the study of texts as more important than the performance of ritual, literacy in the Tibetan scriptural language serves as a key moral ideal in modern Ladakh. Those lacking in the ability to comprehend Buddhist texts are viewed as incapable of deep understanding of real Buddhist doctrines and moral ideals. While many Ladakhi Buddhists can recite the script found in the text, few can comprehend their meaning. Lay and monastic Buddhists associated with the LBA, the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, and other groups thus advocate for greater educational resources for the study of classical Tibetan.

This emphasis on literacy assumes that authentic Buddhist practices are to be found within canonical scriptures. During one of my interviews with Sonam Phuntsog, an esteemed lay historian in Ladakh, he leveled the following critiques of *lhatho* traditions: “*Lhatho* cannot be found in any of Buddha’s scriptures... Gautama Buddha did not believe in these things...” For Phuntsog, those who believe in the *lhatho* are “not acting like Buddhists” because the *lhatho* is a belief neither confirmed by the Buddha nor sanctioned by Buddhist textual traditions.

Some Buddhists view local traditions as false beliefs that lead Ladakhis to make religious commitments to non-Buddhist entities. One middle-aged monk insisted to me these faulty commitments are due to a lack of religious education: “Those who know about Buddhism take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha; those who don’t know about Buddhism turn to these worldly gods.” He maintains that educating oneself about Buddhism distances Buddhists from the “superstitious” and “blind faith” based cult of the worldly spirits. Buddhists then turn instead towards more authoritative sources of refuge, specifically the three jewels of Buddhism. Religious reform paradigms assert that, ideally, as Ladakhis become more educated, future generations will learn about the real Buddhism and give up the fears and superstitions that plagued Ladakhis in the past. When I asked one parent if he wanted his children to continue to look after his family’s *lhatho*, he replied, “No. My kids should study and follow the teachings of the Buddha. If my kids really understand Buddhism, they will realize that they do not need to look after the *lhatho*.”

One woman said to me, “I don’t know if I really believe in the *phaslha*. It is my **culture** to believe these things.” Here again a dichotomy is drawn between religion and culture. A monk from Thiksay monastery insisted that the *lhatho*-s were part of Ladakh’s culture or *shesrig*, but they should not be confused with religion or *chos*. Moreover, because *lhatho*-s are a cultural expression in conflict with *chos*, the reformists argue Ladakhis ought to abandon belief in them. Lama Thupstan Paldan declares, “I do not want this *lhatho* system to remain... If this ends, then people will focus on the Buddha and go in the directions of the Buddha’s teachings. Otherwise, the people they do not study. They do not compare. They do not analyze.” Established “cultural” traditions such as annual *lhatho* ceremonies are argued to represent a blind and mechanical repetition of rituals. Attachment to these practices,

according to Lama Paldan, creates a false sense of security from being protected by worldly gods and the rituals associated with them. Such attachments thwart critical inquiry into the Buddha's teachings. Only after Ladakhis abandon these cultural practices will they be able to focus exclusively on cultivating a more intellectually informed understanding of Buddhism.

Gods and Demons in the Public Sphere

Using terms such as the “ancient matrix” of shamanic traditions, and the “sacred cosmos,” scholars of Vajrayāna Buddhism have detailed how Buddhists imagine a universe in which humans and spirit beings live alongside one another, sharing locations in the natural geography such as mountains, rivers, trees, and soil (Mumford, 1989 and Samuel, 1993). Some of the new moral reform stances examined earlier critique beliefs and traditions associated with this imagined universe as blind faith, superstition, and bad Buddhism. However, for most Ladakhis the shared world of humans, spirit beings, and nature constitutes a delicate moral order in which Buddhist identity is connected to duties and obligations to maintain purity in this religious matrix. Relatedly, Mumford argues, “Personal identity is relational, defined in terms of connections between persons and the landmarks of local space. The sense of time in the individual is in harmony with cycles of nature” (Mumford, 1989: 16). For many Buddhists in Ladakh, the individual sense of identity is tied to their conceptions of landscape and time. The individual resides within a landscape inhabited by humans and classes of spirit beings that may be divine or demonic in nature. Ladakhis refer to these entities as gods or *lha* (*lha*) and demons or *dre* (*dre*). While modernity for some Buddhist leaders presents an imperative to become better Buddhists by abandoning purportedly inauthentic Buddhist traditions, such as the ritual propitiation of local gods, some ritual specialists argue that modern Buddhists neglect their moral duties to the local gods and goddesses. Further, this dereliction of duty causes numerous misfortunes such as diseases, environmental disasters, and demonic attacks. The authenticity of vernacular rituals, specialists further argue, is evinced both by the pragmatic consequences of these traditions and Buddhist tantric sources. It is the dialogue between these two different poles on the spectrum of moral ideology that continues to shape Buddhist identity.

