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Cosmologies of Freedom and Buddhist Self-Transformation in the Mongolian Gold Rush

Abstract

This article examines how Mongolian Buddhist monks view the freedom they have experienced since the fall of Soviet socialism in 1990. Whereas the anthropological literature on postsocialism tends to focus on political and economic transformations, I argue that contemporary Mongolian politics point to the co-existence and interdependence of human and nonhuman agents. The article highlights how, in the context of the country's current mining boom, postsocialist politics require attention to contemporary religious practices and spiritual beings beyond the 'secular'. Considering emerging forms of Buddhist environmentalism, I describe how the freedom projects of Mongolian monks crystalize the intersection of Soviet socialist materialism, neoliberal individualism, and a Buddhist ethics of self-transformation.

In 2006 a large crowd gathered at the annual *Maidar Ergeh* (Skt. Maitreya) prayer ceremony in the mountainous region of Uyanga in Central Mongolia. Chanting Buddhist monks¹ (*lam*) were seated outside in the blazing summer sun, surrounded by dozens of makeshift market stalls and a motley swarm of lay worshippers and giggling teenagers on horseback. The lamas swiftly spun their prayer beads, sounded their conch shell horns and blew waves of juniper incense across the onlookers in anticipation of the future Buddha's coming.

Discreetly retreating from his seat, a middle-aged lama joined me in the cool shade and shared the following reflections:

Since 1990 I have strongly supported our freedom (*erh chölöö*) to live and work. But people's living standards are going down. Now there is so much poverty, alcoholism, and poor health. As you know, our Uyanga is very rich in gold. It is also a place where people just seek their *own* gains and make a living by digging into the ground. But we can't blame nature for being rich in resources! Some people are doing 'offensive politics' (*uls tör hiij dairah*)...

In referring to 'offensive politics', the lama was not only lamenting the predominance of corrupt politicians pursuing their own interests before those of the country. Nor was he simply talking about people's short-sighted, presentist desire for mineral wealth that is turning the country into an emerging mining nation dependent on global commodities demands and China's continuing economic growth. In a country where politics (*uls tör*) involves state prophecies, shamanic advisors, and astrological divination, elected politicians are only some of the agents that appear on the political scene (see Empson 2006; Pedersen 2011). In addition to the role of religious specialists in Mongolian politics, agents with or without a human body are also central to political negotiations. These multiple and diverse agents have carefully and respectfully to balance their interests and actions in attempts to ensure their 'peaceful' (*taivan*) and 'beautiful' (*saihan*) co-existence. If they fail to do this, calamities are expected to happen. Although the exact timing, character, and

victim of the impending misfortune remain unknown, its eventual appearance is beyond doubt (High 2012). Recognizing politics as not necessarily delimited to the human realm, ‘offensive politics’ have potential repercussions far beyond what we might call a ‘secular’ political domain.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union a growing body of literature has sought to understand the lived experience of socialism and its aftermath. The ‘freedom’ that the lama, mentioned above, has supported since 1990 is part of this wider geopolitical history that spans much of the Eurasian continent. The postsocialist literature has given careful attention to local experiences of the ‘transition’. Yet, as Gal and Kligman suggest, “most scholars of and in the region have more vigorously explored economic and political processes such as marketization and democratization” (2000: 3). Indeed, Berdahl calls for analyses that move away from this “predominant focus on large-scale economic processes, political elites, and evolutionary trajectories” and instead begin to unveil the multiple, sometimes hidden, agents that have remained suppressed for so long (2000: 3, 9). Analyses that approach political agency as a capacity exclusive to humans not only risk reproducing oppositions central to Soviet ideology (Luehrmann 2011; Quijada 2012), but also, in my view, hinder our understanding of politics as anything but primarily ‘secular’.² Political agents are presumed to be human, whereas ‘the spiritual’ is regarded as a fundamentally unrelated and incompatible sphere.

Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2005 and 2011 in and around the monastery of Uyanga (*Uyangiin Hiid*), this article examines

how Buddhist lamas view what they refer to as the freedom that their country has experienced since the fall of Soviet socialism. But rather than approaching spirit-religious views in terms of “the anxieties and uncertainties brought about by the collapse of socialism and the incipient market economy”

(Buyandelgeriyn 2007: 127), I seek to address personal convictions as both creative engagements with and contemplations on the world (see also Højer 2009). My aim is to transcend the binary opposition of esoteric ‘belief’ versus this-worldly ‘knowledge’ that so powerfully reifies religious views as separate and separable from the person – a tendency of purification and distinction that marked both Western and Soviet projects of modernity (Pelkmans 2009: 5).

Rather than offering an account of Buddhist theology as a distinct kind of abstract epistemological orientation separate from politics, I consider Mongolian Buddhist views of current postsocialist freedom projects. That is, I examine the ways in which political freedom is imagined from the perspective of a cosmology that does not presuppose politics to be secular, or even human-centred.

Since the decades of socialism were generally detrimental to religious practices, including Mongolian Buddhism, it is tempting to assume that most lamas would simply cherish their post-1990 freedom. In the 1930s thousands of lamas were sent into forced labour camps or killed during widespread purges (Dashpurev and Soni 1992; Kaplonski 2002). Monasteries were destroyed and religious relics were burnt. Mongolians were forced to practice in secret, facing imprisonment, torture, or execution if caught by the authorities. In the aftermath of Mongolian independence, religious practices

have been publically allowed again and churches, monasteries, and mosques have been built across the country. Followers are recruited into religious education and religious institutions can once again play a central role in people's lives. Yet, many lamas in Uyanga do not regard this freedom as something that liberates and frees them. Indeed, for them, such a freedom should not be a goal that we should strive towards. To their frustration, they complain that many of their fellow countrymen mistakenly think that they are now 'free' (*chölöö*). By looking at what they mean by 'freedom' and being 'free', this article considers a Buddhist ethics of self-transformation alongside concerns about Mongolia's current mining boom.

