

Lund University
Center for East and South-East Asian Studies
Masters Program in Asian Studies
South Asian Track
Fall 2003-Winter 2005

WAKING UP IN DHARAMSALA

*An Inquiry into the Stories of Young Westerners Who Have Sought
Buddhist Wisdom in Northern India*

Adam Peot
Supervisor: Sidsel Hansson

ABSTRACT

This is a brief inquiry into the stories of young Westerners who have chosen to travel to Dharamsala India and participate in activities related to self-inquiry and spirituality, as presented through a Buddhist context. The main question to be researched in this thesis is WHY would a diverse group of international young and middle-aged adults choose to spend time, money and comfort traveling to a Buddhist retreat center in northern India? There are several motivations for taking such a “spiritual vacation”, and all are interdependently related to living in today’s complex Post Modern, Global environment. Presented is a brief discussion of these motivating factors and other elements related to the topic at large. Next is a description of the actual setting of my research as a “self-reflexive anthropologist” in the retreat centers and eclectic international crossroads known as Dharamsala India. In order to empirically research an ‘insiders view’ of the Buddhist retreat experience and those encountered there, I participated in several activities related to Buddhist philosophy and inquiry. The diversity of those encountered and their own interpretations of their experience illustrate an increasing global occurrence related to many: increasing spiritual exploration through exotic means.

CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION	4
1.1 Introduction	4
1.2 Research Problem	5
1.3 Aim, Hypothesis and Research Questions	6
1.4 Methods and Design	7
II. THESIS	12
2.1 Recent Related Research	12
2.2 Larger Context and Framework	15
2.2.1 Post Modernity and Globalisation	15
2.2.2 Shangri La Syndrome	17
2.2.3 Evolving Identities	18
2.2.4 Spiritual Impulse	18
2.3 The Indian Experience	19
2.3.1 In The Field	21
2.3.2 Tushita Center	23
2.3.4 Vipassana Center	26
2.3.5 The People	29
III. CONCLUSION	34
Works Cited	39

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In the present age of Post Modernity and Globalisation, many focus on the processes of the ‘Westernization’ of the world’s population. Despite this ever-present reality, there is a growing percentage of Western citizens—of diverse backgrounds and ages—whose own identities and experiences are also influenced by the exploration and adaptation of ‘foreign’ psychology’s, religions, world-views and daily practices.

One specific example of such experimenters consists of those born into the world of the West, who despite appreciating the benefits of Post Modern living, have felt the desire (if not conviction) to pursue something more. This ‘something more’ has often taken the form of a spiritual/psychological search through the forms of Eastern Spirituality; foremost Buddhism. So in the age of Globalisation—where old identities are being torn down and integrated with new—many young Westerners are seeking new experiences which take them to the idealized and often romanticized home of their souls, most exemplified by the lore of Tibetan Buddhism which is to be found in a few key areas of northern India, Nepal and Tibet.

This paper is an inquiry into why these young visionaries, adventurers, romantics, seekers and dreamers—whom despite their colourful backgrounds—have converged in

this one area, perhaps looking for something they felt they were less likely to find in their Western origins.

1.2 Research Problem

If there was one overarching point to be defined as the ‘research problem’, it would be that of exploring and understanding ‘WHY’ so many young westerners have chosen to spend time, money, energy and personal discomfort (both physically, psychologically and emotionally) travelling to a so-called ‘exotic spiritual place’, such as the Buddhist retreat centers found in and around Dharamsala India.

In an era where the general Western mentality often places such importance and priority on sensual and materialistic ego-gratification and stimulation, why would a motley crew of young adults choose a wet and secluded hill-top retreat center where much of what they ever took as reality and built their lifestyles and identities upon, is being questioned, chewed up, challenged and spit out? One would assume that a trip to Cancun, Ibiza, London or Tokyo might offer a bit more fulfilment, fun, sun and rum-soaked relaxation for the ambitious (yet perhaps confused) Post Baby Boomers from the North-Western Hemisphere.

So the ‘problem to be solved’ (or at least researched) involved going below the surface of this increasing phenomenon in order to gain greater clarity into the mentalities, motivations and experiences related to such spiritual vacations.

1.3 Aim, Hypothesis and Research Questions

An Illustrative Look at a Unifying Process

To Fill A Gap by Focussing on Youth

From a broad point of view, The “main purpose” is to shed light upon what factors might motivate a generation of diverse Westerners to congregate in an exotic spiritual local such as Mcleod Ganj India; and to discuss what such a phenomenon possibly illustrates on a larger scale. The most obvious way to go about fulfilling these aims is by exploring the questions posed as the main research problems: *WHY and WHO?*

Hypothesis

Too Many Choices

My general hypothesis is that living in the eras of Post Modernity and Globalisation, as well as the ideals, allure and illusions of what Buddhism and the East represent, influences the increasing number of young westerners to seek out a spiritual vacation. When exploring such a topic, all of these interdependent factors must be considered.

I am attempting to consider that ‘the East’ (Tibet, India and Buddhism) symbolises much more than geographical, cultural and bacterial otherness; rather it is ideally meant to represent a historical center where ‘spiritual-interior’ progress and potential can be experienced in a supportive environment. One can ideally explore the human experience through means that have been significantly ignored and suppressed in the name of Western scientific rationalism, dualism and materialism. These ideals are what led many of the presented travellers to India.

Research Questions

For the sake of organization and simplification, I would consider answering the research questions based upon two general contexts: *pre*-Indian experience (such as ideals, needs and drives) and *post*-Indian experience (such as what actually occurred and was experienced during and after ‘seeking’). When it comes to trying to answer such questions, the line between the two categories can often become blurred. Some examples of such helpful questions include asking who are they, what exactly are they looking for, and what do they expect to discover? Understanding their motivations is important. Therefore it helps to inquire about what they feel they would take back to their ‘real lives’? ; and once there, are their expectations met? Answering such questions should help shed light on larger questions, such as how is this generation perhaps unique, and why is it that these post Baby Boomers—many with such diverse backgrounds—have converged in such a distant and exotic place? Perhaps we can then understand what is appealing about a Buddhist retreat in India.

1.4 Methods and Design

An Empirical Study of an Insider’s View

Self-Reflexive Anthropology

Walter Y. Evans-Wentz was the first Westerner to translate the most sacred and significant book of Tibetan literature, *The Tibetan Book of The Dead*. In the introduction he wrote:

“Anthropology is concerned with things as they are; and the hope of all sincere researchers in comparative religion devoid of any religious bias ought always to be to accumulate such scientific data as will some day

enable future generations of mankind to discover Truth-itself—that Universal Truth in which all religions and all the sects of religions may ultimately recognize the Essence of Religion and the Catholicity of faith” (in Lopez Jr., 1998, p 64).

While I agree with his ideals, I cannot side with the claim that I could remain as a totally *unbiased* observer. Claiming that one can collect ‘objective data’ in regards to personally subjective motivations (such as ‘spiritual intentions’) is something modern scientific materialism currently finds difficult to accept.