Whereas the concern of the LBA and the reform leaders lies with creating a model Buddhist citizenry within the context of the Indian-state and a dignified Buddhist community in the eyes of international Buddhists,⁴ vernacular ritual specialists such as priests, oracles, and astrologers are concerned with the local landscape. Agriculture remains foundational to this local moral order. Agriculture is the traditional form of livelihood for most Ladakhis. A successful farming season depends on roles played by chthonic spirits. By appeasing the *lha* and warding off demons, Ladakhis hope to ensure a bountiful harvest, timely rainfall, and the protection of livestock. Humans and spirits are thus linked in a sacred ecology, the maintenance of which helps sustain agriculture. Ladakhis believe they face persistent pollution created over the passage of time. Throughout a given year,

⁴ On this last point of international Buddhist audiences, it is important to note that contemporary organizations such as the Mahabodhi Center and the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, tourist agencies, and others seek to attract international attention to Ladakh by offering training in Buddhist Studies to local and foreign audiences and by characterizing Ladakh as a bastion to learn about true Buddhism.

human pollution contaminates the sacred ecology and, thereby, offends and taints local gods and their shrines. This causes proliferation of demonic forces throughout the land. This in turn causes misfortunes, including illnesses, untimely death, loss of livestock, and a poor harvest. Through rituals, Buddhists seek to purify their individual bodies and broader landscape. These rituals tap into the protective and beneficial power of the gods and avert harm caused by demonic spirits, and they ensure the purity of individual bodies, local deities, and the natural landscape. This then yields fertility and favorable conditions for agricultural enterprises necessary for survival in Ladakh.

Before examining a few of these rituals, it is important to provide a glimpse of the architecture of the moral universe in which they operate. Gods, demons, and humans live together in a world constituted by three layers: (1) the upper realm of the gods (*steng lha*), (2) the lower realm of the *nāgas* (*'og klu*), and (3) the middle realm in which humans reside (*bar sam*). Different gods protect each of these three realms. Different chthonic spirits have domain over these respective tiers. All three of these realms are present in the local landscape.

This three-tiered cosmology is fragile, as locals believe that human transgressions and demonic beings threaten to pollute this order. Pollution in any one realm threatens all three tiers. The indigenous term for pollution is a *dip* (*sgrib*); this is a nebulous entity created by anything seen to disrupt order in society or in nature. Body odors, negligence of social responsibilities, contaminating water, failure to perform rituals on specified dates, the mixing of saliva and so forth showcase the diverse sources of pollution or *dip* (Huber, 1999: 16–17). For locals, purity rituals ensure that society and the cosmos maintain order and cleanliness; these rituals also preserve the world of the gods and prevent spirits from turning demonic.

The main ritual actors for purification rituals are lay priests or *lhardag* (*lha bdag*), who officiate a ritual of cleaning called *sang* (*bsangs*), involving the offering of scented materials while invoking the names of different gods and goddesses. This offering is among the most prevalent practices in the Tibetan cultural sphere, with significant social ramifications for affirming social bonds and hierarchies (Karmay, 1998: 405). Key to the performance of the *sang* ritual is the purificatory power attributed to smoke. When I asked why they performed the *sang*, the priest gave four general responses: (1) the purified scent serves as an atonement offering to ask for forgiveness for any pollution humans produced; (2) the smoke cleansed both the spirit and its physical abode of the *lha tho*; (3) because spirits are scent eaters (*dri za*) the fumigated smoke and the aromatic foods served as a feast for the deity; and (4) these practices served as payment for the services rendered by the god during the past year and a guarantee that the spirit would continue to look after locals. These responses underscore important beliefs pertaining to a local moral order. Humans, gods, and demons all suffer from disorderly conduct, yielding pollution. Humans have a moral obligation to purify the landscape through rituals. Further, gods and humans symbolically enter into a business relationship. In exchange for payment in the form of ritual services, spirits provide aid to humans. This is a moral order presenting a symbiotic relationship between Buddhists and local numina.

