

“Life is Suffering”: Exile, Suffering, and Cure in Tibetan  
Narratives from Dharamsala

by

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## 0. INTRODUCTION

### **0.1 SUFFERING: A PRELIMINARY GLOSS**

Life is suffering. Ignorance is suffering. Physical pain is suffering. Mental strife is suffering. Separation is suffering. These statements lie on a flattened plane at first glance. Upon unpacking them, the first is recognized as the First Noble Truth in Buddhist doctrine which acknowledges that there is suffering in life due to interdependent co-origination, and the second identifies its root within that doctrine. Suffering as a synonym, corollary, or consequence of physical pain is a long-standing equation, and the growing conceptualization (and accompanying codification) of mental illness pulls it right along into this discussion. It seems a stretch to refer to a pulled muscle in one's leg as "suffering," but slightly more legitimate when referring to a chronic pain in that leg which resists treatment and results in a limp. If that leg were instead to be covered in pervasive burns, it could almost certainly be considered suffering. Yet a man who I spoke to in a hospital ward in Dharamsala whose legs were covered in blindingly white burns and blisters made no mention of his physical state when asked about what suffering was to him: suffering was not being able to afford to open his own business.

Suffering is emotional. It is practical. It is at turns a dull persistent throb and an incendiary burn. It is subjective, to an extent, but not a fully open category, at least if it is to be taken seriously. To be taken seriously, it should resist easy amelioration. It burns in immediacy, and festers long after the initial sting. To be taken seriously, suffering must be legitimized by the self, as well as the community. On a scaling typology that goes from internal to entirely external, suffering may be: a pathological

predisposition, an internal state, a circumstantial experience, or an external condition or stimulus. Suffering can be individual or collective. Suffering can be national, and as individuals we can bear the suffering of a nation.

Suffering can be any or all of the above things, and countless others, but what is often wielded is a flattened understanding of the term, at once vague and monolithic. Both the experience and expression of suffering are of interest. Given that the only way to access experience is through expression, this project's primary concern will be situated therein—what are the stories about suffering we tell ourselves, and what are the stories we tell others? What are the stories we tell about ourselves, what are the stories we tell about others? What are the stories we are willing to tell and those we are not?

## **0.2 CURE: PALLIATIVE FORCES**

My project began with interest in drawing on the field of Narrative Medicine in my work in Religious Studies. The field of narrative medicine is defined by Rita Charon in her book *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness* as “medicine practiced with the narrative competence to recognize, absorb, interpret, and be moved by the stories of illness.”<sup>1</sup> In *The Wounded Storyteller*, Arthur Frank writes, “Stories have to repair the damage that illness has done to the ill person's sense of where she is in life, and where she may be going. Stories are a way of redrawing maps and

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<sup>1</sup> Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine : Honoring the Stories of Illness* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, USA, 2006), vii, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/alltitles/docDetail.action?docID=10375053>.

finding new destinations.”<sup>2</sup> Frank aims to “shift the dominant cultural conception of illness away from passivity... to activity. The ill person who turns illness into story transforms fate into experience... Seriously ill people are wounded not just in body but in voice. They need to become storytellers in order to recover the voices that illness and its treatment often take away.” Charon and Frank are two prominent proponents of a growing field that formalizes the “healing through stories” methodology, extending the palliative reach of stories from the psychological to the somatic, and, in Charon’s case, developing a clinical practice out of it. Implicit in their views is the notion that narrative expression is both the release valve and proof-positive of alleviated suffering.

While revisiting Frank’s book on a Buddhist Studies program in India, I wondered if “life is suffering,” the First Noble Truth in Buddhism, was the ultimate foundation for a palliative narrative. Religion, after all, has often been perceived to do the work that Charon and Frank purport to achieve through Narrative Medicine—as Jonathan Z. Smith has noted, “no religion has survived that does not heal.”<sup>3</sup> Thinking further, I realized that Buddhism might instead dispense with the need for narrative healing altogether. If religion occasions stories we tell ourselves to mitigate suffering, what of a religion in which suffering is not circumvented but a predicate; does “Life is suffering” therefore stand against the common characterization that suffering is inarticulable by providing a baseline understanding through de facto acceptance? Suffering characterized by inexpressibility was brought to light in Elaine Scarry’s *The*

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 57, <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/description/uchi053/95012989.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, “Healing Cults,” *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Macropaedia, vol. 8 (Chicago, 1977), 685.

*Body In Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, in which the inability to articulate is an abscess in both personal and interpersonal relation to pain.<sup>4</sup> Does the default of “life is suffering” then provide a vocabulary for the inarticulable? To be sure, a single verbal articulation is no more practically applied than any other aphorism, but as an underlying fundamental it may undergird outlook and expression in significant ways. If one function of religion is to assuage the fear of death and suffering through stories we tell, is the acceptance of suffering that serves as the bedrock of Buddhism simply a different sort of narrative or does it circumvent narrative coping altogether? Charon writes, “That illness and suffering must be told is becoming clear.”<sup>5</sup> I sought to examine this claim.

Charon’s supposition that the narration of life events, particularly suffering, is second-nature and crucial to lived experience is not unreasonable—I recognize it as native to my personal process. Yet the neurotic, coherentist tendency to rake over the past and emplot one’s life narrative is a distinctly post-Enlightenment preoccupation of Western-inflected society, one that arguably goes a step further beyond the reflexes of memory and reflection. I argue that some of the fundamental concepts of Buddhism go against this grain—namely, karma and rebirth.

Scholar of Indo-Tibetan philosophy John Powers writes that the “Buddha taught that one’s present life is only one in a beginningless series of rebirths, and each of these is determined by one’s actions in past lives. These actions are

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<sup>4</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Charon, *Narrative Medicine : Honoring the Stories of Illness*, 65.

collectively referred to as ‘karma.’”<sup>6</sup> Powers goes on to compare karma to Newton’s Third Law of Motion, and the parallel holds in that they respectively posit causal laws of reality and nature. When I asked a high school student if Buddhism impacted his life, he answered somewhat apathetically, “Yeah, if I do something bad somewhere, I’m going to have bad karma. So I feel like I cannot kill anybody and things like that.” For those with self-castigating tendencies, could having an explanatory law at their disposal lead them to dwell on all the “bad things” which have led to “bad karma” just as the neurotic Westerner might? This might be the case if karma was not embedded within a broader framework of rebirth and cyclic existence.

I will now briefly explain this framework, The Four Noble Truths. That all cyclic existence is inevitably connected with suffering—this is what “life is suffering” refers to, rather than the fact that suffering is the essence of life. “Suffering” in Buddhist doctrine consists of three primary strands: the first encompasses all physical and mental strife including illness and loss; the second comes from the realization that all things in life are in a constant state of flux; and the third being the suffering endemic to cyclic existence. Failing to understand the impermanent nature of existence leads to desire and grasping at objects, people, or states to which one might find oneself attached—this is deemed “ignorance” in Buddhism, and considered to be the root cause of all the suffering in life, which must be overcome through a method consisting of Buddhist ethics and meditation, the specifics of which I will not go into here.<sup>7</sup> Trying tirelessly to pick apart the mechanics of karmic causation would therefore be counterproductive within this

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<sup>6</sup> John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, 1st U.S. ed (Ithaca, N.Y., USA: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), 54.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-59.

framework. Ideally, understanding karmic causation and transcending attachment will allow the Buddhist to understand why suffering might have happened to her, and then let it go.

Given the multiplicity of ways in which suffering can be conceived within Buddhist doctrine alone, if I was going to examine how suffering is experienced and expressed, I decided that a culturally Buddhist community would be an interesting place to start. Particularly with regard to the second type of suffering, the recognition that all things are in a state of flux, I thought to approach members of the Tibetan diaspora, some of whom were living in India. I chose to go to the Tibetan settlement of Dharamsala, which houses the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's place of residence; the Central Tibetan Authority, whose Department of Health includes a Torture Survivors Unit; and the headquarters of the center for Tibetan Medicine, Men Tsee Khang. Tibetan Medicine is closely tied to Buddhism, and its text, the *Gyushi*, or Four Tantras, states that suffering is unavoidable and present from the time of birth.<sup>8</sup> As a system of medicine, Tibetan Medicine presupposes the very suffering most others seek to eradicate, and I was interested in how it shapes health-seeking behavior and conceptions of suffering amongst the community.

### **0.3 DHARAMSALA**

I set foot in McLeod Ganj, or Upper Dharamsala, a Himalayan mountain town in India, after emerging from ten weeks of living in a monastery in Bodh Gaya. Upon our arrival at nine in the morning, my friends and I down celebratory red wine with

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<sup>8</sup> Audrey Prost, *Precious Pills: Medicine and Social Change among Tibetan Refugees in India*, Epistemologies of Healing, v. 2 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 88.

our *tsampa*, porridge made of barley flour that is a staple of Tibetan cuisine and one of the emblems of their culture. The ramshackle stores stocked with imported alcohol announce one thing: Toto, we're not in Bihar anymore. Strongly suggestive of this, too, is the demographic of the town, a mix of Tibetans, predominantly Western tourists, and Indian workers, most of whom I later learnt were Kashmiri or Bihari. My second time in Dharamsala was during the summer months, when Indian tourists from Punjab were also a major presence in the town. Dharamsala is distinct from other Tibetan settlements which are often more self-contained, such as Bylakuppe in the south and Ladakh in the Jamu and Kashmir region, for its strong international presence as well as seemingly greater opportunities for interacting with Indian nationals. This, Tashi, a manager of a youth vocational training center who grew up in a Tibetan settlement in the South, tells me, dilutes Dharamsala's "Tibetanness." He gripes about the noise pollution, gesturing towards the street where cars driven by Punjabi visitors and tourist vans are honking, undeterred by the fact that perpetual bottlenecks are a way of life in Dharamsala during the summer months. I ask what "Tibetanness" means to him. "It is not possible to say in English," he replies.

For most anyone else, whether or not they have spent the last months of their life in the dust-addled flatlands of Bihar, Dharamsala is the very picture of mountainous idyll. Dotted with multicolored rooftops and overlooking lush forests, a word that comes to mind in describing Dharamsala is "paradise"—Shangri-La, with internet cafes. Tsering Namgyal, a well-known Tibetan novelist and journalist who resides in Taiwan, featured Dharamsala as the subject of his first book, *Little Lhasa*.<sup>9</sup> He writes:

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<sup>9</sup> "Little Lhasa" is a common colloquial moniker for Dharamsala, and Lhasa is the capital of the Tibetan Autonomous Region.

Dharamsala has become the beating heart of exiled Tibet. If you stand long enough in McLeod Ganj the whole world, it seems, would eventually pass by you. High-profile visitors have included the Duke of Gloucester and the Duchess of York, the first ladies of France and Peru, supermodel Christy Turlington, actors Pierce Brosnan, Richard Gere, Steven Seagal, Goldie Hawn, Jet Lee, Harrison Ford, Sunil Dutt, not to mention the scores of writers and scientists who come to town.

Notwithstanding the glamor of the tourists and celebrity visitors, the place continues to be the capital of Tibetan dislocation. This is where they have seen their imaginary and real homes merge subconsciously to give birth to an entirely unique entity called “Exiled Tibet” just as writers see their vivid imagination intersect with hard facts to produce words of creative nonfiction.<sup>10</sup>

Tsering Namgyal’s depiction points out several crucial aspects of life in Dharamsala, most significantly that it bears examination beyond its tourist trappings. By referring to it as “the beating heart of exiled Tibet” and “the capital of Tibetan dislocation”, this recentering of notions of the occupied and therefore “imaginary home[land]” onto the Dharamsala–“Little Lhasa”–not only positions Dharamsala as a repository of memory and projection but creates a physical and conceptual amalgamation of locative Tibetan identity. “Exile Tibet”, a term I will refer to throughout this paper, carries with it the associations of occupied Tibet held by both Tibetans and non-Tibetans, but is also its own place and phenomenon.

Travellers flock to Dharamsala for its picturesque location, which receives bonus points for being located in India, the land of exotic Eastern spirituality. Spiritual seekers range from those whose general interest in Eastern religion often coincides with a quest for (often decorative) prayer flags, to devout practitioners of

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<sup>10</sup> Tsering Namgyal, *Little Lhasa: Reflections on Exiled Tibet* (Mumbai: Indus Source Books, 2006), 59.

Tibetan Buddhism who have come in search of particular monastics and spiritual teachers living in the area. Tibetan is characterized as the school of Buddhism in which “the Tibetan world of gods, demons, and men, the Mahāyāna Buddhist orientation to universal enlightenment, and the ritual technologies of Tantric esotericism are tightly interwoven.”<sup>11</sup> It is known in particular for the aspects of ritualism and esotericism, as well as the heightened importance of the guru-disciple dynamic in said rituals, which contribute to its appeal in the West.

In his *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, John Powers paints a picture of how a Tibetan Buddhist orientation and practice is typically conceived (emphasis mine):

At dawn in Dharmasala, as the sun rises over the mountains, a number of people are already awake and walking on the path around the residence of the Dalai Lama...[They] often chant the mantra of Avalokitesvara<sup>12</sup>—om mani padme hu—a practice that pays tribute to the **Dalai Lama as an incarnation of Avalokitesvara** and focuses their minds on the goal of eventually attaining his level of **wisdom and compassion**, the two qualities that buddhas employ.... The development of such pure compassion in the **ordinary world of ignorance, desire, and hatred** is said to be as rare as a lotus growing up from the bottom of a swamp and opening its petals to reveal a perfect jewel in the middle.... As they walk, they try to keep this symbolism in mind, because it is thought that the more one familiarizes oneself with something the more natural it becomes, and one comes more and more to think and act accordingly. This is a basic idea underlying the system of **tantric meditation, which is considered by Tibetans to be the most effective means for attaining buddhahood**. In this system, one tries to transform one’s mind through mediation and through surrounding oneself with symbols that resonate with one’s religious goals, that draw the mind toward thoughts of compassion, wisdom [and so on.] The people on the path around the Dalai Lama’s residence are **making religious merit that is expected to pay dividends in the future, but on a deeper level they are trying to reorient**

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew T. Kapstein, *Tibetan Buddhism A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2013), 11.

<sup>12</sup> The buddha of compassion, and patron deity of Tibet

**their minds in the direction of greater and more spontaneous compassion...**<sup>13</sup>

This brief but helpful glimpse of Tibetan Buddhism nonetheless fails to sufficiently introduce how Tibetans who identify as Buddhists in Dharamsala navigate practice, philosophy, and the lived experience of religion. Firstly, how Tibetans living in Dharamsala relate to religion and Buddhism interacts with, but must be distinguished from, how spirituality is approached by those passing through. Over *momos* (dumplings) at my favorite food stall primarily patronized by Tibetan locals, I fell into conversation with two men at the adjacent table who asked me about whether I had come to Dharamsala because of my interest in Buddhism. “So many people who come here know so much more about Buddhism than us Tibetans. For me, Buddhism is just loving-kindness and compassion, that’s all,” he said, shrugging. On another occasion, a young Tibetan man told me that he preferred the teachings of the Zen Buddhist teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh<sup>14</sup> to Tibetan Buddhism, which he found alienating in its esotericism. Finally, when having lunch with my first translator and her health care worker friend, I asked the friend about her religious affiliation. “I’m a Buddhist, of course. All Tibetans are Buddhists.” “I’m not,” my translator replied stoutly.

“All Tibetans are Buddhists” was a refrain I heard uttered throughout the course of my fieldwork by both Tibetans and non-Tibetans. On a volunteer fieldtrip with preschoolers to the Dalai Lama’s complex, I observed as the children

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<sup>13</sup> Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, 12-16.

<sup>14</sup> Vietnamese monk and author who coined the term Engaged Buddhism and who has gained a considerable following in the West

approached prostration boards and cushions with as much familiarity as they would playground equipment, and began to prostrate, seemingly from muscle memory. Yet as seen from the range of responses above, though many Tibetans identify as Buddhist, being Buddhist meant different things to the people that I met. In asking how Buddhism affects how Tibetans in Dharamsala navigate suffering, beyond examining conceptions of suffering, I thus sought to tease out the multiplicity of ways in which they relate to Buddhism.

In order to do so, I conducted life history interviews at a Western biomedical Hospital, Delek Hospital, and at the Men Tsee Khang, the Tibetan Medical institute. I also sat in on clinic observation sessions at the latter. I approached the sick about suffering, challenges, change, hopes, and fears. I asked about religious practice, and to see if they volunteered information about how these might aid in the alleviation of fear or challenges. I asked if anyone had ever asked about their story and if they found any value in the process. I then extended the same sets of questions to ex-political prisoners, residents of an eldercare facility, and finally people I met around Dharamsala, many of whom were well-educated young activists who worked for the CTA or Students for a Free Tibet. Next, I spoke to people who professionally produced narratives, literary and medical, respectively: writers who primarily worked in English living in Dharamsala, and doctors at the Men Tsee Khang and Delek Hospital. I asked them questions specifically about how they approached elements of narrative, pain, and healing. Because it is impossible to speculate about lived experience and intent, such as whether representations of self are self-conscious or not, data will be interpreted at the level of representation rather than inaccessible

reality. Finally, finding that the evolving institutional narrative of Tibetan Medicine involved maneuvering conceptions of suffering and legitimacy, I conducted in-depth studies on specific medical concepts in the *Gyuishi* with various doctors at the Men Tsee Khang to see tease out approaches and change.

#### **0.4 CONDITIONS IN EXILE**

In addition to “All Tibetans are Buddhist,” a second and, I suspect related, refrain I heard was “All Tibetans are Peaceful.” If the British are attributed the stiff upper lip, the Tibetans might be most closely associated with a sunnily resilient smile,<sup>15</sup> oft asserted in the face of conditions in exile.

In *Precious Pills: Medicine and Social Change among Tibetan Refugees in India*, an ethnography on the social and medical worlds of Dharamsala in which she examines how exile has changed Tibetan medical practices, Audrey Prost writes:

Tibetan exiles’ stories are entangled with tales of medical neglect and discrimination. Tibetan political prisoners suffer extreme abuse in Chinese prisons: beatings, electric shocks, and multiple forms of torture are commonly reported by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International....When they arrive in Dharamsala, refugees are usually accommodated in the reception centre financed by the Dalai Lama’s relief fund. This lasts for about fifteen days on average. During this crucial period, a nurse or doctor from the biomedical hospital gives new refugees an initial health check. A government official takes down their details and the story of their escape. Their basic needs are ‘assessed’ and an audience with the Dalai Lama is scheduled before they are relocated to educational facilities or to other Indian settlements. The refugees are given a ‘starting fund’ and second-hand clothes.

Although Tibetans benefit from the protection of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees upon arrival in Nepal, in practice, the abuse of Tibetans crossing the border into exile is widespread and commonly reported by human rights agencies in Kathmandu and Dharamsala. In general, the

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<sup>15</sup> Tenzin Tsundue, “My Tibetanness,” *Writings of Tenzin Tsundue*, <http://www.tenzintsendue.com/poems/my-tibetanness/>.  
“Serene monks and bubbly traditionalists.”

health of newcomers upon arrival in India is poor. Many Tibetans from rural regions of Kham and Amdo do not have access to primary care, and are consequently not vaccinated for diseases such as TB, polio, or typhoid until their arrival in [exile]...<sup>16</sup>

When I asked about the rehabilitation of ex-political prisoners who had recently come into exile, an administrator for the Torture Survivors Program at the Department of Health stated matter-of-factly, “[The torture survivors] do not remain victims for a long while. We do not see a lot of mental health problems amongst the political prisoners.” When I asked why this was so, she shrugged, “We Tibetans are a peaceful people.” While conversations as well as press reports and protest pamphlets produced in Dharamsala consistently reflect atrocities and human rights violations perpetrated in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China (Tibetan Autonomous Region), they are matched by a commitment to maintaining that Tibetans emerge emotionally unscathed by trauma. Suffering, the externally induced stimulus, may have been inflicted through torture in Chinese prisons, but suffering, the ongoing state, is one Tibetans are impervious to in exile.

I met a Tibetan man in his late twenties passing through Dharamsala on his way to the Kalachakra ceremony in Ladakh. He had sought political asylum when he went to college in the US and was in the process of getting his US citizenship, and filled me in on the legal aspects of living in exile:

Living as a Tibetan in India, I think is different for different people. Some Tibetans have proper legal status. These days, there’s a change in Indian regulation that Tibetans born after some time can apply for Indian citizenship. In that case, that would be different. Those that recently came from Tibet who don’t have proper document will have more tough time. Indian government has been supportive of Tibetan unlike any other nations. So as you see all

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<sup>16</sup> Prost, *Precious Pills: Medicine and Social Change among Tibetan Refugees in India*, 36-38.

these houses, settlements, schools... because of India, I think it's been good so far. But there are large number of Tibetans who don't have Indian passports, more than 90% who don't have Tibetan passport... but who have R.C., Registration Certificate. They have to renew it every year. The status of Tibetan in India is unique because they not considered as refugees, as per UN definition. And they are not Indian as well. Tibetan in India have very special legal status. Tibetan who don't have Indian passports cannot apply for government job in India or go to universities. Some universities give Tibetans scholarships but few. In McLeod Ganj, If you want to buy a land, you must have documents. It is hard for a Tibetan because in India you can own or find a place to rent, so Tibetan can do it..." He gestures under the table.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout most of my conversations, I found that the expression of personal anxiety was almost always linked to undefined legal status in exile and inability to legally register businesses or finance them, though a change in legislation in 2014<sup>18</sup> is moving towards allowing more possibility for the latter. Claudia Artiles notes, "The rights and services afforded to Tibetans arriving after the 1970s are scarce and indicative of a changing Indian policy—arguably in an effort to preserve Sino-Indian relations."<sup>19</sup> A political science undergraduate at a college in Delhi who was working at the Central Tibetan Authority on a summer internship said, "I once took a test

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<sup>17</sup> Tenzin Nyandak, personal communication, June 16, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> "Now, Tibetans-in-Exile Can Start Enterprises in India," *Mid-Day*, <http://www.mid-day.com/articles/now-tibetans-in-exile-can-start-enterprises-in-india/15704159>.

<sup>19</sup> Artiles further notes, "In 1963, the Indian government ceased to legally recognize arriving Tibetans as refugees. Consequently, those arriving after 1979 (including some arriving in the late 1960s) have had greater difficulty acquiring RCs. The newer process to acquire an RC is arduous and particularly concerning because employment, residency rights, and international travel are contingent upon this document. In addition, while the Indian government provided land to the original refugee community, newer arrivals have not been as fortunate.... As a consequence of the Indian government's lack of assistance, the CTA (with substantial assistance from NGOs) has had to shoulder the burden of providing for these refugees. Although the CTA is able to cover basic needs, they are overwhelmed and are unable to effectively address the broader social welfare of this burgeoning community." (W.F. Adams, "Tibetan Refugees in India: Integration Opportunities Through Development of Social, Cultural and Spiritual Traditions." *Community Development Journal* 40 no. 2 (2005) : 216-219., cited in Claudia Artiles, "Tibetan Refugees' Rights and Services in India," *Minority Rights, Human Rights and Human Welfare Journal*, 2011)

where by far the hardest thing on it was filling in the particulars at the top. They asked for citizenship. I wrote Tibetan, then erased it because legally I was not. I wrote Indian, then erased that too. In the end I think I left it blank.”<sup>20</sup> Dhardon Sharling, a vocal young woman who is the youngest member of parliament in the Central Tibetan Authority cabinet and a frequent spokesperson for Tibet at international forums on human rights, also put it strikingly: “[The Indian] government could change policy and we could be somebody else.”<sup>21</sup> Instability of legal status or citizenship and tenure in places of residence make the entity of “Exile Tibet” transient in dynamic as well as nature—it is also a conceptual placeholder for the eventual reconciliation of real and imagined Tibet. The greatest embrace of Exile Tibet also ensures its retirement: using the state of exile to agitate for freedom of the occupied homeland.

## **0.5 THE TIBETAN INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT**

China invaded Tibet in 1950. Its occupation has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Tibetans and the imprisonment and torture of thousands more. After a failed uprising against Chinese rule in 1959, Tibet’s political and spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, fled into exile in India followed by tens of thousands of Tibetans. Inside its borders and across the world, Tibetans have never stopped believing Tibet is a nation. Since 1959, they have continued to oppose and resist China's rule and China has responded with intense repression.<sup>22</sup>

The above was taken from the website of the Free Tibet Campaign, one of the most prominent organizations within the Tibet support movement. The

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<sup>20</sup> Ugyan Choedup, personal communication, June 28, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Dhardon Sharling, personal communication, July 1, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Free Tibet, “Introduction to Tibet,” <http://freetibet.org/about/introduction-to-tibet>.

movement now consists of more than three hundred organizations on five continents, most heavily concentrated in Western Europe and North America beyond Tibetan settlements in India. A majority of these were established in the late 1980s as a response to a period of uprising and crackdowns in Tibet which coincided with the country being opened up to foreign tourists. Many of these organizations are involved in a hybrid of campaigning and relief work, with about a hundred and fifty focused solely on political campaigning to bring about Tibetan independence.<sup>23</sup>

Organizations in Dharamsala are staffed with an equal mix of Tibetan and Indian employees, and have a volunteer base made up of both long and short-term tourists. In equal measure with spiritual seekers, visitors and volunteers interested in the Tibetan cause for freedom form a large part of the social landscape of Dharamsala. Advocates for Tibetan independence fall broadly into two camps: those who stand for a free and independent Tibet as their aspiration to end China's occupation of Tibet, and the Central Tibetan Authority's official position of treading a Middle Way path of achieving "genuine autonomy for all Tibetans living in the three traditional provinces of Tibet within the framework of the People's Republic of China."<sup>24</sup> In the context of this paper, the term "Tibetan independence" will cover both approaches unless otherwise specified. Almost every person I talked to in my interviews brought up freedom for Tibet, whether or not this was couched as a political stance or a personal wish, and whether or not she was

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<sup>23</sup> Alison Reynolds, "Support for Tibet Worldwide," in *Exile as Challenge: The Tibetan Diaspora*, Hubertus von Welck and Dagmar Bernstorff, eds., (Hyderabad, India: Orient Longman, 2004), 447-449.

<sup>24</sup> Tenzin Gyatso, "His Holiness's Middle Way Approach for Resolving the Issue of Tibet," *His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama of Tibet*, <http://www.dalailama.com/messages/middle-way-approach>

pursuing a career as an activist. The appeal for Tibetan independence therefore presents itself in the everyday social exchange of Dharamsala, from being dropped into conversation to the ubiquitous “Free Tibet” logos emblazoned on countless forms of paraphernalia, as well as on the level of global discourse.

## 0.6 STORIES OF EXILE

During our conversation at his office, the novelist, former spokesperson for the Tibetan Government in Exile, and current director of the Tibet Policy Institute, Thubten Samphel, reflected:

Half of Tibet was composed of nomad and the other half, farmers. The only source of entertainment during the dark, long nights in the plateau is to tell stories. I believe it plays a significant role in terms of an individual in understanding his surrounding, landscape, origin, inner source of cultural life. Here, stories, any short stories has become even more important. That is because of our experience in China. Our struggle is non-violence. The only way we can get international immunity is to tell our stories. Many of the stories told took the form of autobiographies—His Holiness came up with “My Land and My People”<sup>25</sup> in early 1960s. A lot of lamas told their stories about life in old Tibet, of how their China came and the great escape—experience in India. This art of telling stories had been caught on by the younger generation of Tibet. They have not seen Tibet but born in India, educated in exile and through listening to their parents, they form a very distinct idea of what Tibet is or what it used to be. As far as I know, stories, this is our way of communicating to the world of Tibet, ourselves and cultures.<sup>26</sup>

Samphel describes a strong oral tradition that fosters camaraderie and collective survival of a tumultuous past and present, and perhaps more interestingly, expresses the community’s vested interest in channeling these stories towards

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<sup>25</sup> The Dalai Lama, *My Land and My People: The Original Autobiography of His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet*, Reprint edition (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> Thubten Samphel, personal communication, 11 July, 2014.

international recognition as leverage for the Tibetan cause for freedom from Chinese occupation. Samphel speaks of “stories,” but in fact what has purchase in his view is a singular “story” of a monolithic “world of Tibet,” as suggested from his notion of younger generations taking up the “art” of paying forward a story of a Tibet they have no direct access to. As Axel Kristian Stroem notes, “Knowledge of the homeland among the second generation exiles is based on the stories of their elders or sometimes on more formal learning in institutionalized settings.”<sup>27</sup> This passing on of lineage is bodily enacted in the final act of his novel, *Falling Through The Roof*, in which the protagonist’s friend, a Buddhism-bashing revolutionary, turns out to be the reincarnation of an elusive lama who taught on the history of Tibet, a rehabilitation and homecoming for the rebel youth and an assimilation of young activism and old Tibetan lore.<sup>28</sup> Holding on one hand the notion of an oral tradition of storytelling amongst the community, and on the other, a globally-oriented construction of a Tibetan narrative, I question if they have anything in common, particularly with regard to how they approach suffering.

