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EDUCATION FOR EXPERIENCE:
ONE VIEW OF TIBETAN TANTRIC INITIATION

by

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EDUCATION FOR EXPERIENCE: ONE VIEW OF TIBETAN TANTRIC
INITIATION

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ABSTRACT:

The ethnographic treatment of "rites de Passage" is discussed with reference to material relating to religious initiation. It is suggested that the major transitions engendered through the Tibetan Buddhist Tantric Wang Kur rituals may be profitably analyzed not simply as changes in social status but rather as tools for the re-ordering of phenomenology which are designed to engender long-term alterations in the initiates' experience of the world. The initiation provides a rationale and instruction conjunctive with ritual technique which is consciously designed to globally and permanently alter the consciousness of the practitioner. Suggestions for studies of rites of passage which take into account this dimension of the ritual control of experience are offered.

EDUCATION FOR EXPERIENCE: A VIEW OF TIBETAN TANTRIC INITIATION

Brian J. Given

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this essay is two-fold. I want to offer a brief ethnographic description of some aspects of a Tibetan Tantric¹ initiation cycle held during 1980-81 at Puruwala in Himachal Pradesh, Northern India called the Lam Dre' ("Lobsche" form). The ritual cycle was last offered in this form about 40 years ago in Tibet. Such a major initiation cycle represents one of a number of possible comprehensive statements regarding the nature of Tantra and the Buddhist view of mind.

In doing so I would like to address three issues relevant to the study of initiation rituals.

1. The Anthropology of Experience

First, scholars have tended to omit from our theoretical discussions of rites of passage detailed investigations of the altered phenomenology that they are often designed to engender. I would like to add my voice to those of Eliade (1964), Harner (1980), Katz (1982, 1984), Laughlin et al (1978a), Bourignon (1973) and others in emphasizing that for many of our informants rituals are, above all, about states of mind. In 1936 Firth (Firth 1936:422) was calling for a detailed study of "the reaction which the initiation ceremonies produce in the person who is the focus for them..." and Victor Turner's (1970) explorations of symbol multivocality gave us an appropriate set of conceptual tools. However, at least with regard to descriptions of the experience of non-ordinary awareness engendered by ritual, we have sometimes been remiss. The analysis contained herein extends the concept of multi-vocality to encompass ritually-derived non-ordinary states of experience.

The ritual cycle I will allude to here, the Lam Dre', is certainly the expression of a highly complex culture and epistemology that has been preoccupied with the

exploration of consciousness for more than thirteen centuries. I remind the reader, however of Bourignon's (1973:418) documentation of institutionalized forms of "dissociation" in 437 societies or 89% of those for which data were available.²

I join Katz, Laughlin, Lex, Bourignon and others in pointing to the fact that most non-western cultures recognize more than one state of mind in which it is possible to apprehend knowledge. In Laughlin's (1978) terms, western societies tend to be "mono-phasic" in acknowledging only the "normal waking state" as that in which one can know "reality." The majority of societies with which anthropological fieldwork is conducted recognize one or more other states of mind as domains of experience in which knowledge can be gained. Examples would include various dream states, a variety of states which those without experience of them may homogenize under the label "trance" states, including the experiences facilitated by many different techniques of meditation.

There is clear evidence that most of the cultures we study possess institutionalized strategies which are designed to produce, for the initiate, the experience of what my Tibetan teachers would call "extraordinary" reality. In many cases a variety of such strategies, designed to produce a corresponding variety of extraordinary experiences, are in evidence. For example, Tibetan Buddhists recognize 32 major kinds of meditation and delineate hundreds of carefully defined experiences to be derived from meditation practice. I suggest that where our informants' cultures incorporate sophisticated taxonomies of ritual technique and experienced result, it behooves the ethnographer to attend to the full range of these cultural categories. To aggregate such experiences with reference to more limited taxonomies under such glosses as "trance," "vision," or "fit" diminishes the complexity of our informants' strategies for learning about and teaching about the world and the richness of experience upon which their pedagogies are based. The Lam Dre' ritual cycle which I will discuss here employs multiple strategies for the attainment of meditative states. Collectively, these techniques and their experiential consequences constitute a pedagogical program which one of the products of one culture's epistemological program. It is arguable that an exploration of such a ritual-based

pedagogy requires an appropriate use of its own lexicon. When our informants tell us that the cognates associated with that lexicon can only be accessed through the appropriate use of ritual we have little recourse but to examine with great care the extent to which our participant-observation methodology addresses the experiential dimension of ritual. We must theorize the concept of "participation" with reference to our experiential involvement in the rituals we study.

2. Asking Relevant Questions

Second, at a methodological level I am led to suggest that asking insightful questions about non-ordinary states of consciousness is likely to be difficult for a researcher who has been unable to experience them (Charles Tart 1969, 1975). It will be even more difficult if he or she does not recognize that such questions may address the crucial aspects of the institution under study from the perspective of the informant. The danger here is that, as researchers, our positivist enculturation and professional training may tend to preclude our asking questions about other ways of knowing. Further, our own culture's de-emphasis of ritual as a strategy for knowing, and our resultant unfamiliarity with ritually altered experience, may render us incapable of asking appropriate questions about ritual based pedagogies.

3. The Question of Time-Frame

Third, also with regard to methodology, it seems likely that in those cases where initiates are introduced to ritual practices and instructions which are believed to alter their experience as a result of much repetition (e.g. Katz 1982, 1984), the process of initiation must be thought of as including both the formal introduction to and the subsequent public or private practice of those techniques. Katz (1972), Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971), Laughlin et al (1984) and my Tibetan teachers emphasize that the events of the few days or months during which formal initiation ceremonies are held can only be properly understood in the context of the initiates mental preparation and subsequent practice of the rituals.

