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Authenticity Without Belief in Western Tibetan Buddhist Practice

Hannah Sharp-Wang

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Authenticity Without Belief in Western Tibetan Buddhist Practice

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This thesis is a study of Tibetan Buddhism as practiced by adult converts in Utah. Semiotic ideology is a thread throughout the paper that functions as an explanatory mechanism for describing the ontological variations between beginning and seasoned practitioners. I show examples of clashing semiotic ideologies that demonstrate differing assumptions in understanding of how the world operates. In Chapter 2, I explore the concept of interiority and the taken for granted assumptions of religiosity in the West. The tensions introduced in Chapter 2 are addressed in Chapter 3, which explores how practitioners resolve concerns about authenticity through reliance on their religious lineage. While most practitioners openly recognize that there is a lack of sameness between practicing Tibetan Buddhism in the US and Tibet, seasoned practitioners are more able to recognize how deeply rooted differences, which I have identified as semiotic ideologies of the West and Christianity, specifically those concerning the self and personhood, are perseverant even after conversion.

Keywords: semiotic ideology, religion, interiority, authenticity, lineage, Tibetan Buddhism, Utah

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1 | Introduction

My first introduction to Tibetan Buddhism as practiced by adult converts who were raised in the US¹ was at a weekly Puja service on a Sunday morning in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than attend the *gonpa*², or temple, located in Salt Lake City, Utah, I logged into Zoom and followed the practice from my own living room. There were a couple dozen other attendees, almost all of them white, all calling in from their own homes. However, I barely saw these people as most of the screen time was occupied by the teacher and leader, who goes by the title Rinpoche.

The best way to describe Rinpoche is jovial. Even when discussing topics like death, racism, and the pandemic, he had a light, airy tone and often giggled at his own jokes. His giggling was not irreverence or mockery, but rather a kind of acceptance that that is the way things are right now. Rinpoche smiled constantly and was so animated when he spoke that I was shocked by how still he became during meditation. At one point, I even thought my screen was buffering. His voice was light, yet deep and mesmerizing. He was bald and dressed in orange and maroon robes that exposed his muscular left arm. Another practitioner once told me that Rinpoche was in his mid 70s. I was surprised because his youthfulness made him seem much younger. He was seated on the floor in front of a short table that held an assortment of books, bells, prayer wheels, and other objects that I could not identify. Directly in front of him were sheets of white paper which he often referred to as he spoke. Hanging behind him were large

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all references to Utah practitioners or practitioners in Utah refer to those who are non-Tibetan adult converts to Buddhism, as this is the make-up of individuals in the groups with whom I conducted my fieldwork.

² While the Tibetan word “དགོན་པ།” is usually Romanized as “*gompa*,” I use “*gonpa*,” which is a simplification of “*gönpa*” because that is the romanization used on this group’s website.

thankas in colorful reds, blues, yellows, and greens. After this first visit, I continued attending practices virtually in Salt Lake City for the next eight months.

At the same time, I also attended virtual practices hosted by an affiliated *sangha*, or congregation, in St. George, Utah. I finally met the teacher of this group, Lhamo, in person in the summer of 2021. Lhamo is in her 70s and has wispy blond hair that she ties back during practice. Like Rinpoche, she wears maroon and orange robes. Her voice is delicate and soft, and always captures the attention of those she is teaching. Lhamo has been practicing Buddhism for decades and often uses her experiences as a retired clinical psychologist in her teaching. Lhamo is a student of Rinpoche and his lineage; therefore, her students in St. George are connected to the same lineage of Rinpoche and other practitioners in Salt Lake City. Some practitioners from St. George regularly attend online meetings hosted by the Salt Lake City *gonpa* as well.

On a hot July morning, I sat on a wooden chair facing the desk that I had seen nearly a hundred times on the screen but never in person. Sunshine flowed into the room behind me illuminating Lhamo's face as she looked at me through her wire glasses. I told her that in my interviews with other practitioners, we had discussed authenticity. Lhamo, herself not having been raised practicing Tibetan Buddhism, replied, "Oh yes," and assured me that authenticity is indeed an important topic. She nodded as she spoke and said that for this group in Utah, authenticity is dependent on lineage. Lineage in Tibetan Buddhism is the succession of teachers and authority from the historical Buddha to contemporary leaders. A painting of Lhamo's lineage, which was passed down to her from Tibetan masters, hung behind her head as she explained, "You break away from the lineage and [you] run the risk that your ego is the one doing the teaching."

When I first set out on my eight-months of field work to do research on Buddhism, I had high hopes for getting past what David Gellner (1990) identified in the study of Buddhism as the problem of “immediately becoming embroiled in issues of identity and authenticity” (109). Eager and naïve, I found myself resisting conversations about authenticity, even when they naturally arose during interviews and observations. However, I eventually realized that authenticity is an important concept that Utah practitioners deal with. As Lhamo explained, recognizing and honoring the lineage is how one practices authentically. Rather than just being a way to connect or associate with the exoticness of Tibet and Buddhism, establishing a lineage connection is an act of humility for practitioners in Utah.