In *Little Lhasa*, Tsering Namgyal notes in a chapter on Indian diasporic writings as a precursor to Tibetan literature:

Exile is the mother of most writers. The immigrant experience, the anxiety of dislocation, the agony of being out of place, provides a fertile breeding ground for writers and artists. It is in this land of expatriation, far away from the comforts of familiarity of the homeland, that one is forced to come to terms with the self. The Tibetan exile is even more thought-provoking. Writings on Tibet could fill a modest library: almost every month books are written,

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<sup>27</sup>Axel Kristian Stroem, “Between Tibet and the West: On Traditionality, Modernity and the Development of Monastic Institutions in the Tibetan Diaspora.” Paper presented at *Panel of the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies*, Graz, Austria, 1995.

<sup>28</sup> Thubten Samphel, *Falling Through the Roof* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2009).

catalogues published, and royalties earned. Not much is, however, written on the Tibetan exile by the Tibetans themselves.<sup>29</sup>

Tsering Namgyal's thoughts on a writerly predisposition towards disenfranchisement are significant to my analysis on two counts. First, he rightly notes that much writing on Tibet has been written from external rather than internal perspectives, though several of my interviewees tell me that this is all set to change with the rise of a generation of educated Tibetans who are poised to become scholars and writers of their own story. Second, and on a note to be filed away for further inspection perhaps, apart from those working in lyric or confessional poetry, scarcely any of the Tibetan writers in exile writing in English demonstrably capitalized on this "agony" in their work in terms of emotive outpouring.

The airing of grievances is arguably more endemic to certain cultures than others, and was explored in a conference at Princeton University in 2013 on "Complaints: Cultures of Grievance in Eastern Europe and Eurasia."<sup>30</sup> A case for an opposite generic convention can be made of the Tibetan culture of forbearance and non-violent struggle which emerges both in everyday exchanges and its literary tradition. In both cases, a national and collective identity is scripted, self-consciously or not, and often extends to expressions of selfhood. To wit, over the din of the tourist-packed Mandala Cafe, I asked Tenzin Tselha, the grassroots director for Students for a Free Tibet, what her greatest challenge in life was. She said, "To free Tibet, I guess." Where others might have cited a personal challenge, Tenzin Tselha's

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<sup>29</sup> Tsering Namgyal, *Little Lhasa*, 59.

<sup>30</sup> "Complaints: Cultures of Grievance in Eastern Europe and Eurasia", Conference held at Princeton University from March 8-9, 2013, <https://culturesofgrievance.wordpress.com/>.

is national. Consistent with my other interviews, I found that expressions of personal concerns were often of a practical nature, and that emotion only bled through when yearning for the homeland. In addition to a paucity of personal histrionics and neuroses, there was a notable lack of angst or complaint over physical pain. It seems that there is indeed a suffering that “must be told”, as Charon says, but it is that of the nation rather than the individual. My central exploration therefore focuses on the deferral of personal suffering in narratives of Tibetans living in Dharamsala. I use the term “defer” in order to pose the question of whether they will manifest in due time, as opposed to “deflect,” in which suffering ricochets off into the distance—I will continue to tend to the temporal dimensions of my argument throughout.

In Chapter 1, I begin with an observation of the phenomenon of distancing from mythology and spirit paralleled by the Tibetan Medicine, Buddhist, and literary communities in Dharamsala. This process of conscious demythologization of Tibetan culture arises in part as a reaction to foreign perceptions of Tibetan identity. This is in tension with the fact that the Tibetan independence movement is reliant on foreign support and perception, and the resulting necessity to create an appeal public-facing identity. I discuss how this necessity is met in contemporary Dharamsala society.

I then turn to presentations and constructions of selfhood in written narratives and oral interviews in Chapter 2. Foreign interest in the cause for Tibetan independence and Tibetan Buddhism, as well as the physical presence of an international community in Dharamsala, has produced an expectation of Tibetan identity centered around the twin pillars of “All Tibetans are Buddhist” and “All Tibetans are Peaceful.” This impacts the way Tibetans construct identity and produce

narratives about themselves. In particular, I focus on a construction of selfhood that defers personal suffering in favor of emphasizing the suffering of Tibet. In my next section, I reflect on the production of testimony in exile and how it relates to notions of posterity and memory, and look specifically at protest pamphlets as a genre of narrative in order to examine how portrayals of the self and of others are intertwined. Of note, in particular, is the genre convention of deferring personal suffering while instead attesting to the suffering of others.

In Chapter 3, I turn to examine two ways in which suffering is mediated. First, I observe the conflation of the individual and the collective in how people talk about suffering. I explore the concept of “collective karma” and how it relates to personal agency over suffering. By conceptualizing of suffering as collective, personal suffering gets deferred in ways that can be helpful or troubling. In 3.2, exploring another mediation, I noted the conception of lands as suffering or causes of suffering. I focus on the portrayal of the Tibetan Autonomous Region as suffering under Chinese desecration, and then discuss the notion of Exile Tibet as pathogenic.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I posit that deferrals of suffering in the narratives I collected have expiration dates: the desired end to living in a state of exile, and the greatly feared end of the fourteenth Dalai Lama’s life. Firstly, suffering may be borne in exile up to a point, but only if the payoff of eventual return to the homeland holds and the state of exile is made redundant. In order to keep suffering at bay, life in Exile Tibet necessarily exists in a state of eternal transience. The very instability that is decried as the greatest challenge of living in exile is therefore the only thing that makes it bearable.

Most of all, what many say makes life in Dharamsala worthwhile is their proximity to Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama. This response is practical in addition to emotional, as many attribute to their being granted refugeehood in India to the universal goodwill the fourteenth Dalai Lama's political savvy and cult personality have accrued. If he plans to reincarnate, the Tibetan nation might be persuaded to embrace a new religious and national symbol, but a cult of personality cannot quite be passed on through spiritual lineage. Worse, he might not, for reasons suggested here: "[Chinese Communist] Party functionaries were incensed by the exiled Dalai Lama's recent speculation that he might end his spiritual lineage and not reincarnate. That would confound the Chinese government's plans to engineer a succession that would produce a putative 15th Dalai Lama who accepts China's presence and policies in Tibet."<sup>31</sup> Circumventing such plans by China might be a wise tactic, but means that the people of Exile Tibet face the ever-approaching expiration of their central source of comfort and security. The journalist Mark Jacobson, who profiled the Dalai Lama, highlights an interesting point of tension: "On one hand, acceptance of death is at the very core of Buddhist teaching and His Holiness' own psychic and historical being. Yet in his unique niche as the spiritual and temporal leader—the popular face of a nation that few current maps acknowledge as existing—his death would be...‘an absolute disaster’."<sup>32</sup> Leading up to my conclusion, I ponder what happens when deferrals of suffering expire.

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<sup>31</sup> Chris Buckley, "China's Tensions With Dalai Lama Spill Into the Afterlife," *The New York Times*, March 11, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/12/world/asia/chinas-tensions-with-dalai-lama-spill-into-the-afterlife.html>

<sup>32</sup> Mark Jacobson, *Teenage Hipster in the Modern World: From the Birth of Punk to the Land of Bush: Thirty Years of Millennial Journalism*, 1st ed (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 185.

## 1. MOVEMENTS IN MODERNITY: DE/REMYTHOLOGIZATIONS

I begin by observing a parallel distancing from mythology and spirit made by the Tibetan medical and literary communities in Dharamsala. This move is characteristic of one made in modernity, a term which will be used here in accordance with the definition provided in *Mapping the Modern in Tibet* by preeminent Tibetologist Janet Gyatso (emphasis mine):

**Modern” refers to what is relatively new, as compared to what is considered traditional or antiquated; ‘modernization’ refers to reforms and transformations meant to facilitate social and technological progress; and ‘modernity’ refers to the larger reified conception of a state of affairs in which modern practices, technologies, or ideas hold sway. Whereas in Western theory ‘modernity’ often references a huge interconnected set of developments—including scientific innovation, the modernization of industry and technology, of rapid urbanization, the expansion of capitalism, the development of the nation state, and all the cultural changes connected to the Enlightenment especially in religion, forms of individualism, and representations rationality—in the following the **discussion will center on intellectual, cultural, and political dimensions of this larger phenomenon, as they pertain to moments in Tibetan history.****

As much as modernity studies can benefit the academic historiography of Tibet, it also behooves us to ask what the study of modern Tibetan history might offer back to those intellectual circles where the question of “alternative”, or “multiple” modernities is subject to rigorous reflection (and where ‘modernity’ and related terms are indeed minutely defined). That contribution would come not only from whatever might be distinctive about the Tibetan case historically. It would also **issue out of the special ways that Tibet has been imagined—even mythologized—in both popular and academic discourse, where the valuation of preserving “tradition” has become as charged as have the value of both “modernity” and “modernization” in other contexts....**

To be sure, any comprehensive consideration of Tibetan modernities as these might be detectable in the pre-1949 period would have to consider the connection between the representations of literature and religion, and the political, economic, and technological conditions in which they are embedded. But even on the evidence of representations alone, we can identify ways that, several centuries prior to the Tibetan capitulation to the People’s Liberation Army in the mid-twentieth century, Tibetan society shows a discernible set of

traces of a modern episteme. That these can be detected over approximately the same span of time that the rest of the world saw a similar development dawning—that is, for more than two hundred years prior to the tumultuous events of the mid-twentieth century—raises questions for the historian. **To what degree do such traces represent what might be construed as foreign influence? To what degree do they build on changes that we find already at work in Tibetan cultural contexts? And what do they tell us about the variety of conditions and ways in which formations of modernity unfold?**<sup>33</sup>

Gyatso's remarks on the formation of Tibetan modernities may be applied here to developments in the communities I interacted with in Dharamsala. In this section, I draw a parallel between the efforts of the medical and literary communities of Dharamsala to distance themselves from the notion of a mythical Tibet which evokes the supernatural. I seek to contextualize these moves within modernity, while also demonstrating that the dismantling of one kind of myth is in the service of dialectically producing a new kind of story, a different way of construing the perception of a culture or an institution. Attending to the question of how much of these movements are motivated from changes within the Tibetan community and how much of an eye is being kept on a foreign presence, I look to attempts of the Tibetan medical community's attempt to present itself as a system of healing that is compatible and helpful to communities beyond Tibetan ones. I ask, too, who Tibetan writers in Dharamsala working primarily in English are writing for.

Literature in the Tibetan language has declined in production in exile, given the erosion of their mother tongue in diaspora where less than 140,000 Tibetans live

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<sup>33</sup> Janet Gyatso, "Introduction—Moments of Tibetan Modernity: Methods and Assumption," in *Mapping the Modern in Tibet [PIATS 2006: Proceedings of the Eleventh Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies. Königswinter 2006]*, ed. Gray Tuttle (Andiaast: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, 2001), 4.

scattered in different locations in India, and literacy in Tibetan is becoming secondary to learning English. Many of the prominent writers in exile are educated in English-language programs in India and the United States.

When I mentioned to the group of Tibetans in their twenties, whose English conversation hour I was volunteering at, that I was going to be interviewing the noted poet and activist Tenzin Tsundue, none of them had ever heard of him and scribbled his name down in their notebooks to look him up. In a profile by the New York Times, Tenzin Tsundue was hailed as “the new and most visible face, after the Dalai Lama, of the Tibetan exile community.”<sup>34</sup> I also interviewed a young activist who had a Masters degree in English Literature from a university in Delhi, and began by asking her about some of her favorite writers, most of whom she cited from the Western canon. When I asked if she had any interest in Tibetan literature, she replied that she had none, nor much familiarity with it at all. Perhaps the best contrast lies between my two translators, both in their late twenties. The first time I was in Dharamsala, I worked with Kungkhyi, who sometimes arrived at our sessions slightly disheveled from a previous late night out, and was more interested in transferring episodes of BBC’s ‘Sherlock’ from my computer to hers than discussing Tibetan film or literature. The second time round I worked with Phuljung, a former monastic who was now a Masters candidate in Buddhist philosophy and a filmmaker whose short films address religion, romance, language, and identity in the Tibetan diaspora. He was friends with many Tibetan writers and activists; she was not. Both wore Woody

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<sup>34</sup> Mishra, Panka, *The Restless Children of the Dalai Lama*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/18/magazine/18tibet.html?pagewanted=all> (December 18, 2005).

Allen glasses, provided contacts amongst the older generation of ex-political prisoners with whom they were friendly with, and were excellent translators.

Given that diglossia and English proficiency is far more prevalent among the thirty-five and under age group in Dharamsala, they would be the likely target audience amongst Tibetans of writers producing work in English. Yet among those I spoke with in this demographic, most did not demonstrate much of an awareness, much less a preference, for works of contemporary Tibetan literature. The social fabric of Dharamsala suggests that there is then a non-Tibetan audience for the works of these writers. Jamyang Norbu explains that he wrote his novel *Warriors of Tibet* in English to give English readers an understanding of “the Tibetan attitude toward the Chinese and the great revolt of 1959”<sup>35</sup>In the case of the Men Tsee Khang, the effort to reach a non-Tibetan audience with their system of medicine was made explicit. I will now discuss how both of these communities have navigated a movement away from their mythologized aspects as a move towards the modern.

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When I first arrived in Dharamsala over the summer, a Tibetan family on vacation was staying in the room next to mine at the Mandala guesthouse. Tenzin Choden, 17, the youngest of three sons, remarked upon learning of the topic of my research, “I don’t understand Tibetan Medicine myself. I have no idea what it’s about—it all seems very complicated. If I feel sick I would probably just take a [Tylenol].”

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<sup>35</sup> Jamyang Norbu, *Warriors of Tibet: The Story of Aten and the Khampas’ Fight for Freedom of Their Country*, (London: Wisdom Publications, 1986), 7, quoted in Steven Venturino, “Reading Negotiations in the Tibetan Diaspora,” in *Constructing Tibetan Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Frank J. Korom, World Heritage Studies on Transnationalism and Multiculturalism (St-Hyacinthe, Quebec, Canada: World Heritage Press, 1997), 112.

Tenzin Choden's eldest brother and sister had moved to New York, and he, too, set his sights on studying computer science in the United States at a college such as M.I.T. once he completed high school in the Tibetan settlement of Bylakupee. Their mother, a teacher at the Tibetan Children's Village School (TCV), intended to join them there as soon as she completed forty years of teaching service. Visitors rather than residents in the town of Dharamsala, the family's plans and network seemed to extend beyond their bases in settlements in India where they variously resided, the children thriving in their respective fields of computer science, graphic design, and architecture. As they were among the first people I had in-depth conversations with over several days before they departed for the Kalachakra ceremony in Ladakh, I became increasingly conscious of the fact that they as individuals and as a family came as a surprise to me, not least because of their fluency in English, but their casual expression of worldly ambition. Implicit in the ethnographer's investment in looking closely at a community is a fascination with otherness; when she finds herself on common ground and equal footing with those she is in conversation with, she is momentarily flummoxed. In approaching Tibetan modernities, I realized, I had still been expecting to find a nucleus of parochialism, perhaps stemming from an unwillingness to treat the presentist realities of diaspora as just that, as well as a quest for the specious notions of irascible authentic culture and selves. My discomfort with the family was born of embarrassment at having made such assumptions when we had first met, and colored the rest of the time I spent in their company.

Tenzin Nyandak, the oldest son, had been living in the United States for over ten years, where he worked three jobs to put himself through an architecture program at the University of Buffalo, while cultivating an interest in sculpture through taking night classes. He was about to embark on a masters degree in architecture in Spain and hopes to become the world's foremost scholar in Tibetan architecture. When I asked about the presence of Buddhism in his life, he replied, "Every aspect of culture is based on Buddhism. When I study painting, sculpture, architecture, day to day life is very strong in Buddhism, especially in architecture study. Even the domestic architecture—forget about monastic architecture, even the domestic architecture—it has strong inklings of Buddhism. Every column in domes, windows is based on Buddhism." A day later, when we returned to the subject, he mentioned that the esotericism of Tibetan Buddhist practice intimidated him. "I like the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh," he offered instead.

I bring up this conversation with Tenzin Nyandak in order to offer a context for his younger brother's response to Tibetan Medicine—that such distancing from a traditional or cultural form of practice is not necessarily isolated to healthcare, but part of a possible broader movement towards a reality in modernity in which it holds comparably less interest, relevance or applicability.

## **1.1 MOVEMENTS IN MEDICINE**

I began my examination of Tibetan perspectives on health by looking at the Tibetan Medicine institute, Men Tsee Khang, and the *Gyushi* (The Four Tantras), its central text. Given that I was familiar with the practices of a biomedical hospital, I

focused more on interviewing patients at Delek hospital rather than exploring its operational procedures, but felt that I needed a firmer grasp of the tenets of the Men Tsee Khang as an institution in order to proceed, perhaps also using it as an entry point to tease out aspects of Tibetan healthcare and health-seeking behavior that are distinct to its culture.

There are three primary health-seeking avenues in Dharamsala, and my findings support Prost's assertion that these are far from mutually exclusive:

Medical pluralism is the norm in Dharamsala. The majority of exiles in [*Precious Pills*] subscribed to the view that biomedical and traditional Tibetan medical systems are complementary, and few doubted the benefits of using both concurrently. Individuals would often juggle a number of practitioners and treatments over the course of a lengthy illness. Typically, Tibetans explained that they visited the Delek (biomedical) hospital and the [Men Tsee Khang] (traditional) clinic for different types of illnesses: they would go to Delek for readily identifiable biomedical disorders, and to the [Men Tsee Khang] for problems that fit the description of Tibetan humoral disorders, usually chronic illnesses....

Other key agents of the medical landscape of Dharamsala are religious practitioners. Some of these have trained in medicine in addition to their monastic education...[Their] divination sometimes relates the illness to possession or the sufferer by a malevolent spirit (don), and prescribes the appropriate exorcism...the work of traditional Tibetan physicians is becoming increasingly dissociated with divination, at least in Dharamsala. The enrolment of ritual specialists to carry out purification rituals is not dealt with by Men Tsee Khang but rather through monasteries...It is also worth noting that astrology is less of a popular subject to study among young Tibetans, in contrast to medicine.<sup>36</sup>

My research at the Men Tsee Khang included interviews with doctors and administrators from various departments over a month and a half, observation sessions at the outpatient clinic (which was orchestrated with shocking casualness and

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<sup>36</sup> Prost, *Precious Pills: Medicine and Social Change among Tibetan Refugees in India*, 38.

seemingly no prior consent on behalf of the patients), and a Tibetan astrology session which I participated in out of curiosity more than anything. Upon emerging from the session, I met up with my translator, Phuljung. Over lunch, I asked him what he thought about Tibetan astrology. “I think it’s very good,” he replied. “Tibetan culture is all we have—we don’t have the economy or the looks, but we have this culture. That’s why you have come here and that’s why other people come here to learn about Tibetan medicine and astronomy and culture, right?” Phuljung’s observation reflects an awareness of the cultural cache of Tibetan Medicine and astronomy, which he juxtaposes against the nation’s lack of geopolitical clout.

This was reflected in the client base of the astrologist I spoke to, a woman in her mid-twenties who had been working at the Men Tsee Khang for three years. When I asked her about her clientele, she revealed that she had never charted the fortune of a Tibetan and had done so only for Western tourists. “Westerners prefer to have their fortunes told on the spot. They are more impatient like that,” she said, offering an explanation as to why Tibetans might prefer the charting of a detailed astrological chart rather than the on-site consultation she specialized in. With its price tag of USD\$40, an apparently primarily tourist clientele, and consultation process resembling fortune-telling, astrology seems to be the wing of the Men Tsee Khang most readily parlayed into part of the Dharamsala Spiritual Seeker experience.

What I observed over my time at the Men Tsee Khang was an effort to bring other aspects of Tibetan Medicine into relevance beyond its niche. As Prost notes, “Tibetan medicine has never been legalized in India, although Ayurveda and homeopathy have been granted special status within the Indian national medical

system....With the growing popularity of Tibetan medicine abroad however, Tibetan practitioners are working towards the standardization of medical training and production in order to achieve legal status.”<sup>37</sup> Crucial to note is the balance required to instantiate this legitimacy while still retaining the “flavor” of Eastern medicine which is precisely its draw for those seeking healing outside of the purview of Western biomedicine.

In Tibetan Medicine, the long-term source of any imbalance of the three types of humors is the three poisons of desire, aggression and ignorance; the short-term source is imbalanced of humors arising from seasonal effects, improper diet and behaviour, and from the influence of spirits. The areas that I felt required the most unpacking and focused on in several of my interviews were the concept of spirits and the idea of mental disorders.

I spoke to Dr. Norchung on the topic of evil spirits, and found in his answers a contemporizing interpretation of the Gyushi that brought to the table his own understanding of Western biomedicine and psychotherapy, a way of using the notion of spirits to allow for ambiguities rather than diagnostic didacticism. Though his answers were far more nuanced, below are the crucial parts of his argument:

In Tibetan medical text, the spirit disorder is caused by evil spirits is regard as mental disorders. We think that evil spirit disorders, there are two ways. According to the text, we have different understanding and explanation. Most of the people believe and according to the text believe that there is an existence of evil spirit inside the external [source]. These are the elemental spirit disorders. **We believe that there is an existence of evil spirit in the environment. And when do they harm us? This is because we do some bad things, for example destruction of the land, also we have irrigations, rivers, natural flow of the rivers, the water in the wrong directions.** We

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<sup>37</sup> Prost, *Precious Pills: Medicine and Social Change among Tibetan Refugees in India*, 39.

think that in the waters, there is the presence of evil spirits. And in the trees, there's presence of evil spirit. In the storm also there is presence of evil spirit. If we do bad things, exploitation of the natural resources and also construction of the road in a not proper way according to the calculation of the Tibetan astrology. There is a proper time and calculation in which we can find the right and right time to do that. If we are not regarding all these things, doing our own will, exploit the natural resources so forth and so forth, **we are disturbing the life of the evil spirit and in return, they are trying to harm us as and when we are very weak physically.** This is how the evil spirits do harm us and this is the cause.

The other kind of cause of evil spirits is similar to the mental neurological disorders if we cover the symptoms and signs and there is the similarities to the Western medical concept of neurological disorders. And one is *nyo-che* translated as psychosis and then *chye-che*. *Chye-che* is lot of memory but according to signs and symptoms it is more similar to the dementia. And then we have something like it is more similar to brain stroke, the blockage of the brain and last one is leprosy. The elementary disorder is only the thing that is caused by the evil spirit and in the bodies, there is no more physical changes we can find. According to the laboratories we can find, I think. But the person, there is some mental and physical changes in the person. This thing we consider that the first step, the energy level disorder. The rest of the thing is physical signs and symptoms we can find. And more laboratory test can find that there is a neurological disorder and there is some damage inside you.

The idea that elemental evil spirits will manifest “if we do bad things, [such as] exploitation of the natural resources and also construction of the road” is part of a thread relating health and suffering to the environment that I found in my interviews, though I did not seek it out. In section 3.2, I will discuss how both Dharamsala and Chinese-occupied Tibet are perceived as disturbed or suffering environments, but the latter seems far closer to the picture Dr. Norchung paints here, given that Chinese exploitation of Tibetan land has become a common talking point in both everyday conversation and Tibetan environmentalist communities. If this is indeed the case, then Dr. Norchung's conception of the behavior of elemental evil spirits spells impending disease for the people in China reportedly desecrating Tibetan land.

Another point to note regarding the conception of elemental evil spirits is that the idea that “we are disturbing the life of the evil spirit and in return, they are trying to harm us and we are very weak physically” operates within a Buddhist karmic framework, such that even when evil spirits are said to emanate from the “external,” the self’s actions are located as the source of suffering.

Dr. Norhchung then went on to speak on psychosis:

We believe that the seeds of the mind resides is in our heart, right? We believe there is a different separation of body and mind as neurological concern of body and mind and is the result of brain activity. And we consider the mind, there is a certain level and which in the subtlest level, it is stayed in the heart. And then in the gross level, it spreads throughout the body through the channel of the neurons. We think that the [psychosis] and [dementia] which is caused by some blockage of the path of consciousness in our heart, this channel. How it’s caused? It is activities and killing people and doing in a not right way. And all these factors disturb the energy, leads to disturbance of the energy in our body. And these imbalance in our bodies lead to the blockage of the pathway of consciousness. And then if there is blockage to your pathway of the consciousness and consciousness goes everywhere. The flow of the consciousness is totally disturbed. And then the mind, the subtle level of consciousness go everywhere and it is leading to psychosis.

I was struck by the turn of phrase and the idea that “your consciousness goes everywhere.” Where in biomedicine the body is seen as host to a parasitic physical or mental ailment and presumes a non-suffering neutral body that needs to be fixed, the interpretation of psychosis here reflects an expansion or excess of one’s mental state, consistent with the idea of requiring balance in ones humors, that leads to psychosis. Cure in this context is an act of restoration rather than eradication, incorporating suffering as expanded normalcy rather than an abnormal abscess. On treatment, Dr. Norchung said:

Normally if you have a mental disorder, the many causes, the separation of channels. First, we have to heal the body, rejuvenate the body because mentally you are disturbed. There is depletion of bodily constituents. And we have to restore these bodily constituents physically as well as we have to give advice to the patients. Most importantly, you development compassion, meditation of reality, emptiness, compassion which helps a lot. And we have some kinds of medicine for [wind] disorder because you are mentally disturbed and there are disturbances of the [wind] which leads to sleep deprivation and loss of memory and we also have [three winds]. In addition, meditation of the mind, through advice, through realization.

Here, he paused, then said, “There is another thing that is possible. Mental disorder that is caused by mind itself. For example if you lose your dearest, like when I lost my father, I have grief, sorrow, and worry too much. Which then caused a disorder. Which can be a cause for mind disorder.”

I asked, “Is there a specific word for that? In the text, what is the word used to mention mental disorder called?” He replied, “In the text, no. In the text it mentioned it is disorder caused by evil spirit. The five types and I have mentioned them.” I clarified, “So for this sort of idea, that mental disorder caused by the mind itself and grief, is it a recent idea?”

Dr. Norchung said, “This is my understanding. I have no references for that.”

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The next department I visited was the Body, Mind and Life department of the Men Tsee Khang. Established only a year ago, the department ostensibly codifies concepts within Tibetan medicine to correspond to a wider understanding of “mental health,” spawning the term “Buddhist psychology.” It is particularly the Body, Mind

and Life department that I sense is carefully navigating the process of trying to establish Tibetan medicine as relevant in modernity while maintaining the centrality and authoritativeness of its source text, the *gyushi*. The nexus that comfortably accommodates this is the field of Mindfulness and Contemplative Studies, which aligns Buddhism with science. During the Dalai Lama's visit to the United States in 2014, he headlined the International Symposium for Contemplative Studies in Boston. Though I was not present there, I did attend a talk of his at Princeton University where he constantly made associations between Buddhism, "studying," "knowledge," and "science." The work of the Body, Mind and Life department appears to be very much in the same vein.

Yet another perspective on evil spirits demonstrates such a movement. Geshe (monk) Tenpa Tashi, the head of the Body, Mind, and Life department, supplies it. As he does so, he sits on a meditation throne in the middle of the office:

Ultimately, evil spirit is the 3 mental poisons. The real evil spirit is the 3 mental poisons, afflictions, like 6 mental afflictions, 20 and 84,000 kinds. All could be considered as evil spirit. It is evil spirit because it harms yourself and others directly or indirectly. In Buddhist culture, it could be classified as something like that, **external evil spirit and internal evil spirit**. Internal evil spirit as we said, all those mental illness, afflictions. Between these 2, internal evil spirit is more harmful. So we need to handle this internal evil spirit, then the outer evil spirit is not harmful. In Buddhist text, all the teachings talk about how to deal with this internal evil spirit. From the root coming from this internal evil spirit, we can find different kinds of outer evil spirit also. Therefore, **if you can control your own mental poisons, outer evil spirit won't harm you. That's what it is. In order to cope with outer evil spirit, main thing is not from outside. Of course there are many kinds of rituals that are there, but mainly it is to heal yourself, to heal your negative emotion.** That is essential. If you can sort of handle your 3 mental afflictions in a proper way, it is the ultimate cause of well being, physically and mentally.