Several aspects of the Tibetan Sakya Lam Dre' initiation cycle present a

challenge to our models for the understanding of initiation rites.

LAM DRE': A BUDDHIST TANTRIC INITIATION CYCLE

Sakya is a principality of central and eastern Tibet. Prior to the Chinese invasion, Sakya's 2100 square miles had a population of about 17,000 (Cassinelli 1964).

The two largest monasteries of Sakya housed and educated about 500 monks. The Sakya monks were respected throughout Tibet for their depth of study and skill in debate. The Sakya lineage is now based in Rajpur in the state of Uttar Pradesh in Northern India as a result of the Chinese occupation of Tibet and suppression of its Tantric tradition³.

I provide a discussion of basic Buddhist doctrine and practices elsewhere (Given 1990). Suffice it to say, for the present, that Buddhists believe that through the practice of "right actions of body, speech, and mind" they can build good "karma," which can be conceptualized as a sort of psychic inertia, such that they can gain a good rebirth in a good family with a comfortable life and with exposure to the religious teachings that will allow them to build even better karma with which to again enter the "bardo states" between death and rebirth (Evans-Wentz 1960).

Tibetan Buddhists believe that "all sentient beings" will eventually attain Buddhahood. However, this might take us three kalpas. A kalpa is a "countless eon." It is taught, however that one may choose to embrace the Vajrayana or thunderbolt path, also referred to as Tantrayana or simply Tantra. Tantra has come to mean the practice of esoteric techniques to promote rapid enlightenment. Through the practice of Tantra an individual of exceptional ability might gain Buddhahood during this lifetime or at the moment of death. Tantric practice is thought to ensure that even an individual of very poor ability will gain Buddhahood within only a few lifetimes.

The Initiations

The Lam Dre' Tantric ritual cycle is described by the Lamas who taught it, as a "complete teaching" - that is, it contains both basic and advanced information,

conjunctive with mental training techniques necessary to attain Buddhahood. As such, Lam Dre' is considered by the high lamas of the Sakya lineage to be an encapsulation of Sakya philosophy and Tantric esotericism. The present discussion is based upon several years of work as a participant observer in the role of initiate-practitioner studying a variety of Tibetan Tantric ritual and meditation practices in North American culminating with the four month Lam Dre' initiation cycle in Northern India. All of the high lamas of the Sakya lineage must be present for the Lam Dre' to be offered in this form. Most of the instruction was given by five high-ranking lamas with His Holiness Sakya Trizin⁴ presiding and, through initiation, becoming the initiates' "Root Guru⁵." Each of the main teachers gave some of the wang kurs or initiations which comprise the core of Lam Dre' although the wang kur which were described as the most important ones were given by His Holiness. All of the main teachers, as well as several monks who offered less central instruction, made constant reference to the importance of our "connection" with the high lamas. Several lamas commented positively about the high levels of meditative and scholarly attainment of the other lamas and it was made clear that with reference to both written texts as well as oral tradition that they believed that they had received a shared canonical version of this ritual complex.

The Lam Dre' was held in the village of Puruwala in Northern India - a refugee community of 300 people and 25 four-room houses which is now an important spiritual centre for the Sakya lineage because the highest teachings have been offered there. A new traditional temple was built in Puruwala for the occasion of these initiations that were received by about 800 people, most of whom were monks.

The initiate is expected to receive initiation and instructions for each successive phase of the initiation cycle and is then expected to practice those teachings through the performance of ritual, meditation and study until "signs" of readiness for the next stage of practice are evident. Such signs may range from evidence of intense emotion such as (the repetition of a refuge prayer) "until one is trembling with devotion and tears are falling" to the production of dramatic transformations in the initiate's phenomenology such as the experience of oneself as a

multi-headed, multi-limbed deity complete with architectural and geographic surround. Further transformations of that experience will be discussed later.

Once an initiation ceremony or wang kur has been performed and the relevant instructions for the practice of the ritual-drama or sadhana have been imparted, the initiate might appear to have received all that he or she needs to know and the ethnographer might be tempted to pack up his or her notebooks. Yet it is explicitly taught that this knowledge cannot be apprehended without major changes in the phenomenology of the practitioner which must be produced by repeated practice of the teachings themselves over a long period of time. The need for exegesis is implicit in the Lamas' instructions. However, the Lamas are explicit in warning the initiates that such an exegesis constitutes a transformation in the phenomenology of the practitioner, not an intellectual abstraction. Their pedagogy appears to consist in a cycle of exploration which involves the receipt of instructions and an initial hermeneutic context within which they may be understood, followed by "practice" and resultant experience. Based upon the initiate's experience, the guru provides additional or more subtle hermeneutics coupled with modified or new instructions for practice.

Turner (1974) suggested, with regard to puberty rites, that initiation rituals may serve to promote cognitive development to the level of abstract adult thought that Piaget calls "formal operational". The Tibetan Tantric lamas who taught us see the Tantric teachings as multi-vocal metaphors addressing levels of world-view beyond Piaget's formal operations.

Just as a child's cognitive development to formal operational thought will, after age 12 or so, permit him or her to understand an allegory like Alice in Wonderland on a new level - that of metaphor - so my teachers⁶ believe that a process of post-adult cognitive development must take place in order for the Lam Dre' teachings to be understood. "Enlightenment" then, is conceived to be a developmental process, rather than a state.

It is made clear at the beginning that if the initiate is to derive the "fruits" of

the Lam Dre' practices he or she is going to have to live the ritual-drama called sadhana and incorporate it into his or her experience completely. This is accomplished through the protracted practice of meditation in conjunction with prescribed practices of thought and behaviour in non-meditative states⁷.

Description of the Initiation Cycle

The Lam Dre' initiation cycle is divided into two major parts, the Nang Sum or Triple Teaching and the Gyud Sum or Triple Tantra.