In the first part of this paper, I explore the tensions of Western and Christian influences on Tibetan Buddhism in Utah for those raised in a Western philosophical environment that is influenced by Judeo-Christian traditions. I demonstrate how those who have practiced longer and deeper are able to transcend this influence, despite some carry over, even for more advanced practitioners. I argue that those who have practiced longer and deeper, like Lhamo and Rinpoche, demonstrate and experience an understanding that is different from more beginning practitioners and perhaps more in line with practitioners in Tibet, Nepal, and India. In the second part of this paper, I explore the concept of authenticity: both its history in anthropological discourse and how practitioners in Utah reconcile the obvious and deeper differences that were discussed in Chapter 2. I then introduce the concept of lineage and ultimately argue that the concept of lineage is used to assert authenticity.

Throughout this paper I reference Tibetan Buddhism in its original homeland. Since *Tibetan* Buddhism indexes a relationship with Tibet, throughout this analysis I will generally refer to “Tibet” as the origin of original Tibetan Buddhism. This decision is in accordance with

the pattern of practitioners who regularly referred back to their Tibetan teachers living in Tibetan communities. However, at the same time, these Tibetan teachers live in Tibetan communities in Nepal, so often the references to how Tibetans practice are references to Tibetan people and traditions that may or may not be currently located in the area of land that is/was understood as Tibet. This decision is also to reflect the need that practitioners in Utah have to account for authenticity because they practice *Tibetan* Buddhism and should therefore be somewhat responsible to being similar to Tibet (as opposed to Nepal). As I discuss later, the association of “real” Tibetan Buddhism with Tibet proper is caught up in current social and political discourse and therefore feeds into the concerns about authenticity that practitioners in Utah face.

Methods: Practice and Practitioners

Tibetan Buddhism, or Vajrayana, is one of the three main branches of Buddhism along with Mahayana and Theravada. Lama, the third teacher featured in this research, described the relationship and difference between the three branches as follows: in Theravada, you are a compassionate but solitary seeker; in Mahayana, you work for the benefit of the self and others; and in Vajrayana, only after you have worked for everyone else do you partake in full enlightenment. The four “immeasurables” (or basic principles) of Tibetan Buddhism are loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

While *Tibetan* Buddhism originated in Tibet following the introduction of Buddhism from India by Guru Rinpoche in the 700s CE, the Dalai Lama, the reincarnation of Chenrezig – the Buddha of Compassion and the face of Tibetan Buddhism, fled to India in 1959 to establish his government in exile. He now functions both as a religious and political leader. Other Tibetan communities were established in India and Nepal. Eventually, refugees settled across the globe, thus introducing Tibetan Buddhism to the world. Tibetan Buddhism became especially popular

in the United States (Payne 2015). American practice typically includes mantra recitation, prayers, meditation, visualization, and other tantric rituals. However, it tends to lack other aspects of “traditional” Tibetan Buddhism, such as debate, discipline, monasticism, and longer time to receive empowerments (Knauft 2019).

The setting of this research is important to the analysis. Unlike surrounding states like Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico, Buddhism has not enjoyed the same popularity in Utah. J.S. Williams and J.B. Wright (2015) found that while there are 120 Buddhist congregations in Arizona, there are only 26 in Utah. They argue that this is because of the prevalence of Christianity and Mormonism (56% of the population identifies as Mormon, or more technically as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), political conservatism, and lower educational attainment (Williams and Wright 2015). While most of the people I met did not personally have Mormon backgrounds (many of them reported being Catholic before becoming Buddhist), all of them had Mormon family members, friends, and/or colleagues. I therefore cannot ignore the impact of Mormonism on life in Utah, nor my own perspectives and influence as an outsider anthropologist who identifies with the mainstream religion of the area. Throughout my research I tried to remain reflexive and recognize how my own upbringing in a Judeo-Christian-influenced environment informs my perspectives.

For eight months during the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted research with two related communities of practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism in the Western American state of Utah, one in Salt Lake City, and the other in St. George. Since this research took place during the global COVID-19 pandemic, proper safety precautions were taken, including mainly conducting fieldwork virtually and only meeting in person once all parties were vaccinated. I attended practices and classes held by these groups four times a week via an online video chat service,

Zoom. My interviews with teachers and practitioners were also conducted remotely. While the logistics of remote field work were initially inconvenient, it provided me the unique opportunity to “visit” both communities simultaneously³ and witness how practices continued during the pandemic.

The *gonpa* in Salt Lake City is the only Tibetan Buddhist temple in Utah, though it is not the only community. It is of the Nyingma tradition, which while being the oldest of the four main branches of Tibetan Buddhism,⁴ has one of the smallest followings in the United States (Griffiths 1994, 192). However, many are attracted to this branch because of its tradition of semi-monasticism (Lavine 1998, 102). Lamas in the Nyingma tradition are rarely celibate monks. They are often married with children and can even have other occupations. The three teachers featured in this study, Rinpoche, Lhamo, and Lama,⁵ are semi-monastics and have jobs and families in addition to their volunteer leadership roles. Most practitioners were born and raised in the US and became Buddhist as adults.