Probably due to the goal of *maintaining objectivity* which was the foundation of the scientific and enlightenment revolutions, Anthropology (as well as all areas, *other than religion*, which were focussed on observing and understanding the human condition), became seen as a field where subject and object were totally separate. Ideally, the anthropologist was an all-knowing observer of the cultural phenomenon he or she observed and perhaps interacted with. As the fields related to ‘understanding human behaviour’ have evolved, so have the realizations that when it comes to observing and interpreting human action, emotion, reasoning and meaning (or as the Buddhists would call it, understanding the ‘mind’), remaining totally unbiased is likely to be an impossibility...or at least somewhat dull. In order to remain as ‘dull-free’ as possible, I have attempted to blend impersonal observations with my own interpretative experience as a young Western ‘seeker’; one who is similar to my ‘subjects’ in many ways. The story presented is both reflections of my own experience *and* those I encountered in India. In this vain, this work could best be described as a “self-reflexive anthropological paper”; one which provides an ‘insiders view’ into the topic at hand.

The apparent benefit of such approach is that it allows for more emotive flexibility and honest interpretation. This approach also admits that personal insights are likely to be ever-present when dealing with anything relating to subjective human motivation and behaviour; and that denying such insights will only detract from the depth of the research experience.

So it seems that mine is one small voice admitting the complexity anthropologists now face; recognizing such complexity helps us to understand why Stoller feels the need for a “Globalising Method” when dealing with a multi-faceted global phenomenon, such as westerners taking spiritual vacations in rural India:

“Confronting contemporary social complexity fully means, I think, that we must look back to the ethnographic future. The multi-layered social contexts of contemporary transnational spaces, which are most spaces today, require not a narrow political or philosophical focus, but an ecumenical epistemology. In transnational spaces the traditional concepts of culture, society, nation and citizen are as anachronistic as the solitary anthropologist salvaging pristine knowledge. The fundamental transformation of space, place and time—all provoked by globalisation—requires broadly based research methods or what I have elsewhere called *globalizing method*” (1999, p 702).

In other words, attempting to make sense of the human experience in today’s complex global world requires an open integral approach which considers different means, (means which perhaps were once thought to be separate). At the heart of my approach is myself, because as Turner writes, “it is proposed that the anthropologist must reflexively interrogate the process by which they themselves contribute to the construction of the information and representations constructed through the research” (2000, p 52). On this note, I relate to the words of Klieger, an anthropologist who has embraced the blending of personal and professional pursuits as an inevitable part in the attempt to understand the human experience:

“Since I like to think of myself as a complete being, this book is primarily about the blending of wild passions and professional interest in the exotic other, one of anthropology’s last ‘‘taboos’. Perhaps it is trivial, misrepresentative, and plain boring to continue promoting the cool paradigm that the ‘science’ of other cultures can exist without emotional sentiment. The anthropologist should be above all humanistic and enriching to civilization” (2002, p ix).

By admitting my role as a self-reflexive anthropologist, I openly acknowledge that my observations and experiences are coloured by my own background as a young Western ‘seeker’. Despite this, I did my best not to influence those I met with in any way. The means by which I carried out my research began with the contextual analysis of literature related to the topic. Once in India, I used removed observations, participant observations and personal interviews to gain insight into the minds and motivations of the young Western seeker. While in India I attempted to observe how those encountered (and myself) related to the large-scale factors which I hypothesized as possible motivations for a spiritual vacation.

Testing My Ideas
Validity and Reliability of Data
How Does One Test and Measure Spiritual Inquiries?

My research goal was to *attempt* to understand the mechanics behind the subjective world of both personal and global spiritual exploration (as well as religious tourism). When one is attempting to understand issues relating to identities, global interaction, spirituality and advanced ideas of human evolution, where does one begin? How is one to measure, interpret and express feelings, intuitions and claims of something currently unable to be measured by the methods scientific materialism often demands? How does one test—or even define—spirituality and the real reasons for those encountered in India? Although Buddhists claim that their practice leads to palpable results (just as any scientific experiment does), most believe that we can only hypothesize; always remembering the *subjectivity* but never denouncing the *suggestivity* of ideas. Until we can somehow measure the emotive spiritual content and motivation of the human being, it is difficult to go fully beyond our own rational minds, deeper instincts and insights which are often found residing below our normal modes of consciousness. As Wallace describes the underlying issue that is the title of his related book, *The Taboo of Subjectivity: Towards a New Science of Consciousness*:

“Whereas much of reality can be studied by objective observation, interior phenomenon can only be studied through subjective observation. Data that is in “front” of one’s eyes can be accessed by the five senses, and it is described and understood in objective, third person “it” language terms. Data that is “behind” one’s eyes can only be accessed through techniques adapt to interior realities, such as phenomenology and introspection, and is described and understood in subjective, first person, “I” language terms. Science here is indeed a science of consciousness/.../and there is next to no room for a genuine science of consciousness. In a world that is strictly material, thoughts, emotions, sensations and the entire spectrum of interior reality is reduced to its material substrate” (Integralnaked.org, feb. 2005).

When reading such a thesis, one must consider this “data dilemma” of measuring subjective experiences. Although meeting and interacting with those who have travelled to Mcleod Ganj is an observable occurrence, the personal reasons are ultimately interior and subjective. I approached and met with my subjects through the methods of *removed*

observation, participant observation and personal interviews. I then synthesized all of the observations and stories and applied them to some broad frameworks (to be discussed later). Based on the “taboo of subjectivity”, this paper is not meant to claim facts; rather, its goal is to observe and understand how and why this is happening, and then how it *potentially illustrates* a visible change and a unifying and interior-aware human. Furthermore, based on my “self-reflexive insiders view”, my own interpretations are interwoven into the paper’s fabric. Thus, it is an empirical presentation meant to discuss and display, rather than prove.

II. THESIS

2.1 *Recent Related Research*

Prior to recent years, the information that could be referenced in regards to this topic has been somewhat disparate. There are the academics, the psychologists, the sociologists, the theologians, the popular culturalists, the philosophers, the marketing and business approaches (just to name a few), all attempting to explain human behaviour and why people seek out certain experiences. Although it seems easier for specialized approaches to focus on a limited or specific issue, *one must consider that occurrences (such as the East-West psycho-spiritual exchange) are complex and often multi-faceted, and to approach them without such an integral point of view is only to tell part of the story.* These diverse schools are valid in regards to their areas of speciality, yet none can claim to be the most viable source in regards to human identity formation and experience.

Academically speaking, there does not appear to be a wealth of information directly linking young Westerners to the spirituality of the East. However, there is an increasing amount of ‘popular literature’ (including print, radio, television, popular leadership) linking the needs and interests of Western individuals and society to the practical and exotic ‘wisdom of the East’ (as well as linking the East to the ideals of the West). These literature/media processes act as the best foundation for understanding this phenomenon from an integral point of view, as well as representing the broadest source of information regarding the history and present state of the West’s interest in all things deemed ‘spiritual’.

One likely reason for this gap in literature on youth and spiritual seeking (both at home and in the East) is because it is a somewhat recently popularized phenomenon, one in which the factors are therefore only now beginning to be linked. Another likely reason is that the “Taboo of Subjectivity” doesn’t support and educate one in spiritual and interior exploration in the same way as many Eastern approaches do. The personal stories

of the 'East turners' are *very* unique and diverse, yet all end up at the same point. Such an occurrence is illustrative of something very new, if not somewhat revolutionary.

Therefore it is beneficial to view the 'macro-picture' context in which this seeking is occurring. Although I have previous experience in researching the growing interest in spirituality to be found within Western society, I used only a few specific literary guides to form my pre-Asia speculations. The main reason for this was first, because as a "self-reflexive anthropologist", I felt my own personal experience and intuition to be as valid a guide as any book, and second, because I wanted those I encountered in India to reveal *their* own true stories.