The Nang Sum is the more accessible part of the teachings while the Gyud Sum is the more esoteric part. We might expect that the Nang Sum part of the initiation would be amenable to treatment with reference primarily to the cultural categories of mundane experience. It should be noted however that one high Lama who came to the initiation at Puruwala had already completed a 12 year cave-retreat meditating the exoteric Nang Sum teachings. Such preparation was considered impressive but not inappropriate.

My teachers explicitly base their instructions upon several major premises as follows:

1/ knowledge changes the mind of the knower, and conversely knowledge is changed (or structured) by the mind of the knower. Hence, learning a system of thought and practice changes the mind of the learner such that subsequent explorations of that same system are predicated upon new experiential and intellectual premises which, in turn, change the meaning of that system. Those changes in understanding both require and make comprehensible further instruction.

2/ for this reason higher truths cannot be presented directly to the initiate. At best they would be incapable of comprehending them, at worst they would be distorted and misunderstood, perhaps in ways that would be harmful to the student or to the teachings. This is a major reason for the secrecy that surrounds these instructions. Many of the most secret instructions are orally transmitted across generations of

teachers and students, while access to high Tantric texts is generally restricted to initiates.

3/ rather than serving as the explicit presentation of objective information, the teachings are presented explicitly as psychotropic devices designed to facilitate the creation of the a mind that is capable of knowing those higher truths. In other words my teachers consider that teaching, or at least Dharma teaching, consists in the manipulation of the students' subjective reality through the psychotropic use of ritual control strategies and supporting hermeneutics.

4/ consequently the teachings consist in a hierarchy of what my teachers call (in English gloss) "views." Each level of view is sought through the manipulation of experience (by means of ritual and meditation) conjunctive with supporting hermeneutics (cosmology). It is understood that these are "partial views" which are presented for heuristic reasons. The truth value of a view is its transcendent quality. Each successive view is intended to be transcended by the progressive changes in consciousness that it facilitates. This succession of views will continue until the final transcendence that is Buddhahood.

The next level of view then, is not seen as being inherently true. Rather, if the initiate acts as if it is true it will shape her or his mind so that a higher level view may generated. Thus it is an extreme example of what Regna Darnell (p.c. 1978) has called "deferred communication" with reference to discourse by Cree elders. Tantric teachers explicitly understand the instruction and initiations to consist in multi-levelled metaphors that will be differently understood contingent upon the initiate's ability to use meditation practice to "unfold" the experiences which are the intentionality of the ritual symbology to which they have been initiated.

The act of initiation then, operates on two levels. The students receives initiation to a new social role (i.e. "Tantric person") and at the same time, is authorized and instructed in the use of powerful ritual tools designed to facilitate the production of non-ordinary states of mind."

As already mentioned, the Lam Dre' teachings, and indeed Tantric teachings in general, are self-consciously predicated upon the assumption that knowledge changes the knower. As a corollary, in order to gain "higher" knowledge we must change the mental conditions that create the projections which constitute our experience, our reality.

At each stage in the Lam Dre' teachings the same set of postulates are presented to the students, but each time within a different, and from my teachers' perspective, a "higher" framework, an understanding upon which a still higher understanding may be predicated.

By way of example; the beginner sees a meditation deity as a being external to himself or herself. An intermediate practitioner might realise that the deity does not inherently exist but is a set of multi-vocal symbols which integrate meaning across multiple domains of experience and which may also may be "unfolded" through meditation to reveal deeper meanings which are antecedent to conscious experience but which are the stuff of which that experience is constructed. The deity then, for that practitioner is the map for a mind-state which is the goal of a particular meditation practice. A more advanced practitioner might recognise that the deity is closer to being inherently real than they are because the archetypal experiences that comprise the deity reflect, and so constitute portals to the underlying processes that create their ordinary reality. These prototypical experiences are lower-order projections of those processes and hence are proximate to the experience of the universal "mind stuff" (to use Heisenberg's term) that comprises our experience of the world. Such a view is also called by Tibetan Tantrists, "Mahamudra," or the "Great Symbol."

THE INITIATION PROCESS

I shall bypass here, the first months of the Nang Sum teachings and will deal only with the more esoteric Gyud Sum part⁸.

The Gyud Sum teachings involve sets of "wang kur" or ritual initiations which empower the initiate to practice particular meditations. In addition, there are "lungs"

or the reading of texts relevant to the practice of the meditations. There is "ti" or the offering of traditional secret instructions by the highest lamas on the practice of the meditation and finally there is "lama teaching" that is developed within the relationship between initiates and individual adepts.

The Lam Dre' initiation cycle involves a great many wang kur, relevant instructions and subsequent practice of meditation and ritual. The wangs are presented in a fixed sequence, each contingent upon receiving the previous one⁹. The initiate is expected to "realize the fruits" of the practices in the order in which they are taught. By way of illustration I will present a short description of one of the preliminary practices, called a Mandala Offering.

THE MANDALAS

There are two kinds of mandalas, the "offering mandala" (or offering of the universe) and the "visualized mandala" (or universe of the deity).

The Offering Mandala

The offering mandala may be understood as the initial ritual renunciation of the phenomenal world and the visualized mandala may be understood initially as the substitution of what my teachers called a "celestial" or higher phenomenal world. The offering mandala consists in the creation of a symbolic representation of the universe as the practitioner ordinarily experiences it.