The leader of the *gonpa*, Rinpoche, was born in the American South and discovered Buddhism as a teenager. He has studied and practiced Buddhism for over 45 years, was ordained as Lama in the 1990s, and was given the title of Rinpoche in the 2010s. Lama, a mechanic by day, is Rinpoche’s second in command at the *gonpa*. Both regularly teach classes and practices. Due to COVID-19, all events were being held via online video calls.

At the first Puja I attended I was totally lost, but I quickly learned that practices hosted by this group often followed the same loose pattern. Rinpoche, or whichever teacher was in charge, welcomed practitioners and then for the next couple of hours interspersed teachings and lecture

³ There are roughly 300 miles between the two communities.

⁴ The other three traditions are Gelugpa, Sakyapa, and Kagyupa (Lavine 1998).

⁵ All names are pseudonyms. The teachers listed here are only referred to by their titles so as to maintain anonymity without losing sense of their positions.

with guided meditation and tantric practices. The teachings covered a variety of subjects including about Buddhism (e.g., theology, how-to's of tantric practice, history) and application to current events (e.g., COVID-19, the Black Lives Matter movement, drought). Practitioners listened intently to these lectures (with their cameras on) and followed along to the guided meditations. Depending on their level, practitioners wore white or maroon and orange robes. At the end of the entire practice there was time for questions and comments, but during the actual practice only the teacher would speak. The *gonpa* followed a general schedule of practices each week, and I was able to attend Puja (Sundays) and the Introduction to Buddhism class (Wednesdays). The introduction class was a bit different because it was aimed at novice practitioners, but even then, the class generally followed the same pattern: teaching about the specifics of Tibetan Buddhism, guided tantric practice, and then questions and comments. In the introduction class, we were also taught how to do daily at-home practices; after completing the class, I was also allowed to attend Ngondro Practice (Thursdays). Ngondro is a beginning practice that helps one prepare to take refuge, or officially become Buddhist.

The *sangha* in southern Utah was founded in 2017 by Lhamo, under the guidance of Rinpoche. While Lhamo leads most of the practices and serves as the head of the *sangha*, Rinpoche is the main leader. Rinpoche and Lama usually visit southern Utah twice a year to lead meditation retreats. Before the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, practices were held in a rented studio. Lhamo and other practitioners have remarked on the amazing success of shifting to online practices. It is much easier for Lhamo to teach from her private meditation room and meeting virtually allows everyone to be comfortable and to hear better as all of the practitioners are elderly. Practices with the *sangha* in St. George are shortened, usually lasting one hour, whereas those at the *gonpa* in Salt Lake City last two.

Since I was new to Tibetan Buddhism, I only attended those practices⁶ which I was authorized to attend, including Puja taught by Rinpoche, the introduction to Buddhism class, taught by Lama, and Green Tara Practice and Awakened Mornings taught by Lhamo. After graduating from the introduction class, I was also able to attend the Ngondro Practice, which was taught by either Lama or Rinpoche. In addition to attending practices, I also learned daily at-home practices, completed homework for the introductory class, and interviewed teachers and practitioners. While I have learned a lot about Buddhist theology and practices, I have also realized that my understanding of Buddhism is like dipping one toe into the ocean – though I have been told that recognizing my ignorance is, in itself, “wisdom.” Given my rather superficial understanding and brief experience with Buddhist theology, I will not attempt to provide a detailed ethnographic description of Tibetan Buddhism. Instead, this work is an attempt to describe what it is like to be a beginner Tibetan Buddhist practitioner in Utah. I provide examples of how the world of the advanced practitioner varies from the novice experience. As I show, more advanced practitioners experience a shift in ontological grounding which can be seen in examples of clashing semiotic ideologies.

Semiotic Ideology

Throughout this paper I use semiotic ideology as an explanatory mechanism for understanding how and why practitioners who are more entrenched in Tibetan Buddhism shift their ontological understanding of the world. Semiotic ideology, according to Webb Keane (2018), “refers to people’s underlying assumptions about what signs are, what functions signs do

⁶ Throughout this analysis I use the word “practice” in a few different ways, but in accordance with the use of this word by Tibetan Buddhist practitioners in Utah. In a broader sense, “practice” means the general doing of Buddhism, e.g., when Rinpoche taught, “This is how we practice—not just sitting, but transforming ourselves, communities, societies, the planet.” In another sense, “practice” is the group gatherings that are regularly held where practitioners get together to “practice”—this third sense of practice refers to doing the specific exercises (e.g., meditation, prayer, prostration, tantric rituals, etc.) that are done to practice (in the first sense) Buddhism.

or do not serve, and what consequences they might or might not produce” (65). In an earlier article, Keane (2003) expanded, “basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world. It determines, for instance, what people will consider the role that intentions play in signification to be, what kinds of possible agent (humans only? Animals? Spirits?) exist to which acts of signification might be imputed, whether signs are arbitrary or necessarily linked to their objects, and so forth” (419).