Background of The Western Attraction to Indo-Tibet and Buddhism

Although Buddhism has a nearly 3,000 year old history, its significant interest in the West began in the mid-19th century. The more large-scale popularization began in the 1960's after the revolutions, explorations and interest in other modes of living and states of consciousness manifested on Western soil. This interest has continued to increase into the present-day. Because this paper deals mostly with Western and Tibetan Buddhist interaction, it helps to address the distant history of its mythic appeal. As Lopez Jr. writes in *Prisoners of Shangri-La*:

"Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism have long been objects of Western fantasy. Since the earliest encounters with Venetian travellers and Catholic missionaries with Tibetan monks at the Mongol court, tales of the mysteries of their mountain homeland the magic of their strange--yet strangely familiar—religion have had a peculiar hold on the Western imagination. During the last two centuries, the valuation of Tibetan society, and particularly its religion, has fluctuated wildly. Tibetan Buddhism has been portrayed sometimes as the most corrupt deviant form the Buddha's true dharma, sometimes as its direct descendant" (1998, p 3).

History of Westerners travelling to The East

The first significant number of seekers who had in-depth interaction with Tibetan (and other) Buddhist teachers began more in the 1950's and 1960's, after several

Westerners ventured to Asia in search of diverse experiences. Many of these individuals have now become leading figures in the promotion of Buddhism in the West. By acting as a link between East and West, these individuals are responsible for everything ranging from creating Buddhist centers in western metropolises and quiet suburban burrows, to writing popular literature, as well as developing elaborate religious and cultural studies programs which present the history, modernity and benefits of Eastern religious views. Based on their unique experiences as westerners who embraced 'uncontaminated' Eastern wisdom (as well as by the popularity by which they have been received), these individuals act as a vital resource regarding the topic at hand. Many experienced a far different Asia than is found today: the English language is more commonplace, the influences of global processes and Westernization are more bountiful and the number of Western travellers has sky-rocketed. Along with such processes, 'spiritual tourism' has found a place to flourish with plenty of hungry seekers--some with more clear and honest desires than others--flocking to areas where industrious Asians wait to 'sell the spirit'. But despite one's intentions, the idealistic call of the East can have a powerful influence when compared to what was experienced by those 'innocent' Western explorers of previous decades.

The Call to Explore

It is also beneficial to recognize and consider the perceived 'positive' and 'negative' aspects of Western living that are largely responsible for the seeking out of Eastern wisdom. Some of these positive attributes include increased media influence, improved telecommunications, increased global travel, cultural interaction and integration of mentalities and ideas of what it means to be a human. Some negative aspects which might lead one to look elsewhere include increased materialism, over-emphasis on logic rather than feelings and intuition, and the breakdown of traditional, cultural and family identities and groups. All of these 'issues' and processes are relevant in the formation of human identities. It appears that no period throughout history has

provided so much stimulus, experience and possibility as the one in which *post-Baby Boomers* are growing up in at this moment.

Such a fast-paced, individual-oriented society, as well as the options now available to aide in one's identity and life orientation, potentially contributes to the needs of addressing the 'internal', the spiritual, the psychological, the physical—in other words—the 'integral/holistic' realities of being a human in the twenty-first century. The ideals of Eastern spirituality often appear to provide an already well established way to integrate both the desires to experience 'the other' (exotic) as well as the needs of the 'other half' of integrative living. In such a case, travelling to the East has the makings for a perfect post-modern vacation: *spirituality and scenery*.

2.2 The Larger Contextual Framework of The Topic

The following helps to display the large-scale context and framework in which this empirical topic is occurring.

2.2.1 Postmodernism and Globalisation

Breakdown Leads to Breakthrough and Experience Seeking

Although I am not attempting to provide any specific definitions of either *Post-Modernity* or *Globalisation*, what I do wish to do is recognize the powerful effects of the processes such terms can come to indicate. Different people may have different ideas of what both of these terms refer to. But for the sake of this discussion, both represent large epochs in the history of humanity in which along with increasing positive potential, the speed of life is rapidly increasing; as well as more distractions, never-ending progress, materialism and class-division. The most significant characteristic of Post Modernity is *subjective diversity*. As Wilber notes: “(Post-Modernity) maintains a plurality of world

views/.../a relativistic series of cultural beliefs, and you can't really say one of them is right and one of them is wrong because so much of what we call truth is really an interpretation/.../not really a given, rather it is constructed and interpreted" (in Cohen, 2002, p 40). Such subjectivity and diversity might motivate one to question long held beliefs and to seek out new experiences and truths found in the diverse world which now has been made increasingly accessible. As Tomlinson points out, Globalisation is not only marked by diversity, but also as an age of complexity:

"To construct this argument, I begin with a simple and relatively uncontentious basic understanding of globalisation as an empirical condition of the modern world: what I shall call *complex connectivity*: By this I mean that globalisation refers to the rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interactions and interdependences that characterise modern social life" (1999, p 2).

Within this exponentially complexifying environment, a culture of information and choice-ridden individuals are attempting to forge a sense of identity, meaning, purpose, belonging and peace in an environment which—due to its rapid subjectivity, diversity and complexity--does not always support such healthy interior endeavours.

Some specific examples of growing up as a young adult in this day and age which might contribute to exploring Eastern spirituality include the breakdown of traditional and modern identity structures and relationships to ourselves, others and the ways which grant a foundation (such as religion, life goals etc.), an increasing complexity of life in regards to everything (choice, experience, perceived needs etc.), the expansion of global awareness and respect/insight of what other human experiences can offer to our own (often superficially idealized), and the exploration of human understanding/discoveries in regards to body, mind, psyche and spirit. As Klieger reflects, it is the combination of the ideal view of traditional living *and* the stress, superficiality and isolation of modern living that leads to seeking something foreign.

"If there is a thread of ego that provides a degree of relationship between the multifarious roles that we play, it is usually buried upon by layer upon layer of accredited, contractual role expectations. The statement 'I will', becomes a hollow cry of self-determination as the tidal forces of modern society tear the individual into smaller and smaller units". (furthermore) "Of course the quest for atonement has many other manifestations. The appeal for the foreign is manifest in the tension between 'modern' and 'traditional' societies. Traditional societies are those whose religious, vocational, procreative, economic, and political activities are embedded in a highly integrated social network. An older, less complex way of dealing with the vicissitudes of everyday life/.../others seek the exotic by roaming the world, experiencing

glimpses of an apparently integrated traditional societies through the plastic bubbles provided by the international tourism industry.” (2002, p 18).

Such an environment leaves many looking for that something which seems to be lacking in typical modern living.

2.2.2 Shangri La: The Illusion of The East

The *Shangri-La Syndrome* is a common description of those who fall prey to the idea that the East will save them by leading them to spiritual revelation. Although for the sake of this paper, I openly admit to the theory that Buddhism has a more advanced history supporting things deemed interior/spiritual, I am weary to proclaim that one *must* travel to ‘spiritual Asia’ to ‘find themselves’ so to speak. As one long time Western Buddhist states the problem of, “having idealized foreign cultures as magically superior and far superior to one’s own in every way”, (to which he answers) “no, the grass is not greener on the other side of the fence, nor is enlightenment shinier on the other side of the world” (Das, 1997, p 392). So in discussing a topic related to seeking, meaning, value and so forth, it is vital to recognize the illusions many fall prey to when romanticizing the East as somehow ‘better’.