Ritual specialists argue, however, that because Ladakhis no longer have as much faith in the *lha-s* and because they no longer participate in rituals to the same extent that they did in the past, gods and goddesses are withdrawing their protective power and allowing demons and disasters to

spread. Onpo Rigzen Padma, who at age 86, is a lay Buddhist and the most senior astrologer residing in Leh city, declares:

In olden times, the deities looked directly at the people, because the people had faith in them. Because the people had faith and respected them, the deities always kept their eyes on the people. The gods, goddesses, and dharma protectors assembled in numbers as vast as the expanse of Mt. Meru. Now, because people are not paying respect to the gods, they do not watch over us like they once did. This is why we see more floods and natural disasters in Ladakh.

This lay astrologer views modern Ladakhis as lacking faith and being disrespectful of the *lha*-s. Attitudes and practices have shifted, and the deities have withdrawn their protective gaze from Ladakh with floods and natural disasters as proof of this. Here, the astrologer is likely alluding to the cloudburst that struck Leh district on August 6, 2010, resulting in flooding that killed hundreds of Ladakhis and caused widespread destruction of homes, public property, and religious structures. Many Ladakhis believe local spirit beings sent this cloudburst to punish humans for neglecting ritual duties and for polluting the abodes of chthonic spirits.

Other astrologers interviewed often also described demonic affliction and pollution as increasing in Ladakh because Ladakhis have become more jealous and competitive towards one another, and less reverential towards the spirits who watch over Ladakh. As the head astrologer from Basgo village describes the condition in Ladakh, “Many more demons are present... more [ghosts]... More problems exist because people do not believe in the gods... They think only of themselves.” In response to reform discourses challenging the necessity of vernacular rituals and favoring a more introspective Buddhism, astrologers and other ritual specialists in Ladakh point to adverse external conditions in society in order to advocate for a revival of ritual traditions and beliefs about local spirits.

Within Ladakh’s public sphere, Buddhist scholars often question the authority and authenticity of gods and goddesses and the ritual specialists serving them. Priests, astrologers, and oracles defend the authenticity of deity-based traditions by pointing to their efficacy. According to ritual specialists, when illness and disaster strike, Ladakhis have no recourse but to turn to local deities and rituals. Times of personal or collective misfortune prompt Ladakhis to seek the aid of local gods. As Lhardag Sonam Norphel, a lay priest from Basgo village describes, “Here, some people make fun and say, ‘Show me the *lha* in front of me...’ Yet when bad things happen, people who once ignored the gods, become eager to please them.” Lhardag Sonam Norphel made these comments after recalling that, one year, some villagers requested he perform a fumigation offer at the village protector’s *lhatho* after a visiting oracle pronounced the deity was upset with villagers for neglecting ritual obligations. Traditional systems of divination and healing are still in wide demand among Ladakhis, especially during times of collective hardship or when individuals suffer illness and misfortune. During such different times, those skeptical or even openly critical of beliefs in local gods and rituals might seek their services out of necessity.

Mocking those who disbelieve in local spirits, one astrologer from Leh said to me, “when people get sick due to gods and demons, regular doctors cannot help them... The work of the astrologer is the last resort. All other options have failed so they come to the astrologer.” In his view, no matter what degree of intellectual knowledge Ladakhis have of “real Buddhism,” they still live in a world where their bodies eventually become ill due to gods or demons. When a person suffers sickness that regular doctors fail to cure, the only recourse is to sponsor rituals. For ill patients, conceptual boundaries, religion/culture (*chos/shesrig*), or philosophy/ritual are not a primary concern. What matters most is the hope that the body will encounter what it requires for healing from any source capable of providing effective treatment. In short, the authenticity of the practice is evidenced by the perception that it works.