The politics of compassion

Mongolian Buddhism is generally associated with Mahayana (Skt. Mahāyāna) Buddhism and its Tibetan variations, whilst also incorporating various local religious traditions (see Heissig 1980). Within this complex, the notion of freedom is intricate and multi-layered. In classical teachings, 'freedom' refers to the ultimate escape from the deluded nature of samsara (Skt. saṃsāra) and the attainment of enlightenment. The Sanskrit word 'samsara' literally means 'continuous flow' or 'to perpetually wander', referring to the flow of existence through birth, life, death, and rebirth. In Mongolian language, *orchlon* (samsara) is approximated to a quasi-place name that denotes 'this world' as opposed to the much worse underworlds or hells (*tam*) or the distant world of bliss inhabited by gods (*burhany yertönts*). Orchlon is a realm of existence that

is at once abstract and immediate, speculative and concrete. Closely associated with the view that beings continue to be born and reborn into any of these realms depending on the karma (*üiliin ür*, lit. ‘result of actions’) they have accrued during life, orchlon underscores the stakes of ethical action in this current world.³ It is through contemplating our actions, caring and taking care, that we can leave it behind. As such, the emphasis on ethical self-formation does not abandon the realm of politics. The ethical and the political are not compartmentalized, but rather exist in unbroken continuity (see also Mahmood 2005). The project of freedom is thus to bring to fruition the potential that most humans have within them to transcend their current bodily form and no longer be caught within this worldly cycle of rebirths.

When one of the lamas in Uyanga described this sense of freedom to me, he was referring to a famous 12th century Tibetan text entitled The Jewel Ornament of Freedom (Tib. *thar pa rin po ch'e rgyan*). It provides an account of how to follow the Mahayana path to freedom, how “on account of this human existence endowed with freedoms and assets, there is the ability to give up non-virtue, the ability to cross samsara’s ocean, the ability to tread the path of enlightenment and the ability to attain perfect buddhahood” (Holmes 1995: 21). For humans, freedom is described as a precious jewel of liberation – a potential so pure, complete, and timeless that it should be treasured and rejoiced accordingly. According to the Dalai Lama, the desire for this freedom constitutes the shared foundation for ethical sensibilities among all beings. In his view, “all beings are equal in the sense that all have a natural tendency to wish for happiness and freedom from suffering” (1994: 4). Since all beings are

subject to the universal law of karma, escaping samsara and attaining enlightenment is a goal not only for humans, but for all beings. However, all beings are not considered equally positioned to achieve the ultimate goal of freedom from suffering. Beings born into lower realms, such as hell beings, hungry ghosts, and animals, are said to be driven by their delusive passions and desires, hence unable to rein in their untamed minds. Humans, on the other hand, are endowed with a precious consciousness that makes it possible for us to perform actions of mindfulness, restraint, and compassion. In contrast to other beings, humans have thus obtained, what the Dalai Lama describes as, “the best form of existence for the practice of the Dharma” (ibid.: 39).⁴ As a result, humans are under a particularly strong moral imperative to realize their unique potential for freedom.⁵

For the lamas in Uyanga, however, gaining enlightenment and reaching nirvana (Skt. *nirvāṇa*) does not lie within their purview. They consider themselves so-called ‘low sutra lamas’ (*baga hölgönii lam*), entangled in the present and primarily concerned about helping other people with *their* pain and *their* suffering. After a busy morning at the monastery, one of the lamas introduced himself in the following way:

I am the kind of lama who people come to for help when someone is sick. For example, a child is crying and can’t sleep, a woman is having difficulty giving birth, or a man is experiencing problems with his eyes. So I recite relevant mantras (*tarni*) and blow on the

painful area. I might hand them some blessed water or
ask them to light some incense at home. I give
blessings (*yerööl tavih*). I am that kind of lama.

Whereas other Buddhist traditions emphasize the liberation of the self as the goal of religious devotion, the Mahayana school emphasizes the liberation of all beings as the central motivating factor. Buddhist scholar Jonathan Landaw attributes this collective emphasis to the fundamental view that “we are not the only ones who experience suffering and dissatisfaction; all other living beings share in the same predicament” (1982: 20). In cultivating compassion - that is, the altruistic desire for other beings to be free of suffering - Mahayana Buddhism foregrounds exemplars of compassion: the so-called bodhisattvas (*bodsadvaa*, Skt. bodhisattva). These beings have reached a state of enlightenment but decided to postpone entering nirvana in order to use their merit to release from suffering all who pray to them. Whereas the lamas in Uyanga seek to help other people with their pain and suffering, they are, however, far from reaching the blessed state of the bodhisattvas. Instead they consider themselves earthly beings that are still held in this immediate world of orchlon.

None of the village lamas in Uyanga have taken the vows of monkhood (*gelen sahiltai*). According to one of the lamas, “a very small part of him” is thus committed to accept the commandments of the Buddha. Most lamas are married and live with their wives and children. They drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, and eat meat. In contrast to the so-called ‘high sutra lamas’ (*deed*

hölgönii lam) in the capital of Ulaanbaatar, the lamas in Uyanga are not obliged to accept a strict monastic discipline and indeed rarely practice deep meditation, philosophical discussion, or prolonged isolation. They rarely go on pilgrimages or study under renowned Buddhist masters in Inner Mongolia or India. They are village lamas who are emphatically caught in the present and its many difficulties.⁶ Freeing themselves from this world is thus neither within their reach nor is it their call. As a younger lama put it, “I am a lama who can’t set the goal of becoming pure (*öörüigöö ariusgah*) but I can instead pray for the good of every living thing”.