According to Buddhist culture they don't regard evil spirit sort of breakthrough. It is not the ultimate thing. One thing is generating loving-kindness, compassion, this is more important. **Once, I had a friend whose mental instability in which he tried to remedy through meditation. His experience didn't help much. Later he cultivated loving-kindness and compassion and by then it helped a lot.** So in a strict Buddhist or a Buddhist practitioner they don't [accord] very much importance [to external spirits]. So you see, lay people when they talk about these things, it could be remedied through astrology, there are many kinds of ritual in astrology. For lay people something like prayer is helpful. The person feels some good thing is happening. This is done. There are many cases, even in *nagas*<sup>38</sup>, where you want to build construction work. We have to think about the place where you want to build. Suppose we have a small house for the *nagas* or before we construct the building, there was the *nagas* residing there. We are requesting that we change the place and so some prayers here and he sits here and we can do the construction. Without treating them respect, so this may harm in lay people — this is how we practice in daily life. Even in Tibetan culture when we talk about disorder cause by evil spirit, in that case medication will not help. Only ritual and all those things are important. Main thing, shall I say is loving-kindness and compassion. In cases, if not possible, that ritual is helpful.

Tenpa Tashi makes two moves here: locating the key to mediating outer evil spirits within the control over one's inner evil spirits, effectively making the supernatural natural and bodily. This move is consistent with Dr. Norchung's relating elemental evil spirits to self-caused action. By giving the patient a sense of control, the affliction of evil spirits is made to seem more manageable. Next, Tenpa Tashi establishes Buddhism as the method for healing but separates meditation and ritual from "loving-kindness and compassion" and mental training, premising the latter and but still acknowledging that ritual can be helpful for "lay people." It must be noted that this is not the first time that "loving-kindness and compassion" are posited as the essence of Buddhism — in my introduction, I referred to a conversation at a

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<sup>38</sup> Water spirits

dumpling stall in which this had been stated precisely. What is more unusual is Tenpa Tashi's opinion that loving-kindness and compassion help but meditation does not, given that certain forms of meditation in Tibetan Buddhism are directly used to cultivate benevolence, such as *tonglen*, a meditation ritual which entails taking suffering into the body and exchanging it for the outward giving of happiness by imagining suffering as black smoke. I began to suspect the distillation of Buddhism to loving-kindness and compassion as rhetoric. Perhaps this unlikely ruling out of meditation, hardly deemed to be too esoteric or ritualistic, was an overcorrection by Tenpa Tashi in response to my questions about evil spirits, the minimal importance of which he seemed intent on conveying. Where Dr. Norchung's interpretation of the *gyushi* is one which pivots off personal experience, Tenpa Tashi's seemed to further an institutional stance that I will now go into more details about.

Given that the establishment of this department could signal a shift towards addressing mental health in the Tibetan community, I asked what possible palliative benefits it could have on the community given a deeper understanding between the connection of "body, mind, and life," particularly in the case of torture survivors now living in exile. Tenpa Tashi replied:

**As compared to the West, anxiety and depression is very low in Tibetan community. I think it is mainly because of the cultural difference because from a child we are brought up in Buddhist culture.** We are taught about karma and all these things in which they are taught about how to accept not only happiness but adversity and all those things. It is something law of nature. Do not take it like, helpless. Exhibit positive nature. Even in Buddhist text, there are many things that taught about benefits of experiencing suffering. So this is the culture difference that makes our people anxiously less.

Mental afflictions give rise to the energy disturbances in the body. Too much desire give rise to physical roughness, mental unstableness, speech unstableness — that really appear. From that we can judge definitely. We see that it is not apparent in Tibetan community is that from physical appearance, there is very less. We are more open nature. For example, think that you are studying so that you can do something for the long run and have good benefit. There is no use of temporary suffering. If you think for the better future, you should be proud that I'm here to study and you have a better future. So it is worth sacrificing. You are temporarily suffering for the benefit of long run. That way, training is important. It is important to understand the mechanism of this nature of mental affliction, how to remedy. For that we need to study. Even for the students coming here, medical students coming from Tibet, parents are there. In their mind, they hope that one day, I will go back. I'm here for study so that I can serve better in future. And here they feel safe also.

The benefits for mental health that the department can offer, he tells me, are really for other people apart from Tibetans who are far more severely afflicted as such. The department's teachings are also accessible because he says:

**It is not a big problem because we are not talking about Nirvana or liberation and all those things.** We are not talking about any difficult concept, something conceptualized, not necessary. What we discuss is Buddhist psychology and something we can understand with common sense, something we can experience with our own experience. Let's say we talk about anger, everybody experiences that. How it works and how it originates, this we can learn from common sense and experience. This is really helpful for them.

The last two important moves made here are, first, to establish Tibetan Medicine as being accessible and helpful to societies outside of Tibet who could do well to learn from such mental training, while maintaining that they are very much the target audience of such research, rather than Tibetans who do not need it since they are, as always, much more peaceful due to cultural circumstances which have shaped their natures that way. This is an effective narrative trajectory of Tibetan Medicine as an institution, while at the same time, continuing to corroborate the

public personae of the peaceful Tibetan, which I will go on to talk about as a cultural myth of selfhood. The distancing move from “Nirvana or liberation and all those things” must also be noted; where the ritual aspects of Buddhism were previously disavowed for “loving kindness and compassion,” here the mythic esotericism of Buddhist lore is deemed a “difficult concept, something conceptualized, not necessary” in favor of the easily digestible “Buddhist psychology” that is likely akin to Mindfulness philosophy. Tibetan Medicine, closely linked with Buddhism, must maintain precisely that connection in order to distinguish itself as a field of Eastern Medicine with cultural cache for an international audience, while striving to legitimize itself as scientific rather than folk practice, in the process codifying not just itself but associated Buddhist concepts as accessible and this-worldly by banishing both the evil spirits and Nirvana.

## **1.2 MOVEMENTS IN BUDDHISM**

I began the chapter by recalling a conversation with Tenzin Nyandak, who expressed a preference for Thich Nhat Hanh’s Zen Buddhist teachings over Tibetan Buddhism. He felt that Tibetan Buddhism intimidated him with the intricacies of ritual and added, “Buddhism doesn’t begin with a textual tradition, it is all a matter of interpretation as to [how to distinguish] the different schools and which you chose. To me Tibetan Buddhism loses a lot of what the Buddha said<sup>39</sup> in ritual.”<sup>40</sup> If Tibetan

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<sup>39</sup> Though not relevant to the scope of my discussion here, Powers (p.54) notes that “what Tibetan Buddhists attribute to the Buddha” is an important qualification, because there is a great deal of discussion among scholars concerning what the Buddha actually taught and which doctrines can legitimately be ascribed to him.

<sup>40</sup> Tenzin Nyandak, personal communication, June 16, 2014.

modernities mark the decline of mythologization, do the ritual and esoteric aspects of Tibetan Buddhism risk its obsolescence in the tides of modernity?

Could this even lead to a disavowal of Buddhism in some cases? An event which comes to mind occurred at the aforementioned Students for a Free Tibet event celebrating the release of two Tibetan writers who had undergone four years of imprisonment on June 22, 2014. The program included a telecast of the homecoming in Tibet. The writers Bhuchung D. Sonam and Tenzin Tsundue were amongst the speakers at the event, each speaking in both Tibetan and English for the benefit of the crowd, which was made up mainly of young Tibetans, Indians, and foreigners. Tenzin Tsundue also translated for Lukar Jam Atsock, another well-known writer in the community who writes only in Tibetan, as well as a former president of the Gu Chum Sum Movement for Ex-Political Prisoners.

Lukar spoke of the guilt of being a writer living in relative comfort in diaspora while his fellow Tibetans were being imprisoned for their work and beliefs. This invokes another challenge of living in diaspora that I had heard in other conversations—the agony of not sharing in the common plight of one’s countrymen, even if that plight itself might entail agony and imprisonment. This is both a type of suffering and a deferral of one’s present experiences in exile for the presumed greater suffering of those in Tibet. To express solidarity and utmost respect for the two recently released writers, Lukar offered *khatas*<sup>41</sup> to framed photos of them, and then began to do full-body prostrations, saying, “I never prostrate before any Gods or

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<sup>41</sup> Traditional ceremonial scarves

religious figures, but I will for my fellow writers.” Later, he added, “Religion cannot solve the problems of Tibet. And it is not economics, because in Potala Palace<sup>42</sup> Tibet had lots of money and it could not save us. Can the arts save us? I do not know for sure. But sometimes religion and ritual is also performance.” By prostrating, a gesture known in Buddhist practice to reflect veneration, Lukar simultaneously recasts his fellow writers as worthy of devotion and tribute and, in acknowledging the aspect of performance of his actions, sheds light on the aspect of performance of that same gesture in a religious context.

I must point out that my raising of Lukar Jam Atsock’s behavior here is a red herring as far as the rest of my interviews go. He is, far as I can tell, anomalous in distancing himself entirely from Buddhism, claiming to have intuitively found organized religion oppressive and troubling even at a young age, and noting that his temperament was always different from that of his rule-abiding brothers. In one of our many conversations that took place solely in Mandarin Chinese, the language we had in common that was native to neither, he mentioned that he was going to take his kindergarten-aged son out of the Tibetan Children’s Village School, one of the cornerstone institutions of the Tibetan exile community in settlements all throughout India. He worried that the curriculum involving Buddhist teachings in its pedagogy would indoctrinate his son and that his son would not have the freedom to decide on his own religious inclinations. I countered that he and I were both raised in religious faiths that we currently did not ascribe to. Lukar said, “It is different for us writers.

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<sup>42</sup> The chief residence of the Dalai Lama until the 14th Dalai Lama fled to India during the 1959 Tibetan uprising.

Not everyone has the same kind of rebel spirit to think for themselves. Us writers will be okay but I am not sure about my son.”

On another occasion, I asked Lukar what he thought about the sentiment that kept being repeated to me—that “all Tibetans are Buddhist”. He said, “It scares me when a whole nation is of one religion. This should not be the way. That way [unification under ideology] leads to communism, like China, no? ‘If Tibetans are not Buddhists, it is bad’, will be like saying that if Tibetans don’t eat *tsampa* it is bad. *Tsampa* itself is good, but to say everyone must eat it is no good. So for me, it might not be a big rebellion, but to say ‘I am not a Buddhist’ is something.” Apart from my first translator Kungkhyi, however, Lukar was the only other person I spoke to in the total of three months that I spent in Dharamsala who totally disavowed Buddhism.

More common were those who identified as Buddhists but found fault with certain aspects of it, such as Tenzin Tsundue finding its pacifism impractical for and incompatible with the purposes of activism. Most common of all were those who claimed not to be staunchly Buddhist when asked to elaborate on their practice, but still mentioned being proud to be Buddhist and living by “our basic beliefs [which] are to have love and not hurt other people.” While volunteering at English conversation hours, I noted how Buddhism was often casually embedded in the answers of both the laypeople and monastics. For example, when the conversation topic was “Are you an optimist or a pessimist?”, a young woman replied that she was an optimist because “if things did not go the way I want, it is fine and I will just try

again because of things in Buddhism like *tong pa ni* [emptiness]<sup>43</sup>, you know?” On another occasion, when asked about a time in the future that they would like to travel to, a young man supplied that he would like to be present at the Coming of Maitreya so he could videotape it and show it to people at the beginning of the next cycle of life.

Plenty of people who live in Dharamsala continue to practice daily *kora* as seen from the well-trodden dirt path that leads to the prayer wheels, while most of the older hospital patients and eldercare facility residents had prayer books by their bedsides. For example, at 85, Sithea Tsering’s daily routine since being admitted to Delek had revolved around check-ups; mostly, he prays. He was holding a book of sutras when I first approached him, but mostly prays from memory as he could no longer see very well. He told me that if not for Buddhism, he would not know how to live. Without compassion, he would be like an animal in the wild. At his age, the thing he focused on most was Buddhism, and accumulating merit for the next life. His most significant influences were dharma teachings, which he returned to and aimed to follow to the best of his abilities. Many people I visited had photos of the Karmapa and the Dalai Lama in their rooms, and some who disavowed most aspects of Buddhist teachings expressed singular devotion to the Dalai Lama, such as the politician Dhardon Sharling. This range of behaviors reflect that there is, as there has probably always been, a variation of ways Tibetans have approached what Buddhism is to them, and that it would be difficult, even specious, to attempt to substantiate the claim that the community’s practice of Tibetan is in decline.

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<sup>43</sup> The concept of “emptiness” in Buddhism refers to accepting the nature of reality as flux that is ultimately ungraspable and inconceivable by conceptual and material understanding

That said, a parallel movement of Buddhism in modernity has already been touched on in this paper through its corollary in Tibetan Medicine in Tenpa Tashi's separation of meditation and ritual from "loving-kindness and compassion" and mental training as remedies: the movement, initiated by the Dalai Lama, to study Buddhist philosophy and understand its teachings rather than simply focusing on ritual. The Dalai Lama's website features a transcript of a teaching he gave entitled "Bring Quality Back into Buddhist Pursuits":

Like I said recently...being familiar with the Sutra and Tantra texts alone won't do. Ritualistically beating drums, striking cymbals and performing cham (religious dance) in supposed displays of religious practice, but remaining unable to recognize the Three Jewels (The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) in reality would put us in danger of performing self-blessings. We must be very cautious about it. **Buddhism is not revealed merely by beating drums and striking cymbals, and there is no way such rituals can enhance devotion.** On the other hand, there is a danger of it becoming a system of ideas without foundation...Within the Tibetan community one can see many instances everywhere of people who had **lost their roots and go about clinging to branches.** To sum up, the noble tradition of the learning of the Tibetan Buddhist philosophy extant in the time of our ancestors should primarily be maintained by our monasteries.<sup>44</sup>

This may be read as both a de-particularizing of Tibetan Buddhism so it is more of a "way of life" as Buddhism has often been coded in the West or even part of the Dalai Lama's increasing practice of multi-faith advocacy<sup>45</sup>. Yet this does not have to be a movement toward ecumenism or secularism. A conversation I had with Lhundup, a manager at the Central Authority of Tibet Information Center, reflected a case of prizing of "study" over ritual by a Tibetan Buddhist. When asked about his

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<sup>44</sup> Tenzin Gyatso, "Bring Quality Back into Buddhist Pursuits ," *His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama of Tibet*, <http://www.dalailama.com/messages/buddhism/buddhist-pursuits>

<sup>45</sup> Tenzin Gyatso, "Closing Address by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to the Global Buddhist Congregation 2011," *His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama of Tibet*, <http://www.dalailama.com/messages/buddhism/buddhist-congregation-2011-address>

Buddhist practice, Lhundup distinguished between Tibetans whose practice is wisdom oriented and those whose practice is method oriented. A wisdom oriented practice allowed him to bear the lack of “innate peace” when living as a refugee that he mentioned feeling at the beginning of our interview. He attributed his ability to live with relative happiness and functionality despite the instability of exile. The distinction between the two types of practice also plays into Lhundup’s conception of the collective karma of Tibetans. First distinguishing between individual and collective karma, Lhundup opined that the Tibetan community has accumulated huge merit from their method oriented practice over generations, but have lacked wisdom, which he seemed to consider “right effort” — “even the Buddha said that he could not help if no effort is put in.” By “help,” Lhundup was referring to freeing Tibet from Chinese occupation, which he believes arose out of the lack of the practice of wisdom and “cultivation of right mental qualities,” citing that “even the Dalai Lama has told us to study, to know what we are reciting.” Lhundup’s is certainly only one interpretation of how merit accumulation works, but it is useful in reflecting the extent to which the importance of “studying” has been thought to determine the fate of a nation by someone who espouses it. I will also return to my conversation with Lhundup when discussing collective suffering.

### **1.3 MOVEMENTS IN MYTH**

When invoking the realm of the spirits in literature, the catch-all category associated with it is often Magical Realism. “Magical Realism” refers to a genre in fiction in

which fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the “reliable” tone of objective realistic report, and is associated chiefly with certain leading novelists of Central and South America. The term has also been extended to works from various other literary traditions, designating a tendency of the modern novel to reach beyond the confines of realism and draw upon the energies of fable, folklore and myth while retaining a strong contemporary social relevance.<sup>46</sup>

Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani notes that “The end of the Cultural Revolution triggered a major effect to translate foreign literary works into Chinese, making possible the arrival of a few key works of Latin American magical realism to the Tibetan Autonomous Region.”<sup>47</sup> The forerunner of the emergence of “Tibetan Magical Realism” is a Sino-Tibetan writer based in Lhasa named Zhaxi Dawa. In her chapter focused on Zhaxi Dawa and Tibetan Magical Realism in *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*, Schiaffini-Vedani uses the the writer’s increasing evocation of magical realism to signify the move from his caricatured portrayal of “Tibetaness” to a heightened entry into the contours of the identity. Born in Batang, a Tibetan area in what is now Sichuan province to a Tibetan father and Han mother, Zhaxi Dawa was given a Chinese name, Zhang Niansheng, and regarded as Han until adulthood. At that point, as a young writer, he was advised to claim a Tibetan identity and name by an editor of a literary journal called *Literature and Arts from Tibet*. Zhaxi Dawa’s earliest work retains vestiges of his Han upbringing; the “still

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<sup>46</sup> Drabble, Stringer, and Hahn, *Magic Realism* (Oxford University Press, n.d.), <http://www.oxfordreference.com/10.1093/acref/9780199214921.001.0001/acref-9780199214921-e-3851>.

<sup>47</sup> Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, “Condor flies over Tibet,” in Laurant R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, eds., *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 202.

superficial understanding of Tibet and its culture, and...exoticized way in which Zhaxi Dawa represented the Tibetan people, clearly unveils an outsider sensibility.”<sup>48</sup> Such a perspective, “superficial” though it may be, remains a realist one, and a shift towards evoking the supernatural and temporal ambiguity is in fact what allows the author’s work to develop greater complexity. For example, his characters traverse different time periods in Tibetan history, allowing Zhaxi Dawa to tap into different iterations of identity beyond the present. Schiaffini-Vedani notes the censorship faced by Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) writers, and crucially points out that Zhaxi Dawa’s work seems to escape this due to the alternate reality established through his creations with their own internal logic which evade the censor: “An intricate magical realist style allows him to address sensitive sociopolitical issues with a certain degree of freedom.”<sup>49</sup>

I have raised the example of Zhaxi Dawa even though, as a writer in the TAR and not in exile he does not belong to the community of writers I am referring to, to note that the freedom that Magical Realism affords Zhaxi Dawa and writers in the TAR has not for the most part been embraced by writers in exile. Though there is a perceived freedom of press in the exile environment of Dharamsala, other pressures exist which shape and restrict the nature of what is discussed in Tibetan literature produced there. Before I go on to discuss the writing community in Dharamsala further, I make one last note on “Tibetan Magical Realism”: rejecting a straightforward cooptation of Latin American Magical Realism as his influence, Zhaxi Dawa said, “Tibetan culture and traditions are able to provide a writer with all

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 204-208.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 217.

reality and magic s/he wants; we do not need to look for them abroad; we just need to look outside the window.”<sup>50</sup> By pointing this out, Zhaxi Dawa reverses the assumed incursion of foreign influence and invokes the innate mysticism of Tibetan lore as the key to his stylistic development. Yet this same innate mysticism which unlocked a deeper insight into his Tibetanness for Zhaxi Dawa and freed his prose from censorship may be a constraint for other Tibetan writers such as those writing in English in Dharamsala.

In Hortsang Jigme’s article on “Tibetan Literature in the Diaspora” in the same volume, he makes a distinction between “philosophy and rhetoric in premodern Tibet” where monks and religious teachers tended not to be involved in producing literary works, leading to a divide between “a lay focus on belles lettres and a monastic emphasis on religious and philosophical subjects.” In the early days of exile in the 1960s and 1970s, the trying conditions led to the prioritization of survival and adapting to a new environment over textual production, and what little writing was produced addressed religion in philosophy. Hortsang Jigme writes, “While other spheres of Tibetan exile, religious institutions, practices, and festivals were carried on by teachers and students who first escaped to Bhagsa in Uttar Pradesh and Dalhousie in Himachal Pradesh from their monasteries in Tibet, to the best of my knowledge there is no record of any new literature at that time.”<sup>51</sup> It is thus striking to consider the development of writings in exile not as a legacy carried over from a prior literary tradition from premodern Tibet but as a later phenomenon established by a second

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<sup>50</sup> Hortsang Jigme, “Tibetan Literature in the Diaspora,” in Lauran R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, eds., *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 209.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

generation of Tibetans in exile who came into India in the 1980s. Much of this was reiterated during my conversation with Bhuchung D. Sonam, one of the most prolific and well-known writers living in exile:

If you look at Tibetan history, Buddhism came to Tibet starting from the seventh century to 1959. There were huge amounts of writing. Some scholars said Tibetans said there was highest level of per capita production of books. **But these are all Buddhist philosophies and commentaries—when we came out here to tell our stories, the way we experienced, we couldn't do that because first of all, we didn't have the tradition of telling our stories in a way it is appealing to modern readers.** Other factors, it's the fact that when we came out in exile the first fifteen to twenty years, it took us [time] to re-root ourselves. There is no luxury to engage in literary or creative writing. We were busy trying to survive and re-root ourselves. It took us a lot of time. Now the second and third, and even fourth generation of Tibetans [living in exile]. We have the luxury of not having to re-root ourselves, we now have the linguistic capacity, either now linguistically writing in German, English, Chinese and any other, even Tibetan. We are now equipped in linguistic levels. In about ten to fifteen years, the balance should be off set.<sup>52</sup>

Bhuchung highlights the fact that the development of literary and artistic forms necessarily takes a back seat to survival and establishment of settlements in the early days of the Tibetan diaspora, and points to the fact that this has left a gap in which there were no narratives reflecting “our stories, the way we experienced” and told in a way which is “appealing to modern readers.” These are contrasted against what the remaining available literature about Tibet and Tibetans was—writing “about Buddhist philosophy and commentary.” Matthew Kapstein writes, “Tibetan Buddhism, as it is presented in the West, is often treated as an erudite spiritual discipline, a world of subtle philosophy and high-powered techniques of abstract

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<sup>52</sup> Bhuchung D. Sonam, personal communication, 12 July, 2014.

meditation, dispensing a bounty of insight and compassion to all.”<sup>53</sup> With these “abstract” and compassionate portrayals being the only available literature, the cornerstones of Buddhist writing may well have become mapped onto Tibetan identity.

When I asked Bhuchung to clarify what he meant about having narratives which appeal to modern readers as he had mentioned above, he expounded:

The tradition of telling stories in Tibet has to do with the land and also with the philosophy; so much about role beyond ourselves, telling about gods and fairies, something that is not directly associated with how we experience things. There never was a story, a book about life of Tibetan farmer—it has to do with either his association with Buddhism or Buddhist philosophies, how he was influenced, how he gave up his life to become a monk. So, there was huge amount of writing in that category. But what we wanted was something more human. There was also a lot of problems with foreign writing [on Tibet], especially [in the early days]. For example, you have books like *Third Eye* or *Lost Horizon* or *Shangri-la* and so on. They were based on Tibet rather than who we are. If we continue along that line then the difference between that narrative and reality would be so vast. People will not understand who we are as people.<sup>54</sup>

Bhuchung’s perspective reflects a rejection of understanding Tibetaness through the vessels of Buddhism or philosophy, yet his classification of “something more human” also implies an alternative, perhaps more nuanced, Tibetan reality rather than doing away with the notion of such an objective “Tibetaness” entirely. Bhuchung is not so much making a critique of essentialism so much as making a correction on a comparable ontological plane. E. Valentine Daniel notes the “uncanny

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<sup>53</sup> Matthew T. Kapstein, *Tibetan Buddhism A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2013), 2.

<sup>54</sup> Bhuchung D. Sonam, personal communication, 12 July, 2014.

resemblance that certain schools of constructivism bear to the essentializing impulses operating in the ethnicism, racism, and culturalism which they critique. In other words, constructivists themselves become definers of their own identity as much as racists, ethnicists, and culturalists become definers of theirs.”<sup>55</sup> Strikingly, Bhuchung does not consider the world of “gods and fairies” to be lacking truth, but finds it to be outmoded in its romanticism that has little relevance in the present day:

We lost our independence in 1959. That was in a way severed off and that world no longer exists and much of it was also based on the way we were living in a land that was on which we lived for thousand of years. So when we came out, my doubt is that if we continue with same worldview, then it would be too much of clinging to something that is already gone and passed away. We wanted something more of how we experience rather than now, than the early years of exile. So I think this would be the disparity [between] the way we lived and how we told our stories then; our reality after 1959 [and] how we are living our lives now. Of course there can be nostalgia about the past, how longingly and some kind of romanticism but if we based our worldview entirely on that, we lose [the present], which is far more important to us.

Taking the cue from Bhuchung’s statement regarding “the disparity [between] the way we lived and how we told our stories” and the the desire to move past nostalgia, the disavowal of the world of the fairies marks a shift that is both temporal and geographical. A shift of what precisely, on the other hand, is worth teasing out. Earlier on, Bhuchung makes two moves: first, he refers to the conscious tending to and “re-rooting” of Tibetan identity as a luxury, suggesting a level of care and construction that goes into the representation of lived experience beyond that lived experience itself; second, he aligns said construction with stories which appeal to the

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<sup>55</sup> E. Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence*, Princeton Studies in Culture/power/history (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1996), 13.

“modern reader.” If Bhuchung moves to distance literature from Buddhism and philosophy, and “our present” reality from folklore of “gods and fairies,” then distinctions of genre and representation are being made. But what of the ontological status of the “our present?” Bhuchung seems to reject a correspondence of mythic tropes to the truth of the lived experience of Tibetan people such as himself. Yet the discussion of “our present” as a reality suggests a collectiveness, almost an objectively applicable common plight. As much as the writer pushes through the thicket of tropes to find individual expression, this expression is grounded in a larger sense of the community and shared experience. The shared experience that reverberates through the conversations I have is the loss of and keen wish to return to Tibet.

This wish felt by writers and non-writers alike, has unsurprisingly featured prominently in writing produced in exile. Yet as Françoise Robin notes in his article on “Oracles and Demons in Tibetan Literature Today,” “Ever since researchers in the West began to survey contemporary Tibetan fiction, they have noted a tendency that characterizes most colonial environments: Tibetan writers have had to compromise between their creative impulses and the social and political frame into which their writing must fit.”<sup>56</sup> At the beginning of this chapter, I questioned who writers were producing work in English for, and noted the lack of interest among young Tibetans whom I had expected to be the target audience. A far greater source of engagement among young Tibetans is the Tibetan independence movement, and I found it to be no coincidence that the event in which I saw the greatest overlap between the literary and

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<sup>56</sup> Françoise Robin, ‘Oracles and Demons in Tibetan Literature Today,’ in Luran R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, eds., *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*, 148.

youth communities was a Students for a Free Tibet event organized to celebrate the recent release of two imprisoned writers in the Tibetan autonomous region. If activism and the Tibetan cause for Freedom are bound up in the interest in Tibetan stories for audiences, such as young Tibetans and for the foreign volunteers who come through Dharamsala, I continue to wonder about the extent to which this dominates Tibetan literature as a subject matter. There are those who consider themselves activists first and writers second, such as Tenzin Tsundue. But as for other writers, is there pressure to speak of Tibet in every work for it to register interest in the community? Does every piece of Tibetan literature tend to be about Tibet? Every writer carries with them parts of themselves as they write but if, in the assertion of the voice of the Tibetan writer, the “Tibetan” part speaks loudest, does the personal get deferred for the national, even as the national gets enfolded as personal?

In discussing Tibetan Magical Realism, I would be remiss not to mention exile writer Jamyang Norbu’s *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes*, which draws on the work of Conan Doyle, as well as Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, and mixes in a heavy dose of Tibetan mythology such as an antagonist who enemy wields occult powers derived directly from the land of Shambala. Complicating the very definition of “post-colonial literature” in title and text, *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* reflects both the influences of his Tibetan roots as well as the effects of British colonization on India where he grew up. In his chapter on Jamyang Norbu and postcolonial literature in *Modern Tibetan Literature*, Steven Venturino notes:

Postcolonial literature and criticism concerns itself with negotiating a return to place or adapting to a place that is “returned” after colonial occupation. For contemporary Tibetan writers colonialism means either exile—a stateless

place—or occupation—an antagonistically shared place. British colonialism has become a part of Tibetan literature written in India, while Chinese colonialism is often at the heart of Tibetan writing in China, manifesting itself in part as “magical realism” or a postmodern clash of modernity and “tradition” defined as premodernity. Each of these fields of colonialism begs the importance of seeing Tibetan history, as well as the Tibetan nation, not as traditionally coherent historical narrative but as a complex and polyvocal narrative engagement with the world.<sup>57</sup>

A profile in *The New York Times* of Jamyang Norbu notes that he “makes no apologies for using Tibetan magic to tell his story. The same man who informs Western audiences that, ‘We are not the dolphins of the New Age here to save you from your materialist ways,’ explains that he can't simply deny the fantastic stories either: ‘These things do happen. Anyway, reality is what's in a person's head. It's something we create, like a dream, and dreams are important to hold onto, especially in a tyranny. The only thing the tyrant cannot control is what's in your head.’”<sup>58</sup> His cross-cultural flight of fancy, however, is an exception to the overwhelmingly realist conventions among writers in exile. With the eagerness to reflect the present experiences as distinct from the creations of those they have needed to “speak on their behalf” in the past, as well as the portrayals of Mythos Tibet which draw on objects of orientalist fascination, Tibetan writers in exile have taken to confessional poetry, personal essay, and realist and autobiographical fiction. These are the works which might, as Bhuchung says, help readers to “understand who we are as people” and are situated in “reality” rather than mythic narrative. In executing this move to

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<sup>57</sup> Steven J. Venturino, “Placing Tibetan fiction in a world of literary studies,” in Laurant R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, eds., *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*, 304.