As part of the exercise the initiate uses various colours of dyed rice¹⁰ to create a symbolic world upon a convex silver plate. The offering mandala is a multivocal symbol wherein the piles of rice represent the "five continents" arising from a "vast ocean" represented by the silver plate; at another level they represent the myriad objects of consciousness constructed through the five "skandas," or sensory domains, arising from the "stainless ocean" of pure consciousness (i.e. consciousness without an object or "Sunyata"). Having created this "offering mandala" representing the phenomenal world, she or he intones a mantra and sweeps the piles of rice from the

plate with her or his arm. Thus the practitioner symbolizes the sweeping away of the phenomenal world, leaving only consciousness itself. Most initiates complete 100,000 offering mandalas as a preliminary or "foundation" practice, although some lamas require 300,000 repetitions or more from their students.

The lamas who taught us about the mandala offering were adamant that while even the most deluded of initiates can comprehend the mandala offering as a symbolic giving up of the "ordinary" world or "the world of appearances," the initiate must repeat the sadhana until it becomes an experiential reality. It is repeatedly stated that it is the generation of the experience rather than the number of repetitions of the ritual which is important. That is to say, the mandala offering must become a personal and very real experience which constitutes a transform of the sadhana itself. Various signs are mentioned as indicators of successful trans-coding

THE MANDALA OF THE DEITY

After the mandala offering, the wiping away of "ordinary reality" the initiate proceeds to construct the extraordinary reality of the deity. This constitutes the vehicle whereby his or her phenomenal world will be re-created. Step by step a complex visual image of the deity and the universe of the deity is constructed in the initiate's imagination.

Each aspect of the visualization is described in painstaking detail. The importance of clearly experiencing the visualizations is frequently emphasised. Over and over again the initiates are told that they must "really know" that they are the deity and the deity's mandala. In all, the basic instructions for the complete imagery require about fifty pages of text. Such an initial description is further elaborated in much greater detail by our teachers. That is, we are told exactly how a specific symbol should be imaged whereas the initial instructions merely told us which symbol to visualize.

The sadhana presents many sets of symbols that are transformed into other sets of symbols only to be transformed again. If one permits even the slightest distraction one is likely to lose track altogether.

Once the initiates have entered this path they are expected to live it twenty-four hours a day. The initiate does not dissolve the deity visualization, but rather arises from the session as the deity. We are encouraged to maintain the image of ourselves and all other appearances as being the mandala or universe of the deity. Our teachers acknowledge that such imagery is very difficult for most students to create or maintain but they repeatedly emphasize the importance of doing so, providing us with a number of exercises designed to help us to sustain the appropriate imagery.

For example, the initiate mentally transmutes their his or her into nectar and offers it to a sacred syllable which they visualize in their heart-centre¹¹. All appearances are to be seen as the deity, all sounds are to be heard as the mantra of the deity.

At night the initiate dissolves all of the deities into an empty symbolic field called Sunyata or (in English gloss) "the Plenum Void" or "Emptiness." When the initiate awakens, she arises as the deity, thereby reiterating the theme of the sadhana. It is made clear that a student who wants "the fruits" of this practice must do it fully. She or he must be the deity and the mandala of the deity full-time for years. Only with such effort can he or she realize the full meaning encoded by the practice. In order to achieve this end it is common for the initiate to do a series of meditation retreats after receiving the teachings or interspersed with various stages of initiation¹². It is recognized that the task of creating oneself as the deity is one which is difficult to accomplish while interacting with people who are enmeshed in ordinary or "consensus" reality.

Clearly, the process of deliberately creating oneself as the deity and the universe of the deity consists in a personal experience of a carefully articulated non-ordinary reality which, at one level, symbolically mirrors the universe of external appearances, the "world of the senses" in what our teachers called a "purified," and what I would gloss as an "archetypical" form. Each symbolic element of that "universe of the deity" has, associated with it, multiple meanings which integrate various domains of experience. In that sense this symbology is multi-vocal (Turner 1969, 1970, 1974). These multiple meanings are explicitly discussed by our tantric teachers

who to them the concept of meditative "unfoldment" which extends the concept of symbol multi-vocality to mean symbolic synthesis across modes of consciousness. There is a final stage on symbol visualization before we can come to understand the purpose of this arduous enterprise.

THE PROCESS OF COMPLETION

The final stage requires that the initiate, while imagining himself or herself as the deity, visualize, inside the body of the deity, a corresponding "body mandala" consisting of the structure of "veins" or energy channels and the "airs" or movement of energy within them. Predicated upon those he/she visualizes a set of inner cakras (energy centres¹³) such as the sixty-four vein Nirmanicakra at the navel, the eight vein Dharmacakra at the heart-centre and so on. Cross-points in the five cakras are visualized as deities.

In all, the practitioner must learn to visualize one hundred and fifty-seven deities, each with its colours, ornaments, 116 physical marks, and specific location. The practitioner also mentally transforms the sense organs (the physical organs themselves) into the forms of deities, adding another five to the total "inner creation" mandala. One of our teachers mentions that these 162 are only the main ones.

I also remind the reader that the above described "Inner Creation" mandala is visualized concurrent with the "Outer Creation" mandala including oneself as the deity and all of the surrounding deities and symbols.

Most of the practices at this stage consist in breathing exercises. These are strategies for manipulating the airs and elements, moving them around in the veins. The initiates are taught that it is these processes which produce conscious experience.

Clearly the initiate will require a high level of meditative skill in order to create and maintain the visualization, to complete the process of creation of the mandala of the central deity and all of the surrounding deities.

The mandala of the deity is designed to fold in upon itself in the same sequence of practised structural transformations through which it is created. These transformations are spatially organized in developmental sequences, from the

periphery to the centre of the mandala, culminating in the goal symbolic field called Sunyata or Emptiness, better translated as the "plenum void" or consciousness without an object. By producing, manipulating and dissolving the mandala of the deity the initiate will learn that ordinary reality is also a mandala.