Since the re-opening of Uyanga monastery in 1990, only a limited number of lamas have continued to pursue their monastic practice. Many of the lamas who have undertaken the monastic training over the years have since left the monastery and joined the lay population. An elderly lama explained:

After reaching the age of 20, some lamas tend to get married and have children. They face a situation where money is required and they realize that the salary they get from here is not enough to take care of a family. They also learn that life as a lama is not that easy, that the life of meditation might not be that comfortable. They then go to the countryside to become herders or begin to work in the mines. They start to think of new ways of making money and so they leave. It might be said that they have left because of greed (*shunal*).

Although many have left the monastery, one of the most experienced lamas in Uyanga has been there since its re-opening.⁷ Budlam comes from a family of lamas: His father specialized in Buddhist philosophy (*choir*) and his father-in-law in Buddhist medicine (*mambe*). After years of working as a math teacher at the local school and later as an accountant for a small company during the socialist period, Budlam joined the monastery in Uyanga at the cusp of independence. During any given day, he is busy attending to the needs of local people. Long queues form in front of his desk at the monastery where he ‘does readings’ (*unshlaga hiih*) for several hours every day. Once he returns home, there is usually someone requesting him to carry out a personal reading. Sometimes he performs readings in his home; other times he will go to people’s *ger* (round white felt tent). Since he is considered the most capable and knowledgeable lama in Uyanga, people often ask specifically for him at the monastery – even if it means waiting around for hours, if not days.

A mining boom

Part of the reason why Budlam is so busy is related to Mongolia’s mining boom. Since the year 2000 Uyanga has been described as the ‘capital of ninja mining’. The term ‘ninja’ (*ninja*) is commonly used throughout Mongolia to refer to artisanal gold miners. In an area with approximately 2000 nomadic herders, more than 8000 ninjas gathered in the early gold rush years in the valleys close to the village. After 10 years of mining the local riverbed for the precious metal, many ninjas have moved on to new areas and the valleys are

now being dug up predominantly by illegal mining companies. The handmade metal picks and plastic panning bowls of ninja miners have thus in effect been largely replaced by industrial diggers and high-pressure water cannons.

In Mongolia mining involves transgressing fundamental taboos (*tseer*) related to the land and its spirits (High and Schlesinger 2010). As one lama described it, “mining is like having a thorn pressed into your hand. That’s how much nature and the land hurt”. Since mining in Uyanga relies on the central use of water for the extraction of gold, it is above all the water lords known as *lus* that are angered.⁸ When travelling along redirected rivers, stagnant tailing ponds, or dried-up riverbeds, herders often lament the disregard (*toohgüi*) that they feel that miners have shown local residents, whether human or nonhuman. And when the main river feeding the region eventually turned deep red from the heavy mineral and sedimentation pollution from mining, it acquired the colloquial name of ‘Red River’ (*Ulaan Gol*). This name referred not only to the changed colour of the river, but also to the ‘red sentiments’ that herders and lamas commonly ascribe to the thousands of miners working in the area.⁹ As an ‘*ulaan heriүүлчид*’ – literally a ‘red quarrelsome people’, miners are seen to instigate angry confrontation and conflict by refusing to care and take care of other beings.

Many of Uyanga’s lamas also point to another reason for why it is the *lus* that has become particularly affected in Mongolia’s mining boom. As Budlam recounts, “Our people never really liked to take a lot of gold. It is a very special and precious treasure that is one of the ‘nine jewels’ (*yösön erdene*)

connected to the gods”.¹⁰ Gold is described as an unmatched treasure that is ‘held’ (*barih*), if not ‘withheld’ (*tatgalzah*), by *lus*. Unlike many other metals, gold is fiercely guarded by these beings. As in the material collected by René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz on Tibetan protective deities known as “treasure guards” (1956: 253), *lus* are said to have adorned their abodes with gold. Staircases, walls, and floors are all made of gold, as is their armour if they have any. They might be protecting themselves with gold shields or brandishing swords made of gold. They might drink from gold cups or curl around enormous gold nuggets. In order for humans to obtain gold without ‘stealing’ from *lus*, it is therefore necessary to first try to persuade *lus* to part with their treasure.

Desiring a metal that is so closely guarded and so destructive to extract, miners often come to the lamas for help. Sometimes they ask them to carry out rituals that will calm the angered spirits.¹¹ Other times they ask them to relieve the physical pain they experience from working in the mines. If the miners have not been able to find much gold, they also ask lamas to cajole *lus* into sharing ‘fortune’ (*hishig*) with them. Or, if they are about to open a new mine, they invite several lamas out to the mines to conduct a large prayer ceremony.¹² For the lamas in Uyanga, *ninja* miners, company bosses and miners working for the illegal companies have therefore now become their most frequent and loyal visitors.

However, according to most lamas, the miners aren’t *really* concerned about the impact of mining on spirits. They aren’t *really* troubled by the pain they

inflict onto other beings in their offensive disregard of taboos. In response to my questions about the high number of gold miners visiting the monastery, they insisted that this was *not* a case of an economic boom accompanied by intense religious revitalization. Nor was it for them evidence of an ‘occult economy’ where human desires are mediated by concerns about angered spirits. Much to my initial surprise, in their view it was rather evidence of the longevity and popularity of Marxist materialism. They regard the current hunger for gold as an example of how their fellow citizens think that the land and its natural resources are simply there to be exploited. In the words of a younger lama: “they think that what truly exist are only the things that are materially real, that everything else is empty”.¹³ Seeing the universe in these terms, the miners are believed to come to the lamas not because they recognize the existence and suffering of spirits, but because they are greedy for money. They just want the lamas to make them more likely to find gold by doing whatever rituals are needed. If they really were concerned about inflicting suffering onto others, they surely would have given up mining a long time ago. As Budlam says,

Today, ninjas come with swollen legs and arms. When I blow on their body it heals again. Then they think everything is sorted out. But that’s not true. The truth is that they are destroying the living world (*yertönts*). They just don’t know that this is a living thing. They were taught to believe that the environment is lifeless. But it’s not. This whole universe is a living universe

and can't be treated as separate from its humans and animals, from its worms and insects, from its water and air. All these together are one whole thing.