Keane (2018) uses the example of the interpretation of exhumed saints by Bolsheviks and Orthodox Christians following the Russian revolution to explore how signs (in this case the signs are the exhumed and decaying bodies of deceased saints) are interpreted and what assumptions that interpretation entails. According to Keane, “semiotic ideology therefore links the ways people makes sense of their experiences to their fundamental presuppositions about what kinds of beings animate the world” (66). To the Bolsheviks, decaying corpses indexed mortality and the illusion of sanctity, but to the Orthodox Christians, “the proof of relics was the performance of miracles, not corporeal incorruptibility” (81). In other words, the same sign (decayed bodies) was interpreted very differently according to each group and their assumptions and interpretations. Keane concludes, “how they take that corpse to signify, what can or should follow from that, and the ethical and political consequences are all guided by their respective semiotic ideologies” (82).

In the examples presented in the rest of this paper, Tibetan Buddhism practitioners in Utah experience different semiotic ideological understandings of various signs. Specifically, the sign of the self, or personhood, is a repeated sign in which, “differences among semiotic ideologies can also be so striking that they suggest quite dramatic contrasts between possible world views” (Keane 2018, 66). The examples show how those who have practiced longer and

deeper do not just understand what Buddhism teaches about self, but actually experience the self differently. In contrast, as I discuss in the next section, many of the newer practitioners are making sense of Buddhism through Christian idioms of belief and interiority. Consequentially, there is a disconnect between them and their teachers. As Keane (2018) explains, “one key symptom of ontological disjuncture is the clash of semiotic ideologies” (81).

2 | **Western (Christian) Influence in American Tibetan Buddhism**

How do people who were conditioned to experience religion in terms of belief and interiority become part of a religion which does not entail the same assumptions? Christianity identifies religious justification or conviction with internal feelings and belief. On the flip side, as I explore in this section, in Tibet, religion is not necessarily as interior, nor experienced in the same way. Getting past the problematic assumptions of interiority is a difficult task, especially since I propose an analysis of a non-Western religion. Of course, while the religion is non-Western, the people are – and therein lies the intrigue of this analysis. Tibetan Buddhism practitioners in Utah are kind of in-between. Almost like a scale of “getting it,” those who are more entrenched in practice are on one end and newer practitioners on the other end. In this section, I explore interiority as an element of Christianity and then show how such elements of Christianity persevere in the practice of Tibetan Buddhists in Utah.

Interiority: Sincerity of Belief

While the word belief, and its verb form believe, can be used in multiple contexts (e.g., I believe it will rain today, I believe she is telling the truth, I believe in God), in a religious sense, belief is commonly understood to mean, “referring to a mental state or conviction in which a doctrine or proposition concerning one's world-view is affirmed as true rather than false” (Tooker 1992, 802).

Tanya Luhrmann (2012), in referencing Cantwell Smith, says, “belief...is simply irrelevant to the way most human beings over the course of human history have engaged with the divine” (319). Julia Cassaniti (2012) reports that during her fieldwork with Buddhists in Thailand she was told, “I’m Buddhist, I practice Buddhism, but it’s just not relevant whether I ‘believe in’

the Buddha,” “belief just isn’t important,” or “as for the Buddha or the Buddha’s teachings, it’s not an issue of belief” (300). Do the practitioners in Utah *believe* in the Buddha? I never heard someone say, “I believe in the Buddha,” like someone would say “I believe in God.” However, sentiments of belief were occasionally expressed in other ways, like saying one believes in the existence of the six realms,⁷ or when matter-of-factly describing how everything in life is karmically interconnected.

Luhrmann (2012), again referencing Smith, explains, “We assume that belief is central because we assume that the person who is religious—we call that person a believer—must assent to a proposition, that divinity is real” (319). According to Deborah Tooker (1992), this definition of belief as a mental state presupposes the natural interiority of religion (802). Assumptions of interiority then lead to false assumptions about the religious, or what she calls the “relationship to tradition,” life of people (803). Tooker challenges this word and its seemingly natural connection to religion in the Western anthropological study of religion. She explains,

There is a common underlying assumption, historically specific to Western thought and discourse—namely the assumption of an idiom of interiorization for people’s ‘relationship to tradition’—in all the various anthropological approaches to the concept of religious ‘belief’. This hidden assumption can best be understood as part of a larger Western cultural discourse which interiorizes ethno-religious identity, and which can be contrasted with non-Western cultural discourses which do not rely on such notions of interiority.

(801)

⁷ The six realms in Buddhism are gods, demi-gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hells. During our lesson about these realms Lama explained “Having a good day? God realm. Bad day at work? Hell realm. So you can experience each realm in one day in the form we are at now ... I believe they all exist actually, but I think they are in our lives too.” Lama expressed belief in the existence of six separate places where different types of beings exist in addition to an analogous interpretation of the six realms, where each represents different moods or feelings that one experiences in this life.