<sup>58</sup> David Tracey, “Tibetan Sherlock Shakes up the Movement,” *The New York Times*, March 28, 2002, sec. Style, [http://www.nytimes.com/2002/03/28/style/28iht-tracey\\_ed3\\_.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2002/03/28/style/28iht-tracey_ed3_.html).

demythologize Tibetan culture, however, this leaves room for a potential remythologization of the Tibetan self in order to fill the gap in the story of a nation in exile on its way to rightful, inevitable, eventual independence. I begin my next chapter by exploring this possible deferral of personal interest when it is dwarfed by a national concern.

## 2. CONSTRUCTIONS AND PRESENTATIONS OF SELFHOOD

Is the issue of Tibetan independence likely to come up in any piece of Tibetan literature? This rings largely true from the survey of literature around Dharamsala that I came across—here, the title of Tsering Shakya's article “Literature or Propaganda? The Development of Literature since 1950” surfaces in the recesses of the cynical mind. My sense is that the line is never clear, particularly when the predominance of concern for Tibetan independence is not exclusive to literature but recurs in everyday exchanges where self-representation occurs but less so for a particular audience. At yet another one of the English conversation hour sessions where I was volunteering at, the group was asked where in the past they would most like to return to if time travel were possible. Every single person in my group replied unequivocally that they would like to return to a time when Tibet was free, “where Tibet was a great country,” “to when my parents were happy, and also to see the Chinese attacks and use it against them so I can change [things] for my parents.” This sentiment was echoed around the room of almost forty people when it was time to share their answers.

My instinct at this point is to retire the question about whether Tibetan literature must always be about Tibet, especially when any suggestion of alternatives devolves into counterfactual speculation. Further, I recall an episode of the podcast “A Tiny Sense of Accomplishment” where host Sherman Alexie, a Native American writer, recounted a question he had been asked countless times: “‘When are you going to write about more than Indians?’ As if the subjects of Native Americans is

limited, as if we have three narratives in our lives.” “And as if that takes away some universality,” his co-host Jess Walter balked.<sup>59</sup>

Instead, it may be more productive to ask if within the pantheon of Tibetan literature, from the personal to that which skews political, if there are any discernable patterns, and if there are, despite variance, any generalizing gestures that hint at their epistemology. During our interview, the youngest politician in the cabinet of the Central Tibetan Authority, Dhardon Sharling, spoke of the desire to capture some notion of a true Tibetan story and self in an effort to reclaim identity and self-determination:

Fifty-five years—Tibetans, someone has spoken on our behalf. We have gone through the worst scenarios but now we have reached the stage where Tibetan can have a voice for themselves. If people want to have a general idea of Tibet, let it come from a Tibetan. The idea that people associate with Tibetan is very subjective. Whatever conclusion you want to draw, as long as it comes from a Tibetan source, it is fine. The younger lot like us, we do have a problem when people try to type cast us to be a certain way. Gone are the days when Tibetan always need someone to lean on to, always need someone to speak on their behalf. Now we have a voice of our own. We are birds with wings, basically. A lot of books and ideas need to be re-written and that will happen very soon. Now you look at the new breed of younger generation Tibetan, well-educated, have an idea for themselves, know the true situation, they will reach out a new course of action.

My data reflects that this “new course of action” could well be the assertion of the contemporary Tibetan voice and selfhood. Donald S. Lopez’s *Prisoners of Shangri-La* famously documents the idealization of Tibetans as “a happy, peaceful people devoted to the practice of Buddhism whose remote and ecologically

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<sup>59</sup> Sherman Alexie and Jess Walter, ‘Episode 5: Why Do You Always Write About White People?’, A Tiny Sense of Accomplishment, podcast audio, <http://www.infiniteguest.org/tiny-sense/2014/10/why-do-you-always-write-about-white-people-sherman-alexie-jess-walter-erica-dawson/>

enlightened land, ruled by a god-king, was invaded by the force of evil.”<sup>60</sup> Presenting at a conference on Mythos Tibet in Bonn, Germany, Toni Huber described a “Reverse Orientalism” in which the Tibetan community-in-exile had created images of Tibet in response to Western concerns, and argued that these represent unprecedented contemporary concerns rather than the maintenance of ancient traditions.<sup>61</sup>

Huber maintains, as do I, that the construction of image and stories about a community can be perpetuated by both external parties and members of the community. Focusing on the latter, I turn to presentations, constructions, and conceptions of selfhood in written narratives and oral interviews. Foreign interest in the cause for Tibetan independence and Tibetan Buddhism, as well as the physical presence of an international community in Dharamsala, has produced an expectation of Tibetan identity centered on the twin pillars of “All Tibetans are Buddhist” and “All Tibetans are Peaceful.” I argue that this in part leads to a construction of selfhood that defers personal suffering in the interest of wearing the struggles of the nation on one’s sleeve. I do not mean to suggest that every person who talks about themselves is actively constructing an identity that corresponds to the myth of the Tibetan self, but seek to examine how pressures, overt and latent, are manifested in how people talk about themselves.

Ex-political prisoner and activist Ama Adhe says in her book, *The Voice that Remembers: A Tibetan Woman's Inspiring Story of Survival*, that “through many years of disappointment, I have come to learn that the most noble of causes is not

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<sup>60</sup> Donald S. Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998),10.

<sup>61</sup> Toni Huber, “Reverse Orientalism.” Paper presented at the *Mythos Tibet* conference at The Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany, in Bonn, Germany, <http://www.ias.nl/iasn/iasn9/central/.html>.

always enough to motivate a world whose leaders do not consider the rights of human beings their main concern,<sup>62</sup> a sentiment that is echoed in our conversation. I return once again to consider how else the Tibetan community in Dharamsala maintains support for the cause for independence and holds foreign attention without drawing on Mythos Tibet. The presented atrocities hold less power if they are perpetrated on the nameless and faceless, so I discern two key ways in which a face and identity is created and functions as a shorthand: the creation of a trope characterization of long suffering political prisoners that is often extended to a grand unified theory of Tibetan suffering, and the rise of the genre of testimony literature present both in literary writing, biography, and protest pamphlets.

Orville Schell suggests in *Virtual Tibet* that “During these years of upheaval, the Tibetan government in exile adopted an aggressive new strategy for gaining support for their causes, a global publicity campaign to portray Tibetans as victims of Chinese oppression.”<sup>63</sup> I argue that this strategy for gaining support is less of a straightforward portrayal of victimhood than the presentation of the resilience, peaceful forbearance, and nonviolent nature of a nation and of individuals. As Tenzin Tsundue writes in his poem ‘My Tibetanness’, “Tibetans: the world's sympathy stock./ Serene monks and bubbly traditionalists,”<sup>64</sup> sympathy is elicited through means other than pathos. My interest is in how this public relations mechanism leaks into internalized constructions of selfhood and to examine other ways in which this serenity may have arose.

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<sup>62</sup> Adhe Tapontsang, *Ama Adhe, the Voice That Remembers: The Heroic Story of a Woman's Fight to Free Tibet* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1997), 235.

<sup>63</sup> Orville Schell, *Virtual Tibet: Searching for Shangri-La from the Himalayas to Hollywood*, 1st ed (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 28.

<sup>64</sup> Tenzin Tsundue, “My Tibetanness,” *Writings of Tenzin Tsundue*, <http://www.tenzintsendue.com/poems/my-tibetanness/>.

On my first trip to Dharamsala, I interviewed two ex-political prisoners who were now living in exile. Tanak Jigme Sangpo served a total of 32 years under three different sentences. His story has been featured in several international publications and is currently being chronicled in a book by a member of the Gu Chu Sum Movement of Tibet, an organization for ex-political prisoners in McLeod Ganj. Palden Gyatso is a Tibetan monk who was imprisoned and extensively tortured for 33 years, and the author of *Fire Under The Snow*, his memoir which has been translated into 28 languages and made into a documentary. He speaks of his time in prisons and Chinese labor camps all over the world, during which, he later tells me, audience members have been known to faint from hearing the intensity of his experiences. As I was relating the progress of my project to Dr. Tsetan Sadutshang, the medical director of Delek Hospital, he commented, only half-joking, that I was interviewing “celebrity political prisoners” and that this was hardly a fair sample of the experiences of many others. At the time, I did not fully comprehend the implications of Dr. Tsetan Sadutshang’s comment.

## 2.1 “SERENE MONKS AND BUBBLY TRADITIONALISTS”<sup>65</sup>

During our conversation, the writer Bhuchung D. Sonam noted:

One observation I can make is fact that Tibetans would, and this is very common in the political narrative, [make] a lot of generalization. So if you read ten stories of ten political prisoners, you will take away certain things. You will not remember each story for its individualism. Maybe it has to do with the community experience. The fact that if you read [these] biographies, you will find similar things. If it is a prison experience, then you would say “I was hungry, beaten, tortured”. You would hardly find names, or days. You will hardly find “On this day, in this prison cell, by this guy with mole on the

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

face he has tortured me.” You will hardly find any specific things. This is one common feature I noticed.<sup>66</sup>

While Bhuchung notes that this tendency extends beyond ex-political prisoner narratives, I begin with two that were shared with me. Geshe Palden Gyatso became a monk at the age of 10. Between the ages of 28 and 62, he was imprisoned for thirty-three years till his release in 1992 when he came into exile in India. Early on in our interview, he takes out his dentures and holds them in his palm, demonstrating to me that he lost all his teeth during the torture he bore in that time. Between 1961-1963, seventy percent of his fellow prisoners died of starvation. Without the monastic training he received between the ages of 10 and 28, he thinks it would have been difficult for him to survive witnessing that alone.

Specifically, he talked about recognizing that amongst beings within each of the six realms, each would have their own problems, and how he compared the difficulties he was experiencing with the suffering of beings in lower ones than the human realm, engaging in *tonglen*, a meditative ritual I will explain shortly, with this in mind. When he was being tortured, he would consider how beings in hell would have to endure such experiences for many lifetimes over, whereas he would have to bear it for just an hour or two till the guards had to stop. With this mindset, his pain was alleviated. *Tsundue*, tolerance, to him meant focusing on bearing one’s pain and understanding it, and looking at it in a way that does not bring misery. He survived 33 years of imprisonment and torture this way.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Bhuchung D. Sonam, personal communication, 12 July, 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Palden Gyatso, personal communication, November 21, 2013.

In Palden Gyatso's account, witnessing the suffering of his fellow prisoners, and picturing the greater and more permanent suffering of beings in the realm of hell, served to contextualize and lesson his own suffering. The practice of *tonglen* itself epitomizes the deferral of personal suffering: the meditator fixes upon an instance of suffering usually belonging to another and breathes it in, visualizing it as black smoke collecting at the center of her heart before expelling it from her body. Then she fills herself with compassion towards the sufferer, herself, and the world, and breathes it out into the world. Personal suffering factors minimally, if at all, in the process, as the idea behind it is that by focusing on someone else's suffering and converting it into compassion through the chamber of the self, compassion is generated towards all including the self, ameliorating personal suffering through the suffering of another.

Tanak Jigme Sangpo, 85, was incarcerated in prisons and labor camps three times for a total span of 32 years. He looked at it like it was his karma, as if whatever he was going through were the effects of his past lives. By placing the blame on himself and not others, he was able to avoid feeling as if he was being subjugated by the Chinese. This calmed him and helped him not to get angry at the Chinese authorities and be at peace, even in prison. Not having as much aggression and frustrations towards the guards as other prisoners did meant that he suffered less than they did. Nonetheless, he was conscious all the while that the immediate cause of his imprisonment was political rather than criminal.<sup>68</sup> He thus felt pity for his torturers for all the negative karma they were accruing, something which Tsundue, a doctor at Delek Hospital, also mentioned that ex-political prisoner patients often told him.

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<sup>68</sup> Tanak Jigme Sangpo, personal communication, November 21, 2013.

When Tanak Jigme Sangpo feels pity for the negative karma that his torturers accrue, it is reasonable to suppose that it is their imminent suffering that results from this karma that he pities. Once again, personal suffering is mitigated in deference to the suffering of others. In this case, however, the dynamic is more complicated: personal suffering is lessened in comparison to the greater impending suffering of another, but that other is the one who has caused the suffering of the first, and will suffer precisely for the suffering he has meted out. This seems like a lot to process in the immediacy of being tortured, though perhaps the mediation happens afterwards. Forgive, for a moment, a reference out of left-field, but Tanak Jigme Sangpo's depiction does have a famous precedent: "When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'"<sup>69</sup> What is more admirable than a subject in pain who has the benevolence and presence of mind to look out for the potential suffering his torturers may incur, be it at the hands of "the Father" or of their own negative karma?

From how they tell it, Palden Gyatso and Tanak Jigme Sangpo not only recovered from their trauma but seemed to rise above it peacefully even as the experience of imprisonment was under way, suggesting that perhaps there was nothing for them to recover from in the first place. Narratives such as these are what enable the administrator from the Torture Survivors Unit to report, "We do not see a lot of mental health problems amongst the political prisoners. We Tibetans are a peaceful people." Prost provides a valuable caveat, however:

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<sup>69</sup> Luke 23:33-34 (New American Standard Bible).

In the daily practice of medical choice-making involving the elaboration of complex explanatory models for illness, exile Tibetans operate negotiations between a traditionalist view allocating the causes of illness and misfortune to karma, and therapeutic choices dictated by social circumstances. **Karma is a concept that can give meaning to traumatic events, but it can also be a means of avoiding questions and potential criticism (the explanation “it was karma” can then act as a “silencing” statement, fending off further questioning).** As such, it can be seen as a contextual “tool” rather than an ontological statement.<sup>70</sup>

Following this train of thought, within the self-rationalization process, karma can be an existentially explanatory concept, but it can also be used to evade self-examination when cursorily invoked, as Dhardon Sharling suggests:

I think it is wrong to need to conceal your emotion; by saying it is karma, you don't explore them. The heaviness is going to remain in you. Even today in our community, if there is a problem in our house, instead of resolving it, you say it is written as part of your karma, fate...Resorting to karma ties you up, makes you accept the grief rather than question it. At the end of the day, it only get aggravated and not solve the problem. Not at all. You are not attempting to explore it, to open the layers surrounding that...You need to connect the dots.<sup>71</sup>

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“Celebrity” political prisoners such as Palden Gyatso and Ama Adhe are some of the faces of Tibet along with activists such as Tenzin Tsundue and writers like Jamyang Norbu. Where it is the place of the activist to agitate, the role of the ex-political prisoner *par excellence* is perhaps to play up their survival as a feat in itself. To make this narrative resonate as much as possible, two things must be established: reporting with physical explicitness the brutalities that were inflicted, and emphasizing that in spite of them survival, well-being, and forgiveness were at hand in the aftermath. This leads to descriptions of imprisonment that are heavy on fact and

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<sup>70</sup> Prost, *Precious Pills: Medicine and Social Change among Tibetan Refugees in India*, 95.

<sup>71</sup> Dhardon Sharling, personal communication, 1 July, 2014.

process, and light on feeling and frustration. At the level of representation, it may be fairly easy to break down these mechanics, and make accordant value judgments. While I bridle at speculating about lived experience, I will point out that uncovering the mechanics of narrative construction does not preclude them from being truly reflective of the lived experience of these individuals. The furthest thing from my intent is to affirm the way in which these “serene monks” have become stock representations of a community. Yet I sat with these people and talked to them, and perhaps it is the folly of the rookie ethnographer but, perish the thought, I thought they might just believe in what they were saying. Narrative mechanics aside, this is my attempt to read the lack of “mental problems” and trauma of these famed prisoners against a pattern of conceptions of health, and examining an overlap from a source who asked to remain anonymous.

I spoke to Dorje\*, a nun in her mid-twenties who was warded at the in-patient clinic of the Men Tsee Khang with a nurse serving as translator. A doctor at the outpatient clinic who I had been shadowing told me that I might want to interview Dorje because she had been warded for “depression and not being well in the head”. At the end of our interview, I asked Dorje how she was feeling, and the nurse reported that she said:

She takes it easy. We Tibetan believe that whatever happens to this life is because of our past life. So sometimes it happens, it’s because of our past life, like it is fate, maybe it is coming now, it’s okay and it won’t come again. It’s okay. Once you become sick, you can see a doctor, can get medicine and be relieved. She doesn’t pay much attention at all. Sometimes, it is because of food habit. She has taken something and she is not well and sick because of food. It is okay—can take it easy.

Dorje had been warded for up to three months. Regarding her prognosis, I am told, “Within these months, she is totally fine. Before she has very strong *lung* disease and her back is always pain. She was warded because she was unable to go to sleep at night at her monastery. Now she is very much better. Not fully recovered, about seventy percent. Now she thinks only one or two weeks she can go back to her monastery.”

In Igor Pietckiewicz’s *Culture, Religion and Ethnomedicine*, an examination of health and disease in the Tibetan community in exile in Dharamsala, he noted a “common tendency among Asians to express emotional distress through somatic symptoms”.<sup>72</sup> This was reflected in one of the interviews in Vahali’s *Lives in Exile*: “Unable to sleep, I began having dreams of my dead family members and imagining the worst possible things for those who were living. I started to fall ill frequently, mostly stomach and digestion related problems.”<sup>73</sup> Similarly, here Dorje complains of being unable to go to sleep and links her stomachaches to there being something wrong with the food she has consumed.

When such observations are considered in view of Pietckiewicz’s claim, they suggest that patients are seeking help for emotional distress “by presenting headaches, stomach pains”. This is not so much a lack of Western diagnostic vocabulary, as Pietckiewicz suggests, as a difference in classification under the Tibetan Medical condition. A term I picked up on is “restless mind”, which I noticed to have a description aligned with psychosis in Tibetan Medicine textbooks. It came up in

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<sup>72</sup> Igor Pietckiewicz, *Culture, Religion, and Ethnomedicine: The Tibetan Diaspora in India* (Lanham, Md: University Press Of America, 2008), 87.

<sup>73</sup> Honey Oberoi Vahali, *Lives in Exile: Exploring the Inner World of Tibetan Refugees* (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 22.

speech as well, such as Ama Adhe's account that "With the result of being unable to bear with tortures, there are so many Tibetans become restless from prisons. It is hard to describe if something was wrong with them mentally, but some kept on laughing for hours and hours and kept drinking silly things." Comparably, *Lung* disorders, mentioned by the nurse above as Dorje's primary condition, refers to wind disorder and is caused by worry, anxiety, financial problems, sadness, family problems, changing from a hot to cold place, unbalanced activity levels, and an unhappy life.<sup>74</sup>

Under the auspices of Tibetan medicine, Dorje is being treated for several of the conditions listed above. This is her story, told in English in the nurse's voice and these are all the things that were conveyed to me before I was told, "She does not pay any attention at all". I have chosen to leave the narrative unabridged (emphasis mine):

She was born in a farming family. In general, she's very happy in Tibet. She became a nun at 17 but as nun she did not have any chance to go to the village monastery as it is a small monastery. There's limit and once a new nun came, they don't have entry in the monastery. The nun has to go to a monastery to do all the teachings. But once she didn't get the chance, there is no use of staying at home [in the TAR]. Sometimes the guards they go out one place to another and if the chance comes, the guards just drop and ask what's your name and where you are from, which monastery, department and everything. [Tibetans] didn't have any freedom to go freely like here [in exile]. Sometimes a great lama comes to give teachings. First, they have to submit their names. They have to take permission then only they can take who can go or cannot go attend. So once they declare the names, then only can they get the teachings. As a nun, she has to practice Buddhism and all these. There she didn't get a chance. So for that, she came to India in 2006 and 2007.

First, she tried to come to India in 2005. The police caught her and returned her back to Tibet. They were put in jail for more than 3 months. They told to her parents and who gave money to [bail her out of jail]. The Chinese took the money and asked them to promise "you don't send you children to India". Her parents did all that and again at the end of 2006, she came to India again. And that time, they hired somebody [to aid with the transition] so the second time, they didn't get any trouble. But the first time she got caught and sent back. That was in 2005.

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<sup>74</sup> Prost, *Precious Pills: Medicine and Social Change among Tibetan Refugees in India*, 47.

There were fifty members altogether and only three other women, including man taking them. They feel happy because [they were] coming to India. On the way, whole night they have to walk, walk, walk. And day time, they have to hide somewhere, hide from people in the forest and once night time comes, they have to walk and walk and finally they reached near Tshar Gonpo valley. Down the valley, they can see Mount Everest and all. The man taking them said today only we can rest and tomorrow we can pass the way.

From Lhasa, there are nine stops, nine small police stations. They have almost passed all the stops. Only one is remaining. So if they cross that police stop, they are free. The man said only one is remaining. So they were all very happy at night and were resting.

The next day the police caught them. Only two members escaped. They were running everywhere. Some upside, some downward because fifty members is a large number. So all the police were shooting their guns. They fear, all the blood coming to their mouths and they were crying and running everywhere but somehow they caught everybody and put them in a truck, they handcuffed all the people and took them to prison. They were hitting very badly for the men but not to the girls. That whole night, they were not allowed to sleep. The police were [working in shifts] and watching: if someone is sleeping, they beat very badly. On the floor, they left all the people.

The prison was in a very remote area. Actually they had taken them to Shigatse<sup>75</sup> prison but some of them ran away and they didn't get all the members. Once they get all the prisoners, they shift from one prison to another. That prison from outside, they put a name called 'Advisory Department' in Tibetan and Chinese language. From outside they showed people who are inside that they are just advising them or like mental people, just like giving education and all. But inside, it's prison. So in first prison, it's like all the prison, small and remote. Eyes—they have a hole that they can see outside and nothing and a small toilet, no water, no mattress, no blanket. The food they are getting is tsampa flour and black tea. They don't have milk and malt to take. They don't have anything to wear and all. With that, they got diarrhea and everybody in that prison go to the same toilet without water. The Chinese when they come for rounds and if they talk a little bit, they come and beat them. Luckily she didn't get any beating because at that time, she was small like young age but the boys, brutally beaten. Every day they questioned whatever they say and they listen carefully means they don't backbite or something. They listen carefully, then they give little rewards like gardening and all. The rest is very brutal. She was in prison for three and a half months.

Her father is the head of the family and he had to come to prison to get a letter and to another district to get the permission to take his child back. They have to pay the prison man, like 5000, 5000 many people one by one. And finally, they have to take her home. In her village district, every week she has to go

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<sup>75</sup> A major city in the Tibetan Autonomous Region

with her father to report that she is present in Tibet and “I’m not going to India”, like that. All the promises has to be taken by the head of the family. **Her father has to take the responsibility and once she is out of prison and she has to do something wrong, the whole punishment will get to her father. Her father is responsible for her. Even though she has told everything regarding this problem to parents and relatives, somehow once when you are out of prison, you are totally free but inside the pain is still there. Her parents never said “don’t go to India”. They know their child is a nun and they don’t have to stay in Tibet as a nun as she is not getting any Buddhist education teaching.** They know the benefits that if she goes to India, she will be more acknowledged and life will be more better in India. So they never say “don’t go to India”. Somehow they feel their child is in danger. Then second time, she was here, from 2007 till now, her identity in China, they have taken it back. And her parents are paying the punishment money till now—monthly or yearly. And monthly or yearly [the authorities] will question [her parents] why she went and how she went.

**For [her monastic] education, everything is better in India. In Tibet, she has no monastery to enter and in India, she has a monastery to stay and live and do all her studies. Somehow she [now] gets the teaching but inside her pain is still there that her parents are getting the punishment because of her.**

Her greatest fears are that her parents are there and she is here. If she again go back to Tibet, definitely she can’t stay in home like before. They will put her in jail more than 5 to 6 years or lifelong because this is her second time. First time, she was caught, she already made all the promises that she is not going back to India. But she went again. And if again she goes back to Tibet, definitely she will be in prison. **Her greatest fear is that her parents are in Tibet and she is here. She doesn’t feel like going back because there is no use. They are there and she is here. The meeting is not there.** That is her greatest fear.

The effects that these experiences have on Dorje and “pain [that] is still there that her parents are getting the punishment because of her” may be encapsulated as *lung* disorder. Thinking back to Dorje’s answer, “Once you become sick, you can see a doctor, can get medicine and be relieved.... It is okay—can take it easy.”, I note that relief may occur at several levels: being able to be treat and cure the disorder, but also just being able to contend with the unwieldy and troubling experiences under a

unified concept. If these problems can be clustered under a condition which may be treated through the restoration of humoral balance, the conceptual framing of one's problems as embodied results not only in a particular self-diagnosis, but also an understanding of its resolution and cure. To this point, Prost writes in *Precious Pills* (emphasis mine):

Tibetan exiles are meaningfully selective in the ways they present and legitimate the intervention of environmental factors, humors, karma, and the relationship between these factors in the course of their illnesses (Prost, 2006a). Some will relate the emergence of disease to personal histories and karma, physical and social constraints, and the hardships of exile....In the context of the TAR, Adams and Janes have described *lung* disorders as a somatized "weapon on the weak", a syndrome through which Tibetans articulate individual experiences of oppression and resistance. **Connor finds that the role of Tibetan medicine is then to provide 'a context in which people can express their distress in their own cultural idioms as vulnerable and disenfranchised minority in the People's Republic of China...'** (Connor, 2001: 16). From this perspective, *lung* designates a force operating both inside the body as humor, but also outside the body as a social and moral force. *Lung* links the social and political by encompassing 'the political as part of bodily suffering, and as [an] expression of the social and moral connections between oeioko' (Adams, 1998: 92). Adams and others have suggested that the Tibetan body is partly constituted by the social, and experienced at least to some degree as a 'collective' body. Indeed, phenomena such as 'lung epidemics' manifest the suffering of individual Tibetans as one 'body politic', in Scheper-Hughes and Lock's terms (1987)."<sup>76</sup>

Beyond the institutional narrative of Tibetan Medicine, this discussion now finds its second relation to narrative: that Tibetan Medicine may be used to provide the vocabulary for suffering and distress within what is pretty much the antithesis of a complaint culture. On the other hand, it must also be noted that it is just as possible that it is precisely because of such conceptions of health, illness, distress, and suffering that the neurotic, emotive unfurling that one might expect from someone in

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<sup>76</sup> Prost, *Precious Pills: Medicine and Social Change among Tibetan Refugees in India*, 95-96.

Dorje's position is held at bay. The connection between conceptions of health and narrative may therefore be one of mutual influence. This unpacking of the notion that "Tibetans do not have many mental problems" may then allow us to see how presentations of Tibetan self-identity as impervious to suffering may be encoded within conceptions of wellness and cure which enfold suffering into diagnosis and posit amelioration.

I do not think that concept and vocabulary are precious pills that cure all; as Dorje spoke, her words flowed but her eyes were cast downwards and her voice low. The "pain is still there that her parents are getting the punishment because of her" and "the meeting is not there", meaning that reconciliation with her family is not a possibility. But I will say that it is Dorje's conceptual understanding of illness that allows her to express that she "doesn't pay much attention at all" and that she will recover in "one or two weeks". Here, I ask: does this conceptual consolidation manage suffering or simply defer it? Could deferral be a potential strategy to manage, and even cure, suffering? I will continue to tend to these questions and address them concretely in my conclusion.

For now, I pick up on a notion ventured in section 1.1 that by conceptualizing the affliction of evil spirits as internally manageable, the patient is given a sense of control. Similarly, conceptual consolidation here makes the messy manageable and gives Dorje a semblance of control over her suffering. On the other hand, giving the patient control can compound suffering instead. At the Tuberculosis ward at Delek Hospital, I spoke to a nun in her early twenties who had been warded there. Phuljung translated and conveyed the following:

Her master said she can treat her disease through meditation, but since she is not good in meditation practice, she can't treat as her master had supervised or advised according to her master. Her master said when you contemplate a subject like illness, you move them or think in right motivation, so that will help to create a good energy in your body. As long as that energy last in body, body will not be caught by that disease. Once you get away from that, everything will open a door for disease to come back again. She can't do as her masters had advised her. There is no frustration or disappointment that she can't treat disease. But there is a very sad feeling in heart and it is very sad for not able to follow advice of master due to her lack of knowledge and practice.