Perhaps not surprisingly, few of the miners would agree with Budlam's rendition. Instead they remark that their frequent visits to the village lamas reflect precisely their recognition of and concern for the spirits. The fact that they do not change their ways or give up mining is, to them, a result of the limited alternatives available. There are few other jobs in the region and pastoralism is demanding work that requires constant participation and considerable patience. Although it has been the traditional backbone of Mongolia's economy for centuries, pastoralism is no longer considered a desirable option for many of the miners.

In an article on the moral apocalypse experienced during postsocialism, Caroline Humphrey (1992) describes how Mongolians have become 'dislocated selves', seeking to revive lost traditions and creating anew a 'truly Mongolian' moral society. As she writes,

Soviet ideology was taken up almost more sincerely, more naively, more brutally than in the USSR itself. In the 1930s the Mongolian government destroyed every single one of the 700 Buddhist monasteries in the country and killed tens of thousands of people, annihilating all that was best and most sophisticated

about native Mongolian culture, philosophy, and art ...

A feudal society permeated with religion at all levels was abruptly replaced by a European, atheist ideology, predicated not on a model of the past but on the modernist development of the present. The moral authority of the socialist period was based on a vision of a future society, which was to be egalitarian, industrialised, and single-minded (ibid.: 375).

The socialist attempt to eradicate anything traditional, anything distinctly Mongolian, and certainly anything religious, has in many of the lamas' eyes been highly successful – probably more successful than ever intended.¹⁴ And indeed, the radical political initiatives that were undertaken in the name of socialist egalitarianism have, in their view, ended up paradoxically producing individuals that have lost their concern for precisely the collectivity. In a vein characteristic of the elder generation of lamas, one of the oldest lamas in Uyanga views the historical transition this way:

We, the Mongolian people, used to be a nation that lived for others. But after 70 years of socialism, Mongolian people only live for themselves. If a stray dog starves, no one will now give him food. If a drunken man sleeps on the ground, no one will now give him shelter. No one will care. Mongolian people nowadays don't take pity on others. When did that

good thing of Buddhism, that thing that teaches people to live for others, get lost? During these 70 years of socialism, when everyone started to live for themselves only, for making his own life better, for getting his own salary, for desiring to have a comfortable life and striving for nothing else, people of our generation stopped dedicating their minds for others. They completely stopped caring for others. Mongolia is being destroyed by itself, by its own people.

Inflected and promulgated through contemporary capitalist ideology, this elderly lama sees a cynical materialism pervading Mongolian society today (see also Humphrey 2002: 84).¹⁵ The self, which was freed from spirituality under socialism, is today on the hunt for money, resorting to whatever means might be available. If this means digging deep holes in the ground and redirecting rivers, people will do it. If it means selling the potent metal of gold that so easily blinds its holders, luring them into bottomless greed, they will do it. The freedom (*erh chölöö*) that Mongolians aspire to, according to many lamas in Uyanga, is emblematically self-centred. It is free of political ties, free of moral obligations, free of environmental restrictions. In this view, socialist atheism has been elaborated and extended into a fundamentally free individual that is conducive to the neoliberalism, promoted in Mongolia's current mining boom.

Buddhist environmentalism?

The lamas in Uyanga are not alone in making these critical remarks about the present state of affairs. Influential Buddhist practitioners across the world are responding to various contemporary problems, whether the Dalai Lama working towards the political recognition of Tibet, Thailand's Sulak Sivaraksa criticizing Western approaches to economic development, or Thich Nhat Hanh calling for a return to a more mindful engagement with the present, to name but a few. Whereas some see the environment as an instructive and exemplary teacher, others embrace a protective and defensive stewardship of nature and its resources.¹⁶ In recent years Mongolian lamas have collectively sought to address the needs and demands that have arisen due to mining. Apart from undertaking various kinds of environmental awareness projects, many monasteries also collaborate with international Buddhist movements, development organisations, and the government. They print books and brochures on environmental issues, undertake reforestation projects, and organize environmental training courses for the lay population.¹⁷ According to the Centre of Mongolian Buddhism, based at the country's largest monastery (Gandantegchinlen), this involvement of Mongolian Buddhists in environmental advocacy work adheres closely to the teachings of the Buddha. Its statement reads as follows:

We need to live as the Buddha taught us to live, in peace and harmony with nature, but this must start with ourselves. If we are going to save this planet, we need

to seek a new ecological order, to look at the life we lead and then work together for the benefit of all; unless we work together no solution can be found. By moving away from self-centredness, sharing wealth more, being more responsible for ourselves, and agreeing to live more simply, we can help decrease much of the suffering in the world (the Buddhist Statement on Ecology, quoted in Chimedsegee 2009: 4).

The Dashchoilin monastery in Ulaanbaatar is commonly regarded as particularly efficacious in mitigating the damage caused by mining. Before a new mine is opened, lamas are often consulted. With reference to instructions contained in Tibetan and Mongolian texts, a mining site is determined to have relatively 'good' or 'bad' properties, just as a given day is regarded as more or less auspicious for 'the breaking of the soil'.¹⁸ Speaking at the Northern Buddhist Conference on Ecology and Development in Ulaanbaatar in 2005, one of its lamas described how more and more mining companies were consulting them to enquire about auspicious start dates for their projects and to request 'appeasement ceremonies' (*argadan örgöl*) addressing in particular the angered *lus*. He believed that company directors were increasingly turning to them for assistance "because company profits are decreasing and because families in the area are perceived to be experiencing harm from pollution (*bohirdol*) and other similar causes" (Chimedsegee 2009: 22). Knowing both the companies and the affected families well, he emphasized how he offered

ritual services and personal advice to miners and company bosses out of his compassionate desire to help mitigate human and nonhuman suffering.