Reform perspectives maintain these vernacular ritual traditions only provide for needs of this lifetime, whereas as real Buddhist practices are meant to help one obtain higher goals, namely higher rebirth in the future life, liberation from cyclic existence, and obtaining Buddhahood for the benefit of others. Thus, some vernacular traditions, such as the propitiation of worldly gods and the exorcizing of demons, do not constitute Buddhism because they have neither been taught by the Buddha nor do their ends represent goals found in Buddhism. Angchuk Lhardag, the eldest member of Leh city’s *lhardag* family, disagrees; he argues that worldly deities and rituals associated with them fall under the Buddhist teachings on tantra:

These *lha*-s are part of Buddhism and practices associated with them will remain so long as Buddhism remains. When Buddha obtained enlightenment, he gave all of his teachings according to the needs of the people. For some of the more elementary level disciples, he taught the Hīnayāna vehicle. For his special disciples, he taught the tantric practices of Vajrayāna. He gave these teachings to disciples who had special capacities. These [*lhatho*-s] are connected to the teachings of Buddha. They are part of Buddhism because they are within the Vajrayāna ...When Guru Rinpoche came to Tibet, he subdued and tamed the spirits [like those which are housed in the *lhatho*-s] ... Those with tantric powers of perception can even now see the *lha*-s directly.

Here Angchuk Lhardag refers to the standard division of the Buddha’s teachings into two textual sources: the teachings contained in the *sūtras* and those teachings contained in the *tantras*. Ladakhis refer to these two categories using their Tibetan translations of *do* (*mdo*) and *gyud* (*rgyud*). Buddhists in Ladakh believe the Buddha directly taught the *sūtras* to all, but he only imparted his tantric teachings to a select few disciples. Angchuk Lhardag argues that *lhatho* traditions are part of tantric Buddhism. He points to the example of Padmasambhava, also called Guru Rinpoche. According to Tibetan traditions, Guru Rinpoche employed tantric Buddhist rituals to tame local spirits and transform them into oath-bound protectors of Buddhism. Some Ladakhis believe *lhatho* gods became protectors of Buddhists in Ladakh due to the power of Buddhist oath-binding rituals. These traditions of oath-binding affirm a moral vision of the Tibetan landscape as inherently demonic and in need of perpetual rituals to maintain harmony and allow Buddhism to flourish (See Dalton, 2011). From this

vantage point, these practices are thus not only authentically Buddhist, but required for the public good and the sustenance of Buddhist religion in Ladakh.

Moral Orders and Middle Ways

This article has thus far presented contrasting moral views of what makes Buddhism authentic or inauthentic in Ladakh. Within the public sphere, a Buddhism concerned with domestic reform and dialogue with international audiences—Tibetan Diaspora leaders, tourists, and foreign scholars—finds articulation, centered on the ideals of Buddhist intellectualism and model Buddhist citizenship within the Indian-nation state. Religious authenticity is legitimized through Buddhist scholastic practice and the citing of Buddhist scriptural authority. Bad Buddhism runs contrary to these ideals, often characterized as “blind faith” and superstition. On the other end of the dialogic spectrum, a localized vision of moral order is advanced; this order focuses on human relations with local spirit beings. Humans are morally obliged to perform rituals on time and engage in practices intended to purify the dwellings of chthonic gods. Authenticity in this moral framework draws on both the efficacy of ritual practices and the authority of Buddhist tantric discourses. Bad Buddhism is viewed in terms of modern-day neglect of ritual duties and humans polluting the abodes of spirit beings.

In relation to these moral frameworks, many Ladakhis place themselves in the proverbially Buddhist middle way. They attend public scholastic teachings on Buddhism, pay homage to religious texts, and will at least nominally acknowledge the importance of Buddhist intellectualism. They will also engage in ritual practices, seek the aid of traditional healers, and engage in practices to placate mundane spirits and ward off demonic entities. In general, Buddhists in Ladakh do not situate themselves on the extremes of this spectrum of moral views. Modern identity attempts to navigate, negotiate, and find a middle ground between different conceptions of moral order. The views of Konchog, a 19-year-old monk and college student I interviewed in 2013, articulate a Buddhist middle way between different moral obligations. He first emphasized the necessity of Buddhist intellectualism:

By studying Buddhist philosophy, one can become a real Buddhist. Many Buddhists have blind faith. Blind faith is not real faith. It is changeable. It can easily be lost. If we study Buddhist philosophy, then we know the qualities of Buddhism... and we can use this knowledge to develop our country and the rest of the world, but in terms of material and spiritual development.