By teaching her that she could heal herself through meditation, the onus for recovery is placed upon the patient. In the advent of its failure, suffering is transferred from a bodily issue to a failure of meditative practice. With volition comes responsibility, demonstrating that control is perhaps only desirable until the patient fails to harness it toward recovery.

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Another flourish in the construction of popular ex-political narratives is attributing individual strength and resilience to cultural factors such as Buddhism or Tibetan warriorship (more on this from Tenzin Tsundue shortly). This allows the extraordinary feat to be extended to that of survival in exile by the rest of the community in the minds of the audience. Luran R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani note that "Recent studies have begun to expose the myth of a Tibet completely shut off from the rest of the world,"<sup>77</sup> implying a perceived mythical landscape and perpetually smiling Tibetan preserved in a chrysalis of Western imagination, but I wish to unpack the way present-day published narratives of suffering and peaceful forbearance get abstracted and projected as a generalization

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<sup>77</sup> Luran R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), xvii.

onto the rest of Tibetan society. I think now of the public faces of the Tibetan community, and the special brand of ex-political prisoner exceptionalism that makes particular stories “worth” telling in the form of books and world tours. These come from exceptionally dire plights, and exceptionally serene dispositions in the face of it; long sentences, horrific beatings, and the ability to have come out on the other side seemingly recovered and free of hate. These individuals and their trajectories are remarkable. If “remarkable” is all that the wider public sees however, the sharing of a life story becomes a waging of a public relations campaign, transcending the personal when it elicits a projection onto a whole community, one of great pain and correspondingly great equanimity in the face of it—a singular reality which elicits the dual and connected responses of “Poor suffering Tibetans!” and “Peaceful Tibetans!”.

I asked an activist who has interacted often with foreign allies in her work with Students for a Free Tibet if she perceives a certain expectation of her behavior as a Tibetan. She said:

Yes, that is a big pressure on us that Tibetan are peaceful, nonviolent, that kind of sometimes it’s a burden for me because I am human and I can be angry. I can fight sometimes when I am angry. This is a human nature but the Western perception is how a Tibetan should be and when they see something like weird, they didn’t perceive it, register it. The religion that we have somewhere...the compassion is the root of the things and we should be nonviolent and I have believed in nonviolence. As human, we cannot be nonviolent all the time in your personal life. It is a burden on us how people think of us. When you go to the club, you see Tibetans fight—why do Tibetan fight? So that kind of thing is there.<sup>78</sup>

Here, the principle of nonviolent protest gets extended to a general nonviolence in nature of Tibetan people. In the pursuit of Tibetan independence,

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<sup>78</sup> Tenzin Tselha, personal communication, 28 June, 2014.

advocates must also calibrate nonviolence and fervence. Take for example the activist Tenzin Tsundue. As mentioned in my first chapter, he was hailed by the New York Times as “ the new and most visible face, after the Dalai Lama, of the Tibetan exile community”.<sup>79</sup> This was in reference to his 2002 protest stunt of climbing a fourteen-storey building to unfurl a "Free Tibet: China, Get Out" banner when the then-Prime Minister of China was visiting a Mumbai hotel, tenacity and aggression are part of the reason for why Tsundue is a renowned figure, apart from his gripping poetry and essays. The protest act itself is marked by nonviolence, but to then map a default of placidness onto the nonviolent protester is a misalignment. In 2013, when I asked him about the impact Buddhism might have on Tibetan society and the reputation of peacefulness it has developed, he said:

It is not just [because of] Buddhism. The courageous acts of compassion that you see in the Tibetan people come from a great culture of heroism and warriorship that was there even before the coming of Buddhism to Tibet. I see the embracing of Buddhism by Tibetans in itself as a very brave act. During the 7th Century, Tibet had the largest empire in Asia, and at the height of their power, they relinquished it because of a great sense of warriorship, a great sense of truth in justice. When Buddhism came to Tibet, the exploration of truth found a greater cause. Where Tibetans used to think there was glory in conquering people, amassing land and physical materials, they now felt that true happiness and glory was in conquering your mind, understanding your anger, greed, and hatred against others. If you could conquer that, you'd be rich.<sup>80</sup>

In addressing the identity of the community, Tenzin Tsundue invokes pillorying Tibetan warriors of yore and contextualizes them as proto-Buddhist figures. Reaching back into Tibetan culture for warrior-pacifists as a model for the present-day activist is perhaps his way of reclaiming a still-identifiable and

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<sup>79</sup> Mishra, Panka, *The Restless Children of the Dalai Lama*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/18/magazine/18tibet.html?pagewanted=all> (December 18, 2005).

<sup>80</sup> Tenzin Tsundue, personal communication, November 19, 2013.

compelling Tibetan identity that is distinct from the toothlessly smiling Tibetan whose power lies in peace without action. Lopez finds that latter portrayal is harmful to the cause of Tibetan independence as it enshrines the Tibetans in a realm of pure ideals, thereby removing any actual political power they might wield.<sup>81</sup> By positioning “conquering the mind” over “conquering people” as a process of discovering what “true happiness and glory” is, Tenzin Tsundue’s intervention creates agency and choice in the fate of his nation, positing that it lost its land not as a result of weakness but due to a shift in values that took place when they chose to let Buddhism in. The pain of being displaced is deferred, as loss and occupation are reframed within the context of a historical precedent of conscious relinquishment.

Another move that Tenzin Tsundue makes here is to contextualize Buddhism within his “Tibetanness” and his Tibetan heritage, rather than have his “Tibetanness” be circumscribed by assumptions based on Buddhist tenets. This reversal marks his priority of affiliation and also demonstrates the asymmetrical nature of those oft-equated properties. For instance, a conventional equation might be that “All Tibetans are Peaceful (substitute with your popular stereotype of choice)” because “All Tibetans are Buddhists”. Tenzin Tsundue’s argument looks more like this: “Tibetans come from a great culture of heroism and warriorship”, so the only reason they embraced Buddhism was because they had the courage to explore “conquering the mind” over “conquering people”, and in doing so bravely risked the formidable

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<sup>81</sup> Donald S. Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*, 10, quoted in Georges Dreyfus, “Are We Prisoners of Shangrila? Orientalism, Nationalism, and the Study of Tibet,” *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies*, no. 1 (2005), 2.

empire they had built. This results in Tibetans today, descended from warriors first and Buddhists second, who enact “courageous acts of compassion.”

Returning to what Dhardon Sharling said, “ If people want to have a general idea of Tibet, let it come from a Tibetan. The idea that people associate with Tibetans is very subjective. Whatever conclusion you want to draw, as long as it comes from a Tibetan source, it is fine.”<sup>82</sup> It seems it is natural and perhaps even helpful to construct emblems of Tibetan identity, but perhaps some portrayals from within the community are more helpful in deconstructing the Prison of Shangri-La than others. By painting the self in broad strokes to construct an emblem, however, I wonder if this is still a form of deferring selfhood and the incumbent interiority. I turn now to the genre of testimony to consider how Tibetans talk about others, how they are more comfortable talking about others than themselves, and how they talk about themselves through talking about others.

## **2.2 TESTIMONY, MEMORY, AND POSTERITY**

When I pay famed ex-political prisoner and activist Ama Adhe a visit, her husband tells me she is out doing a round of Kora<sup>83</sup>, which she does twice a day, so I decide to see if any of her neighbors are willing to chat instead. “There are other ex-political prisoners who live in this block,” my translator Phuljung says, as if this is common knowledge. We knock on a door two apartments away. Losang, 27, opens it; I ask if I can speak to him about my project, and he agrees and invites Phuljung and I into a narrow but comfortable room that he shares with two other roommates. From a shelf

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<sup>82</sup> Dhardon Sharling, personal communication, July 1, 2014.

<sup>83</sup> Turning prayer wheels

above his dresser displaying framed photos of the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa, he reaches up and retrieves a laminated sheet full of text. Throughout our interview, he constantly refers to the sheet. Nearing the end of the interview, I enquire about the sheet to which he is referring. He tells me that it is “the whole story” of when he participated in a demonstration, when he was born, and how he fled from Tibet:

Since I am not good enough in Tibetan language, I just tell my stories to someone who [transcribed] my whole story and there is no influence or no other person who re-wrote or corrected my biography. Because I do not have a sharp mind—I have quite a memory problem—so it helps me to have a record of the story of my life. When I get the opportunity to tell my story after many years, I will not forget the number of years I have participated. So I keep this record very precious because my mind not that sharp to remember everything.

I asked if getting the opportunity to tell his story was important to him. He replied that the record of his stories allowed him to meet the Dalai Lama. He added, “There is not enough time to tell all my stories when I met His Holiness, so they just pass my stories by some piece of paper and [so as to] not consume the time of other people. So I just simply distribute and send my record whenever I have a chance to meet high ranking people instead of telling a one hour story.”

On who he else he hoped his story would reach, Losang said, “I hope my biography on this file will allow me [to serve as] witness that such things happen in Tibet, to say, ‘I was there. I’m the witness and I have gone through this and there is no freedom of speech in Tibet and people are suffering in Tibet.’ This file will prove very good evidence or witness to Tibetan inside Tibet and for people here.”

Losang demonstrates two uses of having a recorded life history of a Tibetan refugee: as personal currency in making connections with important figures, which is dependent on having a reproducible physical document on hand for easy distribution, and the affirmation as a first-hand witness to events. I will discuss the notion of witnessing and testimony shortly in this section, but first note that Losang's expressed interest in preserving the truth in the face of eroding memory runs counter to the assertion of having remembered everything perfectly that I found in some of my other interviews. Palden Gyatso said that he was motivated by the knowledge that he would need to tell his story when he was eventually freed from imprisonment, and decided to process and commit his experiences to memory for this reason.

During my interview with Ama Adhe, she spoke of the importance of sharing her experience as a way from galvanizing young activists:

The best way to bring the voice of Tibetan elders to the younger generation is to constantly tell stories to youngsters year by year. I had been willing to keep telling my story to the staff member of Students for a Free Tibet many years ago and that really helped the Tibetan youngsters to move them and work hard for the Tibet Issue. Years later there was an unbelievable change taken place at Students for a Free Tibet office of how they work on. Now we can see there are so many office run by Students for a Free Tibet scattered throughout every country. At one meeting of Students for a Free Tibet, they said, 'Ama Adhe is our mother because of her story sharing we are able to come such a long journey to help sustain the Tibetan movement.' So sharing stories—it is the best way to cover the breach between the older and new generation.

Though similar in expression to the novelist and politician Thubten Samphel's notion of the younger generation taking up the "art" of paying forward a story of a Tibet they have no direct access to through stories that they are told, I would take care to distinguish Ama Adhe's intentions as inspiration rather than transference. I then

asked if it was difficult for her to recall the more painful parts of her experiences such as the instances of sexual assault laid bare when she was recounting it for her book. Though I had meant “difficult” in terms of triggering or emotionally taxing, this is registered as “hard to remember” by Phuljung when he translates my query. Lost in translation, the question bears this answer, “Because it was unbearable in prison, I could remember each and every story without any effort and it lingers in my mind as if it had happened yesterday. It didn’t take hardship to tell my stories so it was quite easy to tell and remember my story.”

The fear of forgetting also resonates on a larger scale: the fervent reinstatement of “Tibetaness” and Tibetan identity, both in exile and in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, reflects this. According to Warren W. Smith, Tibetan national identity is a product of shared historical experiences of the empire period later developed through encounters with distinctively foreign culture, especially China.<sup>84</sup> If Tibetaness is defined as “not Chineseness” then it is an active disavowal of attempts at assimilation, a collective effort to not forget the atrocities that have been committed in Chinese-occupied Tibet, as much as it is about not forgetting salient cultural touchstones.

Returning to Losang’s comment, “I just tell my stories to someone who [transcribed] my whole story and there is no influence or no other person who re-wrote or corrected my biography”, I note an effort to maintain the correspondence between presentation and lived experience, and the emphasis on the lack of mediation, even with someone like Losang whose story has not been published. The

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<sup>84</sup> Warren W. Smith, *China’s Tibet?: Autonomy or Assimilation* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2008), 5.

assertion of perfectly functioning memory could be another manifestation of this; time and human memory, too, are mediations.

At the end of my interview with Losang, Phuljung turned to me and said:

[Losang] is making a request to me and you not to misuse or mislead other people to this information or sometimes putting a lot of exultation of his stories. He has shared very sincerely from his heart, the love for his people and respect for His Holiness. And how the Centre of Administration has taken care of the life of political prisoners. So it is really important for us to write accurate and print information to write in the papers or to share to other people. So this is very man-written. He said he is floating two hands in front of us, please make sure we don't misuse any information about his life story. He is saying his heart-felt thanks for coming to have interview and listen to some of the stories of people in Tibet and also if you need any further information or to know about Tibet, he will always share his viewpoint and help you to get holistic information of Tibet.

I never clarified with Phuljung what he meant by “floating two hands up in front of us”, though perhaps I should have. I imagine it one of two ways: two palms facing out in surrender, or a facing each other in a *namaste* gesture. Here I reflect on the dynamic that exists between the foreign interviewer and the Tibetan interview subject.

Honey Oberoi Vahali writes in the introduction to *Lives in Exile*, her collection of interviews with Tibetan refugees in India:

By locating meaning in the intersubjective third space, where the subjectivities of the researcher and the researched meet, one primary objective of this effort has been to make sense of those complex aspects of human experience which are sometimes best reached only when dialogical aperture enables a person to articulate certain difficult aspects of her inner experience in the presence of an empathic ‘other’—the researcher.... by associating with the lived experience of the participant, the researcher closely follows the narrator’s attempts at formulating and reformulating the stories of his/her

life...the very act of narrating one's story is an intrinsic part of negotiating with one's experiences and even life itself.<sup>85</sup>

Such a positioning is well intentioned and places the ethnographer sympathetically. Ethnographers are part of the very social landscape of Dharamsala that we seek to examine, curious inquisitors of the everyday. Particularly among a community that has a vested interest in presenting itself favorably to the international community, the ethnographer is perceived by the subject to hold a power not unlike that of a journalist, particularly with the phenomenon of celebrity Tibetologists who are integral to the bolstering the Free Tibet campaign. Being perceived similarly to journalists, ethnographers are also equally suspect of misuse of information. Dorje, the nun who I interviewed at the Men Tsee Khang inpatient ward, implored that I not use her name in my paper. "So many people came from, like foreigners and Tibet. They came together, interviewing, recording. So many people came and that time I didn't know. Like you, it is not a big deal; you are [accompanied by someone from the] Men Tsee Khang department. From outside somebody comes, it will be fear for me. That experience I got that day [when I arrived] in Nepal, so many people came and question and asking the journey and all. I didn't imagine that my interviews will affect my family but they somehow give my news to the Chinese government and my parents will have problems. So that fear I have." Dorje's caution in sharing her story highlights a tension between the uses of ex-political prisoner narratives in exile, be it for political asylum of the individual or for maintaining posterity in the nation's oral history, and the risk they pose within the Tibetan Autonomous Region.

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<sup>85</sup> Vahali, *Lives in Exile: Exploring the Inner World of Tibetan Refugees*, xx.

These complexities must therefore be taken into account alongside Vahali's description of the exchange between the interviewer and interviewee as a freeing, reflective space of actualization. While I have had several interviews in which the conversations appeared to elicit joy and gratefulness for the interest in their stories, such as a former soldier who eagerly shared his battle tales when I talked to him at an eldercare facility , perhaps due to a less sustained engagement with my subjects as compared to Vahali's process which took place over several days for each individual, I would not portray the interview space as necessarily transformative. Vahali writes that "the very act of narrating one's story is an intrinsic part of negotiating with one's experiences and even life itself"; I would argue that for some Tibetans living in Dharamsala, the very act of narrating one's story is an intrinsic part of life in Dharamsala.

Recorded testimony exists not only in the form of life histories collected in books such as *Lives in Exile* and *Children of Tibet: An Oral History of the First Tibetans to Grow Up in Exile*, but in narrative pamphlets widely available around town in shops selling Tibetan cultural paraphernalia and Students for a Free Tibet merchandise, the office of the Gu Chu Sum Movement Association of Tibet for ex-political prisoners, and the Central Tibetan Authority Information Center. "Pamphlet" is perhaps a scanty term for some of the literature; some are booklets upwards of 150 pages containing fleshed out narratives, while others more closely resemble newsletters and contain snippets or summaries of several people's stories. Most of these attest to the torture and human rights violations committed in Chinese-occupied Tibet. Many also contain accounts of self-immolation alongside biographies and

grainy monochrome photos of the self-immolators. They feature occasionally first-person but mostly second-hand testimony, rarely self-authored due to the occasion for writing often being either to speak on behalf of the imprisoned or to remember the dead. The ratio of pamphlets I saw in various locations in McLeod Ganj produced in Tibetan to English was about 3:1. Tellingly stated in one of the pamphlets, “In Tibet there is no freedom of speech, and therefore, writing a book there on one’s life experience under the Chinese is not possible. Therefore, it is imperative that one’s experiences of life under Chinese rule should be written, and for clarity in one’s native language first. The Association...[has] published five books thus far. This is the first life story of a political prisoner we have published in English, and we will bring out more in future.”<sup>86</sup>

These pamphlets stand out to me a body of work containing narratives that have been overlooked in Tibetan Studies partly, I suspect, because they are written in a vein that neither qualifies them as being literary works nor collated oral history in bound volumes. This is not precisely a high-low culture divide, given that oral history efforts precisely attempt to fill in the gaps of a People’s History. Rather, protest literature might simply seem too pedestrian and dispersed by nature of their intended purpose, to be considered and analyzed collectively. More closely aligned with oral history narratives because they generally lack poetic embellishment, testimonies in these pamphlets are distinct because they lack the cohering influence of the collating

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<sup>86</sup> Gu-chu-sum Movement of Tibet (Dharmasāla, India) *The Courage to Rebel against Oppression: A Brief Biography of Lobsang Tenzin, a Serving Political Prisoner*. (Dharamsala: Gu-Chu-Sum Movement of Tibet, 2003).

ethnographer or journalist<sup>87</sup>. These pamphlets therefore strike me as important because they are a particularized deviation from top-down historicization of a community. The testimonies within say as much about the featured individuals as they do about the ones who are providing testimony, and this dynamic of witnessing bears further analysis.

I first draw attention to the introduction of a pamphlet entitled “The Courage to Rebel Against Oppression: a Brief Biography of Lobsang Tenzin, a Surviving Political Prisoner”, which sheds light on the ends to which testimony is being produced (emphasis mine):

The Courage to Rebel Against Oppression is printed with two aims. **First, we seek to secure the release of Lobsang Tenzin**, who is still languishing in prison. Due to the excessive beatings and inhumane conditions he endured in prison, he is suffering from poor vision, cardiovascular problems, constant headache, back problems causing difficulty in bending down and other orthopedic trauma.

Second, during the 28th National Uprising Day on March 10, **His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to write down in black and white the sufferings individuals had endured** under the Chinese. He said that some have suffered much, and that **if we do not document their story, then many of those who suffered will soon pass away and their stories will remain unknown**. He added that if we do not act now, there will be a day when we would say that such-and-such a person had endured much suffering at the hands of the Chinese, but we will have no **precise and comprehensive documentation**. **His Holiness therefore suggested that all data on the victims be collected and printed, no matter how little or how much....**

The subject of this story is still languishing in prison, so **we are not able to provide a comprehensive and detailed history**, lacking all but the most general information on his present circumstances. We have used the available document on him with us, collected information from the various concerned

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<sup>87</sup> For example, Valhali describes her process in *Lives in Exile* as taking individual life histories of Tibetan refugees over several sessions and pieced them together to form a coherent narrative.

governmental, interviewed former political prisoners and friends, and hence undertake to bring out this publication.<sup>88</sup>

The first thing to note is that the pamphlet cites the Dalai Lama's authorizing power as the drive to document incidents of suffering for posterity. This is consistent with the fact that it is the Dalai Lama who has spearheaded the few notable oral history projects, such as *Children of Tibet: An Oral History of the First Tibetans to Grow Up in Exile*, for which he provided the introduction.<sup>89</sup> He did so for Ama Adhe's book as well. Similar to the authors of the pamphlet, Ama Adhe was compelled by the Dalai Lama's call to action:

During the first time, the American woman told me she's going to write a book about me. I refused to that lady. Later, there was a letter from His Holiness saying that it will be helpful for the Tibetan people and people who are interested to learn about the situation in prison and Tibet. This will be helpful to people and with the strong support from His Holiness, so I changed my mind and accepted. I was very lucky and feel happy to be able to share my story with His Holiness. Now I feel it is my responsibility to share the unbearable torture I had gone through in Tibet to a larger number of audience.

When Ama Adhe notes that she originally objected to becoming the subject of a book, I am reminded of the first door I knocked on during my visit to the eldercare facility in Dharamsala. A woman in her mid-seventies answered the door cautiously, and after Phuljung explained my project, she agreed to speak with us. As we settled in her room and began to ask her questions about her life in Tibet, however, she began to grow uneasy. Haltingly, she told us that she had not received an education in Tibet

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Vyvyan Cayley, *Children of Tibet: An Oral History of the First Tibetans to Grow up in Exile* (Balmain NSW, Australia: Pearlfisher, 1994).

and that she worked in the fields with her family, who were farmers by trade. Following that, she would say no more, and turned to Phuljung with a shake of her head. He explained, “She thinks she is not good enough to accept the interview and feels very sorry. She thinks she does not know anything and you should go to someone else who can talk better than her.” This sentiment of not feeling “good enough” or comfortable with sharing one’s story was not pervasive among the people I spoke to—if that were the case there is a good chance that this project would never have gotten off the ground. The few instances of hesitancy do however stand to highlight the fact that volunteering to narrate and share the trajectory of one’s life might not be instinctual or natural among the community. If there is a force that propels such sharing and the related act of documenting tales of suffering for posterity, the Dalai Lama’s authorizing power proves to be a strong contender. I will discuss the community’s reliance and deference to the Dalai Lama further in my last chapter, in section 4.2.

Returning to analyzing a second pamphlet, the sixteenth issue of *Tibetan Envoy*, the annual English language publication of the Gu Chu Sum Movement Association since 1988, also explicitly spells out its intentions:

International and internally within Tibet  
1. To continue our thorough research on the conditions of Tibetan political prisoners and to keep records of the Chinese police and soldiers who inflicted torture upon Tibetan political prisoners. We shall **continue to present reports to international organizations that investigate human rights abuse and the United Nation’s human rights council. Here we keep documented records of political prisoners.**

The list goes on, but the first listed goal is most striking, along with the excerpt above it, in painting a picture of the motivations behind producing these pamphlets, given that they demonstrate an intended audience and a clear focus on keeping documentation for posterity. The goal of “precise and comprehensive documentation” is juxtaposed against the acknowledgment that lack of access is a limitation (“we are not able to provide a comprehensive and detailed history”). What are the salient details which make an account of a person’s life or situation “precise and comprehensive”? Will these pieces of testimony, ranging from a single paragraph to an entire pamphlet, count for anything?

This all depends on the desired outcome used to evaluate their “worth”. The first pamphlet states, “His Holiness therefore suggested that all data on the victims be collected and printed, no matter how little or how much”. Perhaps, as I have suggested, anything produced through the Dalai Lama’s authorizing power is intrinsically worthwhile. Beyond this, I am similarly inclined to say that every bit of recorded information has value, even if all that recalls an existence are several short sentences, though perhaps this is born of romanticism more than anything. Cohering history is sometimes compared to quilt-making; indeed, many of these narratives are unlikely to standalone as historical documents, but together would make a striking tapestry of what happened in Chinese-occupied Tibet during those times. If the effort to amass these testimonies (that is, the metaphorical stitching process) and the triumph of its very existence are not enough, however, their individual and collective “worth” must then be evaluated against extenuating ends.

According to the intended goals underscored above, the culmination of testimony occupies two separate timelines: upon the projected eventual freedom of Tibet, and during the lifespan of the prisoners who these testimonies seek to free. The first culmination results in remembrance, while the second results in rescue. Given that most of the English language pamphlets on the shelves at the Gu Chu Sum office were from 2011 and 2012 when I visited in 2014, I could not help but note that the second timeline along which seeking release for prisoners is the end goal holds within it a potential expiration date of these testimonies. To wit:

Lobsang Tenzin has been imprisoned for the last 23 years and is currently in Chushul Prison, Lhasa. At present he is known to be in critical condition. Lobsang Tenzin, the longest serving current Tibetan political prisoner post 1987 was arrested in 1988 for participating in popular anti-China protests that later led to the declaration of martial law in Tibet under Hu Jintao.<sup>90</sup>

The CTA quoted an audio message by the unnamed Tibetan official at the Tibetan Buddhist Association saying that “Jadrel Rinpoche is dead.” The report quoting from the audio message states that “some say Jadrel Rinpoche was poisoned to death.”<sup>91</sup>

Here is where the testimony of seeking rescue passes into the second mode of remembrance; tonally, nothing changes—there is neither an escalation nor de-escalation of urgency. It occurs to me that while there is no expiration date on a testimony of remembrance, there is a reverse time pressure exerted on its relevance: a testimony which rescues must come into use while the prisoner is still alive, while a testimony of remembrance becomes most useful in a future which allows for reflection on such atrocities safely sequestered as tragedies of the past. The first races

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<sup>90</sup> Gu-chu-sum Movement of Tibet (Dharmasāla, India), *Tibetan Envoy*, no. 16, (Dharmasala: Gu-Chu-Sum Movement of Tibet, 2003), 5.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 6

against a deadline, while the second requires reaching the end of occupation in order to come into fruition. The use of pamphlets to set in motion the freedom of the individual and the freedom of the nation-state fall along the same teleology but have differing rates of completion. As the proverbial quilt is being stitched, one lingers the knowledge that it is most likely to be appreciated in its aftermath. In some cases, it leads to the obituarization of the living.

Most testimonies follow the same pattern of providing biographical information: familial background (nomadic or farming, for example), names of relatives, possible monastic background, reason for imprisonment, location of prison, tortures endured, a report of physical health. This is nearly identical to the biographical data provided for those who have passed, without the addition of circumstances of death. The limitation of having “all but the most general information on [prisoners’] present circumstances”<sup>92</sup> results in a sketch of human lives less typical of chronicles of the flux of lived experience than summary expected upon its conclusion.

Then there are the pages upon pages of reports on self-immolators, which read like the most bare-boned obituaries of all:

Tsultrim and Tennyi, both 20 years of age, set themselves ablaze in Ngaba on 6th January, 2012. The protest took place in the courtyard of a hotel...[a witness reported] “with folded hands, they faced towards Kirti Monastery and raised a number of slogans amongst which the audible ones were “**Long live his Holiness the Dalai Lama**” and “**We want the return of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Tibet**”.’ Tennyi, a monk from Kirti monastery, died on 6 January and Tsutrim, a lay person, died on 7 January.

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<sup>92</sup> Gu-chu-sum Movement of Tibet, *The Courage to Rebel against Oppression: A Brief Biography of Lobsang Tenzin, a Serving Political Prisoner*.

On 8 January 2012, Sonam Wangyal, a respected spiritual figure in his early forties from Golok in Eastern Tibet, passed away on the spot after drinking and spraying kerosene all over his body before lighting himself up according to sources in exile....[He] self-immolated in front of the police station...shouting slogans calling for Tibet's freedom. In his audio message he says, "This is the 21st Century, and this is the year in which so many Tibetans have died. I am sacrificing my body to stand in solidarity with them in flesh and blood, and to seek repentance through this highest tantric offering of one's body. This is not to seek personal fame or glory. I am taking this action neither for myself nor to fulfill a personal desire nor to earn an honor."<sup>93</sup>

The act of self-immolation, as stressed by Sonam Wangyal's speech, is not about making a personal statement but adding to the collective call hailing the freedom of Tibet and of the Dalai Lama. Where I had previously cited the Dalai Lama's authorizing power, here the individuals invoke the Dalai Lama's long life as the only one that matters—rhetorically, but perhaps in actuality as well, seeing as this rhetoric directly precedes the extinguishing of their own lives. The message, though political, is depersonalized; the body is incinerated into the common carbon of solidarity; the self is immolated in a united stand. In order to reflect collective suffering, individual lives are forgone. As Robert Barnett notes, "The immolations changed [the] existing, unclear practice of political suicide in the post-Mao era by ritualising it, giving it a specific form, and conducting it in public space. A hazy and probably pervasive notion in contemporary Tibetan society about suicide as protest has thus been re-framed by the immolators as a clear, emphatic statement embodying high motives and collective purpose, one in which the act of self-killing is noble,

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<sup>93</sup> Gu-chu-sum Movement of Tibet (Dharmasāla, India), *Tibetan Envoy*, no. 17, (Dharamsala: Gu-Chu-Sum Movement of Tibet, 2003).

virtuous, and beneficial to the nation.”<sup>94</sup> Beyond the incidents themselves, note too that in these pamphlets, the focus is not on the actors but the act. Far from revealing anything about their life histories, these reports focus on what is likely all that is known of these people: the circumstances of their death, and their words shortly before it. Their legacy is perhaps as they intended, last words blending into a collective cry on the page, a refrain where each testimony echoes the last.