In this process the practitioner's experience of self and other is distilled to elemental form in a set of multi-vocal symbols which correspond initially to a relatively anthropomorphic body with pseudo-geographic and pseudo-architectural surrounds. Later on he/she will experience himself/herself as both the deity and as the mandala of the deity. Finally, through the medium of the inner mandala, which I have just described, he/she will experience himself/herself as being, in his or her nature, the process which underlies the creation of the outer form of the deity and the universe of the deity.

Thus the entirety of phenomenal experience is mapped onto the psycho-physical body of the practitioner. Each of the primal elements of experience corresponds to a primal body-structure and process. More complex composite experiences are attributed to more complex composite structures of veins which represent transformations upon these lower order symbols. The transformations from primal structure to primal experience (i.e. of the effect of moving the "airs" in the "veins"), from primal to archetypal experience and finally to mundane experience is articulated in the morphological pattern whereby the veins and airs elaborate to form the outer world or the "world of the senses." Again, while this is a cosmological map of the forces which are believed to underlay experience, its major function, its intentionality (to use Husserl's concept) is as a map for experience.

THE VAJRA BODY AS SYMBOLIC CONTROL SYSTEM

It is clear that the deity map of the body is intended as a symbolic control system. My teachers do not pretend to their Tantric students that the deities which are to be visualized have inherent existence. The practitioner is expected to be able to come to experience the veins and elements as the "guna" or essence, the qualities of the deity, without having to have recourse to a pseudo-physical form. At this point in the

initiation cycle the lamas make it apparent to the students that the deities are symbolic strategies for manipulating psychological processes.

The first, albeit long and arduous, step is to establish this symbolic paradigm in the experience of the practitioner. The second part of this ritual process is to link, through intellectual discourse as well as through sets of transformations of symbols in the initiate's visualization practices, the paradigm to all facets of the practitioners' experience (both "ordinary" and "extraordinary") of the world. If the initiate can accomplish this practice he/she is now in a position to fold the projection back in upon itself. In so doing he/she aims to transform and disengage from awareness the composite elements which constitute the lower-order objects of consciousness upon which ordinary experience is predicated. The goal of such global dis-entrainment of the cognitive models or experiences antecedent to ordinary experience is to generate the symbolic field upon which they, in turn, are predicated. According to my teachers, diligent practice may enable the initiate to further penetrate to the experience of consciousness itself or consciousness without an object, Sunyata. The bench-mark of Sunyata or "the Plenum Void" is the criterion for epistemological objectivity, the only basis for knowing.

UNDERSTANDING INNER SIGNS

I suggest here (after Laughlin et al 1984) that the deity and associated mental techniques ("yogas"¹⁴) have been developed over time because these particular signs have proven to be efficacious codes for the keying and activation (i.e. activation in consciousness) of deep, genetically based elements of experience. These non-ordinary experiences constitute lower-order components of ordinary experience and, as such, constitute experiential precursors to Sunyata, the target symbolic field.

This hypothesis implies that the "outer sign" as presented to the practitioner must be keyed in some way to "universal" or genetically based signs. Webber (1979) postulates that outer signs represent the cultural, sub-cultural, and perhaps idiosyncratic transforms of genetically based universal signs. For example, focusing one's attention on the experience of the breath at one's nostrils (which Tibetan

tantrists would call an "outer sign") does, for many individuals, yield spontaneously the arising of an internally generated experience, (which tantrists call the "arising sign") which a number of initiates have described to me variously "crystalline structure," "fish eggs," or "crystal network." While interviewees have usually made reference to such visual descriptors, most also mention kinaesthetic, auditory (e.g. the "music of the spheres" was mentioned by several interviewees) and other sensory experiences, described as allegorical to the visual experience. I have interviewed several meditation teachers with extensive cross-cultural experience and all claim that the only culture-specific variation in students' reports of the results of extensive work with this practice is that of the choice of descriptive metaphor.

With regard to deity visualizations, Webber (1979) posits two stages of internalization of the object of meditation. In the first stage, the practitioner creates a stable mental replica of the outer sign. He notes that practitioners report that this "inner sign" tends to elaborate itself, with the apparently spontaneous appearance of additional detail as well as changes in appearance. The inner sign may also become animate, again without the conscious intervention of the practitioner. Hence the inner sign represents a transcoding of the outer sign which produces a private object of meditation. With extensive meditation upon this inner sign, a further transcoding is possible, producing the universal or "arising" sign.

My teachers assured me that such an "arising sign" constitutes a universal transcoding of the object of meditation or "outer sign" which will occur with sufficient practice regardless of the cultural background of the practitioner. Where my teachers would agree that the outer form of a deity, for example, is mediated by cultural background, the "essence" or final inner transcoding of the deity is posited as inherent in the human mind (see also Webber 1979).

This experience of the outer sign being displaced in awareness by the arising sign is called by my teachers Jhana, a Pali¹⁵ term which translates as "absorption." Such an experience may involve visual, olfactory, kinaesthetic, or auditory modalities and is remarkable for its affective intensity (see also Webber 1979, Laughlin et al 1984, Shearer et al 1977).

The universal sign that arises in response to meditation upon the object is called by my teachers an "arising sign," - hence, this is the practice of "arising yoga."

Understandably, no specific teachings are offered regarding the attributes of the arising sign, nor is the initiate necessarily informed that such an experience may occur. It is considered necessary that the practitioner should produce it through his/her own efforts. My teachers emphasize that this stage, although it may take years of diligent practice to reach, and may not be reached by all practitioners, is only the beginning. One continues to meditate upon the arising sign as a vehicle for further transformation. For some practitioners, those whom my teachers classify as of "superior ability," absorption into the universal or arising sign may lead to the experience of Sunyata, a clear awareness that they believe is "pure consciousness," or consciousness without an object. This final transformation in consciousness is the target symbolic field, the "ground of being," and the experiential bench-mark from which perspective conventional concepts of "illusion" and "reality" are seen as semantically equivalent fallacies. While such an experience constitutes "enlightenment," the Lamas are quick to point out that this event marks only the first stage of enlightenment or first "Bhumi." There are thirteen Bhumis.