Throughout the course of our interview, Konchog identifies as Buddhist on the three levels: an individual Buddhist practitioner, a Buddhist citizen of India, and a Buddhist residing in an increasingly global world. This structured recognition begins by his identification of more personal and inner benefits. Specifically, philosophical studies enable monks and nuns to become real Buddhists, because their faith becomes grounded in intellectual knowledge of Buddhist teachings. The study of philosophical texts enables him, in his view, to become a more morally well-rounded Buddhist in terms of his various levels of identity. He further added that Buddhist philosophy provides Buddhists with the intellectual and moral faculties to solve modern problems such as government

corruption, sexual assault, and economic inequality. Often throughout the interview, Konchog reflects on Buddhist moral subjectivity defined in the context of a broad global moral order, where individual Buddhists have an ethical responsibility as Indian citizens and members of a 21st-century globalized world.

Konchog's comments above reflect how Ladakhis, both lay and monastic, find themselves within a broader global framework in which they place their local identities in dialogue with broader international audiences. What are sources of the global self? Konchog, like other Buddhists in Ladakh, conceptualize and debate what it means to be an ethically engaged modern Buddhist through both local print media and through participation in dialogues on international media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. Further, major globally renowned Buddhist figures, especially the fourteenth Dalai Lama, visit the region and through large-scale public teachings promulgate visions of what it means to practice Buddhist tradition in the context of a 21st-century global society. Finally, Konchog, like many lay and monastic Buddhists, interacts regularly with Indian-domestic and foreign tourists eager to learn about Buddhism. These inquiries foster self-reflection on what it means to be Buddhist in relation to audiences outside their traditional social networks.

Yet, Konchog also emphasized why Buddhists must preserve and promote the ritualized moral order centered on local spirit beings:

We have to perform rituals in three main places: the monastery, the village, (*yul sa*) and domestic temples (*mchod khang*) in Ladakhi homes. We have many different rituals to perform, during different occasions, at these three locations: the monastery, the village, and the domestic temple. If we neglect to perform any one of these required rituals, then many problems will arise in the monastery, in the village, in the homes, and also in your own individual life. Just like, for example, if we do not perform a special ritual in the monastery at the right time, then we will not have timely rainfall for the crops and also infectious diseases will come into the village. These are the some of the harms (*gnod pa*) that come from neglecting to perform the required rituals.

Konchog would likely agree with José Cabezón's observation that "Not only does ritual fill Tibetan space, but it also pervades time" (Cabezón, 2010: 2). As Cabezón describes, Tibetan and Himalayan societies are replete with ritual objects, and ritual activity, moreover, increases during specific points of time such as days marked auspicious (*dus bzang*), festive dates in the Tibetan calendar, and days commemorating the hagiographies of holy beings such as the Buddha or Padmasambhava. Ladakhi ritual life parallels these broader trends. Since the historical development of the Buddhist sangha, monastic rituals in general, as Gregory Schopen demonstrates, have been shaped by the regulation of time: calendars, clocks, and liturgical dates for monastic liturgical practices and the appropriate times for laity to sponsor liturgical rituals (Schopen, 2004: 260–284).

Konchog's assessment of ritual in Ladakh articulates not just the temporal and spatial context of rituals, but he also maintains that time and space regulate rituals, and rituals regulate the conditions of time and space. In particular, he identifies three distinct zones for monastic ritual practice: the monastery (*gompa*), the village (*yul sa*), and the domestic altar (*mchod khang*) found in

private homes. Traditional Buddhist society in Ladakh is an interconnection of these three spaces. The family home is part of a village, producing the materials and resources required to support the monasteries. Monasteries in turn perform rituals in monastic temples, sacred spaces in the villages, and in household shrine-rooms; these rituals ensure the well-being of families and the village as a whole by diverting demonic influences by channeling the powers of tantric deities and local worldly gods.