However, at a monastery where apparently 80% of Ulaanbaatar-based mining companies come for ritual services, it would seem that a new and substantial mining-related clientele has emerged. Whereas many lamas have had to forego a monastic life due, in part, to the low income, is this postsocialist generation of lamas drawing on environmental discourses whilst seeking to profit from the affliction that has arisen in the mining boom?

Perhaps not surprisingly, many lamas object to such a reading. They explain how the monetary aspect of rituals is not that straightforward. As a younger lama grumbled after a particularly busy service in Uyanga, “all the big mining bosses came by here today. But it doesn’t matter how many readings we do during our meeting (*hural*). We still don’t get any more money”. At the monastery there is a set price for rituals, paid directly to a lay accountant (*nyarav*). At the end of each month, the accountant hands out a salary to each lama depending on his seniority. Approaching seniority largely in terms of age, the youngest lama receives 60,000 *tögrögs* per month (approx. 50 USD) with a sliding scale up to the most senior receiving 100,000 MNT per month (approx. 83 USD).¹⁹ The salaries are more or less fixed so in times of greater ceremonial activity, the extra income is not necessarily distributed to the lamas themselves. It might instead be saved for quieter months or subsumed into the substantial maintenance budget. “It is expensive to keep the monastery operating”, the accountant explained. In the old days the cost of basic food and ritual supplies were covered by the laity, but today such networks of support

have largely disappeared. Although the lamas might not receive a higher salary from their ritual activities during hural, the accountant said that the monastic institution certainly benefitted from the mining boom.

Beyond the set price for rituals, visitors to the monastery also often present offerings (*tahil*) to gods and, depending on the circumstances, to the lamas individually. Elaborate arrangements consisting of sweets, dried milk curd, and silk scarves topped with crisp new bank notes are presented to the lamas, recognizing the position of the higher ranking lamas with more extensive offerings. It is not rare for such offerings to include the highest denomination of 20,000 MNT (approx. 17 USD). These offerings constitute a substantial additional income beyond the monthly salaries. This is particularly the case in Uyanga where unfortunately there is reputed to be at least one fatality a day from the gold mining. During the intense transition period (*bardo*) of 49 days when the soul (*siins*) of the deceased travels between lives, relatives often present additional offerings and request additional readings from lamas. By thus making merit (*buyan hiih*), relatives can aid the journey of the parting soul. These sad occasions take place regularly and involve extraordinary levels of generosity. In a region of relative poverty, many of Uyanga's lamas have now become noticeably well-off. In addition to the mining company bosses, lamas are now some of the only ones owning Land Cruisers and computers, investing in local businesses and going on international holidays.

Yet, they dismiss this wealth as insignificant and ephemeral. "Material wealth", the lama administering the Uyanga monastery (*da lam*) pronounced,

“can bring much misfortune (*gai*) and malicious gossip (*hel am*) among the laity, but not among us. This is because it only matters to the ‘greedy mind’ (*shunal setgel*)”; that is, a mind that clings to the present and values its current embodied self above other beings. As one of the wealthiest lamas in Uyanga, the da-lama insisted that to criticize him for his material wealth was a reflection of people’s own greedy minds rather than a shortcoming of his. Since he did not suffer from such ignorance, he could own multiple cars and houses without these possessions ‘pulling at him from behind’. And when I broached the topic of sharing his wealth with the much poorer villagers, he reasoned that sharing his prayers was much better – “I think what is best for the Mongolian people is the philosophy of Buddhism, not wealth and possessions”.

Looking past the flow of money, the lamas’ involvements in the mining boom would also seem to facilitate, if not indeed legitimize, practices that the lamas themselves consider offensive. As they carry out ‘appeasement ceremonies’ and recite texts that encourage the lamas to pass their treasure to humans, are the lamas not also involved in the ‘offensive politics’ for which they criticize the ‘*ulaan heriүүлчид*’ of miners? Amid the project of self-transformation, are they not evidencing a way of being that is also fundamentally ‘free’ and self-centred?

According to the head of Gandantegchinlen monastery (*Hamba lam*), such a view separates actions from the soteriological motivations of the involved lamas. He argues that it is because the fate of humanity is inextricably

interwoven with and dependent on the fate of the environment that the Centre for Mongolian Buddhism encourages ritual involvement. Drawing on the belief in reincarnation (*dahin törölt*), he explains that since humans can be reborn as any animal, including insects – or even as trees or water – we must respect these elements of life. Prior to our present existence, we have known the suffering experienced by these beings because we have, at some point, lived a life in that body. Harming any being is dangerous for humans who may be reborn as any of these in the future. In this view, mining is a form of violence, inflicting onto others a pain and suffering that we are all intimately familiar with. It entails a profound ignorance of other beings, especially those who do not have a human body. If lamas were to no longer conduct ‘appeasement ceremonies’ and other rituals, they would then, in his view, be presuming the environment to be ‘empty’ (*hooson*) and humans to be ‘free’ (*chölöö*). At the Northern Buddhist Conference on Ecology and Development, he therefore called on all Mongolian monasteries to “support and work closely with environmental organizations, encouraging above all the participation of the religious community” (2005: 8).