Postmodernism, Globalisation and The Shangri-La Syndrome constitute a significantly changed contexts for identity formation; change which likely leads some towards the seeking of ‘common ground’ (as was seen in McLeod Ganj). The clearest way that such developments can be understood to illustrate change and seeking is through *evolving identities*.

2.2.3 Evolving Identities

All of the factors of growing up in such complex times mean one is less likely to follow in the same traditional footsteps as their ancestors. Long held ideas of identity are under attack. In some cases this can be liberating, in other cases, stressful. Such examples of evolving identity structures could be described as from *narrow to broadening* and *from specific culture (ethnocentrism) to humanism*: as global cultural interaction influences the exchange of ideas, psychology's and perceptions, both individuals and societies are less likely to maintain a totally 'igno/ethno-centric' (some might say limited) sense of self and other. Simply, many are beginning to view themselves as part of a global human family (even part of a cosmic design).

In such an evolution, more are recognizing similarities rather than differences. A further example of crossing new barriers is the change from one religion to another or from a non-religious perspective to a new 'spiritual' belief system; both allowing for a new interpretation of what it means to be an 'atheist'. In the void of solid identity foundations, many feel the draw of *both* interior wisdom traditions (e.g. Buddhism) and what *Shangri La* provides.

2.2.4 The Spiritual Impulse

Consciously Partaking in the Experience of Being Alive

Like many aspects of this essay, the term 'spirituality' is a difficult term to define. Depending on how many different people you ask, you are likely to receive as many different ideas of what it means to be spiritual. Perhaps the easiest way to define spirituality for the sake of this paper is to relate it to *the intentions of seeking and self-inquiry*. One does not have to be an enlightened Buddhist master to be living a spiritual life. Generally speaking, if an individual sees the limitations of their current modes of living and seeks ways in which to improve through particular practices, they could be

said to be seeking a ‘spiritual path’. So for the sake of time, space and sanity, I will refer to spirituality as *the human quest for understanding life in order to be happy*. Despite the *ideal* that interior-spirituality should involve all areas of life, it can be inferred that certain “approaches” to life (such as religion, psychology, philosophy and science) are more advanced in their dedication to understanding and then making the most of reality. In the words of one man related to this discussion, the Tibetan leader known to most as His Holiness The Dalai lama states:

“I believe that if someone really wants a happy life then it is very important to pursue both internal and external means; in other words, mental development and material development. One could also say ‘spiritual development’, but when I say ‘spiritual’ I do not necessarily mean any kind of religious faith. When I use the word ‘spiritual’ I mean basic human good qualities. These are: human affection, a sense of involvement, honesty, discipline and human intelligence properly guided by good motivation. We have all these qualities from birth; they do not come to us later in our lives’ (2003, p 15).

So when the words ‘spiritual’, ‘spiritual impulse’ or ‘spirituality’ are used throughout this paper, recall the wide range of possible meanings such terms can indicate. For the sake of this paper, many believe, or at least are exploring the claim that certain Eastern wisdom traditions have developed advanced means to understand and experience life, as well as be authentically happy in a way which transcends but includes the attempts and progress the West has made.

2.3 The Indian Experience

The Appeal and Potential of Exploring Traditional Space

Why would an increasing number of Westerners choose to look to the East of all places? Why would so many, bright, well-educated and materialistically comfortable people even consider that a hemisphere consisting mostly of third-world countries, has something valuable to offer in regards to ‘the meaning of life?’

I have attempted to provide an overview of why one might feel inclined to explore Buddhism in India. Perhaps all of us can relate to the attraction in our own unique way: the exoticism, the adventure, the romanticism, the sense that something is missing in our own home, the spiritual ideal, or the voyeurism to see these ‘poor people living in darkness (and thus make us feel better about our comfortable lives). Regardless of one’s motivation for travel, once in a place such as India or a Buddhist retreat center, other insights are bound to manifest.

When it comes to seeking some sort of personal fulfilment or discovery, the world seems to offer an endless array of exotic destinations. There is the wilderness, mysticism and danger of places like Africa or Latin America. There is the lore and legend of ancient Europe. There is space, solitude and spiritual history to be found throughout every continent. So why then would one residing in Western Europe, North America, Australia or any other Westernized country feel the draw of South Asia rather than one of these other realms of discovery? In the eyes of the West, the East (especially India) are as notorious for poverty, natural disasters, corrupt government and perceived ‘cultural backwardness’ as it is for offering any apparent means to greater wisdom. Many might scoff at the notion that such places provide any authentic value other than providing a glimpse of how lucky we are to have moved out of such traditional ignorance.

Without a doubt, many travel to such foreign abodes for the thrills of cheap living, adventure, beautiful nature, danger, exploration, cheap drugs, booze and exotic shopping. But since this paper deals with the experience of time spent at a Buddhist retreat center, I will focus on elements related to such locations.

2.3.1 In The Field

Mcleod Ganj

Home to the Tibetan Government in Exile

'I expected something... grander'

Based upon the narrow crumbing road/trail that led me out of the plains and up into the Himalayan foothills, I should have known that Dharamsala would be smaller than I had envisioned. I had expected the Tibetan Government in Exile's new abode (Little Lhasa) to me more of a city than a town. Yet after a few days of exploration, I found this spiritual/cultural center (and modern Mecca) to be little more than 3.5 main roads, one of them pedestrian.

In recent years, Mcleod Ganj appears to have become a very interesting and eclectic meeting of worlds. If one so wishes, a typical day could go as follows: awake before sunrise and meditate in a Buddhist *Gompa* (prayer temple), walk down to the *Current Event Café* (run by a 25 year old native Californian), and enjoy a Starbucks latte, walk a few minutes to the Dalai Lama's palace to see if he is available for a chat, go and eat a delicious and affordable Japanese, American, Thai, Mexican or Tibetan lunch, buy something at one of the 18,000 or so Tibetan gift shops (run by Kashmiris), have a beer while listening to hip hop, watch *Spider Man 2*, concluding the day by one last meditation session on emptiness and the meaning of life, all in the same temple you began your day with.

For someone with a need for a gentle transition to spiritual life, where becoming a monk or a nun seems like too much commitment, such a day can appear to be quite appealing.

A five minute walk down any of the main boulevards will take one past a virtual parade of those manifesting the visible effects of global cultural exchange (some might say confusion). One shouldn't be surprised to witness a rich American draped in traditional Indian garb, chatting it up with a youthful Tibetan decked out in the latest over-sized hip-hop apparel most common to the poor urban areas of large U.S. cities. Both images (especially the latter), were the last thing I expected or wanted to witness on my first spiritual pilgrimage to this idealized 'Holy Land'. Somehow it just seemed

wrong that a young Tibetan, who likely still has family in Tibet, and is surrounded by such an abundance of advanced human wisdom, would choose to wear such drastic clothing from a materialistic culture he has probably only experienced through fleeting satellite images. Yet now I wonder, were we all just as guilty for romanticising the Indians and Tibetans as being something other than simple humans?

Passing by these two, and in between the dodging of large horned cows (sometimes images of Pamplona come to mind) and dozens of unpredictable monkeys, one will encounter the rest of the colourful human stew that call this small place home. The streets are filled with the many Tibetan monks and nuns, Indian beggar families, Kashmiri merchants, Israeli youth on a post military holiday, English nuns and all the other ‘pilgrim/tourists’ (the difference can be difficult to recognize) from every Western country imaginable.