Even though Tibetan Buddhism does not rely on belief in the same way as Christianity, tantric practices do require significant mental and psychological effort (Knauff 2019). However, the mind work to do these practices is not about belief but instead about visualization. When I asked Lama if the deities that we see in our minds during visualization are real or not he responded, “All the deities and everything is as real as you want it to be, even those emanated from someone's mind. So, the idea is not, if in fact they're 100% real or not. What effect are they having on you in doing the practice?”

For these Tibetan Buddhist practitioners in Utah there seems to be a tension between wanting to “believe” or have a kind of internal mental/psychological experience and recognizing that Tibetan Buddhism is not necessarily experienced the same way. The Judeo-Christian and Western notion of belief requires a self that has internal conviction of a truth or reality. However, the tension of belief in Tibetan Buddhism stems from the idea that the self does not in fact exist: “The Dharma’s view of the self is as evolved and radical as Copernicus’ view of the universe: The self, as we know it, doesn’t really exist” (Lama Surya Das 1997, 116). Rather, “according to [the teaching of *anatta*, or egolessness, or “no-self,] we are each compromised of form, feelings, perceptions, in moment... There is no fixed, eternal *I*, or ego” (118). Lama taught this concept to his students in the introduction course:

So homework for this week is to find out where this ‘I’ is that is so precious. As you sit in your cushion think, ‘is ‘I’ in my toe? my knee? my chest?’ ... There is no right or wrong answer. But once you discover, you realize there is no ‘I’ to discover. This is where Buddhism gets interesting ... You take apart your ego. Take apart your version of self. There is no self unto itself. It is an effect of a group of aggregates. If the self existed in its

own, we would all be the same and this is empty. The real form of emptiness is something that does not exist on its own.

In contrast, belief is an exceptionally potent concept in Utah. Central to the Western semiotic ideology of belief is an authentic or sincere self.

During my first in-person visit with Lhamo, she gifted me a prayer bracelet and blessed me and the bracelet. Knowing my own religious background, she told me about a time when she received a blessing from a Mormon leader to help her finish writing her dissertation. She smiled as she commented on how she could now return the favor by blessing another Mormon person as they finished writing-up graduate research. Later, I showed my family the bracelet and told them about Lhamo's experience receiving a blessing from a Mormon leader several decades ago. In response, they smiled at the story and asked if she *believed* that the blessing helped her. In contrast, Lhamo did not ask if I believed that her blessing and the bracelet would help me. Rather, she gave them to me and instructed me to repeat a specific mantra when I see the bracelet. This is not to say that Lhamo did not have any internal convictions about whether or not the bracelet and blessing would help me.

Lhamo rarely (if ever) phrased her conviction or understanding in terms of belief. Rather, her attitude was more in line with the idea of faith in Tibetan Buddhism. In Western Christianity, faith and belief tend to go hand in hand. In Utah Mormonism, "Faith is to hope for things which are not seen, but which are true (Heb. 11:1; Alma 32:21), and must be centered in Jesus Christ in order to produce salvation" ("Faith" 2022). Faith is also connected to belief: "The Articles of Faith," are the basic tenets of Mormon theology, of which each of the 13 statements begins with the phrase, "We believe..." In the Nyingma sect of Tibetan Buddhism, "faith opens the gateway to taking refuge" (Rinpoche 1998, 171). Faith means "accepting what is there" or "what has been

taught” and the idea of emptiness is based on faith. A closer translation of the Tibetan word, “དད་པ་གསུམ་” is trust or confidence.

While these understandings of faith are similar, there are distinct differences. Notably, faith in Christianity ultimately leads to believing in Jesus Christ in order to produce salvation, whereas in Tibetan Buddhism, faith is confidence and acceptance and leads to emptiness. It is emptiness that leads to enlightenment. Lhamo taught this kind of faith to her students, “If we realize that whatever happens is an illusion, it loses its power over us and we won’t have as much suffering. What does this look like in our life? If something bad happens you step back and have less suffering.” Lama explained this as well,

In fact, all of our senses are really nothing more than chemicals [and] chemical reactions.

So, this is all just a hallucination right? No, it's not. But the idea is eventually you start getting into what is emptiness. How does that relate to your life? How does that relate to everything? It's empty...Is it real? Yes, but it's empty. Is it solid? Yes, but it is empty.

Emptiness is not without form and form is not without emptiness.

Getting past Western ideas of self and the implications of such semiotic ideologies is not easy for practitioners. As the following example illustrates, newer practitioners often still articulate their conviction in more Western and Christian ways. In terms of semiotic ideology, this articulation is indexical of the different ontological standings of newer and more seasoned practitioners.