When talking to Budlam in Uyanga, he draws on a slightly less conventional Buddhist critique of extractive industries. Attacking the ideological framework that justifies practices such as mining, he seeks to prove how Marxist materialism and its celebration of the atheist individual misconstrue the relationship between humans and the environment. As he says:

This atmosphere, this vast seemingly empty space called the universe, is not empty. It truly exists in the same way as material objects exist. All beings, such as animals and humans, trees and rivers, emit energy (*enerji*) through their own minds and actions.²⁰ They emit electricity, heat, and energy. As long as they think of good things and do good deeds, they disseminate energy that causes other living beings to also think of good things and do good deeds. But if they think of bad things and do bad deeds, then that energy also gets spread around them through the environment and into the atmosphere. This bad energy causes others to suffer and degrade. This energy always emanates from beings, especially from humans as they have a higher level of reincarnation.

Now, today, when we use mobile phones to get connected to each other, who is connecting us? How can we talk to someone in America, directly? The great energy that is constantly being emitted from living beings in the vast space of air, that positive and negative energy, that plus and minus energy, that energy of hot and cold, that's the only thing connecting us. This universe is one whole sphere of energy.

Marxists say nature is empty, but it's not. That's why
we can talk on mobile phones.

Budlam here draws on technology as material evidence for the existence of beings that we otherwise might not recognize and sometimes not even see. In this sense sentient life is everywhere around us. Its usual invisibility, however, does not justify our ignorant actions. If we mistakenly think that we are free and independent, we just need to cast a quick glance at the ways in which we now communicate across great distances. Incorporating technology into his view of the interdependence between humans and nonhumans, Budlam questions the human-centredness of Marxist materialism and questions the supremacy it has so successfully lent to the material.

In Buryatia, Buddhist monks similarly draw on science and technology in attempts to assemble persuasive evidence of Buddhist understandings of being. When the Bolsheviks established the Soviet state in 1927, a high-ranking Buddhist monk Etigelov settled into prolonged meditation (Bernstein 2011; Quijada 2012). Having chanted tantric texts for the dead, he 'left' the corporeal plane of existence and was subsequently buried. Following his own instructions, he was exhumed in 2002. He was reported to have emerged still seated in the lotus position and scientists stated that his miraculously preserved body appeared as if dead for only days rather than decades. The scientific testing underscored the common view that "Etigelov's lack of decay is not merely a miracle; it is a scientifically proven miracle" (Quijada 2012: 145). Linking his bodily state to Buddhist notions of transcendence, the Buddhist

monastic community drew on science to prove their faith, thereby reconciling any dichotomy between science and religion. Quijada sees this reconciliation between science and religion as closely related to people's experiences of a failing postsocialist state and the distress it has brought upon its citizens. Whereas Soviet discourses came to define religion and science as mutually constitutive categories by virtue of their antithesis, the present desire for treatment and healing has altered their dialogic relationship. In this case, "Etigelov has transcended a specifically local Buryat and post-Soviet condition of suffering, rooted in the dislocations of post-Soviet transformations" (ibid.: 149). As different modes of assembling persuasive understandings of the world, religion and science have in postsocialist Buryatia become potentially mutually supportive.

As one of the first in Uyanga to be equipped with a mobile phone, Budlam refers to technology as evidence for his understanding of the world and the ways in which all living things are mutually interrelated (see also McMahan 2008).²¹ For him, this is not only a philosophical reflection on the state of the universe, but also an understanding with powerful ethical and political implications. If we are all part of a vast, interdependent network of being, our actions can have profound implications for others. Conversely, lacking any inherent self-existence, actions carried out by others can have profound implications for us. In a world where we are all constituted by our interactions with other beings, humans are far from the only agents on the political scene. And whether or not Budlam and other lamas seek an active role in the gold rush, they know they will be affected by the inflicted pain. As Lama Zopa

Rinpoche suggested on a recent visit to Mongolia, ‘we have created the situation in which we find ourselves, so it is also up to us to create the circumstances for our own release’. For the country’s lamas, it is therefore pertinent, even if also profitable, to focus on easing the suffering inflicted on others.

Although the current mining boom has evidenced a flourishing of ‘offensive politics’, it is a phenomenon that cannot meaningfully be regarded as produced mainly under conditions of ‘socialism’, ‘postsocialism’, ‘neoliberalism’, or ‘capitalism’. By moving beyond the bounds and legacies of a Cold War oppositional view, the critiques advanced by lamas have laid bare certain presuppositions that are common to these otherwise different ideologies. They are not just critiquing the past or the present, favouring one political regime above another. Instead they show how a secularized political domain, devoid of nonhuman agents, has transcended major political transitions and continued to form a single, shared political field.

Cosmopolitical freedom

Having recognized the multiple notions of freedom that overlap and co-exist in the gold mines of Uyanga, what kind of freedom are the lamas lamenting as lacking in their fellow citizens? What can we call freedom projects that do not aim to set us free? For lamas like Budlam, the political transition to a postsocialist regime was an opportunity to recognize their relationship with,

and indeed dependence on, multiple other beings. It was a historical opportunity to recognize that they are in fact *not* free. This view of freedom is also captured by Isabelle Stengers' (2010) approach to 'cosmopolitics' where freedom can be seen as a challenge, not a condition. For her, politics "should not be restricted to our fellow humans, as politics since Plato has implied, but should entertain the problematic togetherness of the many concrete, heterogeneous, enduring shapes of value that compose actuality" (2002: 248). Embracing a vast number of human and nonhuman entities, the lamas of Uyanga reject the idea that politics means the give-and-take in an exclusively human club. Similarly, they also reject the notion of a universe as a passive and empty background to our actions, devoid of recognition and respect. The freedom they experience and would like for others to exercise is not simply a human-centred freedom that we could call 'political'. It is rather what I would like to call 'cosmopolitical': A freedom that does not presuppose the equality, or even similarity, between political agents, but rather an attentive coming together of multiple non-equivalent entities.