Although my intentions to seek felt pure at the time, witnessing so many ‘average westerners’ (and everything catering to their needs and desires) makes the fantasy of the ‘exotic East’ not as exotic. It reminded me of my short stay in Prague in the Czech Republic. Prague is often referred to as one of the most beautiful historic European cities to survive the ravages of WWII. Its extensive cobble-stoned streets, narrow alley ways and towering spires are quite charming. Yet a great deal of the charming areas consist of store after store of tourist junk. As one finds themselves strolling through living history, they do so not with Czech locals, but with other loud tourists from everywhere but Bohemia. It really feels as if one is in a sort of ‘Traditional Euro-Disneyland’. Initially I experienced similar feelings while making my way through McLeod Ganj, only this time it was ‘Indo-Tibet land’.

So then, the initial perception one might have after encountering so much westernization, is a bit of defeatism; as if somehow, the forces of free-market capitalism and tourism are truly destined to consume the entire world—for if this place can’t defeat it, where can? Such concerns do carry validity. Yet the spiritual authenticity of McLeod Ganj is still there below the visible surface, one just has to have patience, some focus, a genuine motivation to seek and explore, and wise determination. Geshe Pema Dorjee, an ‘authentic’ Tibetan monk who had fled from Tibet decades ago, was the first person I met during my stay in McLeod Ganj. When I told him of my intentions for exploring the

Western-Buddhist interaction, he warned me that there were many impostors waiting to sell me spirituality for a good price.

From a personal point of view, it is here that Mcleod Ganj becomes a metaphor for life: In order for one to discover the spiritual and cultural richness residing below the immediate illusionary surface of things, one must prioritise and sift through the crowds, shops, and imitations. ‘Real’ Buddhism (perhaps better referred to as ‘awakenism’) is everywhere; it is just that our ego, its distractions and ignorance is also there, constantly blurring our vision. And so one needs to connect with and listen to the ‘spiritual impulse’ which led them there in the first place...it must be one’s guide.

So on one hand, the average Western youth, interested in Eastern spirituality could talk to a random monk on the street, ask for some advice, take a photo, and then consider such a ‘spiritual experience’. But in order to escape the pull of shopping and Lattes, and follow an impulse deeper while in such a place, what is one to do? What apparently is the best option for a curious seeker not yet ready to declare monk or nunhood? What I, along with several other international travellers decided, was that a one-week or more Buddhist retreat was the answer.

2.3.2 Tushita Meditation Center

*It was here that I first encountered the generation I was seeking...reflections of myself
Western accessibility meets traditional Tibetan Wisdom*

Tushita Meditation Center is part of a growing global network of Tibetan Buddhist locations. Collectively this is known as The FPMT (The Federation for The Preservation of The Mahayana Tradition). The center itself is conveniently situated a short taxi ride up the steep road from Mcleod Ganj (which the actor Richard Gere supposedly funded to have *sort of* paved). Nestled amongst the rich damp mountain forests, several dorms, *Gompas*, *Pagodas* and a kitchen, house diverse activities ranging

from month-long retreats, Tibetan monks on isolated retreat, ancient prayer rituals and what many young visitors were seeking, the one-week “Introduction to Buddhism” retreats.

Here one paid a fee of around 100 U.S. dollars for ten days of room, board, food, teachings by experienced Western and Tibetan teachers, group interaction, isolated meditation practice and everything else necessary to cram thousands of years of the meaning of life into a little over a week. In this beautiful and isolated setting, where the monkeys and insects are the only thing louder than one’s conscious, one has no other responsibility other than to explore the reality of their own life in the space and purpose provided by Tushita.

Although the introduction courses may vary in length and style based on the teacher’s approach, the general daily schedule is quite consistent. One awakes before sunrise to the sound of a gong in the air. The day begins with morning meditation, either concentration, mindfulness, visualization or mantras, all based on the teachers wishes. This is followed by breakfast. The day continues with a few hours of teachings from an experienced monk or nun, almost always of Western origins. Meditation is then followed by lunch where one is free to read, walk in the woods or keep ‘noble silence’ (avoiding any verbal, gesture or eye contact with another in order to keep from distraction). Such an environment was said to create the space and solitude to encourage ‘looking in’ and reflection; what many stated was a rarity in their typical busy Western origins. This is followed by group discussion where for an hour or so, participants from all over the world gather to verbally express certain topics and feelings of the day. This is followed by more teachings, question and answer periods, dinner and an evening meditation. One is free to go to bed whenever they please, as long as they are quiet and do not feed the monkeys.

The Teachers

Based on the observations of those I met, it was agreed that the staff at Tushita are a vital part of what experience one has at the center. Despite the underlying wisdom that is the foundation of Buddhist popularity and validity, the way it is presented to inquiring

minds is just as important as the content itself. The Buddha is known for promoting the importance of 'skillful means', which basically indicates that one must know who they are talking to if they wish to effectively get their message across. This is as true in business as it is in conversion. In the case of the Tushita participants, most had little to no experience with traditional Buddhist philosophy, and so if they were to walk away with anything valuable, the teacher would need to present it in a way that young cynical Western minds could relate to.

Both of the retreats I attended were led by female nuns. The first was Kathleen McDonald, a thirty-year practitioner originally from California. The other was Robina Courtin, a short, tough and vibrant Australian nun of over 25 years. The two of these women had extremely contrasting personalities. McDonald was very soft-spoken and humbly laid out the practicality of Buddhism in easy to relate to terms. Courtin on the other hand, presented Buddhist wisdom and theory in an equally practical way, but with a much more fiery, unforgiving and 'in your face' method. After speaking with various participants, the general verdict was that both teachers did an interesting and convincing job of explaining the practicality and value of Tibetan Buddhism.

In order to make it feel 'more Tibetan', various Tibetan teachers paid a visit to the retreats. These men draped in traditional robes spoke in English and Tibetan, as well as occasionally being translated into Hebrew for the many Israeli visitors. And as only could be done in modern times, participants also were paid visits by The Dalai Lama and other revered teachers, albeit in the virtual sense of video form.

What made the teachers most effective was the fact that they themselves had once walked in the so-called 'real world'. Despite their crimson robes and shaved heads, they were down to earth and approachable. They explained how they had been through the tough times of personal tragedy, self-doubt, seeking in forms of drugs, sex, alcohol, relationships, money and what they felt were all the other unfulfilling means to the ends of happiness. They openly shared some of the deepest experiences of their dark periods as a way to express the hope that lies within and beyond every obstacle. It was Buddhism in which they found their path to inner peace and wisdom. And what is perhaps most remarkable (when compared to many other forms of religious representation), they did so without trying to press Buddhism on anyone by means of guilt or superiority. They

merely presented what they had learned and asked that the listeners consider it for themselves. One of the foundations of Buddhist psychology is that it is not based upon blind faith, rather one is said to act like a scientist through experimentation. If one tries it and receives beneficial results, wonderful. If not, there is no need to continue. In this vain, the teachers claimed to simply present what they had experienced.

And to answer to those who might initially judge monks or nuns as ‘escaping the real world’, these women provided a stark contradiction. Both were extensively involved in projects relating to education, prisoner ‘rehabilitation’, travelling, writing and speaking. Their lives were not spent in isolated monasteries, but rather in the gritty world of human suffering, where they gave a great deal more of their time and energy to benefiting others than do many who live in the so-called ‘real world’.