Bearing Testimony

During a practice in St. George, one woman, a relatively newer practitioner said, “I just want to bear testimony on the power of prayer. My sister went back to work today and survived COVID. And you remember praying for my son who was diagnosed and is now much better.” If I closed my eyes, I would have thought that this sentence was being spoken at a Christian

church. To those familiar with Mormonism, this is a comment one would regularly hear at a Sunday service (Knowlton 1991), though this woman identified as Catholic before taking refuge to become Buddhist. She laughed a little, recognizing the overtly Christian tone of her comments, but she continued, seemingly unaware of any other way to express how she felt.

This idea of bearing testimony or witness is a common theme in Christianity and again indexes Christian semiotic ideologies of personhood. In his essay about sincerity and missionary work, Keane (1997) explains, “Missionization demands an enormous amount of talk, as preachers, converts, and the unconverted are compelled to explain themselves to others, to explain others to themselves, and even to explain themselves to themselves” (677). For this woman, even though she was speaking of Buddhist prayer, she was doing so in the way described by Keane that indexes assumptions that stem from a Christian understanding of personhood – feeling the need to offer explanation of interiorized belief and assuming rational, autonomous, authentic persons (see also Mafra 2011).

Compared with the earlier example of Lhamo’s blessing and bracelet, it is clear how practitioners at different levels of experience and depth try to reconcile semiotic ideologies that they are used to with the ways they are now being taught to think. This practitioner could tell that she was expressing herself in a very Christian-way, and yet she continued because it was the only way to express herself. In a Christian semiotic ideological way of doing religion, expressing belief through such speech acts such as bearing testimony index that one is a real or sincere practitioner.

Additional Examples of Christian Influence

In addition to the perseverance of interiority of religious experience, I will also demonstrate how other elements of Christianity seep into Tibetan Buddhism in Utah. The

following two examples further illustrate how Christian and Western semiotic ideologies permeate the practice of practitioners in Utah. Like the above examples, we can see how long-time practitioners may have more “authentic”⁸ ways of doing and understanding. However, as this first example illustrates, even more seasoned practitioners may use more Western ways of conceptualizing their practice.

(Non) Membership and Participation

When I began my research, I was welcome to attend and participate in introductory practices. As I describe in Chapter 3, I was also given all transmissions (permission to perform specific mantras, practices, prayers, etc.)⁹ that were available to new students interested in Buddhism. After completing the introductory class, Lama informed the students that it was time to start thinking seriously about whether we wanted to commit or quit. Committing would require continued practice and dedication to prepare for taking refuge and would allow access more advanced practices. Even though I was not planning to take refuge, I was allowed to attend the next level practice with my classmates who were planning and preparing to commit themselves. However, this is the most advanced practice that I was able to attend. As such, throughout my fieldwork, I was limited in my observations because I was not able to attend practices which I was not prepared for or committed to. In other words, I was not really a Buddhist.

For Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, the taking refuge ceremony is the process whereby one officially becomes a Buddhist. However, as Martin Mills (2003) documents, membership is a non-concept and even taking refuge is treated differently by ethnic Tibetan Buddhists in India.

⁸ See Chapter 3 for discussion of “authentic.”

⁹ This is not to say that I had free range of all Buddhist practices. I was not permitted to attend practices without first being given authority and empowerment to practice through transmission. And there are many practices which were not available to me at all as I had not taken refuge, or officially committed to Buddhism.

Lhamo too recognized this difference when describing how taking refuge works: “It’s really supposed to be the first act of a Buddhist here, you know where it’s not engrained in our culture.” She further explained, “You’re not a Buddhist till you do it. You’re not married until you get married.” While I did not have the opportunity to attend a taking refuge ceremony during my fieldwork, Lhamo described the process to me:

After you find a teacher, you need to prepare for taking refuge and then ask permission. This is one of the purposes of the Introduction to Buddhism class in which I was enrolled. In this class, Lama taught us the basic tenets of Tibetan Buddhism, beginning practices, and the specific practices that need to be completed before we are given permission to take refuge. We also learned about the vows, which include 1) refrain from killing, 2) refrain from stealing, 3) refrain from false speech, 4) refrain from sexual misconduct, and 5) refrain from using intoxicants. According to Lhamo, the ceremony itself includes the taking of vows and a symbolic transformation that is completed by changing clothing, cutting hair, and giving a new name, which are all rituals that are iconic of the Shakyamuni Buddha’s own journey to enlightenment and transformation. Family and friends can attend the ceremony and afterwards there is usually a short reception with refreshments.

On one occasion I asked Lama if anyone can be “kicked out” or “excommunicated” from Tibetan Buddhism. He responded that there was not much one could do for that to happen except, “obviously, joining another church is one of them, things like that.” Lama’s response reflects the typical Western and modernist ideas about personhood. That is, a person is autonomous and sincere (Keane 2002), therefore membership in one church “obviously” means non membership in all others. The assumptions here are a consequence of Western individualism and “a perception of the universality of the self as a separate and autonomous entity” (117). To

contrast, anthropologists including Mills (2003) and Geoffrey Samuel (1993) have described the continued practice of interacting both with local entities and Buddhist deities by Tibetans in India and the continued simultaneous practice of Bon (indigenous Tibetan religion) and Buddhism. Similarly, Gananath Obeyesekere (2014) also describes Sri Lankan habits of attending Buddhist, Hindi, and Christian services and temples. Beatrice Diamond Miller (1993), in her article entitled, “Is there Tibetan Culture(s) without Tibetan Buddhism?” describes some interlocutors who were critical of religious leaders. Of them, she says, “if Buddhism had had any provisions for excommunicating heretics some of my sources probably would have suffered such a fate” (226).