As such, for the lamas of Uyanga Buddhist self-transformation does not entail *achieving* freedom. They do not regard freedom as constituting a liberating end point, a moment of fulfilment, or a moment of completion. It is not a distant goal that exists above and beyond them. Instead, they seek to *exercise* a freedom that is grounded in action and contemplation. It is the freedom to be able to reflect on how they live their lives in the present. Since such reflection takes different forms in different historical situations, the lamas' freedom project crystallizes the intersection of Soviet socialist materialism, neoliberal

individualism with a Buddhist ethics of self-transformation. It is a state of being that is not only historically contingent, but also historically reflexive. The lamas engage history in their contemplation on how to exercise a ‘cosmopolitical freedom’.

Rather than presuming that freedom goes hand in hand with ‘being free’, they thus invite us to move beyond the notion that freedom is only possible in the absence of constraints. Exercising ‘cosmopolitical freedom’ is not predicated on, and indeed goes against, the view of people as ‘free agents’, exercising choice without coercion. As Laidlaw (2002) suggests in his work on freedom and ethics, it is crucial that we distinguish between notions of freedom and agency. For Laidlaw, “if the word ‘freedom’ is reserved only for choices one approves, then it loses its meaning” (ibid.: 326). Given the fickle character of spirits and the difficulty of living amidst so many different beings, I can imagine that Budlam would agree with this statement. ‘Cosmopolitical freedom’ is not about the ability to make free choices, but rather the ability to act in a world that extends far beyond the individual.

Such limits on human agency are not only central to the challenges of Buddhist self-transformation, but also figure centrally in contemporary Western concerns about global technosciences. For example, Latour (2004) seeks to come to terms with the facts of co-existence; a world that is increasingly populated by nonhuman entities that we have invented. Styrofoam cups, oil tankers, genetically modified organisms (GMO), and thorium reactors now populate the earth, having acquired an existence of their own with unknown

capacities to influence our lives. GMOs, for example, do not behave in controllable or even predictable ways. Other species that they come into contact with are not in a position to ‘choose’ whether or not to become implicated in the evolutionary trajectory of a new, scientifically generated species. Since so many of these entities are simultaneously toxic and attractive to one another, Whiteside poignantly asks: “Can we live together? – where ‘we’ is people and all the nonhuman phenomena with which they become entangled” (2006: 105-106). In their calls for a ‘precautionary politics’, both Latour and Whiteside argue that the entanglements forged between humans and nonhumans now require a new kind of politics that engages a ‘cosmopolitical’ vision that is not predicated on conventional bifurcations of the world. As for the lamas in Uyanga, the possibilities for freedom involve multiple and various agents beyond those that happen to take our familiar human body. And in order for us to begin recognizing the illusion of political agency as a pre-eminently human property and politics as separate from the cosmos, they suggest we reflect on those spaces that we might otherwise presume to be ‘empty’.

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Notes

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¹ In order to approximate the Mongolian terminology and avoid potential Western connotations of monkhood, I henceforth use the term ‘lama’ to refer to the Buddhist monks.

² In her work on ‘postsecular religion’, Sonja Luehrmann demonstrates elegantly how “Soviet secularization was ... not only about replacing the church with the cinema and appropriating the cinema’s cultural power to the state. It was also about accustoming people to social relations in which there were no significant nonhuman agents” (Luehrmann 2011:7). It is this ‘exclusive humanism’, which Charles Taylor (2004; 2007) has traced in modern Western thought, that I claim still thrives in the scholarly literature known as ‘transitology’.

³ Regarding ethics as fundamental to the human condition is far from particular to religious devotional views of the human subject. Lambek and others (2010) have made a call for greater scholarly recognition of ‘ordinary ethics’, ensuring that it can “overcome its own inherent tendency to succumb to metaphysical denunciations of its apparent vagueness, imprecision, superstition – not overcome this once and for all, but in each incidence of our intellectual and spiritual chagrin” (ibid.: 2, quoting Cavell 2004: 8).

⁴ The Sanskrit word ‘Dharma’ is derived from the root ‘dhṛ’ which means ‘to carry’, ‘to uphold’ or ‘to support’. In Buddhist terminology, it has various meanings ranging from the state of Nature “as it is” (Skt. *yathā bhūtā*) to the teachings of the Buddha.

⁵ The unique position of human beings for following the path to salvation, as described by the Dalai Lama, is debated within the Buddha’s own teachings. In the Lotus Sutra, for example, it is made clear that the attainment of Buddhahood is available to all beings who follow the teachings, even the epitome of evil Devadatta and the nonhuman dragons or *nagas* protecting the Buddhist doctrine (Watson 1993: ch. 12).

⁶ The distinction between ‘low’ and ‘high sutra lamas’ is central to the village lamas’ own presentations of themselves. However, it should not be mistaken for also an analytical dichotomy. Following the work of Martin Mills (2000; 2003) on Tibetan Buddhist communities among the Ladakh, I see Mongolian Buddhist monasticism as a scalar field where social and religious identities are recursively and increasingly transformed, rather than replaced or repressed. As such, the Mongolian ‘low sutra lamas’ might approximate Mills’s “incomplete renouncers” (2003: 69).

⁷ Although there have been concerted, and often internationally-backed, efforts to reinvigorate Mongolian Buddhism over the last few decades, the notion of ‘revitalisation’ might not describe adequately the heterogeneous processes that have taken place (see Abrahms-Kavunenko 2011).