2.3.3 Vipassana Center

Buddhist Boot Camp

‘‘The worst experience I don’t regret’’

Literally a two-minute walk up the road from Tushita lies the Vipassana Center where one is introduced to a method of Buddhist practice quite different from the introduction course at Tushita. Vipassana is an ancient technique often described as the practice of bare attention and deepening awareness. It is also said by some to be the original teaching/practice of the historical Buddha before his works were reinterpreted over time. In Mcleod Ganj, it is presented as it is taught by S.N. Goenka, a former Burmese-Indian businessman who has been teaching for nearly half a century. The technique as taught by Goenka has flourished in an amazing way. Based on its apparent effectiveness, Vipassana centers have cropped up on nearly every continent over the past few decades. One may initially judge this as some sort of money making venture or popularity stunt. But when one considers that all of these centers run entirely on donations, such judgements must be re-evaluated. A twelve-day period, complete with

board and meals costs only as much as the practitioner is willing to pay, whether it is one dollar or one thousand.

The method of Vipassana itself is quite simple, yet initially quite demanding. It requires one to first focus the mind on the breath. Once stable concentration has been established, one moves to the sensations of the body. The general aim is to *observe rather than react* to sensations and discomforts that arise while sitting for hours. The theory is that eventually every sensation arises and passes (or that everything is 'impermanent'). When one observes rather than reacts either in favour or against (craving or aversion) a particular sensation, the mind gradually releases attachment to certain habitual tendencies which keep one always addicted and stressed, often at a very deep, habitual and unconscious level. Vipassana is a non-dogmatic, non-ritualistic method based purely on direct experience. Goenka, the charming and practical English speaking icon continually refutes anything to do with organized religion, esoteric theory or ritualistic grandeur. He promotes practice, persistence, equanimity and results...nothing more, nothing less.

It is this non-religious approach to getting results which initially sounds so appealing. It also sounds so easy; nothing fancy, just sitting, how difficult could that be? Well, as any first-time Vipassana practitioner can tell you, very very difficult.

Nestled amongst the tall evergreens, a group of diverse people gathered either to try it out based on recommendations or curiosity, or as returning participants. Males and females remained in complete isolation for the 11 days to follow. In the front sat the returning students. In the case of the McLeod Ganj center, this group consisted almost entirely of middle-aged Indian men. In the back of the room sat the rest of the lab rats, a diverse group of Euro-Americans with the average age of mid-twenties. On the female side, the group consisted almost entirely of young Westerners. The reason there were no Indian women suggests something of the traditional Indian culture.

A typical day begins with a wake-up bell at 4 a.m., followed by meditation from 4:30 to 6:30. Everyone then silently stumbles their way to the breakfast line, where like a row of inmates awaiting their daily rations, they are handed spoonfuls of sustenance food by experienced volunteers. All eat in silence on the floor (wondering what they have gotten themselves into, as many later joked). There is a short break, before the challenging day of meditation session after session continues. The long day, complete

with lunch, evening snack and occasional breaks to wander in the yard, concludes with a one-hour video of Goenka and one final meditation session. Lights go out around 10 in the evening.

For three days all one does is tame their mind through focussing on the breath. With day four begins the actual practice of Vipassana, specifically the awareness of bodily sensations. Other than occasional recordings of mantras by Goenka and brief question period to an old Sikh, noble silence reigns until the final day, where freedom to speak is once again restored.

Despite the fact that this sounds more like punishment than something one would actually willingly participate in, the ten plus days are said to be the minimum requirement to catch a glimpse of the potential benefits of practising Vipassana.

The McLeod Ganj center offered far more challenges than merely trying to sit still for over ten days. The course I attended, which began the afternoon of October 1st and ended the morning of October 12th, took place when the first cold rain storms made their way into the southern Himalayas. After the third day, one could see snow at the top of peaks in the not too far-off distance. Although this may sound like a charming experience (meditating in the snow capped Himalayas while Tibetan monks stroll through the moss-laden forest), the problem was that we slept in open plastic tents, meditated in a damp draft-exposed room and ate on a cold linoleum floor. Needless to say, this combination, along with long hours, stressful practice and all the self-doubt that can arise when one is left so sit alone for eleven days, led to many in the group to become quite ill. And when one has to 'focus on their breath' for ten days, it helps to be able to breath!

One other intriguing explanation for so much illness was said by both the volunteers and Goenka videos to be the arising of 'Sankaras'. What this word refers to is the process of the release of deep psychosomatic negativities which have been deeply rooted in the unconscious. When one sits and observes rather than reacts, a samkaric 'knot' is released and arises to the surface, often in the form of illness. Whether this is true or not is not for me to determine. Yet it does give a different perspective to illness as well as supporting the growing claim in Western medicine that mind and stress can significantly effect physical health.

2.3.4 The People

Answering The Research Questions

The ideal of this paper is that it would present a quick look into one process of human exploration and development. Perhaps nowhere in time have people from Europe, North and South America, Africa, Australia and Asia all gathered in such a casual way and in such an exotic place to discuss the meaning of life through a spiritual Buddhist approach. So who then are these people who illustrate the seeking out of spiritual vacations, and what is it about their encounter with Buddhism that effected them in a way that their 'normal' ways of cultural upbringing have not?

Although there were variations of those I encountered at the Tushita and Vipassana retreats, the general similarities were very consistent. Both had a relatively equal number of males and females, the average age was in the mid to upper twenties, participants were almost entirely from Western countries (with particular countries representing a larger portion), most had little to no experience with Buddhism prior to the retreats, and most seemed quite open to what was presented. Finally, most said that they had found something valuable in what they experienced, something they would like to take with them after they left India. The greatest difference to be found between the two centers was that the experienced Vipassana meditators were mostly Indian, whereas each Tushita course had only one Indian participant.

Although the total number of those I encountered during the three retreats in India numbered well over 200, to try and discuss them all would be tedious and impossible. What I did do was get a glimpse into the lives of a handful who spoke openly with me as a friend, fellow human and interviewee. Although their stories might appear different, taken as a whole, they represent the face of a new type of Westerner. This one who has taken risks, gone beyond the mould and made the effort to explore their world, both outer and inner.

Somehow I had expected those I would encounter in India to be more of a particular 'type'; specifically, sort of the unshaven, tie-dye wearing neo-hippie confused college graduate tasting the last of freedom before 'real life' took them back to responsibilities of the office or family. Perhaps I expected to meet more spaced-out people who spoke in really 'groovy' soft voices and smiled a lot; sort of like those one might come across at a Grateful Dead show. Perhaps this was the case when the first westerners made their way to India in the 60's and 70's. But now, there was a new kind of global spiritual inquirer: the guy or gal next door.

Yes there were the stereotypical neo-hippies, but only in small number. The majority of those I met were as 'normal' as anyone you might pass on a busy urban road in the West. They came from California, New York, Brazil, Germany, the UK, Scandinavia, Israel, South Africa and India. They were students, business professionals, computer programmers, architects, organic farmers, musicians, psychologists and aimless wanderers.

They were in their teens as well as in their 50's. In other words, they were from almost everywhere and fit most any description. But perhaps the most common trait was that despite their apparent diversity, they had an open and inquisitive mind which was temporarily directed towards the inner-outer exploration of Buddhist ideas in rural India.

What Exactly Are They Looking For?