While the classification of Tibetan Buddhism as a religion or church may not always be appropriate,¹⁰ it is clear that some practitioners in Utah considered it as such—“joining *another* church.” In contrast to Mills’ (2003) description of Tibetan Buddhism in India, church membership has become an important aspect of religion in America. In Utah specifically, asking about someone’s “membership” (usually in relation to the Mormon church) is ever present (Taylor 1999). Lhamo, aware of the differences in ideas about membership between Utah and Tibet, explained that these differences in understanding and practice are a consequence of living in Utah and not Tibet. In Tibet (or in communities in Nepal and India) Buddhism is such an inherent part of everyday life (e.g., in food, architecture, living arrangements, education, etc.), that there is not much distinction between religious and secular life. When Mills (2003) set out on his fieldwork with Tibetan communities in northern India, he did not need to differentiate between studying Tibetan life and Tibetan Buddhism. In contrast, during my fieldwork, Buddhism was not engrained in the everyday lives of my interlocutors. It is therefore expected

¹⁰ See Pyysiäinen 2003, Southwold 1978, and Spiro 1966.

that they would bring Western and Christian semiotic ideologies, for example in the idea of Buddhism as a church and its adherents as members of a single faith tradition, to their practice.

Commenting on One's Body

This second example illustrates conflicting ideas concerning the self and personhood between newer and more advanced practitioners. During one practice with Lhamo, myself and about seven others were seated in our individual homes and looking at each other through our computer screens. As part of a lesson on how one ought to be learning Tibetan Buddhism, Lhamo casually mentioned that Rinpoche, who is her teacher, our grandfather teacher, and the overall leader of the Tibetan Buddhist communities I was working with in Utah, told her (at least twice) that she needed to lose weight. One of the benefits of virtual fieldwork is that I could easily witness other people's reactions. Some widened their eyes, others shook their heads, and a few dropped their jaws. All seemed shocked. Rinpoche is a leader and example that everyone admires. How could he say something so insensitive and maybe even a little sexist?

Lhamo expected this is how the class would react. She said, "None of you could experience what I have from a teacher. And I do that by choice. I know that for sensitive people there is a tendency to get out of there if it feels like a self-esteem threat rather than change." But to Lhamo, while being told she should lose weight may have been a bit jarring, this was not a personal insult. In her (and Rinpoche's) understanding and living of Buddhism, she cannot have this issue of self-esteem if in Buddhism there is no self. She further explained the purpose of sharing this experience, "Old baggage with authority figures comes out. Like the five-year-old saying 'you're not the boss of me.' But we all have that. Americans are very self-focused. This tendency to be into yourself is what Buddhism tries to get at."

Even though Lhamo and Rinpoche were both born and raised as non-Buddhist in the US, they have both practiced Buddhism extensively – Rinpoche so much so that according to Lhamo’s recounting of this experience, he does not even seem to realize that these comments could be considered offensive. Lhamo’s practice is deep enough that she understands Rinpoche, but also understands that her own students may not understand and could learn from this experience. Since Lhamo has a more advanced (in Buddhism) understanding of the self, she was not offended by Rinpoche’s comments. She also recognizes that her students likely are not able to understand the self in this way. Sharing such a shocking story helps the students better understand Buddhist semiotic ideology about self. On another occasion Lhamo expanded on what happens when students are not able to overcome their preexisting ideas about self:

I’ve never told anyone they need to leave the *sangha*, but I have told people they need to change and then it’s their choice...If you want to go deep you need to go into the self.

You need to get past negative thoughts like ‘Oh, I can’t do that oh I’ll never be Buddha.’

Those ideas have been inflated and if bolstered they are hard to overcome or

transform...It requires that you stop and remember that everything is empty.

In Lhamo’s comments from two separate practices, she shows her students why shifting ontological grounding for those raised in the West is fundamental to Buddhist practice.

3 | **Establishing Authenticity and Authority through Lineage**

In highlighting the perseverant influence of Western and Christian semiotic ideologies in novice Tibetan Buddhist practice in Utah, there are questions that the examples in the previous section bring to mind. Does authenticity of Tibetan Buddhism rely on its “sameness” to Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet? If so, how deep does this “sameness” need to go? Is it “good enough” that practitioners are doing the rituals, or is it a problem that they seem unable to let go of the self? In this section, I briefly describe the anthropological debates around authenticity. I then show how practitioners in Utah express concerns over authenticity and how they alleviate those concerns through citing the lineage and its authority.