⁸ The water lords *lus* are in many ways reminiscent of the Buddhist beings known as *nagas* (Skt. *nāga*, Tib. *klu*). The Sanskrit word *nāga* means ‘snake’ or ‘serpent’, and *nāgas* dwell in rivers, lakes, and other water sources. They have their own society or kingdoms under the earth and are passionate beings that will strike back at offenders (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956; Tucci 1949: 723). However, in contrast to the ways in which people describe *lus* in Uyanga, *nāgas* are further depicted as creatures with the torso and head of humans, and the body and tail of a snake. Moreover, *nāgas* are said to be able to assume human form at will (D. Lopez, personal communication). Although Sühbaatar (2001) has collected some similar Mongolian examples, I did not in Uyanga come across such descriptions of anthropomorphic features or abilities in *lus*.

⁹ There are many expressions in Mongolian language that associate the colour red with negative feelings of anger and violence. Those that I have heard used to describe miners include *ulaan galzuu* (lit. red rage), *uurlej ulaih* (lit. to become red with anger), *ulaan heriülch*

(lit. a red quarrelsome/argumentative person), *ulaan üzsen araatan shig* (lit. to be like a wild beast that has seen red).

¹⁰ In Mongolia the ‘nine jewels’ are pearl, coral, turquoise, lapis lazuli, mother of pearl, steel, copper, silver, and gold. These gems were sometimes ground up and used as pigments to handwrite Buddhist texts, representing the gem-like teachings of the Buddha (see Zhengyin 2003: 618).

¹¹ In his analysis of the Tibetan soil ritual *Sa Chog*, Gardner argues that the ritual is not intended to avoid inflicting harm on the serpent, but rather, alongside its veneration of nonhuman beings, to “maximise the violence” (2006: 11). In Uyanga, the rituals not only address spirits that are different from the Tibetan soil serpent and are far from as elaborate as those described by Gardner. But they also do not seem to bear any parallels to the Tibetan “symbolic stabbing wrapped in a wrathful subjugation narrative” (ibid.: 11). Beyond the lamas’ own commentary, the ritual orchestration itself that calls forth spirits and offers items most desirable to them, the patient waiting and the still unknown aftermath, ascertains the expected display of respect and veneration of other beings. It is thus more in line with Charles Ramble’s discussion of a harvest ritual where sacred texts are recited in order to protect the cultivated fields from external harm (Ramble 1996: 145).

¹² It is not only miners who draw on the expertise of monks to carry out rituals. As noted by Elverskog (2006), Buddhist practices today often centre on ritual efficacy through the reading of texts, making astrological predictions, and conducting other rituals.

¹³ This sounds almost like a pun on Marx and Engels’ verdict on capitalism ‘*all that is solid melts into air*’, which also gave Berman the title of his book on modernity. Marks, Engels, and Berman, just like the monks’ views of the Mongolian miners, are taking it for granted that only the material is real, but simultaneously suggesting that old certainties and values are threatened by global modernity (I am grateful to Nicolas Argenti for highlighting this link).

¹⁴ Although the monks lend support to Humphrey’s view of the successful espousal of socialist ideology in Mongolia, there are also numerous counter-examples. Apart from the fact that many people continued their religious practices, albeit in secrecy, during the socialist period, staunch defenders of socialism also incorporated traditional rituals into the socialist work regime. The former governor during the late socialist years in Uyanga, for example, recounts how they made offerings before laying the foundations of new buildings in the 1980s: “We had to ask the land for permission”.

¹⁵ The ideological association between socialism and neoliberalism has also been discussed by Boyer and Yurchak (2010) in the context of a particular parody genre (*stiob*) that flourished in late-socialist USSR and today’s US late-liberalism.

¹⁶ Critical Buddhism, associated primarily with Japanese Buddhist scholars such as Noriaki Hakamaya and Matsumoto Shirō of the Sōtō Zen sect, argues against the possibility of Buddhist environmental ethics. While the Japanese Buddhist tradition emphasizes that all beings are ‘inherently’ enlightened (including non-sentient beings such as plants and rocks), they claim that attempts to posit a unified reality as the source from which all particularities emerge is ultimately non-Buddhist since it conflicts with the doctrine of non-self (*anātman*) (see Swanson 1993).

¹⁷ In attempts to formalize their environmental conservation work, they reintroduced in 2001 the notion of Buddhist Sacred Reserves (*Ariun Dagshin Gazar*), ritually marking areas that are deemed protected by deities. However, the success of these attempts is still doubtful (see also Dudley et al. 2005).

¹⁸ Kenneth Kraft (2000) in his activist work on, among others, nuclear waste uses notions of ‘eco-self’ and ‘eco-karma’ to refer specifically to the acting self and its moral implications for the environment.

¹⁹ In a region where it is not common for members of the monastic community to observe even the basic Five Precepts (Skt. *pañca-sīlāni*), the older the lama, the more senior and higher paid he is likely to be – almost regardless of his abilities to study scriptures, engage in devotional practice, or cultivate higher wisdom. Approaching seniority largely in terms of age is in continuation with broader regional practice of patriarchal social organisation.

²⁰ In referring to ‘energy’, Budlam is likely to draw both on popular Russian new age spirituality and Tantric Buddhist understandings of ‘energy’ flowing through our bodies and the universe, creating and upholding our being. Through rituals and meditation we can contact and channel this ‘energy’, thereby achieving mindfulness and liberation from suffering.

²¹ In a similar vein, Buddhist scholar David McMahan writes: “That we live in a radically interconnected world has become a truism. Indeed, this age of internationalism and the internet might well be called the age of *inter*: there is nothing that is not interconnected, interdependent, interwoven, interlaced, interactive, or interfacing with something else to make it what it is. Thus, any religious tradition that can claim ‘interdependence’ as a central doctrine lays claim to timely cultural resonance and considerable cultural cachet” (2008: 149). In his attempts to position Buddhism as a pre-eminently ‘modern religion’, McMahan evinces a certain theory of globalization that is fraught with presumptions of unprecedented ‘connectedness’ (I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for highlighting this link).

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