Where testimonies in pamphlets do get fleshed out, it is often in the realm of fact: drawing out relational ties or presenting physical evidence of torture. “The Tragic Fate of Bangri RinpoChe, Nyima Choedon and the Gyatso Orphanage School” illustrates both. The piece begins by situating the author giving testimony:

My name is Dechen Chonzom. I was born in Kham Nangchen, Rongpo Tsang. Our family is nomadic cum agricultural based. My father’s name was Karma Lhakyap and my mother’s name was Tashi Palmo. When I was 7 years old, the Chinese branded our family “high class”. My father was subjected to a struggle session. He was beaten severely, his ribs were broken, and he became lame. As a result, he could not work and became severely ill for more than 20 years, and eventually succumbed to illness. My parents had 8 children...

I worked at my family farm and looked after the animals until I was 18 years old. At that time, I joined Tashi Yangchengling Nunnery in Kham Nangchen to study Buddhism.... Afterwards, I stayed in Lhasa with my mother at the wish of my brother, Bangri Rinpoche. In 1996, I joined Gyatso Orphanage School as a foster mother.<sup>95</sup>

Dechen Chonzom discusses family before going over her personal vocational and monastic experience. The experience of her father foreground her own, and are presented without any personal input on the torture she witnessed. Graphic depictions

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<sup>94</sup> Robert Barnett, “Political Self-Immolation in Tibet: Causes and Influences”, *Revue d’Etude Tibétaines*, no. 25, (Paris: CNRS, UMR 8047: 2012), 47.

<sup>95</sup> Gu-chu-sum Movement of Tibet (Dharmasāla, India), *The Tragic Fate of Bangri RinpoChe, Nyima Choedon and the Gyatso Orphanage school*, (Dharamsala: Gu-Chu-Sum Movement of Tibet, 2005).

of physical injury are seamlessly juxtaposed with nondescript biographical data (“My parents had 8 children”). These characteristics of giving testimony recur widely in other accounts I read. At the beginning of the third paragraph of her account, Dechen Chonzom begins to make explicit her ties to the subjects of this pamphlet, who then become the narrative focus, “At this point, I will introduce my younger brother Jigme Tenzin Nyima, Nyima Choedon and the Gyatso Orphanage school. My younger brother Jigme Tenzin Nyima is also known as Bangri Rinpoche....”

From this point on, Dechen Chonzom refers to her younger brother exclusively as “Rinpoche”, indicating that while establishing family background is premised over individual trajectory, Buddhist hierarchy supersedes familial ties relationally. Her testimony shifts to focus on Bangri Rinpoche’s life, marriage to Nyima Choedon, and their founding and running of Gyatso Orphanage School. Narrative focalization returns to Dechen Chonzom when Bangri Rinpoche and Nyima Choedon are arrested in March 1999, and Dechen Chonzom is left to burn and destroy documents that may be used by the police to “make up false stories. Dechen Chonzom writes on (emphasis mine):

On 29 August, the police came to take me for interrogation, but all the children cried and pleaded with them. **Two of the children, Tsering Dickyi (age 12) and Bhutima (age 11) were both slapped by the policemen, but still the children would not let me go.** Around midnight, when all the children were asleep, the police came and took me, telling me not to make any noise. I was taken to Sangyip Prison. In the prison I was interrogated and asked who founded and funded Gyatso Orphanage school... The police told me not to lie and said the Gyatso Orphanage School was one of the Dalai Lama’s “splittist” schools. **They slapped me very hard in the face. They asked me who was connected with Bangri Rinpoche and Nyima Choedon.** I did not answer any more of their questions....I was detained in Sangyip for nine days. Since I did not speak, I was handed over to the North Side (Shiko) Police Station. From there I was dropped back at the Gyatso Orphanage School.

On the morning of 17 October 1999, the Chinese army and police came to the school....At that time, Ani Karma Yeshe, Gelek Nyima and I were arrested and taken to Gutsa Detention Center...**I learned that Ripoche and Nyima Choedon were also in Gutsa.**

In Gutsa Prison, my cell row was filled with people from Gyatso Orphanage School: in cell 1—Rinpoche, [lists cell 2-10].... I did not answer their real questions about Bangri Rinpoche and Nyima Choedon. They warned me that I might end up in prison for life....After this they called me every three months for interrogation. During interrogation they used both gentle and harsh tactics to extract information. **I faced the worst suffering during interrogations. Sometimes they beat me, slapped me and kicked me. Many times they used electric shocks,** causing me to fall unconscious....

The court sentenced me for three years. After a month I was taken for a blood test to check whether I was suffering from any illnesses. My health was already very fragile and I pleaded with them not to extract any blood from me, but to no avail....My heart started beating rapidly and I could not stand up for a long time.<sup>96</sup>

The title of the pamphlet implies that “The Tragic Fate” belongs primarily to “Bangri Rinpoche, Nyima Choedon and the Gyatso Orphanage School”. While Dechen Chonzom’s imprisonment and interrogation are due to her ties to the above parties, the testimony offered in relation to them also provides information about her own emotional and physical suffering, a “tragic fate” that includes being beaten and witnessing violence towards children. Dechen Chonzom’s personal suffering is deferred in the face of the suffering those of others due to familial, religious-hierarchical ties. By the very fact that Dechen Chonzom has been called upon as the author of this pamphlet due to her ties to Bangri Rinpoche rather than her own personal hardship, the intent of the publication itself is one such deferral.

Dechen Chonzom ends her testimony on a note of explicit intent, “I decided to go to India to meet His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan Government in Exile,

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

and the international community. I needed to speak about the plight of Bagri Rinpoche, Nyima Choedon and the fate of the Gyatso Orphanage School.” Here, the suffering of the freed is put aside to give voice to the suffering of the still-imprisoned. When a now-freed individual is asked to produce testimony focused on the suffering of someone currently imprisoned, a common assumption is that once someone is no longer in the environment in which suffering was inflicted upon them, they no longer suffer, which is why their focus may now be diverted. Semantically, at least, this is not unreasonable if “suffering” is used singularly. The ex-political prisoner is therefore expected to be post-suffering. If Palden Gyatso and Tanak Jigme Sangpo are models of behavior, the stakes are further raised. From their accounts, even while undergoing torture, they did not really suffer—forget being post-suffering; they are altogether above it.

Yet this is the suffering of Dechen Chonzom and not Bagri Rinpoche: “My health was already very fragile and I pleaded with them not to extract any blood from me, but to no avail. My heart started beating rapidly and I could not stand up for a long time.” The admission of physical suffering is rarely allowed to give way to emotional response, however—only once in the entire pamphlet does she describe her feelings when she expresses her worry the first night that Bagri Rinpoche does not return home. Here, as it is with the biographies of Ama Adhe and Palden Gyatso, the lack of “I felt” is keenly felt by the reader.

The works referred to in this chapter amount to an entire industry engaged in the production of narratives of suffering. Both genres of ex-political prisoner narratives and testimonial pamphlets navigate a delicate balance of depicting

suffering: they are as much about cementing the authorial presence's imperviousness to suffering as they are about conveying the suffering of others in need. The former is deferred precisely to facilitate the emphasis of the latter. Here, a contradiction occurs: how can a directive to "pay attention to the suffering at hand" function alongside the assertion that "there is no suffering"? Sympathy for the cause for Tibetan independence is desired, but personal sympathy is not, given the frustration of being relegated to victims short on agency. Here is a population in need of support that does not want to appear like a population in need. A corollary to the industry producing narratives of suffering thus emerges: the business of redirecting sympathies—"Help my country, please, but not me; I am doing just fine." I now proceed to discuss how personal suffering is dealt with and deferred, particularly in relation to collective identity and collective suffering, and the framing of challenges in exile in comparison to challenges of those within the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China.

### **3. MEDIATIONS OF SUFFERING**

“Tibetans by nature are not the suffering kind. We may call ourselves refugees but we are not the painful, suffering refugees. We have a deep sense of dignity, and our dignity comes from our hard work. My parents came from Tibet in 1960 and immediately they started to work as road construction laborers. For the past 53 years my parents have been working every day, making their living from farming. This dignity comes from a place of self-reliance and not being dependent on other people, and that’s where it comes together with the yearning for independence and freedom,” Tenzin Tsundue, the activist-poet, said in our interview.<sup>97</sup> I will now unpack how “suffering” is being used in this context.

On a typology that goes from internal to entirely external, suffering may then be any of the following: pathological predisposition, internal state, circumstantial experience, and external condition or stimulus. “By nature not the suffering kind” implies that suffering is closer to a pathological predisposition than a circumstantial experience, one which Tibetan people are immune to. “We may call ourselves refugees but we are not the painful, suffering refugees” implies control over the manifest state in the face of refugeehood, which may be characterized as adversity, and the singling out of dignity implies that suffering lies in opposition to it, making both contemporaneous responses. The “painful, suffering refugee” as an archetype renders “suffering” an adjective in addition to being an ongoing state. Self-reliance is described by Tenzin Tsundue as the key to this dignified, non-suffering state of refugeehood, and the desire for independence and freedom is ostensibly stretched

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<sup>97</sup> Tenzin Tsundue, personal communication, November 19, 2013.

from the individual to the national. Even within this single statement, suffering takes on a multiplicity of meaning.

Next, I consider the context in which such characterizations of suffering may be born. I refer to Tenzin Tsundue's previously cited poem, "My Tibetanness", in which he writes, "Tibetans: the world's sympathy stock./ Serene monks and bubbly traditionalists."<sup>98</sup> When nested within this point of view, "We are not the painful, suffering refugees" takes on a note of rebellion and defensiveness against a stock portrayal and the phenomenon of White Saviorism of passersby, volunteers, and Tibetologists alike. To live as a refugee in a popular tourist town is often to be doused in sympathy; suffering is assumed, and therefore must be fought against and denied by those resisting such essentialist moves. It bears noting that Tenzin Tsundue's claim of self-reliance is complicated by the fact that he is an activist, and that the activist must be heard by others to succeed. As galvanizing a crowd requires their sympathy and allegiance, Tenzin Tsundue runs up against the old problem of having to appeal to an often-foreign audience while wishing to disabuse them of the notion that he needs their saving. The refusal to play into external perceptions of their experience may then be one reason why many Tibetan people are less than effusive about personal suffering. Just as Tibetans are shown to resist the mythologization of their culture in modernity as I have discussed earlier, the resistance to discussing suffering may be pushback against the assumption of "poor, suffering" refugeehood.

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<sup>98</sup> Tenzin Tsundue, "My Tibetanness."

Another reason for why Tibetans “are not the suffering kind” and do not tend to discuss personal suffering may be an issue of language and expression. I asked the writer Bhuchung D. Sonam about the discernible lack of pathos-wringing in both written narratives and conversations I had had. “It has to do with, maybe, cultural habit. If you ask a Tibetan where he is going, six out of ten [Tibetans] will say “just here” (*la so*). Maybe it’s culture habit or they don’t feel important or maybe you are not in the center and what has happened at that time was more important than what has happened to you all have suffered.” This, he says, is a matter of failure to convey a range of experiences rather than a uniformity of experience in itself: “Of course if there were a hundred prisoners going through something, it will be different. In which case you have a unique story to tell but that has not manifested.” Bhuchung suggests that Tibetans are generally plain-spoken and tend not to be overly demonstrative or effusive: things are “just so”; they are the way they are. By referring to it as a cultural habit, Bhuchung supplies both a linguistic tendency as well as a way of relating to the world that premises acceptance of its natural state. It is possible to relate the latter to a cultural mindset shaped by Buddhism and karmic causation, though perhaps more subtly than a deterministic equivalency between Buddhism and peaceful Tibetan natures. If we confine the discussion to expression rather than nature, the suggestion that Buddhism’s influence on Tibetan cultural production leads to this plain-spokenness may be easier to approach. Finally, as I have suggested throughout this paper, it is specifically personal suffering which I have noticed people are reticent about, while the suffering of others or of Tibet as a nation brooks more

expressiveness. I posit that it is the conception of greater collective suffering which causes the deferral of expressions of personal suffering.

### 3.1 COLLECTIVE SELFHOOD AND SUFFERING

Tenzin Tsundue writes in his poem “My Tibetanness”:

*Tibetans: the world's sympathy stock.  
Serene monks and bubbly traditionalists;  
one lakh and several thousand odd,  
nicely mixed, steeped  
in various assimilating cultural hegemonies.*<sup>99</sup>

Here Tenzin Tsundue suggests that his Tibetanness is far from his own; it is currency for cultural appropriation. The metatextual quality of addressing the notion of Tibetanness in popular imagination while bringing about a sense of its more fraught, complex state in Tenzin Tsundue’s own experience is present in much of his poetry. The lyric poem is the most proliferated form of Tibetan literature; throughout the town of McLeod Ganj, thin booklets of self-published poetry, by poets emerging and known, are sold everywhere from bookstores to clothing and souvenir shops. In my experience as a reader, the greatest outpouring of emotion about suffering occurs in these booklets of poetry, far more than in conversation or in other written forms. The lyric poem is the vessel for the irascible “I,” which grieves, opines, and brims over with anger; it is also the “I” who hopes and cherishes. In this way, I was inclined to map the speakers in poetry and the speakers in conversations onto the same

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

representational plane, and note how “I” and “my” can be used in reference to both the collective and the singular.

For some, like Tenzin Tsundue, who considers himself an activist first and a poet second, his creative output is a part of a broader purpose and message which he lives out through actions beyond words, harnessing a facility with verse towards oratory prowess in rousing crowds in support of Tibetan freedom. For Tenzin Tsundue, the use of the singular and particular is used to both invoke and evoke the sense of collective. “The activist sometimes has to stand in front of thousands of people and speak with no preparation; the writer is interested in watching what he’s going to do, thinking all the while about what the most appropriate way to describe it all will be.”<sup>100</sup>

For others, the coalescence of individual fate and the fate of Tibet is implicit, embedded, and evoked offhandedly. When I spoke to Jinpa, 86, at Delek Hospital where he was an inpatient, he talked of an arduous diagnosis process of his cancer and kidney disease, concluding with “now, it seems like I have been waiting to die.” When asked about his hopes, however, he replied, “I am looking forward for a happy time for Tibet, time for freedom and time for reuniting with the remaining Tibetans in Tibet.” Similarly, Kunchun, 79, who I interviewed next, said, “There is no fear other than when I shall die. I am old and it [is] bad; it is very uncertain too.” When about his hopes, he replied, “I look forward to restore freedom in Tibet,” and when asked what he believed in, he replied again, “I believe one day we will get freedom.” The doubling up on hope and belief, two notions that, while categorically overlapping,

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<sup>100</sup> Tenzin Tsundue, personal communication, November 19, 2013.

occupied different answers every other time I had asked about them, struck me as a reflection of the pervasiveness of the Tibetan cause in Kunchen’s mind. There is an implicit self-inclusion in the scenario of returning to Tibet despite the fact that its likelihood is slim given the patient’s current health, yet what is expressed goes beyond a hope for others and extends to the self. This may be attributed to either a collective selfhood or a suspension of the limitations of the individual self to reach a desired collective fate.

Collective selfhood and the collective fate of Tibet were evoked by Lhundup, the manager at the Central Tibetan Authority Information Center who I mentioned previously to distinguish between wisdom and ritual-oriented Buddhism as what was responsible for the collective karma<sup>101</sup> of the Tibetan people. The lack of a wisdom-oriented practice among Tibetans caused them to lose their land to the Chinese in 1959, he said. Through a ritual-oriented practice, however, Lhundup believed that Tibetans had accrued huge amounts of merits over past lives, which was what has allowed them to live like non-refugees, living well on a daily basis with “no acute material problems,” a far cry from the expectation of how refugees are expected to live—as “painful, suffering Tibetans”, as Tenzin Tsundue might say. Further, because

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<sup>101</sup> Shravasti Dhammika, *Dhamma Musings*, <http://sdhammika.blogspot.com/2014/01/collective-karma-myth-or-reality.html>.

There is no Pali or Sanskrit words for collective karma in the traditional lexicons. The idea is also absent from later Buddhist texts. In his *Abhidharmakosabhasya* Vasubhandu has a comment that could be interpreted as suggesting something like collective karma. He says: “When many persons are united with the intention to kill, either in war, or in the hunt, or in banditry, who is guilty of murder, if only one of them kills? As soldiers, etc., concur in the realization of the same effect, all are as guilty as is the one who kills. Having a common goal, all are guilty just as he who among them kills, for all mutually incite one another, not through speech, but by the very fact that they are united together in order to kill. But is the person who has been constrained through force to join the army also guilty? Evidently so, unless he has formed the resolution: ‘Even in order to save my life, I shall not kill a living being’.” (Vasubandhu, *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya*. Vol.1, translation by Leo M. Pruden 1991.)

of “generations and generations of merit accumulation,” Lhundup believed that “Tibetans as a people have developed an innate awareness of humanity and goodwill—no matter how bad things are, it is very difficult for Tibetans to generate hatred. It takes mountains of effort to generate hatred, but is very easy for them to generate good feelings. Even towards the Chinese, maybe at the emotional level there is anger once in a while but it is still difficult for Tibetans to hate.” Lhundup cited Tibetans’ coexistence with Chinese visitors and residents in Dharamsala as evidence of this.

Lhundup’s characterization of collective karma is compelling for several reasons. First, note the way in which cause and consequence are bound up in Lhundup’s opinions. Lhundup attributes the Tibetan “awareness of humanity and goodwill” to “generations and generations of merit accumulation.” For some, to be Buddhist is to extend loving-kindness and compassion. For Lhundup, compassion is a result of merit accumulation in Buddhism. Taking this apart, the equation appears to be as follows: you need to do good things to do good things. Yet this tautology is a fecund one, as it provides a mechanism behind the “humanity and goodwill” of Tibetan people, characteristics which are often portrayed as almost *a priori* in nature.

Next, he understands karmic philosophy in relation to the collective as well as the individual, a conception that disperses both action and consequence: If individual karma operates within a macrocosmic framework that determines the fate of the society or nation anyway, then individual responsibility is diminished in personal immediacy, but at the same time compounded when one’s actions cumulatively implicate the fates of others. An individual karmic framework can evoke two broad

gestures when contending with suffering: accepting that present suffering was a result of negative karma accrued in either present or past lives, and thereby taking ownership of it and locating blame within the self so as to have agency over both suffering and amelioration. This is the overwhelming model presented in interviews, such as those with ex-political prisoners. Second is the unspoken possibility that karma can serve as a stresser. Ex-political prisoner Ama Adhe comes close to broaching it when she says, “I think [about] everything Ripoche said, I believe it’s because in my life, I haven’t committed any crime to go into prison. Sometimes when I think about the long years in prison, I really wonder why I’m in prison, why I had to go through suffering.” She concludes that it might have been something she has done in a past life, but as she says this, a look of doubt flickers across her face.

Since karmic causation operates on a timeline that goes beyond this life, it is not unthinkable that bearing the negative karma of unspecified past actions can also serve as a lamentable burden or frustration, given that it is essentially blind causation. As such, karma is at once a release and a bind. If it operates at the collective level, both of these dynamics may be alternately heightened—one might be able to take suffering in stride because of the societal forces that accumulated to produce one’s karma, or be further frustrated at being swept along by societal tides beyond one’s control. The former, I have found in my interviews, has led to the deferral of personal suffering in order to focus on alleviating collective suffering and changing the collective fate of Tibet. That said, if one’s greatest personal wish is contingent upon a collective achievement of that fate, it seems entirely consistent that the accumulation of personal effort goes toward a nationalistic goal, though the factors

which influence the alignment of individual and collective goals at the goal-formation level must also be noted.

My conversations with Lukar Jam Atsock, who had prostrated before his fellow writers at the Students for a Free Tibet event I wrote about earlier, often drifted to the one ostensible thing we had in common: the craft and life of a writer. I shared that when I first began, I was often troubled about how solitary and potentially solipsistic the writing life could be—I had been worried that my perspective was all that was beginning to feel compelling. Lukar Jam replied,

For me, it was different, opposite. I had difficulty remembering many specific details of my life sometimes. They just did not seem all that important, even things like what happened to me when I was in prison. I think sometimes I am too focused on the whole, the collective, the people. For the longest time this is what I cared about. You know, it was only at 42 that I decided to find a wife and get married, and then have a child. Before this I thought that with my priorities, thinking of the people first, there was no way to have a family. But eventually, you know...

I recall a similar sentiment conveyed to me about Tenzin Tsundue by an middle-aged storekeeper who knew him. I had expressed the fact that I admired how he made his living with his poetry and was able to devote his life to his activism. “Yes, but he leads a humble life and he rents a small room. He will not be able to support a wife and child so he supports only his cause,” she said. At a practical level, it seems, the all-in pursuit of the cause for Tibetan independence is perceived to be at the expense of personal priorities—one might not feel as free to dangle from a parapet in protest with a family on the ground. The focus on *ren min*, “the people,” and not on the self is also depicted by Lukar Jam as affecting memory retention, implying that

if one defers personal suffering to focus on the fate of the collective, it may be possible for that suffering to lose its imprint.

When some remember suffering, it is for the sake of others and not for the self. Palden Gyatso relates that when he was first imprisoned, he knew that one day, though he did not know when, he would be free, and that he would have to give accounts of what had happened to him and tell his story. He kept a secret log of life in the prison, but after being uprooted to another prison after two years and losing that physical log, he decided to commit everything to memory. Driven by a purpose behind telling his narrative, he was thus motivated to process and commit his experiences to memory such that he could communicate them in time.

For others, suffering's imprint is not lost but merely buried, judgments about the individual masked as indictments of a collective whole. When I conducted interviews at Jampaling Old People's Home, a low-income eldercare facility down the road from the Dalai Lama's complex, one room stood out. It was far larger than the others and included a spacious sitting room. Most of the residents were single, but a couple resided here. Norchung, 89, was a former bodyguard of the Dalai Lama, and as a result a popular subject of oral history projects. Pema Lamo, his wife, was sixteen years younger than her husband, and I was the first ethnographer to ask to interview her alongside him. She was excited and insisted on stuffing my translator Phuljung and me with plenty of biscuits and butter tea before we began. They promised to share many photos along the way.

At 14, Norchung became a soldier and one of his jobs was to take care of His Holiness as a bodyguard. He had to go along with His Holiness to the Potala

Palace and to Norbulingka Palace during the summer time. Pema Lamo started her journey to India when she was 7 years old. She spent her childhood as a road constructor for a long time. It was a “really hard life for [Pema Lamo and her parents] and we earn very less and working for the daily livelihood. We moved to Dharamsala, and worked to build Bhagsu waterfall.”

Meanwhile, Norchung had come to India in 1956 and spent time living and working in different cities including Sikkim and Mysore. He moved to Dharamsala after working some years in the pepper factory in Mysore. During that time, when he came to Dharamsala, there was no palace of His Holiness. There were no more houses at that time. He was the head of the construction work of His Holiness so he built the palace of His Holiness, the Tsuglagkhang temple, and His Holiness’ private office. In Dharamsala, after both had lived there for a few years, Pema Lamo and Norchung met at a Tibetan handicraft centre—“we met and fell in love in a romantic lifestyle.”

Since the time they met at the Tibetan handicraft center, she had been doing odd jobs selling *tsampa* and doing odd jobs in the street. “It is a really hard life as a refugee because I had to start this life as a refugee and leaving behind my country. This is the consequence and it is really hard time for me. And being a refugee you have to depend a lot on other people because it is very hard life.”

On his part he feels that “with the grace of His Holiness, we are having a good situation as compared to other refugee community. So I am always in a big doubt, what circumstances or condition we will face if His Holiness will pass away. That will be a great challenge for many people to face. So I am always worried about my life after His Holiness [passes].

Though they expressed these doubts about their existence as refugees, Norchung and Pema Lamo appeared to be in good spirits. True to their word, they showed us many photos of themselves in their younger days, such as one of a young Pema Lamo selling *tsampa* on the street and sorting grains. I noticed some photos taped to the glass case below a framed photo of the Dalai Lama of younger people in photographs not nearly as yellowed as the ones before us, and enquired about them. Norchung said:

These are the photos of our sons and daughters. Since we have a little problem of not enough money, we are not able to send us to other countries for the

sake of their future so all their children remain and live in India in Delhi. We are not expecting much except to have a healthy life for us. Of course, the children are coming here to visit us and stay at home a few days. We are living a very independent life without relying on any financial support or sponsor from outside. Even this house is given to us by the eldercare facility from their office. Anyhow, the food is all taken care of, all the expenses covered by us, but still we do lots of odd jobs to sustain our life. I always feels happy to stand on my own feet to work on. I feel happy for this. The children, they have gotten married and have [their own] sons and daughters. It's very hard for them to help us parents in this situation because they have to cover their own children for school fees and all.

Pema Lamo added:

Both of us are very old and we could not make a journey to receive their children in Delhi. So children have to come here to pay visit. There's no more relationship in terms of financial relationship. So, it's more like independence relationship with children and parents and we are getting old and the road here is not good to make us safe journey to Delhi. So it is up to children whether we want to pay visit or not. We both are old and can't support our children.

Both Pema Lamo and Norchung claimed not to mind that they had a mutually non-dependent relationship with their children. I inferred from our conversation that since they have stopped providing financial support for their children, their children have had less incentive to visit them and care for them. Yet pragmatically acknowledging their own financial constraints as well as those of their children, is not tantamount to emotional acceptance of this dynamic, and in fact proves to be a deferral of the anxiety and disappointment felt towards their children that is revealed as our conversation progresses. When I asked about his hopes and fears next, however, Norchung said:

I do not have any hopes as I am aging day by day. But I worry about what happens to my wife after I pass away. I do not have any hope that my children that we will take care of their mother if I pass away. Till now, there has not been any support received from our children. It is not because they don't love

us but because there's too much obstacles in their life in Delhi, taking care of wife and children. It's not letting them think and care for us. Nowadays it is hard for children to support their parents when the parents get old, maybe because of children not knowing how important parents are.

When I asked if Norchung felt that all the oral history projects he had been asked to participate in were useful, he opined:

I do not think that by telling stories at this time, at this very deep generation time, will not help the younger generation to think or ponder our stories because the time has changed a lot. Now children don't care about their parents' words. They don't listen to their parents. They do the things they like and even the community had changed in the past years. The community look for wealth and money and those who don't have wealth or money, they are not considered well or respected in the community. So with this huge and big change in community, I think that it is quite hard that by telling our story it would help the next generation or those who are interested.

Norchung projects the unsatisfactory behavior of his children, which he had claimed to accept, onto the entire younger generation of Tibetans, bringing the issue into a question that I had not explicitly asked about. This is not an uncommon maneuver by any means, but is worth noting for the conceptions of "the younger generation of Tibetans" can come from a loaded place rather than existing as an unquestioned monolithic category most of the time. Further, it brings to light an important nuance to Tenzin Tsundue's statement cited at the beginning of this chapter that "dignity comes from a place of self-reliance and not being dependent on other people, and that's where it comes together with the yearning for independence and freedom." The circumstances of Norchung and Pema Lamo provide an insight into this "dignity...of self reliance," demonstrating that negotiating self-reliance not only

operates at the level of foreigners offering aid to Tibetans, but within smaller units of Tibetan society such as the family.

One of the major issues in the Tibetan diaspora has been the separation of families, with some members staying behind in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Though I have found that opinions vary on how adequately the exiled community in Tibet serves as an alternative support system, there was a consensus that it differs from the sense of community established in one's Tibetan hometown. During an English conversation hour focused on the topic of singlehood and aging, one woman replied when asked who would take care of her in old age if she remained single, "In Tibet, my community, the Tibetan people, not just my relatives, would take care of me. But here in India it is different. The community cares for you but in Dharamsala it is the government [in exile]." I perceived a distinction between the instinctual caretaking by one's community in Tibet, and a more official, obligatory oversight by the government in India. Even for those who felt that the exile community in India was a close knit one, there is a difference between those bound by national identity and a common plight as refugees, and the sense of community that grows in one's place of birth. Further, for immediate families who live as a complete unit in exile, the need for self-reliance may reflect neglect—having to rely on oneself, even if one is capable of doing so, can be an instance of suffering rather than a triumph over it.