CONCLUSIONS

I return to my three earlier points: (1) the ethnographic truncation of our representation of our informants' range of conscious experience, (2) asking questions about non-ordinary states of consciousness and (3) the ethnographic telescoping of time-frame with regard to ritual initiation. I will suggest that these three issues are central to an anthropology of ritual which respects the knowledge and experience of our cross-cultural teachers.

1. The Anthropology of Experience

Whether or not my teachers' hermeneutic system is valid within other cultures' frames of reference is a matter for a separate discussion. For an ethnographer it is sufficient that this hermeneutic system is valid for its adherents. I suggest that as

researchers, working with people whose world-views are based upon experience that is systematically transformed through the use of techniques such as ritual and meditation, it is inappropriate to base our research upon assumptions, experience, and questions that ignore that reality.

We are obliged to consider the intentionality of ritual from our informants/teachers perspectives and experience. It is the experience of transformation with which both the teachers and initiates at Lam Dre' were concerned. For them, the ritual's purpose is to yield experiences that render new levels of hermeneutics understandable and, more importantly, make further penetration possible. Invariably the lamas' answers to questions about the meanings of practices take the form of instructions for mental exercises designed to enhance the initiate's personal trans-coding of those practices. Furthermore, successful trans-coding (i.e. the generation of the inner sign followed by the arising sign) is only an interim goal of the practice. When the initiate achieves a new level of transcoding of the meditation object, the Lamas provide him or her with new instructions for seeking the next level.

Models for the analysis of ritual that are unable to incorporate successive transformations of key symbols, across shifts in modes of consciousness, must invariably ignore those transformative qualities of ritual that are definitive for our informants. So too, must they fail to recognize the difference in experience and therefore in meaning between the practice of ritual adepts and that of non-adepts. Perhaps too, such models preclude our teachers teaching us their culture's discoveries about human nature. Analyses of ritual through conventional intellectual symbolic exegesis provides valuable insight into the ways in which rituals do, to paraphrase Wallace (1972) "the work of religion." My Tibetan tantric teachers provide such scholarly exegesis as a part of their epistemological program and some lamas recognize that exegesis within a western cultural idiom is useful for western initiates. The lamas who taught the Lam Dre' clearly believe that deeper understanding, the understanding which constitutes the value of this ritual cycle, may only be apprehended through meditative exegesis. They also clearly believe that analyses of

their ritual epistemologies which omit this essential pedagogical component can only devalue their culture's contributions to human understanding.

I note, after Turner (1974) that because their semiotic operating ranges transcend the boundaries of ordinary time and space the elements and processes of ritual integrate broad ranges of cognitive and social phenomena within a phenomenal matrix which is beyond the bounds of ordinary experience. Such a matrix necessarily cuts across that range of cognitive elements and processes which produce our ordinary experience, but is not limited to that sub-matrix. Ritual then is a vehicle with which we activate in our awareness cognitive matrices which may subsume all or part of, but are not limited to, those which produce the reality we ordinarily experience. Ritual then, frees us of the reality of ordinary or "normal waking state" time and space to experience and formulate alternate realities which cut across or render meaningless the categories and constraints of "ordinary" reality.

Our informants have been telling us all along that their ritual systems constitute epistemological pedagogies through which the practitioner's cognized model of reality is transformed in the direction of greater isomorphism with that set of principles and processes which comprise natural law (Chagnon 1977, Laughlin et al 1984, Evans-Wentz 1958, Firth 1967). We haven't heard them, in part, because our colonial and post-colonial ethnographic discourse has tended to minimize the inclusion of references to non-western pedagogies as a basis for acquiring knowledge.

Initiation as a sub-set of ritual may be understood as the introduction of a system of semiotic operators that function as cognitive/phenomenological devices to integrate, as a symbolic control system, various symbolic elements and transformational processes which underlie human experience in a matrix that is free of normal spatial and temporal determinants. In this non-ordinary "reality," (i.e. in an alternate state of consciousness or A.S.C.) the symbolizing process is freed from the matrix within which cultural or personal conditioning has bound it. Its elements exist in liminality or lessened coalescence and are ultimately re-combined to form a new matrix, a new social and cognitive reality.

To paraphrase Anthony Wallace (1972), ritual is where the work of religion is done. There is ample support in the literature for the contention that ritual-practitioners usually regard their practice as making possible more ontologically valid reality-experience. Further, it would appear that the initiates' progress through the series of initiations and practices that constitutes an initiation cycle often may involve multiple levels of ritually introduced experience which are thought by the teachers and initiates to constitute a hierarchy of states of consciousness. My Tibetan teachers have developed a vast and complex lateral and hierarchical taxonomy of mind-states to be attained through application of ritual as the technology of their epistemological system (Evans-Wentz 1958, Beyer 1978) but are not unique in this regard. For example Reichel-Dolmatoff's (1971) Amazonian teachers refer to "seven levels of knowing" that may be sequentially attained through appropriate initiation and ritual practice, Rinzai Zen recognizes three "Kenshos" or levels of enlightenment¹⁶ while Jainism recognizes "Twelve Facets of Reality" (Chitrabhanu 1980). Similarly, Marcel Griaule (1965) reports that Dogon secret society initiates seek to attain successive levels of knowing through their ritual-initiation cycle.

Questions regarding the purpose of initiation are often answered by anthropologists' informants with reference to shifts in consciousness such that the "reality" experienced by the initiate during the liminal and post-initiation phases differs dramatically from their former experience. Such an insider's view implies a developmental perspective that accounts for the greater truth-value that is attributed to the experience of adepts within such ritual-epistemologies.