To ask twenty different people what they came looking for would be to get nearly twenty different answers. At the beginning of the Tushita retreats, all were asked to go around the room and introduce themselves, where they were from and why they had come to the retreat. The reason for their arrival ranged from following a friend's recommendation, to exploring an interest in Buddhism, to strengthening their practice to looking for some means to further insights. Many said they had little to no prior knowledge of anything relating to Buddhism, but they had an instinct to commit ten days of their lives to waking up early, meditating, maintaining silence and questioning, debating and in some cases, releasing their long held beliefs. At the foundation of all their diverse expectations was the fulfilment of their curiosity. What some referred to was the

seeking out of something that might provide greater peace, wisdom and meaning to the restless confused nature that they felt is part of being a young Western adult in today's world.

After the retreats many stated that what they learned on retreat had helped to clarify what they felt they were missing before; and what partially led them to undergo such an experience. As one young German female explained, "I knew my priorities weren't making me happy, but before coming here, I didn't exactly know why...Now I understand what I was looking for...*inner* wisdom, not more stuff". One analogy that many related to was that we often notice what is missing only when it reappears. In this vain, the retreats reminded many of what they felt was lacking in their lives of external emphasis.

What Did They Really Expect To Discover?

Once again, every individual had a somewhat unique set of expectations prior to arrival. Yet ultimately, most felt that they hoped to discover something they could not have done in their western environments. This seeking out of newness was true for why they came to India as well as why they came to the retreats. One young American man came with the hope of "taking his spiritual practice to a new level, one beyond mere intellectualization". Another Swedish man introduced himself as "the irritating guy who will ask many doubtful questions", somehow expressing the cynical attitude many rational-minded Westerners have towards the unknown realms of the spiritual and supernatural. One Finnish woman wanted to see how Buddhist beliefs related to the environment, as she was a member of an organic community. Since so many came with only a little knowledge but a large open mind, their expectations were left in the void of exploration. Like a child being exposed to something new, for many of the participants of both retreats, the present moment was where expectations were instantly created and either met, enticed or left unfulfilled.

What some shared—both in interviews and in open discussions—was that these retreats marked not only the first time they had ever meditated, but the first time they had ever really taken a deep look into their own lives. The seemingly simple task of sitting

still and watching one's breath for anywhere from 15 minutes to two hours (a general practice of most Eastern spiritual paths) left many facing the doubt of their ability to function in a quiet space, one where the distractions of their normal lives couldn't sweep them away. Some I spoke with, such as a young Canadian woman, laughed at the anger she felt when learning how truly untamed her mind was. Yet by the end of her third retreat, she could sit for hours, clearly recognizing the suffering caused by her conditioned restlessness.

So the general expectation shared by most was to have their curiosity satisfied. And despite the doubt many came and left with concerning certain aspects of their experience, most said they had a deep interest and inspiration stirred up and opened to more.

What Do They Believe They Would Take With Them Back To Their 'Real Lives'?

To best answer such a question, one must remember that each of the retreats, despite their intensity, only lasted for an average of ten days. A little more than one-week of going against one's normal habits of thinking, acting and believing is nothing in the span of one's entire life. All of the teachers stressed the fact that the spiritual life requires patience and effort, and is one of unfolding growth and realizations which take place over long periods; months, years, even lifetimes. What most stated at the end of each respective retreat was that they had been touched by something deep; insights which could almost only come about through stepping out of one's normal and habitual modes of being. The last day of the first Tushita retreat, many left hugging one-time strangers who they had virtually no interaction with throughout the retreat, while others planned on meeting at other centers in their homeland; clearly displaying that some 'bonding' had taken place as a result of the past week. Several participants stressed that it was one of the best experiences of their life and that it revealed convicting (yet conflicting) demands to continue what they had been introduced to.

At the end of the Vipassana retreat, most staggered out beyond the high fence surrounding the center where they pondered the pull they now felt: one way towards the world they knew, the other to remain with the solitude and wisdom the previous week

inspired. At a small café outside of the center, many sat silently, taking in the mixture of feeling happy to “be free”, filled with a glow and appreciation for the world of texture they had let pass superficially by their eyes for so long; while others still experiencing the wake of such an ‘abnormal’ and intense experience. Next to those who seemed to sit with reverence of their experience, sat those who raced their way to the counter to buy cigarettes and chocolate they had been denied for the past twelve days. As the fog surrounded the mountaintop where we sat, one woman couldn’t refrain from blasting her portable radio. Even though she could not have chosen more obnoxiously conflicting music to play, many seemed to enjoy it, not sure if they were celebrating the gift of music, or simply expressing their restless need for noise.

As the second of the Tushita retreats came to a close, many felt conflicting emotions. Some, thoroughly convinced of the value of Buddhism as presented by Robina Courtin, took the Buddhist vows, not to become monks or nuns, but to follow certain precepts. Others stated their undeniable attraction to certain aspects of the practical philosophy and psychology, while at the same time being unconcerned about the aspects which seemed to be too foreign or profoundly impossible to grasp. Others still felt the “requirement” to incorporate what they had learned into their livelihood. Such was the case with one young woman from New York who had trained as a Western psychologist. Her concern was that she would face difficulties finding people in her society whom could relate to what she had learned in India. She felt that to go ‘back’ into a field that did not understand or address the undeniable wisdom she discovered, would be a self-deceiving and limiting approach to helping others.

If there was one commonality that seemed to be expressed by most at the end of each retreat, it was that they could not deny much of the practicality which was presented, but felt unready to completely accept many of the more ‘advanced’ ideas of Buddhism; such as reincarnation, karma and renunciation. With such an honest outlook, many seemed likely to take three aspects with them: an explanation for the struggles and dissatisfaction of the human experience, a vaster, deeper and accessible philosophical outlook on their own lives (one that could be further explored through means in their homeland), and the value of meditation and mindful living.

III. CONCLUSION

The Value & The Illusion

How To Measure The Meaning Of Life And The Future In Progress?

This paper is nothing more than a peek; it barely touches upon the surface of the many aspects of human identities, generation issues, psychological states, religious validity and the ways in which all these were interpreted by both myself and those I met in India. It is not so much about Buddhism itself, nor about Asia; or my role as a researcher, or ‘the other’; although it involves all of these. It is merely the result of trying to understand how others are choosing to take positive new steps in exploring both themselves and the world at large, and how such attempts at understanding (seeking) are just another expression of man’s search for meaning, truth and happiness in the complex Global Age. As the teachers repeatedly stated, promoting Buddhism may sound like an attempt to be profound, but in reality, it has nothing to do with anything other than the most practical aspects of real life: insight, happiness, self-knowledge and acceptance, relationships, work, purpose, emotions and all those other things we seem to struggle with, yet are the essence of our lives. Ultimately such inquires will always be personal, and thus subjective. And when anything is seen as such, it is open to criticism. But I feel that this criticism—although valid in some respects—often comes out of the lack of supportive literature and scientific materialism which colours the vision of many. The most significant difficulties faced when considering the greater scope of this topic are based on the ”taboo of subjectivity”, the newness of the topic and the chaos and lack of integral perspectives which exist during this Post Modern-Global time of rapid change.

Thus we should consider both the flaws and potential of our current system of thinking and evaluation.

And so a period, roughly two months in duration came to a close. Many of those I met at the various retreats were later met strolling the streets of Mcleod Ganj. What many said was that the retreats inspired topics and insights rarely discussed or even encountered before coming to India; as if just being there gave the permission and an environment supportive of inquiring about “spiritual things”.