The proud instantiation of Tibetans as a collectively self-reliant people makes a clear outwardly-directed statement which guards against a foreign portrayal of victimhood, but the in the case of Pema Lamo and Norchung, also serves to mask the painful circumstances out of which self-reliance has arisen: distance, emotional rather

than only physical, from their children. The mechanics and implications of how selfhood comes to be conceived as collective should therefore be noted in how people talk about and conceal suffering.

### **3.2 LANDS OF SUFFERING**

I will now discuss suffering as tied to physical landscape. There are two facets to this: the conception of the exile environment as pathogenic, in which the self is perceived to be infected by the environment, and the perception of Tibet as suffering, in which expressions of the desecrated and suffering land may also reflect personal suffering. As mentioned in section 1.1, these complex relationships with the environment were not something I had sought out as a research question, and it was only in going over my notes that I began to observe a thread connecting suffering to the land. I have corroborated my findings with Toni Huber's analysis of "Green Tibetans" and those of Damaris Miller, my colleague from the Antioch Buddhist Studies in India program. Miller's fieldwork is on Buddhism and the environment and was conducted at a Rumtek monastery in Sikkim, in the south of India, which houses the seventeenth Gyalwa Karmapa's<sup>102</sup> environmental council. Alongside my sources, what I found was not precisely a deferral but a mitigation of suffering: mapping the suffering of Tibetans in exile onto the suffering of a Tibetan landscape that is out of their hands is both a reflection and a deferral; and relating the suffering of adapting to life in exile to the physical environment is an attribution.

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<sup>102</sup> The head of the largest sub-school of the Kagyu Lineage in Tibetan Buddhism and thought to be its second most influential figure after the Dalai Lama

Beginning by discussing the suffering of the land, I look to Ama Adhe's book which presents two instances in which the suffering of the people and the Tibetan homeland are conflated (emphasis mine):

Basically, we Tibetan prisoners were all in a state of **constant depression**. After the Communists had confiscated everything we owned, **now they were destroying our land**. It seemed that China must not have any of its own wood. We said to each other, "Of course, they can't take the mountains and the land, but otherwise, they are taking everything. If the jewelry of the mountains is not there, it is as if a human being is standing before us without clothing." Many of the elders who had realized the implications had said, "**Our land will not be happy for a great many years. There will be many natural calamities, and in time the harvests will again fail.**" We prisoners prayed that under the leadership of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Tibet would be saved. Otherwise, we felt that the Chinese would simply uproot everything and leave our country.<sup>103</sup>

In this first passage, Ama Adhe perceives the extension of Chinese occupation from territory to landscape as a progressive assault—not only have the Chinese seized governance of the land but are now physically desecrating it. I will shortly discuss the portrayal of the purity and sanctity of the Tibetan landscape in relation to how Dharamsala is perceived, but mention it here to stress how this desecration is seen as a particular travesty, as seen from the incredulity expressed. While I would not go as far as to assert that this passage connotes sentience of the land and earth, there is a discernable correlation between the suffering of the people and the land. By saying that "our land will not be happy... and harvests will fail," this externalization of internal suffering may be read alternatively as an articulation or deferral of personal suffering, such as the people whose livelihoods may be affected by a failed harvest.

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<sup>103</sup> Adhe Tapontsang, *Ama Adhe, the Voice That Remembers: The Heroic Story of a Woman's Fight to Free Tibet*, 169.

Here, I bring in Miller's conversations with Mingma, a monk at Rumtek monastery, which may be read against Ama Adhe's point:

After describing the significance of compassion to Tibetan Buddhism, Mingma said he thought the best way to practice compassion was to protect the environment. Several times in our discussions he used the example of a tree, explaining that "if you save one tree, automatically you help three, four, five sentient beings or more who live in the branches or trunk; if you cut down tree, those animals might die because they have no home, or landslide ruins the whole area. Also trees give us oxygen, so we need them to survive."<sup>104</sup>

In contrast to Ama Adhe's projection of personal suffering onto the environment, Miller's analysis reflects that Mingma provides a clearer, more balanced correspondence between environmental and personal suffering and health. I now returning to my second passage of focus in Ama Adhe's narrative:

Even looking into the forest and the hills, one could see that the herbs and flowers had been exploited to the extent that the hills were completely barren. I was overwhelmed by the devastation. **How could such a complete lack of reverence for life ever be explained? How could one rationalize the enslavement of the Tibetans as "freeing" us from a system that, though imperfect, was our chosen way of life? They took away our families, homes, possessions, land, religion, culture, and the right to speak our thoughts publicly. They destroyed our forests, animals, and flowers.** They tried to convince us that we were evil, that we were less than human beings, and subjected us to violence and humiliations that could not have been imagined before their arrival. They seemed a people enslaved to a system that had no soul—a system of plunder and destruction, hatred and lies.<sup>105</sup>

Here, a progressive assault is presented once more with "forests, animals, and flowers" positioned as the last bastion of thriving Tibetan life being quashed by

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<sup>104</sup> Damaris Miller, "The Practice of Knowing: Environmental Education and Action in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery" (B.A. thesis, Princeton University, 2015), 15.

<sup>105</sup> Adhe Tapontsang, *Ama Adhe, the Voice That Remembers: The Heroic Story of a Woman's Fight to Free Tibet*, 184.

Chinese occupation. It expands on the first passage by focusing on the “complete lack of reverence for life” of the Chinese occupiers, and embeds a concern for the environment within a larger moral claim. Miller’s interview with Mingma also corroborates this:

Mingma expresses these sentiments numerous times in our conversations, explaining that people cannot become enlightened, for example purifying their body, speech and mind, without the outer environment being clean. He says that people will not attain peace and happiness if their environment is not “neat, clean and pure” while also explaining that the kind of life Buddhism describes as a path to peace and happiness involves purification of the inner environment, which will manifest in the outer environment.<sup>106</sup>

While Mingma provides a commentary on best practices for the Tibetan community, Ama Adhe’s remarks on morality and the environment are aimed towards criticizing the actions of Chinese behavior in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. This also resonates with my previous analysis of Dr. Norchung’s characterization of elemental evil spirits, which he claims will manifest “if we do bad things, [such as] exploitation of the natural resources and also construction of the road” in section 1.1, a thinly-veiled reference to Chinese actions. It is not a stretch to code these opinions that juxtapose suffering, Buddhism, and the environment as a political move.

The alignment of environmentalism and the Tibetan cause for independence was another strand that I did not seek out but found to be present in some of my interviews. In his article “Green Tibetans—A Brief Social History,” Toni Huber

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<sup>106</sup> Miller, “The Practice of Knowing: Environmental Education and Action in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery,” 17.

focuses on “a set of essentialist representations of Tibetan peoples, their culture and lifestyle which depicts them as being in harmony with nature, non-exploitative of the natural world and its resources, and consciously sensitive to the complex ecological processes inherent in the physical environment.”<sup>107</sup> He notes that “Religious identity figures prominently in these images,”<sup>108</sup> primarily Buddhism, and that “During the past decade invoking the image of Green Tibetan identity has virtually become an obligatory aspect of presenting the Tibet issue in popular world media and in pro-Tibetan political literature, but especially in a range of publications issued by the Tibetan Government in Exile... This last fact is hardly surprising since the image of Green Tibetans was largely created in Dharamsala and has continued to be disseminated from there to the rest of the world.”<sup>109</sup> This was reflected in my interview with Ama Adhe, where her feelings towards the desecration of her village were encoded into a broader message of environmentalism as she spoke about having been “unlucky to have lack of knowledge about environmentalism when she lived in Tibet,” she was “glad to come to know the importance of the environment in exile.”<sup>110</sup>

Huber also contextualizes such movements within a trend of “greening of identities”: “Green Tibetans now take their place in a long list of ecologically aware, environmentally sensitive and so-called in-harmony-with-nature identities promoted by and on behalf of a wide range of non-Western populations...many of whom were

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<sup>107</sup> Toni Huber, “Green Tibetans: A Brief Social History,” in *Tibetan Culture in the Diaspora*, ed. Frank J. Korom (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1997), 103.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>110</sup> The politicizing of the personal emerged several times in my interview with Ama Adhe. Given that she is one of the most well-known ex-political prisoners and activists, this seems par for the course.

formerly colonized and oppressed.... With the formation of a strong environmentalist zeitgeist during the 1980s and 1990s, promoting a green identity is no longer just a signal of concern about a commitment to care for nature. It has also has much to do with strategic position for social, economic and political advantages”.<sup>111</sup> Alongside “serene monks and bubbly traditionalists” then, the “greening” of Tibetan identity presents yet another possible construction of selfhood. I will however distinguish between the invocation of an environmentalist message and the point I made earlier about the bridging of personal and environmental suffering. While the latter may be folded into the former for emotional resonance, it can also be analyzed as a separate phenomenon as I have done.

I now move on to discuss the notion of suffering being wrought by the land in the form of an exile environment perceived as pathogenic. At the Men Tsee Khang inpatient clinic, I asked about the health of Dorje, the nun who had been caught once before successfully escaping into exile. The nurse said, “She was totally fine in Tibet, like some small diseases, it was okay. Once she was here in India, all the diseases and health becomes worse. Maybe the weather doesn’t suit her. Maybe the food doesn’t suit her. Somehow she gets ill all the time. Her health is not good in India.”

Food and weather as a source of ill health in exile were commonly mentioned to me, as the Indian climate was deemed incompatible with a Tibetan diet. Notably, blame was placed on the exile environment rather than on rich Tibetan foods, such as the staple of butter tea, and the people’s desire to continuing to consuming them. The

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<sup>111</sup> Huber, “Green Tibetans: A Brief Social History,” 108.

climate of exile is further attributed to other health conditions. Prost writes, “The experience of being ill connects the embodied experience of exile (the constant maladjustment and discomfort of the body in exile surroundings), with the subjective interpretations of illness and misfortune constructed out of individual biographies. Some disorders, such as *lung*<sup>112</sup> imbalances, have emerged as specific problems linked to the hardships of exile. The physical environment of exile further exacerbates such disorders: *lung* imbalances occur primarily in the hot summer season, when Tibetan refugees recurrently complain of the heat in the Indian settlement.”<sup>113</sup>

Prost also notes that beyond being a source of acclimatization issues, the exile environment was sometimes perceived as pathogenic in itself, as “Tibetans felt at risk from dangerous microorganisms in food and water and assailed by air pollution caused by increasing amounts of motorized traffic in Dharamsala,”<sup>114</sup> leading me to recall these same complaints of Tashi, the manager at the youth vocational training center that I mentioned in my introduction. He had said, when asked about his health of late, that “[due to] traffic and noise pollution, it is not so healthy.” Prost also found that many Tibetans “viewed the exile environment as pathogenic. Pollutants and dangerous ‘microorganisms’ brought endless stomach problems and diarrhea. On the other than, when I asked India-born Tibetans about prevalent illnesses in Tibet, many told me their homeland was free of the diseases endemic to the subcontinent for its high altitude and dry, cold climate.”<sup>115</sup> These views arise out of the notion that Tibetans are not meant to live anywhere but Tibet, which is why their bodies

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<sup>112</sup> Wind or breath

<sup>113</sup> Prost, *Precious Pills: Medicine and Social Change among Tibetan Refugees in India*, 96.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

physiologically reject relocation. This was reflected in Tenzin Tsundue’s opinion that “the Tibetans had created a very unique home. An eagle who built its home on a high peak will not one day build its nest in the gutters. We all have our own sense of home, and our home is in Tibet, on the roof of the world, and that is why we cannot build our home anywhere else.”<sup>116</sup>

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*The heart of the world, fenced around by snow  
The headland of all rivers  
Where the mountains are high and the land is pure*<sup>117</sup>

“Shangri-La” first originated in James Hilton’s 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* as a fictionalized mountainous landscape in the mountains of Tibet and has since become synonymous with earthly utopia and paradise. Though contemporary depictions of Tibet by Tibetans tend to focus more on the purity of the landscape than its mythic quality of Hilton’s depiction, the phrase “High Peaks, Pure Earth,” first popularized by the website of the same name,<sup>118</sup> still fits the description of Shangri-La. It’s usage as the title of a collection of writing by Tibetan, Indian, and Western scholars on Tibetan History and Culture demonstrates the phrase’s entry into the lexicon.<sup>119</sup>

In *Virtual Tibet*, Orville Schell writes that inaccessibility, both geographically and, in the past, legally, holds the key to perpetuating the mystique surrounding Tibet, thereby making it fertile grounds on which Westerners could project ideals of what

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<sup>116</sup> Tenzin Tsundue, personal communication, November 19, 2013.

<sup>117</sup> Adapted from a translation of an ancient song on the manifestation of the first emperor of Tibet. *High Peaks Pure Earth*, epithet on masthead, <http://highpeakspureearth.com/> .

<sup>118</sup> The English-language site “High Peaks Pure Earth” provides sociopolitical commentary and translations of writings in Tibetan and Chinese that are gathered from blog posts made in the TAR and the People's Republic of China.

<sup>119</sup> Hugh Richardson, *High Peaks, Pure Earth: Collected Writings on Tibetan History and Culture* (London: Serindia Publications, 1998).

they found lacking in their own worlds. “Fantasies of escape are naturally more powerful when rooted in real geography; the concreteness of an actual place helps us believe our romantic myths are something more than baseless, chimerical dreams....[those] could only move on the strict assumption that they were real and even actual—that they had happened somewhere and to somebody, either in this world or in another.”<sup>120</sup> If inaccessibility creates an inroad to imagination, this may be applied not just to the foreigner but to the Tibetan in exile whose access to the land is in fact far more limited under Chinese control. For both those who have long departed from Tibet and those who have never even set foot in their homeland, the Tibet of their imaginations is a loaded creation—while Schell cites a Western escapist contraption, the Exile Tibet could similarly function as a repository of hopes in areas where exile has been found lacking, or a frozen memory bank of community, physical and temporal space.

The sole person I interviewed who had actually returned to Tibet after coming into exile was a man who I met at Delek Hospital on my first time in Dharamsala. I found Sithea Tsering, 85, lying on a bed adjacent to his wife’s in the women’s ward. She was curled up in a fetal position facing a window but occasionally unfurled herself to interject weakly mumbled Tibetan words several times during our interview. His eyes were bloodshot, and had been that way for five years. We began by talking about his journey to India from Tibet, which prompted him to talk about his return trip—he told me that he went back to visit Tibet once, only to find his ancestral home destroyed, and all his relatives except for his youngest uncle dead. As

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<sup>120</sup> Orville Schell, *Virtual Tibet: Searching for Shangri-La from the Himalayas to Hollywood*, 1st ed (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 16.

he said this, his red eyes filled with tears. For the rest of the people I spoke to, their Tibet was a paragon of purity but in danger of having that purity destroyed. It is against this height of purity that Exile Tibet appears to be measured.

To put it crudely, expressions of longing for an inaccessible homeland can read like a manifold intensification of clichés: “absence makes the heart grow fonder”; “the grass is always greener on the other side”; “Tibet is Shangri-La”. If, as Tenzin Tsundue suggests and many others implicitly affirm, Tibetans are not meant to live anywhere but Tibet, then the heat and dirt of India may exacerbate their woes, but existentially they would suffer regardless of the particularities. Yet they tell me that their suffering is held at bay. Beyond the serene monks and sunny traditionalists, many people I spoke to portrayed life in exile positively while simultaneously and fervently longing for home. In view of the strength of their desire to return to Tibet, how was it that most of these individuals were never overcome by suffering, even as the expressions of the desire to return home pervaded much of their narratives? My last chapter puts forth that it is finding purpose in exile, particularly by agitating for Tibetan Independence within Exile Tibet, and the presence of the Dalai Lama that are the two factors upon which deferrals of suffering rest.

Before moving on, I return to address one of the previously raised clichés: “the grass is always greener on the other side.” There is a whole generation of Tibetans born into exile who express yearning to for their “Tibetan hometown” even though, for them, the term is more applicable to Dharamsala or whichever Tibetan settlement they were born in, than it is to the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Geographically, Tibet and Exile Tibet are separate entities and the former is always

the desired axis mundi for reasons that I have outlined in this section. In section 3.1, however, I noted that the perceived differences between a birthplace community and a community formed in exile could cause dissatisfaction for some refugees in Dharamsala. But what if they are one and the same for those born into exile?

During my final days of working on this project, I came across a photo that one of the writers from Dharamsala had posted on a social media site. He was pictured with two octogenarians at an eldercare facility, whom he referred to in his caption as his “grandparents in love” who had “become family” when they took care of him while his parents and grandparents were hard at work. In the photo, they are laughing over a shared joke. This snapshot does not contest the existential pain of living in diaspora, but suggests that yearning for a sense of community may differ between those born into exile and those who arrive from Tibet. Nonetheless this distinction seems to dissolve under the authoritative stance that “we cannot build our home anywhere else,” even if that nest comes equipped with *communitas* and all other desired amenities.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Tenzin Tsundue, personal communication, November 19, 2013.

#### 4. Deferral Expirations

If Tibet is pure, those I spoke to tended to view Exile Tibet as comparatively less so, both in terms of the pathogenic environment and as a landscape which preserves “Tibetan culture.” Dharamsala is further measured against other Tibetan settlements in both regards. I refer again to my conversation with Tashi, the manager of a youth vocational training center that I mentioned earlier, who said:

Dharamsala seems [to have] lots of difference in terms of especially the mentality of Tibetans living in South India and over here, in terms of financial and economic status and condition. In South India, it is isolated for Tibetans and the place is for us. We feel like in a different country once you in those Tibetan settlement. Over here, its kinda mixed, more modernized and culture is mixed up with Indian. **Actually the main aim of Tibet is to sustain Tibet culture and tradition. So that is the main aim of resettlement in India. So once you mix up with other community, there’s chances of degeneration of Tibetan culture and Tibetanness.** Dharamsala is a very fast growing town and there are a lot of economic activities and because of that, it affect the culture.

The youth in Dharamsala is kinda more advance, more openness compared to youth in the settlement—their attitude and perspective towards life. The youth here are independent, not attached to their family and are opened to any relationship. In settlement, they are reserved, inward.

The thing is, Tibetan culture is based on religion and once there is more of religious activities, chances of more culture preservation. If there are more Tibetans, there will be more Tibetan activities and culture. **In settlement, there are more of culture preservation compared to the community that is mixed with Indian or local people.**

Tashi’s characterization of the youth in Dharamsala comes from a place of expertise, given his occupation. Also of note is his equation of authenticity with preservation, and a monolithic Tibetanness that has cropped up in the views of several others. Going along with this, I asked what, then, constituted effective cultural preservation in his view. Tashi replied, “Staying together is very effective. It is quite

difficult nowadays because of economic development, migrating to different places, quite difficult for culture.” I then asked what this culture he wished to preserve was, to which he opined:

Tibetan, we have... I can't express it in English... it is kind of like... You can differentiate a Tibetan [from] others [through their] humbleness and decency]. Tibetan sticks to [being] honest, humble, kind. That makes a difference. Older generation—I can confidently say they are Tibetan with such qualities like [being] simple, kind, compassionate but the younger generation is degenerated. **So am I going to the track you are going?**

I laughed and replied that there was no “right track” I was looking for. Strangely enough, though I am disinclined towards this view, if awareness of and pandering to a foreign presence is what might be considered “inauthentic” and “corrupting” within a society, Tashi was proving his own point. Tashi then went on to complain about the pollution and traffic congestion he felt was endemic to Dharamsala. “How do you bear with it?” I asked. Tashi said, “I don't know, maybe escape far from here.” It is the possibility and promise of “escape” that I believe undergirds the deferral of suffering in Dharamsala.

#### **4.1 Seeking Purpose in Exile**

One person who “escapes” occasionally is Dr. Tzewang Ringzin, a research director at the Men Tsee Khang:

So yearly I go to Germany as a holiday and some consultation. It is good experience, but when I come back then I feel I have a happy life. Here I have basic facilities and necessities but don't have the luxury. But I have more richer life mentally. You have the exposure of India. It's very dirty.

Everything is not safe. I go away and mentally I am more relaxed. I go there, I enjoy, then I come back.

Tzewang Ringzin cites the low standards of cleanliness and safety as the negative parts of life in India, and shows that having a reprieve from it helps her to make the best of what she considers to be its benefit: the ability to facilitate a richer mental life. This is one instance in which escape is temporary rather than permanent.

Unlike Tashi, far from considering it diluted, some portray Dharamsala as the nucleus of Tibetan culture. Dhardon Sharling's following sentiments are consistent with the fact that the Central Tibetan Authority resides in Dharamsala, and that her authority and renown might not extend beyond "Little Lhasa." That in itself presents a challenge:

In India, if you look and ask, "are you a Tibetan or Indian?" I don't have a complete identity. **Dharamsala is like a haven for us. Once you step out, you are lost in the huge sea.** Last week, I was in Delhi and I was going in the metro train. There were Indians, foreigners and me. The Indians there coming from Northeast India. For me, I'm Tibetan and I'm also confused as to how related I am to the Indians standing next to me.

There's a lot of conflict of identity, I would say. First, it is challenging. Second, what happens is when you are in an exile setup? You don't have control over the resources of this country. You don't have constitutional rights and the privileges. And the government here many times has to work underground. A lot of things, constraints come up.

All these puts constraints on you, it takes you from daring to dream. Every day we fought the risk. We swim against the mud. We are swimming and wading through and getting to the shore. **What I'm saying is, [where we are is] thanks to the fact that there are challenges, and if everything was perfect, I don't think there would be any challenge. Because not knowing what future holds for us, not knowing our movement tomorrow, your sense of conviction is strengthened. You want to make doubly sure what you do today will sustain tomorrow. So the bigger the risk, the bigger the challenge, the stronger the movement becomes. Though it's going to give you sleepless nights but the results are going to be very different.**

So, life as a parliamentarian. Last year, I went on a massive lobbying campaign where I met political leaders, parliamentarians and when we met them, here as a parliament, everyone knows you. **But there, even the guard won't let you in. They don't know you. You are not the Indian Parliamentarian.** So before meeting the political leader, you go through ten different people. That every step teaches you something. If it was an easy meet and go, what's there to learn and to gain? When you have to start from scratch, I think, what happens, it sets the standard for more work. That kind of really raises the barometer. That's why being in exile, challenges does a lot of good for us. Because they hone you, the challenges. Under these circumstances, you end up growing up. There's a lot of growth, lots of progress you have to [undergo] by virtue of being intelligent. **You cannot afford to let a moment go.**<sup>122</sup>

Dhardon Sharling credits the challenges of exile for the momentum and strength of “the movement.” When she speaks of having been conditioned such that she “cannot afford to let a moment go,” this reflects urgency, appreciation, and efficiency that is cultivated in exile. This is echoed in Tenzin Tsundue’s opinion that what unites the activist and the writer within him is that “they are all very observant people,” and the ability to maintain being observant and disciplined under situations of duress has been key to weathering his experiences, be it the twelve times he has been imprisoned, or the threat of having a service elevator lowered onto him as he hung onto the scaffolding of the building during that infamous protest stunt.<sup>123</sup> One thing which they both seem to have in common is being galvanized and given a sense of purpose and vocation in exile, not just in spite of but because of the challenges they face.

When asked about where they grew up and about their childhood, the people I interviewed who grew up in Tibet almost unfailingly described the physical environment and concomitant emotional attachment to it, while those who grew up in

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<sup>122</sup> Dhardon Sharling, personal communication, July 1, 2014.

<sup>123</sup> Tenzin Tsundue, personal communication, November 19, 2013.

exile mostly described day to day activities that characterized their childhoods in cities or Tibetan colonies. The former may be ascribed to the farming and nomadic backgrounds of those who grew up in Tibet, where lifestyle and vocation are tied to the landscape—some describe having to give up the nomadic lifestyle in exile as a considerable hardship. “My life became hard since my wife died when she was young, [in Ladakh]. I had to sadly leave the nomadic life and relocated to Leh, the city [region], to work as a laborer,” Jinpa told me at Delek Hospital. Jinpa did not dwell on the loss of his wife, instead focusing on the inability to function nomadically without her partnership. In this case, loss of access to lifestyle and the landscape takes precedence over relational loss.

I now turn to the example of the military as an institution which encourages collectivism and the ability of vocation to shape identity and conceptions of nationhood of those living in exile. I interviewed Kunchen, 79, at Delek Hospital, where he was being treated for pain in his knees. When we met, the pain had largely subsided, but he was still unable to walk. Kunchen was born in Têmo, in Tibet, where he became a monk at 13. Of this, he said, “Though I was monk, I was not serious in my studies and mostly focused on home chores. I helped my family in the field.” He nonetheless enrolled in the most prestigious monastic university in Lhasa at 24, but “unfortunately, due to the Chinese occupation, I had to reluctantly leave all those great opportunity and had to flee from my country in 1959.” In India, “We were sent to work as ironsmiths for two years by Indian government in 1959. After that I joined road construction work and worked for one and half year. Later, I joined the Indian

military force and served for 11 years as a soldier. Finally, I served his Holiness the Dalai Lama as his bodyguard.”

Unlike Kunchen, whose entry into the militia took place only in India, Sonam Norbu, 76, was married into his bride’s military family in Tibet, and fought in the 1959 battle. I met Sonam Norbu at an eldercare facility , where he seemed delighted to have guests and to share his story:

Tibetan soldiers waged war against Chinese soldiers at the Potala Palace which is His Holiness Dalai Lama’s palace. I was guarding the palace with the other brave Tibetan soldiers. Firing started and smoke rose badly obscuring the opponents, some were injured and some were killed. Though Tibetan Deities were on our side, we lost the war.

We were so tense that we forgot about food for a few days. Finally we got *tsampa*, but, since we didn’t get water for a few days, all our throats had dried up and we were hardly able to eat it. Slowly, we headed to India with heavy heart. Our journey route begun on foot from Nyara. Eventually the footstep turned into the sounds of firing and all we could hear in our ears was the firing. We passed a flight when we reached at Phenpo but, it didn’t fire at us. We resumed firing when we reached at Tsethang. We crossed the Mhago hill and entered the India through Arunachal Pradesh.

I enrolled in military force again when I reached India. It’s been almost forty years since I became soldier from Tibet. **One of my most unforgettable and proud moments in my life was when we celebrated the victory of war against Bangladesh.** Meanwhile, I feel happy for being able to serve my country during the black year.<sup>124</sup> And I feel proud to say I am clean guy; never smoke and never drink.

During life history interviews, my concluding questions were left intentionally open-ended—I asked what their greatest challenges and hopes were, followed by what they “believed in,” allowing room for interviewees to bring religion into the

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<sup>124</sup> Tibetan calendars regularly mark three types of inauspicious dates. "Bad days" are marked with the Tibetan letter zha, and last from dawn to dawn. "Black days" are marked with a nya, and cover only the daytime. Both occur on fixed dates each year, one during each Kalachakra month. Furthermore, from the Chinese-derived element calculation system, each year contains two "black" or inauspicious months, and occasionally there is a "black" year. In this case, Sonam Norbu could be referring to 1959.

discussion if they chose to. If they did, I asked more follow up questions about practice and how religion may have intervened in their lives. Many replied that they “believed in the Dalai Lama,” which could imply a religious orientation but did not guarantee it, as the Dalai Lama’s significance as a figure extends beyond his religious oversight, something I will discuss in my final chapter. For Sonam Norbu, his answer to the most challenging moment of his life was immediately followed by what mediated the experience: “I still clearly remember my time at the border of India. Bullets came from our opponent Pakistan like cats and dogs in the air toward us but, strangely the bullets altered their destinations and leaving our house undamaged and we were safe. We believe it was all because of the pills that His Holiness gives to Tibetan soldiers to protect from war.” Sonam Norbu derives self-worth from his military career which has continued from Tibet into exile and it is a rare instance in which a sense of purpose crosses nationalities and carries on its charge, demonstrating that collectivisation is driven by sources other than nationalism—in this case, being part of the military, whether in Tibet or India.

In the case of Kunchen, his monastic training prior to leaving Tibet seems to have had a greater impact on his thinking than his subsequent foray into the military. He said, “I had studied little about the Gelug sects<sup>125</sup> and because of this, I am found myself quite open-heart, less depression and less worry. I think it’s all are the result of learning Tibetan philosophy. The biggest challenge is how I could lead of

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<sup>125</sup> Gelugpa is best known in the West as the school of Tibetan Buddhism associated with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. In the 17th century the Gelug school became the most powerful institution in Tibet, and it remained so until China took control of Tibet in the 1950s.

meaningful life. I think I have achieved it. There was no moment in my life that I found myself in deep depression, and I am 79 years old.”