If ritual and ritual initiation can function to precipitate experience that is not a part of the "normal waking state" of consciousness, as the ethnographic record seems to indicate that it can (e.g. Katz 1982, 1984, Webber 1979, d'Aquily et al 1979, Cove et al 1984), then any theoretical formulations dealing with these phenomena must take into account data relevant to the production, experience, and ontological consequences of such shifts in consciousness.

2. Asking Relevant Questions

The field-worker faces a quite practical problem when confronted with informants who claim that their world-views and decision-making processes are mediated by experience derived from one or more transformations of consciousness. He or she is likely to ask questions that, at best, reveal a lack of relevant experience. Further, it is likely that the sorts of explanations that are offered to a naive questioner are very different than those likely to be offered to a fellow practitioner. For the informant, the researcher may appear to be stubbornly denying very real experience that (to paraphrase Levi-Strauss) allows the ritual to "think through him"¹⁷.

My Tibetan teachers are quite willing to discuss Dharma¹⁸ with Western scientists. As a group, however, they see us as rather obstinate primitives who must be talked down to. With great courtesy they make it clear that unless we are willing to make the effort to generate the experience upon which understanding must be based, there is little that they can do except humour us.

Most tragically, often the field-worker never finds out that he or she has been dealt with according to perceived limitations in his or her experience. If we are genuinely interested in our informants' unique experience, it may be necessary for some researchers to undertake the training necessary to satisfy our informants that we are capable of inter-subjectivity (see Tart 1975, Katz 1982).

3. The Question of Time-Frame

A further common deficit in anthropological treatments of ritual initiation results from a tendency to treat the ceremony as an isolated event apart from the extremely lengthy period of preparation leading up to it. Some authors, (e.g. Whiting et al 1958, Katz 1982, Jorgensen 1972, Jung 1944, 1952, 1956) have taken this preparation into account though none have considered preparation and ceremony as a single phenomenon¹⁹. Few scholars have attempted to model initiation as an on-going process that includes ritual activity before, during, and after the actual ceremony which marks initiation. My teachers tell me that the preparation is essential because (to use a Tibetan metaphor) it produces "fertile soil" in which the

initiation ceremony "plants a seed". In addition, after initiation, only the individual's regular, (usually daily) recapitulation of the initiation process through personal practice can produce "the fruit" which is the goal of a ritual cycle (see also Katz 1982, Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971, Laughlin et al 1984). The ethnographic record, then, requires a theoretical treatment of initiation ritual which considers the phenomenon as a complex of related ritual activity which may extend throughout the lifetime of the individual and which is capable of transforming his/her pattern of experience in ways which they perceive as deeply meaningful.

4. Respecting the Cross-cultural Teacher's Experience

The theoretical concerns discussed above are particularly relevant to the analysis of Tibetan Tantric initiation and ritual practice. The Lam Dre' initiation cycle which is my ethnographic focus here was, according to Tibetan historical sources, developed by the Indian sage Virupa at the ancient Nalanda University. Tibetan Buddhists have preserved a ritual system which was developed by Indian Buddhists who brought these traditions to Tibet around 600 A.D.

There is in fact little evidence that the Tibetans have innovated very much beyond the Northern Buddhist school of the sixth century as evidenced by comparisons of ancient and recent texts (Snellgrove and Richardson 1980). They have, however, done an excellent job of preserving written and oral teachings that they have adopted from India over the last thirteen centuries. Through a carefully controlled program of oral transmission they have maintained lineages of practitioners passing the oral instructions and discipline from master to student²⁰.

The entire purpose of that ancient school's teachings was its intent to evoke in the individual yogis who applied its techniques a direct experience of Buddhist tenets.

Given that this avowedly epistemological enterprise is predicated upon the ritual control of experience, an adequate theoretical formulation must model the relationship between a system of ritual-initiation and the practitioners' phenomenology. Further, such a model must account for short and long term changes in the ritual practitioner's world-view as a consequence of initiation and ritual

activity.

Anthropologists have long studied ritual and ritual-initiation. Unfortunately existing conceptual and methodological tools seem to cause more problems than they solve when applied to a ritual-system as complex as that employed by Tibetan Tantrists.

The Tibetan system, while extremely sophisticated, is not unique in its use of ritual based pedagogical strategies. Theoretical and methodological biases have resulted in the failure of field-workers to ask the sorts of questions which would allow them to elicit and model technologies for the realization of cosmologies in the cultures they study. Griaule, for example, worked for twelve years with the Dogon before his teachers felt he was ready to be taught cosmology. Even so, this instruction was given as if to a young child. Similar experiences are reported by other authors (Chagnon 1977, Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971, Given 1990). My Tibetan teachers often expressed anxiety that "some scientist" would get hold of their secret teachings and distort their meaning. Only with years of successive initiation and practice was it possible to gain access to certain information crucial to even a limited overview of the system. Even then, my own work reflects the information available to a junior practitioner.

My ethnographic example demonstrates that it is necessary for western scientists to examine Tibetan psychological technique both with, and without, reference to Tibetan Tantric hermeneutics. It is necessary to study the phenomenological as well as the social structural concomitants of Tantric practice.

Perhaps more importantly, this example demonstrates that we as anthropologists must be willing to undergo change, to place our concepts and ourselves at risk. Such an enterprise, according to my Tibetan teachers, will inevitably require a careful re-examination of our personal as well as our professional a' priori assumptions regarding the nature of mind, the process of knowing and our concept of self.