Spiritual Tourism

Old Meets New: The World We Live In

Without a doubt, this topic is also a sign of spiritual tourism; where the old is exploited to appeal to the minds of the hungry new. As Klieger noted previously, many are so hungry to belong, to find some basic essence and truth to themselves, that they superficially seek out foreign or decaying traditions to try and fill the gap. Despite what many felt is the timeless practicality of Buddhist wisdom, the illusion has also been exploited. The Dalai Lama himself has said that he does not expect everyone to become a Tibetan Buddhist, or to pursue a one-world religion. Most of those I met did not plan on becoming “official Tibetan Buddhists”, but by unknowingly taking some of the basic human wisdom with them, they perhaps are contributing one small step in the evolution towards a ‘non-ethno/religious-centric human’.

I suppose that I could have inquired about people seeking for a deeper relationship to life through a Buddhist context anywhere. There are centers, yoga studios and spiritual media locals flourishing throughout the West, all representing a diminishing gap between the ‘East’ and the ‘West’. Yet going to India and committing at least ten days to such an event is a large endeavour, especially to the average Western youth on a whirlwind tour of Asia.

Was It A Valuable Experience? Only If It Lasts

Most I spoke with fully supported much of what they had learned, yet they struggled with the fear that going against the grain of one's entire life and what most of their culture values is no easy task. As one young author states, "The present mood of hyper-apathy among us has created terrible conditions for spiritual pursuits" (O'Connor, 2004, p 108). Most of those encountered in India enthusiastically said they would leave with some plans to continue what they learned over those many weeks. But who will really continue to nurture their unique experiences, we will never know.

The ideas presented are a shallow look at what is difficult to document: the *spiritual experience*. One way to see the illustrative reality of this developing seeking movement, is to imagine this experience in comparison to both the past and the future: When ever has the past seen such a coming together of diverse peoples and mentalities to discuss the spiritual meaning of life in such an open and exotic context? Then consider that this is a documented growing trend among all walks of Western life (as was represented by the diversity observed in India). Finally, imagine the future, where continued global exchange, scientific breakthroughs and the expansion of self-understanding continues to promote the seeking of other and self. If one has this 'big picture' view, this topic appears to be more illustrative and important, and those encountered can be seen as pathfinders. But perhaps it is easiest to classify them as:

The new post-modern global open-minded spiritual seeker tourist human who happened to stumble upon Mcleod Ganj India.

The main aim of this paper was to shed light on *why* a diverse group of young westerners would choose to take a spiritual vacation in India. Beyond mere observations, one goal was to consider how such a phenomenon might illustrate something larger—something representing us all to some degree--specifically, to consider how this represents an unprecedented "coming together" of diverse stories under the influence of self-chosen spiritual exploration.

In the attempt to illustrate these ideas, I began by presenting the potential macro factors that might lead more recent generations to "seek" through means such as foreign psychologies, religions and worldviews. These factors include the powerful forces of living in the eras of Postmodernity and Globalisation; forces which facilitate an exploration and opening up to oneself and the world at large. Living in such an environment includes the increased positive awareness made possible through the newly manifested "complex connectivity". Such an environment can also lead to the breakdown and breakthrough which contribute to one's evolving identity. The ideal of consciously exploring has led some to absorb the benefits of 'foreign' Buddhist wisdom. While the breakdown of once long standing traditional identity structures has also led many to fall prey to the illusions that *Shangri La* will save them.

There were those I met in India whom fell under all of these categories to a lesser or greater degree. Whether it was the former Dutch businessman questioning his entire life, or the German architect looking for something "deeper" than he encountered in his previous education and religious upbringing; or the Indian software expert seeking the practical wisdom beneath his homelands rituals that "hid the forest for the trees", or the New York highschool group exploring the philosophy of the other side of the world in between other South Asian photo opportunities; or the French Canadian who while on an adventure trip around India found new ways to understand the death of his family, or the Israeli housewife who wanted to gain new perspectives on her country's struggles; all claimed to have discovered (or at least considered) what they deemed as a spiritual, yet down-to-earth look into life—one foreign and vacant from most of their histories.

I then briefly presented the specific centers and how they catered to the perceived needs of those who participated: specifically, by providing an opportunity to step out of one's normal modes of being and into a supportive environment; one where the solitude and lack of distractions--coupled with the leadership of experienced teachers--created an environment ideal for insight, contemplation, introspection and exoticism. Nearly all those I met with (who had not already participated in a similar retreat) praised the appeal and need, yet lack of such experiences of slowing down enough to have quality self-inquiry.

Ultimately what one is left with is the specific stories of those encountered. The basic fact was that they were diverse, open, inquisitive, convinced and more "normal" than one might ever imagine. The fact that the interaction of so many diverse people meeting in such a 'foreign' environment, openly embracing such a different approach to experiencing life, is a visible account of something amazing, and never-before experienced. It is illustrative of change—and of a unifying (some might say awakening) human being. This explorer is one who has ventured beyond cultural and ethnocentric boundaries, and has begun to gain new and liberating insights into the similar nature of their own lives and the lives of others. After my experience in India, I personally felt that *Waking Up In Dharamsala* is a microcosm of change, unification and development of the human being; a development at a deeper and broader level than ever before. It is my belief that as the many factors of Post-Modern Global living continue to increase, humans will be led to recognize both their unity and their spiritual composition. At first glance, and to the scientific materialists previously discussed, this is hog wash. But based on those I encountered in India, my personal conviction is that this case has been strengthened.

What I hope can be considered (after a little contemplation) is the large scale insight this topic depicts. None of these participants were forced to travel to such an experience. It was agreed by nearly all I encountered, that what was presented was not a specific religious dogma, but rather a cross-cultural insight into the human experience as presented in a Buddhist context; an insight into how we ultimately are responsible for and capable of living authentically happy, positive and fruitful lives—no matter what our current state. Based on the possibility that most of those encountered will not fully dedicate their lives to the tenets they learned while in India, some may feel the need to judge such occurrences as nothing more than a fleeting 'experience'. But I would argue that these increasing 'experiences' are the illustrations of a visible, growing coherence among humans.

WORKS CITED

Books

Das, Lama Surya. *Awakening The Buddha Within: Tibetan Wisdom For The Western World*. New York, Broadway, 1997.

Heehs, Peter. *Sri Aurobindo: A Brief Biography*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1989.

His Holiness The Dalai Lama. *The Dalai Lama's Little Book of Wisdom*. Harper Collins, India, 2003.

Klieger, P. Christaan. *Tibet-O-Rama*. Green Arrow Press, San Francisco, 2002.

Lopez Jr., Donald S.. *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism And The West*. University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Tomlinson, John. *Globalization And Culture*. Oxford, UK, Polity, 1999.

Magazines

Cohen, Andrew. "The Guru and The Pandit: Breaking The Rules". In *What Is Enlightenment*, Vol. 22, Fall/Winter, 2002, pp. 39-49.

Iyer, Pico. "The Last Refuge". In *Condé Nast Traveler*. November 2003, p. 270.

O' Connor, Maura R.. "The Vanguard Generation". In *What Is Enlightenment*. Vol. 25, May-July, 2004. Pp. 106.

Stoller, Paul. "Back To The Ethnographic Future". In *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Vol. 28, December 1999. pp. 698-704.

Turner, Aaron. "Embodied Ethnography. Doing Culture". In *Social Anthropology*, 8, 1, 2000, pp. 51-60.

Internet

Wallace, Allan. "The Taboo Of Subjectivity". In *Integral Naked.org* (the "Featured Guests" Section). February, 2005.