In contrast, on hope, Sonam Norbu replied, “I don’t have hope; I am getting aged day by day and feeling lucky under the shelter of His Holiness.” Framed as such, hope is read as a want or craving for the future, its necessity dispelled under the security of exile. Sonam Norbu’s answers are situated in the present and in India, while Kunchen’s lie in Tibet—I suggest that this contrast could depend on the continuity of one’s purpose in life from Tibet into exile, since Sonam Norbu was able to continue his military career whereas Kunchen went from being a monk to a ironsmith and finally a soldier.

For some, the ability to pursue one’s chosen purpose served as a reason for coming into exile, as well as a key factor in determining life satisfaction there. I return once again to Dorje’s story, and the unspoken understanding between her parents and herself that she needed to go to India in order to pursue the monastic training that she lacked in access to Tibet— “For [her monastic] education, everything is better in India....Somehow she [now] gets the teaching but inside her pain is still there that her parents are getting the punishment because of her.” The former restriction on religious freedom, a challenge in Tibet, is eradicated in exile. If the ability to follow one’s chosen vocation is the determining factor for coming into exile, however, the assumption that this necessarily improves quality of life falters in Dorje’s case, as she accrues the “pain” of the consequences her departure has wrought for her parents.

I think also of Tadin, a young woman I met at an English conversation hour. When our group discussed how we felt about living in a society of mind-readers, she mused, “It’s okay for me. My mind is open —they can see.” After the session ended, at her invitation, I stayed to chat with her, and she began telling me about her life. When she first came to India in 2005, leaving behind her parents in Tibet, she would often cry in the corners of rooms, she told me, her voice steady. She currently lived in lower Dharamsala with her sister, who worried constantly for her, and being the source of worry for her sister concerned her, in turn. Ideally, she wished to return to Tibet in order to bring her parents to India, having been very worried about her sick father. Back home, she had goals of being a teacher or a nurse, particularly the latter after seeing many people suffering without access to cures. Being in Dharamsala now, her plans had dissolved and she expressed not knowing quite what to do. Yet she also said over the course of our conversation several times, “I am so happy,” often in reference to being able to learn English and go to school through the provisions of the Tibetan government in exile and NGOs. From our conversation, I gathered that learning and education were very important and provided some measure of happiness for her. This did not negate the fact that she was unable to pursue some of her goals that were specifically tied to being in Tibet, such as being of medical aid to the ailing population there, which unmoored her to some extent. The competing emotions of “I am so happy” and “I am so sad” bubbled up from within her with equal frequency.

Tadin’s and Dorje’s are two trajectories in which the fulfillment or dissolution of one’s plans in exile do not lead to deterministically positive or negative

experiences. On the other hand, Dhardon Sharling, a member of parliament and frequent spokesperson for the government, and Tenzin Tsundue, an activist and mouthpiece of the Tibetan independence movement, have clearly defined purposes in exile and thrive because of this. Part of this state of thriving has depended on their being able to turn suffering into a source of strength, and to harness it to galvanize others. At the peak of both their achievements would be independence for Tibet, and the effective redundancy of Exile Tibet. The most successful engagement with the movements produced within Exile Tibet would also ensure its end. If suffering may be converted into positive motivation for agitating for Tibetan independence, then the fuel for positive conversion is predicated upon a teleological endgame in which Exile Tibet self-immolates. This fuel is generated on the basis that the endgame is a given, and I question what may happen if ignition is deferred—will suffering continue to be deferred as effectively, or for much longer? Will Dhardon Sharling continue to claim or feel that “the bigger the risk, the bigger the challenge, the stronger the movement becomes” if the movement fails year after year to bring about independence for Tibet? According to the setup she has provided, it will only serve to motivate her further. As she continues to exert the full force of her purpose within Exile Tibet and it stubbornly remains Exile Tibet, Tibet itself evermore remote, I wonder if this motivation extends into perpetuity.

Thinking beyond the figures at the forefront of the Tibetan independence movement, I have previously established that the wish to return to Tibet emerged in nearly every conversation I had, and that even the dying conceived of it as a realistic achievement within their lifetime. In many of these conversations, personal suffering

was often deferred to address the great loss of their nation. I suggest that the deferral of suffering is contingent upon the state of exile being perceived as transient, an existential stopgap between loss, and found. Existentially, it must be noted that those born into exile have lived their entire lives within this stopgap; yet, they have undeniably known loss. Temporally, Exile Tibet's successful conception and forward momentum being contingent upon its transience and eventual dissolution takes on new meaning with each new expiration date unmet: the passing of each year, and potentially, of each generation. It seems gauche to question someone when they smile peaceably at you. But I might just wonder when their smiles may tire. 2015 marks their 56<sup>th</sup> year in exile.

#### **4.2 Seeking Refuge in Exile<sup>126</sup>**

I visit the room of a terminal patient at Delek Hospital. I am told he is approaching his last days. His family stands around silently—the only sound that can be heard is the voice of the Dalai Lama, emanating from a laptop playing a recording of one of his dharma talks.

I then moved to the next room, where I interviewed a man approaching the age of 90. He mentioned that he liked living in India after having gone into exile in Nepal first, as he was able to see the Dalai Lama. When asked who he trusted and

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<sup>126</sup> “Refuge” refers to taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha in Buddhism, under one’s refuge guru. This guru may or may not remain one’s root guru. Many Tibetans I spoke to referred to the Dalai Lama as their root guru. A root guru is the teacher who inspires one most, and whose advice one respects and follows most closely.

relied on, he said that it was completely the Dalai Lama, as he no longer had any relatives. Sonam Norbu, the former soldier I spoke to at the eldercare facility, was alone in Dharamsala as well. He said, “Yes, I feel sad sometimes. My sweet brothers were passed away. I am the only survivor. When I look from another perspective, I am lucky staying freely in India under the grace of His Holiness. This is not our land but we live freely.” Later in our interview, he added, “I am older day by day and feeling lucky under the shelter of His Holiness.”

The feeling that by living in Dharamsala one is being sheltered and taken care of by the Dalai Lama, given a perceived proximity to him (or his place of residence, given that he travels much of the year on speaking engagements), emerged in many more of my interviews. Ama Adhe said, “There is no time that I feel lonely here because I am always happy to know I am staying in a place where His Holiness lives. This place is my only hope to stay close to His Holiness. I told His Holiness I want to devote my remaining life to good deeds, trying to accumulate merits as much as I could, so with that I have always try to keep away from worldly walks.”

The presence of the Dalai Lama is so cherished by Tibetans that, as an administrator at the Torture Survivors Unit tells me, “For the political prisoners, as soon as they come to India, they are granted a direct audience with His Holiness and blessed by him. Having one of their greatest wishes fulfilled heals their trauma.” Dorje was certainly one such individual, as her “main aim was to come to India to visit and just have a glance of His Holiness the Dalai Lama because in Tibet, I was young and never seen him in my life.” Palden Gyatso, who is also quoted in *Lives in Exile*, expressed precisely this, “[The Dalai Lama] referred to many of my fellow

prisoners by name, which gave me an idea of the genuine concern he had for us...I was weeping when I left the room. The meeting had been my life's ambition.”<sup>127</sup>

The Dalai Lama also provides motivation for action, be it through explicit request or voluntary tribute. As previously mentioned, Ama Adhe was compelled by a letter from the Dalai Lama to change her mind about sharing her story in the form of a book, for which he eventually provided the introduction. “I was very lucky and feel happy to be able to share my story with His Holiness,” she said. Acting in service of the Dalai Lama resonated with Pema Lamo and Norchung, the couple that I met at the eldercare facility . Norchung said, “We always feel we are refugees and we are here because of His Holiness; I am doing this work without looking at the amount of money I get from my work. I am doing this, going through all the hardships, taking care of all those big projects of construction because of His Holiness, as a service for His Holiness.” Pema Lamo added, “I believe the main reason for the healthy life and longevity of my husband is because of for the whole time he had been working in construction for His Holiness, he was doing it hard and dedicating, whole heartedly, not thinking of his family, just thinking that his work will really serve His Holiness. So with this good deed, now he has a healthy, long life. I believe it is his good intention of serving His Holiness for the past many years. So his only hope is His Holiness, remembering His Holiness.” Norchung concluded our conversation on this note, “I am always in a big doubt, what circumstances or condition we will face if His Holiness passes away. That will be a great challenge for many people to face. So I am always worried about our life after His Holiness.”

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<sup>127</sup> Vahali, *Lives in Exile: Exploring the Inner World of Tibetan Refugees*, 203.

This, too, is my question.

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The Dalai Lama's 79th Birthday celebration was held at the Tsuklagkhang Temple in Dharamsala on July 6, 2014. Honored guests included the seventeenth Gyalwa Karmapa, many high-ranking Rinpoches, and Indian parliamentarians from Himachal Pradesh. Many in the town of Dharamsala, including myself, were also in attendance. The Dalai Lama, on the other hand, was in Ladakh, presiding over the Kalachakra ceremony. A steady stream of dance performances, each featuring costumes more colorful and furry than the next, and speeches by both Tibetan and Indian officials were lined up to pay tribute the revered guest, never mind that he was absent. “When he’s gone,” I wondered, “will they simply carry on without him like today?”

As I inched closer to the my summative thoughts on this chapter, I wondered if there was a way that Dalai Lama might live on for the community in exile without reincarnating. Since the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet, appears to be the primary balm of life in exile for many, it seems reasonable to consider if Buddhism might be a related or remedial salve. When seeking amelioration of their troubles, many who mentioned prayer directed their prayers to the Dalai Lama, rather than to the Buddha. Of those who spoke about feeling fortunate to live in Dharamsala because of proximity to the Dalai Lama, about a third explicitly mentioned receiving “blessings” from the Dalai Lama, while the rest simply talked about how they felt assured because he was “here” or “near.” These expressions of the assurance of his nearness register in the key of emotion, but are also grounded in a political reality.

As Dhardon Sharling suggests below, the presence of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama provides political currency to Tibetan settlements in India based on the goodwill he has built up as a globally beloved figure. In fact, she explicitly separates the impact of Buddhism from the impact of the Dalai Lama. The comfort and stability he provides may be related to Buddhism in that he is a Buddhist leader and teacher to many, but such consideration is as political as it is religious. I recall Phuljung saying, “Tibetan culture is all we have—we don’t have the economy or the looks, but we have this culture.” The persona of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama is a big part of this culture, and is certainly the closest thing the nation of Tibet has to a geopolitical bargaining chip. Economically, the presence of the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala is a huge tourist draw, and the revenue this generates also factors into the Indian government’s decision to continue to house Tibetan settlements.

If the Tenzin Gyatso is indeed the singular figure who set off “the right thing happening in the right circumstances” in order for the exiled Tibetan population to come into India and build a life for themselves, then even the teaching of impermanence will fail to mitigate the permanent loss of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama as leader, guarantor, and symbol.

The journalist Mark Jacobson interviewed Tenzin Gyatso, and suggests that the latter is concerned “the manner in which many Tibetans continue to rely on him personally”, characterizing it as “a child does a Father ...something which is not healthy.” When Jacobson relates that a refugee who had just arrived in Dharamsala had said, “To see His Holiness, that’s what keeps us going,” Jacobson writes that “Hearing this story, the Dalai Lama, who personally greets every refugee arriving in

[Dharamsala], grimaces. ‘This is a serious matter...Something I am aware of,’ he said in a lower register.”<sup>128</sup> Jacobsen also reports that Tenzin Gyatso often likes to joke about his health:

Asked if he ever gets nervous, the Ocean of Wisdom said, ‘nervous? Yes!...my last medical checkup...after the first check the doctor want another. To take some blood. The nurse try to take some blood from here. It failed. No blood come. Another visit was arranged. Second try. Failed. Then he tried to take from there. Third time, no blood. Then I am *nervous!*’” But jokes aside, there have been many tests recently, [and] a number of personal appearances and tours have been cancelled.<sup>129</sup>

Perhaps even the Dalai Lama defers suffering, deflecting the worrisome situation with jokes. With an entire nation seemingly more concerned that he “live long” than with their own mortality, Tenzin Gyatso’s concerns are focused on the people in return. To Jacobson, he admits, “Owing to particular situation we find ourselves in, a definite crisis.”<sup>130</sup>

Similarly, Dhardon Sharling situates the very existence of Exile Tibet precariously when she locates what she feels its sole lynchpin:

I don’t think [how Tibet has fared in exile] has anything to do with Buddhism. His Holiness is one figure. It has massive influence of how we have fared today. I think it is the right thing happening in the right circumstances. And we are able to sustain ourselves this way as a close community. India being too generous, I think. It’s the Dalai Lama, no question about it. He is the revered guest. Tomorrow these people would be chucked out, what happen is we would go to the regional government office and take an appeal letter, bearing His Holiness as a patriarch. And they would say “Oh the Dalai

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<sup>128</sup>Jacobson, *Teenage Hipster in the Modern World: From the Birth of Punk to the Land of Bush: Thirty Years of Millennial Journalism*, 191.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

Lama.” And these people will be in place. That is the reliance. He is the face of the other coin. It’s undeniable. We can’t argue with this.<sup>131</sup>

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“He is the revered guest. Tomorrow these people would be chucked out.” — “Tomorrow” comes when the Fourteenth Dalai Lama dies. And he does not plan to reincarnate.<sup>132</sup> The pivot away from loneliness and suffering in Exile Tibet will be removed when the man in countless framed photos in homes, schools, convenience stores, and restaurants across Dharamsala passes, and is no longer near. The sole *raison d’être* for coming into exile for many and, as Dhardon Sharling suggests, the reason why they are allowed to stay, has ensured the demise of his own eternity. “Long Live the Dalai Lama” the self-immolators chant, moments before they set themselves on fire. Tenzin Gyatso is 79 years old.

As with the lifespan of a piece of protest literature, the narrative of Exile Tibet finds its survival contingent upon two clashing expiration dates: the longed for expiration of Exile Tibet as Tibetan independence is reclaimed, and the long feared death of the Dalai Lama. Suffering may be deferred so long as the second is held off long enough for the first to occur. For every conception of alternate temporality, time moves only in one direction.

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<sup>131</sup> Dhardon Sharling, personal communication, July 1, 2014.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

## 5. CONCLUSION

Three friends sat in a café in Middletown, Connecticut. They had met in Bodhi Gaya on a Buddhist Studies program. Before going on their semester abroad, one had been a committed Zen Buddhist practitioner, while the other two had little to no knowledge of Buddhism. On the program, the first ordained as a monk, the second committed to being immersed in the experience fully and eventually took refuge with the Tibetan Buddhist Rinpoche teaching on the program, while the third struggled with hang-ups about institutional religion as they lived in a monastery. Over a year-and-a-half had passed since then, and the third was now exploring Shambhala Buddhism, the school founded by Chogyam Trungpa<sup>133</sup> aimed at achieving an “enlightened society” through meditation.<sup>134</sup>

“It’s crazy how that program has changed so many lives,” they said.

“It’s the Buddhism,” they said, now that it seemed incontrovertible.

“Robert must know what it does. It’s probably why he set it up all those years ago,” they said, configuring a demiurge.<sup>135</sup>

“It’s conversion,” they said, as uncomfortable as this might have made them in the past, “one that’s at once oddly self-aware, and incredibly subtle.”

“They”, of course, is a conflation of the first, second, and third, and the presumed eventual dovetailing of their experience with Buddhism. None of the

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<sup>133</sup> A major and controversial figure involved in dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism to the West, and best known for founding the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, under which Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman, John Cage and Diane di Prima set up the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics.

<sup>134</sup> <http://shambhala.org/about-shambhala/the-shambhala-path/>

<sup>135</sup> Robert Pryor founded the Antioch University Buddhist Studies in India program in 1979

statements “They” made were untrue to the views of the three friends, but from a point of analysis, that they have been represented collectively in the narrative must be noted.

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Still, perhaps Lukar<sup>136</sup> was wrong, and the writer *is* susceptible to religious education after all. For someone whose life has been changed by studying and practicing Buddhism, I was tempted to look at the Tibetan community, who maintain that they as individuals do not suffer as refugees, and say with a knowing nod of solidarity, “It must be the Buddhism, right?”

Hunting for confirmation, I might note the correspondence between Sonam Norbu’s statement, “My sweet brothers were passed away. I am the only survivor. When I look from another perspective, I am lucky staying freely in India under the grace of His Holiness. This is not our land but we live freely,” and these lines from the Heart Sutra, “Bodhisattvas who practice/ the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore/ see no more obstacles in their mind,/ and because there/ are no more obstacles in their mind,/ they can overcome all fear,/ destroy all wrong perceptions/ and realize Perfect Nirvana.”<sup>137</sup> It must be the Buddhism, right?

Such snap attributions which conflate Buddhist teachings and the views of Buddhists, and which assume all Tibetans are Buddhist, may explain why Tenzin

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<sup>136</sup> The writer who prostrated to his fellow writers but never to the Buddha, and thought that unlike him and myself, who possessed the independent thinking of writers, his child might be prone to religious indoctrination in schools with Buddhist-infused pedagogy

<sup>137</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*, 20th Anniversary Edition edition (Berkeley, Calif: Parallax Press, 2009).

Tsundue is quick to assert “It is not just Buddhism. The courageous acts of compassion that you see in the Tibetan people comes from a great culture of heroism and warriorship that was there even before the coming of Buddhism to Tibet,” and why Dhardon Sharling insists, “I don’t think it has anything to do with Buddhism. His Holiness is one figure. It has massive influence of how we have fared today. I think it is the right thing happening in the right circumstances.” Just as these “not-Buddhism” positions may be reactions against the tendency to attribute Tibetan behavior to Buddhism, the invocation of Buddhism as mediation for suffering and refugehood in verbal and written representations should also be considered in view of the contexts from which they arise. Particularly in the case of many members of the younger generation who talk about Buddhism only when asked about it directly, and often as an afterthought, Buddhism may serve as an identity marker far more than as a mediator of experience.

I think back to my colleague’s description of how our study abroad program’s promulgation of Buddhism was at once “self-aware” and “subtle”, and while it is not a direct corollary here, I use this distinction to highlight the ways in which asking how Buddhism mediates suffering of Tibetans living in Dharamsala is analytically fraught. At the beginning of my paper, I noted the ontological gap between lived experience and representation, and concluded that my focus would be on representation since the only way for me to access experience is through expression. I then analyzed the specific set of contexts which gave rise to these representations, both in terms of “self-aware” deployment and other “subtler” influences. As I wrote, I realized that the subtlest of influences may be considered, but facticity never will,

given that an exact correspondence between representation and experience is indeterminable. Stopping short of diagnosing sincerity, the best the social scientist can do is make note of a strong conviction. As such, speculating whether Buddhism impacts life in exile almost inevitably leads away from an affirmative conclusion of any kind. To wit, the penultimate sentence of my previous paragraph invites the reader to question both those who claim that Buddhism affects them *and* those who claim that it does not (“Just as these ‘not-Buddhism’ positions may be reactions...the invocation of Buddhism as mediation...should also be considered in view of the contexts from which they arise.”). It thus seems impossible to pin down religious permeation beyond representation.

Maybe the question then is not whether Buddhism mediates suffering, but how people are constructing Buddhism as mediating or ameliorating suffering. Even so, in considering suffering and its mediation, it is difficult to posit a mediation or cure, be it Buddhism or otherwise, because suffering has largely been deferred rather than enumerated in most of my conversations. As I have been dealing largely in deferrals for the course of this paper, I have refrained from commenting on whether or not personal suffering has occurred, and focused instead on how it has been pushed aside in narratives of Tibetans in Dharamsala. In mapping a field of representations produced by people living in this town, I thus focused on two primary aspects: how people talk about Buddhism and how it plays into the ways they talk about health, the environment, and exile; and the ways in which they put off talking about personal suffering.

On that second aspect, I note that just as people resisted having their actions defined by Buddhism, many resisted being defined by a presupposition of suffering in refugeehood. In a town where tourists make up a large part of its social landscape, Dharamsala may well serve as a microcosm for the way the Tibetan community relates to the rest of the world, particularly in negotiating identity. The challenge has been to cultivate a public-facing identity that still feels authentically self-determined, given that the many of the organizations in the Tibetan independence movement started and gained traction in the 1980s due to strong foreign support, and continue to rely on it today.

At the same time, a tension arises from the sense that much of the writing about Tibet has come from interested foreigners, many of whom intersect with that first group of cheerleaders for independence such as celebrity Tibetologist Robert Thurman. One major problem is that there have not been enough perspectives from within the community to contextualize the differences between external and self-representation, be it in journalism, academia, or travel writing. As they were focused on survival, most people had no time to narrate the survival process when they first came into exile, I am told. Now that they have settled, the second generation is ready to let its voice be heard<sup>138</sup>—most likely a university-educated voice that hints at the rise of a scholar class, but a start nonetheless. As I contend towards the end of my paper, however, this feeling of being settled cannot last for long, as a peaceable existence in exile endures only insofar as the state of exile's imminent unsettling and self-destruction. The Tibetan in exile is never so settled as to call Dharamsala home,

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<sup>138</sup> Ugyan Choedup, personal communication, June 28, 2014.

for in doing so, they may risk losing a fundamental part of their “Tibetanness.” Is this suffering? Certainly, woes of displacement are what many are most vocal about, but still suffering in exile is still never decried as abject. A last deferral may be posited here—Tibet is suffering, fellow Tibetans and the land are suffering, but those in exile are getting by. As I have posited, this state of getting by has an expiration date. What, then, potentially mediates the expiration of deferred suffering?

Here, I continue to meditate on the idea of deferral. Deferral does not mean avoidance—it can simply mean to put it off. Suffering, in the case of Tibetan refugeehood, seems to be put off in deference to a presumed soon-to-occur homecoming. I have suggested that the effectiveness of this deferral is time-sensitive and races against the competing expiration dates of the end of Chinese occupation and the end of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama’s life. The first must arrive before the second in order for these deferrals, as currently expressed, to hold. If this happens, however, deferral is not only more productive than avoidance, but might constitute cure. Even without speculating about these eventualities of politics and mortality, in the immediacy of lived experience, is the ability to keep suffering at bay substantive enough to be considered a cure?

Just as the fledgling Buddhist wishes to believe that Buddhism is the cure for Tibetan (non)suffering in Dharamsala, the writer and proponent of narrative medicine wants badly to say, “tell me your story, talk about your problems, and you’ll start to feel better about them.” From the conversations I’ve had in Dharamsala, however, people tell me that they are doing just fine. In her work on Narrative Medicine, Rita Charon wrote that “illness and suffering must be told”, but it appears that deferral

might work, too. How might this be so? If the deferral of suffering functions performatively, then in its most simplistic form, the first part of this argument might go: one escapes suffering by deferring suffering, and one is not suffering if one does not suffer presently.<sup>139</sup>

The Tibetan in Dharamsala<sup>140</sup> “takes it easy” (Dorje) as she shrugs and remarks that life in exile is “just as it is” (Bhuchung)—it is in a constant state of flux, but so is all existence. Life, after all, is suffering.<sup>141</sup> And deferral is starting to look rather Buddhist indeed. Holding on to the philosophy of impermanence and recognizing that the instability of refugeehood is true to the nature of reality, she takes her first steps towards overcoming suffering. If personal suffering is deferred to attenuate the suffering of others, all the better: is this not loving-kindness and compassion? The Tibetan in Dharamsala imagines the suffering happening in Tibet, picturing it as so much worse than her own suffering could ever be. She visualizes it as black smoke collecting at the center of her heart, and expels it from her body. Then she fills herself with compassion and breathes it out so the wind may carry it over to Tibet. But wait—if the Tibetan in Dharamsala acts as a Buddhist should, must she not also acknowledge that the loss of Tibet, and whatever is happening in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, are part of the nation’s weathering a state of flux? Must she not accept it as the collective karma of the Tibetan nation as suggested by Lhundup, the manager at the Central Authority of Tibet Information Center? Is longing for Tibet not also a form of attachment?

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<sup>139</sup> Permitting, here, usages of suffering to mean an enduring state or present condition

<sup>140</sup> Forgive the use of a stereotype for dramatic effect

<sup>141</sup> But I will use the word “impermanence” to refer to Buddhist suffering for the sake of clarity, albeit at the expense of equivocal panache

To this, Geshe Tenpa Tashi of the Body, Mind and Life department of the Men Tsee Khang looks faintly impatient with this ridiculous query, then says:

Yes, the desire is to return to Tibet. Aspirations and desires—they are not likely to be completely negative. As a human being, we have all these desires. If you don't have all these things, we are not as a human being. [There can be positive desires.] Say, if we say we desire to be a good person. Even in case of Tibetan, why we say we desire for [freedom is] so that we can serve through our culture in a better way. It is all about [negotiating] limitation and desire.<sup>142</sup>

This clarification is useful. It also demonstrates that attempting to trace a trajectory according to broad Buddhist brushstrokes may not be conclusive, but does help to draw out how protracted particular viewpoints are, when taking a principle to its logical conclusion is viewed as a *reductio ad absurdum*. How attachment to the Tibetan homeland possibly be harmful?

It speaks volumes, too, that despite my genuine philosophical curiosity on the matter, I felt faintly ridiculous and rude for posing such a question to a Tibetan. After all, there are questions that the friendly ethnographer does not ask. For example, as mentioned in section 2.2, Vahali, who compiled the oral history volume *Lives in Exile*, conceives of the interview process as one that “enables a person to articulate certain difficult aspects of her inner experience in the presence of an empathic ‘other’—the researcher.”<sup>143</sup> I have noticed the tendency among my interlocutors in this field to be a single or multi-hyphenates—there are the scholar-healers among ethnographers such as Vahali, scholar-practitioners within the field of Buddhism more so than any other subdivision of Religions Studies, scholar-practitioner-activists

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<sup>142</sup> Tenpa Tashi, personal communication, 20 June, 2014.

<sup>143</sup> Vahali, *Lives in Exile: Exploring the Inner World of Tibetan Refugees*, xx.

such as Robert Thurman, and scholar-writer-healers such as Charon and her colleagues in Narrative Medicine.

I found myself attempting to wear several of these hats at any one time during the span of this project. I cannot speak for those who are authoritative in their fields, and reflect only on my limited personal experience. As an ethnographer, I wanted to believe that I was also doing the work of a healer, partly because I had briefly entertained the notion of “poor, suffering Tibetans” before having ever met a Tibetan person, but mostly because I felt that asking people to talk about suffering was such a huge imposition that I hoped they got something out of the exchange as well. As a scholar-writer, I resisted the urge to poeticize my analysis of these narratives. As a scholar-practitioner of Buddhism, I am tempted to map Buddhism’s mediation of my life onto the question of how it mediates suffering in Dharamsala. As a philosopher-social scientist, the philosopher in me wants to know how Buddhism can help people deal with suffering while the social scientific nature of this project focuses the discussion on how people are constructing and using Buddhism. Especially since part of my second chapter was spent discussing conceptions of selfhood in Dharamsala generated in reaction to the foreign presence in the town, I reflect that, as part of this foreign presence, it is important for scholars working in Dharamsala to be mindful of the tendencies that come with our many alternative hats and how they may shape our research practices, social exchanges, and analytic discourse about this community.

I conclude by considering Tenpa Tashi’s statement, “It is all about [negotiating] limitation and desire,” in the context of suffering surrounding the Tibetan issue. If there was ever a line drawn to indicate what is too great a desire for

Tibetan independence, perhaps it should stop short of self-immolation. Focusing on the dynamic in Exile Tibet, however, I consider “limitation” as both as self-control and as a bounded vessel—just as I observed in section 2.1 that Dorje’s conceptual consolidation of her problems since coming into exile under the diagnosis of *lung* disease helped her to manage and feel a sense of control over it, perhaps the deferral of personal suffering to Tibet,<sup>144</sup> and Tibet serving as as a repository and barometer for suffering, gives people a handle on both their suffering and irrepressible hope. Narrative Medicine empowers people to tell stories about their suffering in order to wrest control of their ill bodies and states. Deferral appears to move in the opposite direction in that it steers clear of acknowledging, much less narrating, suffering. Yet it addresses and directs suffering in its own way. For proponents and practitioners of Narrative Medicine, the hyphenate of “writer-healer” in this field was formed expressly from the belief that healing takes place through narrative construction. As a writer, I can imagine that must be incredibly gratifying to empower other people to tell and write their stories, and see them get better, and to be able to write your own story about that process afterwards. Yet we must recognize that narrating our lives and suffering is not native to everyone’s process, as I have shown through my examination of deferrals of personal suffering by Tibetans living in Dharamsala, and that seemingly universal categories and strategies may not function similarly in non-Western-inflected cultures. I, for one, am still a storyteller, and this is my story about a group of people who do not tell stories about their personal suffering.

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<sup>144</sup> By which I mean each person’s own construction of “Tibet”

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