The rituals performed in these three locations are also believed to purify the landscape and ensure a bountiful harvest. Furthermore, because each of these three spheres depends on the other, each must remain pure for the whole socio-religious complex to remain pure. Monks thus perform rituals at all three places. Often the performance of rituals is determined by what the liturgical calendar deems auspicious and efficacious. For Ladakhis, failure to sponsor or perform a required ritual at the right time and the right place leads to calamitous consequences, potentially threatening the purity and sanctity of all three spheres of Ladakhi Buddhist society: the monasteries, the villages, and the family homes. Conversely, if monks perform the rituals in these areas during specifically calculated and designated times, time and space harmonize and facilitate religious and material prosperity for monks and laity. While the local orientation of rituals contrasts with the national and global orientations of the reform discourses, both moral orders operate alongside each other in Ladakh, as Konchog's testimony demonstrates. Buddhist moral identity is forged within a spectrum of ethical ideals and moral imperatives.

Conclusion

Modernity prompts struggles over religious and moral identities in Ladakh. This case study reflects Charles Taylor's observation: "Modernity is a movement from one constellation of background understandings to another, which repositions the self in relation to other and the good" (Taylor, 1995: 25). Taylor maintains that modernity is best conceptualized as cultural and historical transformations producing new moral ideals along with identities and forms of social life built on these moral norms. The public sphere in Ladakh engenders new normative standards of good/authentic Buddhism in contrast to bad/inauthentic Buddhism. These stances reflect the region's history within the Indianation state and multi-layered moral dialogues shaping Buddhist identities. There is not, however, a clear-cut distinction between modern and traditional moral orders. Rather, different layers of ethical understanding enter into dialogues with one another, fostering multidimensional identities and layered perspectives on religious authenticity. As Buddhist citizens throughout the nation-states of Asia deal with the promises, prospects, and challenges of political modernity, moral dialogues in the public sphere are generating diverse and dynamic visions of identity, authority, and authenticity.

Corresponding author:

Rohit Singh
Visiting Assistant Professor
Department of Religious Studies

University of North Carolina at Greensboro
 rohitsingh5@gmail.com

References

- Aggarwal, Ravina. 2004. *Beyond Lines of Control: Performance and Politics on the Disputed Borders of Ladakh, India*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bertelsen, Kristoffer Brix. 1997. "Protestant Buddhism and Social Identification in Ladakh." *Archives De Sciences Sociales Des Religions* 42 (99): 129-51.
- Cabezón, José Ignacio. 2010. *Tibetan Ritual*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Dalton, Jacob Paul. 2011. *The Taming of the Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Dreyfus, Georges B. J. 2003. *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press.
- Huber, Toni. 1999. *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain: Popular Pilgrimage and Visionary Landscape in Southeast Tibet*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Karmay, Samten Gyaltsen. 1998. *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point.
- Lopez, Donald S. 1995. *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Mendelson, Michael and John P. Ferguson. 1975, *Sangha and State in Burma: A Study of Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Mills, Martin A. 2003. *Identity, Ritual and State in Tibetan Buddhism: The Foundations of Authority in Gelukpa Monasticism*. London: Routledge Curzon.
- Mumford, Stan. 1989. *Himalayan Dialogue: Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Namgyal, Morup. 2011. *The Origins of Lamdon School*. Leh, Ladakh: Morup Namgyal and Erik Koto.
- Obeyesekere, Gananath. 1972. "Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon." In *Two Wheels of Dhamma: Essays on the Theravada Tradition in Ceylon and Burma*, Bardwell L. Smith (ed.), Chambersburg: American Academy of Religion, *Studies in Religion*, (3): 43-63.
- Samuel, Geoffrey. 1993. *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Schopen, Gregory. 2004. *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters: Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Shakspo, Nawang Tsering. 2010. *A Cultural History of Ladakh*. New Delhi: Center for Research on Ladakh.
- Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1995. "Two Theories of Modernity." *The Hastings Center Report* 25 (2): 24-33.

- Van Beek, Martijn. 2001. "Beyond Identity Fetishism: 'Communal Conflict in Ladakh and the Limit of Autonomy.'" *Cultural Anthropology* 15 (4): 525-569.
- Veer, Peter van der. 2001. *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.