1. The term "Tantra" has come to refer to the practice of esoteric ritual techniques in order to attain rapid enlightenment. Tantrayana (yana="way") is also referred to as the "Vajrayana" or "thunderbolt path". A discussion of the three levels of practice, Hinayana, Mahayana and Tantrayana is provided in Given 1990.

2. I refer the reader to the works of Bourignon 1973, Lex 1979, Webber 1979, Laughlin et al 1978, McManus 1979, Shearer 1977, 79, Harner 1973, 1980, and Katz 1982, 1984 for discussions regarding the prevalence of institutionalized altered states of consciousness and related theoretical and methodological issues.

3. The Chinese invaded in the late 1950's. This occupation has resulted in the death of about one million Tibetan people and the destruction of over 6,000 Buddhist monastic communities. The International Committee of Jurists labelled Chinese policies in Tibet "genocide." This suppression continues today with frequent arrests and torture of Tibetan monks and nuns.

4. His Holiness is also referred to as the "Sakyapa" or head of the Sakya lineage. As such, his religious status is comparable, within the Sakya lineage to that of His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, the head of the Gelug lineage who is also the legitimate ruler of Tibet and is best known as the Dalai Lama.

5. One's Root Guru is the lama from whom one has received the highest teachings. The relationship can be one of considerable personal intimacy although many students will rarely see their Root Guru, receiving most of their guidance from other teachers. The essential dimension of the relationship with the Root Guru is that of the "direct-transmission" of the meditation experience or "empowerment" which takes place during the Wang Kur or ritual of initiation and through contact with the lama. The Lam Dre' is an initiation to one form of "guru yoga." It was taught that the root guru "takes on the karma" of the student and that thenceforth the students and teacher's karma were "yoked" (the root of the term "yoga" means "to yoke").

6. Throughout this paper I avoid the ethnographic convention which would have me refer to the Tibetans who were so kind as to teach me about the Tibetan form of the Buddha Dharma as "informants." The label "teachers" better reflects the nature of our relationship and, I would argue, of the appropriate relationship between a culture member and a cross-cultural researcher. Where I am less certain about the roles of interviewer and interviewee I use the more conventional term.

7. I have described the sequence and the teachings in detail elsewhere (Given 1990). The information runs to hundreds of pages of precise instructions regarding techniques to be used by the initiates to manipulate their consciousness such as to be able to generate the experiences upon which particular doctrines are based. My purpose here is to elucidate several principles upon which such practices appear to be based, on the evidence of my own experience as an initiate as well as that of extensive interviews with initiates, and to provide a brief example of such a practice.

8. For ethical reasons I will not reveal specific meditation or ritual instructions with sufficient detail to permit unauthorized practice or teaching. In the Tibetan Tantric tradition, only a practitioner who has been authorized to do so may transmit a particular practice.

9. So important are the appropriate initiations that the practitioners were issued with a document upon which each initiation was listed; a stamp was to be placed beside it upon completion of the wang kur. This "Dharma passport" was required in order to gain access to the next initiation. One lama pointed out to me that the document would be very useful to the initiates because we would undoubtedly require further instruction as our practice progressed after the initiation cycle was over. Most lamas would be reluctant to discuss Tantric practices unless we could demonstrate that we had received the appropriate authorization for practice.

10. Other symbolic media, including hand "mudras" or gestures, may also be used to construct the mandala.

11. The "heart cakras" or energy centre is visualized in the centre of one's chest.

12. The Lam dre' is more commonly offered as a three-year retreat. Several lamas explained to me, during instruction sessions, that a number of meditation retreats would normally be interspersed with the initiations and instructions. One lama pointed out that this allowed monks and nuns from various parts of Tibet to receive all of the initiations and essential transmissions during one extended trip and that they could then receive personal guidance nearer their home monasteries. The initiates were repeatedly told that, while they were receiving all of the essential instructions, they would have to do years of practice and seek additional personal instruction in order to realize their meaning.

13. The cakras are usually visualized as multi-spoked wheels. The locations of the main cakras correspond roughly with those of neural plexes.

14. Yoga is usually glossed as "way" in the sense of "Bhakti Yoga" as the way of Bhakti or devotion. Yoga can also refer to a specific technique or set of techniques such that a given practice may embody a variety of yogas. In the case of the Hevajra Tantra which is the focus of Lam Dre', there are 10 main yogas associated with more advanced practice.

15. Pali is the language in which the historical Buddha's teachings are recorded (i.e. the Pali Canon). The historical Buddha likely taught in both Kosalese and Maghadese.

16. I base this characterization upon my study with a Japanese Zen Rishi and through discussions with Japanese Zen monks.

17. In Levi-Strauss's words, "rituals thing through man." To paraphrase Cezanne, the initiate comes to understand the ritual by "becoming its consciousness" (Merleau-Ponty 1977)

18. The Sanskrit term "Dharma" and Pali word "Dhamma" are usually translated as "religious teachings." For my Lama teachers Dharma is the study of the process of coming to know and as such encompasses the Western categories of science and religion. I suggest that a better English gloss might be "epistemology."

19. Extensive periods of preparation often constitute a major part of the mythology of initiation (e.g. Evans-Wentz 1928)

20. It is reasonable to argue that relatively few changes have taken place in the basic form of the Lam Dre' initiation cycle. The 26 written texts of the Lam Dre' date from specific times, places and authors while the transmission of the oral tradition has passed through a relatively small number of high lamas. The lineage is taught to initiates and does not appear to be "telescoped." I suggest too, that the practice of integrating oral and textual transmission with the meditation exercises which are considered necessary for what my teachers call the "unfoldment" of these practices has a stabilizing affect as well. Finally, as mentioned earlier, my teachers make clear distinctions among textual transmission, the oral transmission of lineage teaching, and the more idiosyncratic form of "lama teaching," which places considerable emphasis upon the need to perfectly replicate the former two categories.

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