Anthropology and Authenticity

In the context of Western practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism, I am referring to a kind of “authentic” that has been a staple of Western conceptions of self and identity for at least the last century or so: “from the beginning of the new left to present-day culture, this desire to be authentically one’s self has become commonplace... to be authentic is to be true to some higher standard; it is to be the genuine article” (Braman 2008, 3). Even earlier, the idea of authenticity began to develop along with Western individualism and in consequence of Enlightenment thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke.

In the 1980’s and 1990’s the discipline of anthropology concerned itself with addressing taken-for-granted terms such as “culture,” “tradition,” and “authentic.” There arose an interest in “the notion that culture forms that derive their authority from a perceived connection with the past are ‘invented,’ ‘imagined,’ ‘constructed,’ or ‘made,’” (Briggs 1996, 435). One of the most well-known examples of invented tradition is that of the Scottish kilts described by Hugh Trevor-

Roper in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's edited book, *The Invention of Tradition* (2012). Trevor-Roper (2012) argues that even though kilts now seem like a ubiquitous symbol of Scottish nationalism, their usage is in fact relatively recent and is even tied to the union with Britain.

The conversation around authenticity became especially potent amongst anthropologists of the Pacific (Briggs 1996; Friedman 1993). Allan Hanson (1989) explores the problem of inventing culture through the example of the Maori, which he claims is a "culture" that has been invented by anthropologists, colonizers, and even Maori themselves. He was met with much push back and criticism, especially from people in New Zealand who, regardless of Hanson's intention, understood his analysis as a way to discredit indigenous movements (Linnekin 1991). Others, such as Charles Briggs (1996), Marshall Sahlins (1999), and Jonathan Friedman (1993) point out the problems with this invention of culture approach, noting how it sidesteps the question of whether "invented" culture can still be "authentic." In responding to Jocelyn Linnekin's (1983) article about authenticity in contemporary Hawaiian identity politics, Friedman (1993) argues that even if "Hawaiian cultural identity is a product of active construction today...the import of elements is nothing new in the history of the world" (765). In other words, actively participating in the "invention of culture" does not invalidate claims to authenticity, but is instead, to use Edward Sapir's terminology, a "genuine" practice (Sapir 1924; Friedman 1993, 765). James Clifford's (1988) analysis of identity in Mashpee comes to a similar conclusion. That is, the Mashpee were unsuccessful at convincing a jury of the "authenticity of Indian culture in Mashpee," because the court was caught up in notions of culture wholeness and structure. They saw "tribal 'traditionalists' and 'moderns' as representing

aspects of a linear development, one looking back, the other forward” (338), not as representing potentially contemporaneous roles.

More recently, studies on how different groups of people make sense of and use authenticity in consumerism, tourism, and cultural heritage have continued in anthropology and sociology (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Ivory 2017; Macdonald 2013; Thurnell-Read, 2019; Zhang 2018). In the introduction to *Debating Authenticity* (2013), Thomas Fillitz and A. Jamie Saris trace the historical roots of authenticity in anthropology. They point out the early Western social scientific work of trying to understand external representations of internal processes and discuss the debates around authenticity in ethnographic writing and representations. The contributors to this edited work go on to analyze authenticity in a variety of contexts including morally, economically, politically, and visually. They explore how authenticity is produced, performed, constructed, and dismissed (Douglas-Jones, 2015).

While the history of authenticity as a concept of study is important to the context of this paper, especially given the following discussion of the role of the Dalai Lama in determining “authentic” Tibetan Buddhism, it is also important to note that I am not saying that the practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism with whom I interacted, nor the general population, have any idea or care about the baggage anthropologists have bestowed upon the word “authentic” (Friedman 1993, 761). Rather, it is important to point out how the obsession with authenticity as a theoretical construct has led anthropologists to potentially overlook how the word still carries significant meaning for the people that we interact with (hence the backlash that Hanson experienced when he argued that Maori culture was invented).

The Dalai Lama and Authentic Tibetan Buddhism

In the context of this research, for practitioners in Tibet and those exiled around the world, concerns about authenticity stem from the Tibetan refugee narrative, “which suggests that the ‘real’ Tibet ceased to exist after 1959 and that the recuperation of ‘authentic’ Tibet has since been presided over by the His Holiness, the Dalai Lama” (Harris 2012, 10). The Dalai Lama is probably the most famous and world-recognized contemporary Buddhist figure. He is the symbol of Tibetan Buddhism and the political cause of Tibetans in exile. To many Americans he represents “nonviolence, peace, and ‘universal compassion’” (Lempert 2012, 3) and is “a chief architect and champion of a kind of ‘modern Buddhism’” (3).

The first Dalai Lama was recognized by the Gelug sect in the early 1400s. During this time of political turmoil due to invasion of Mongols as the Yuan Dynasty (which covered most areas of present-day Mongolia and China) and religious differentiation between sects, the Gelug sect gradually gained power over other Buddhist sects in Tibet. In 1642, Gusri Khan, Mongol prince of the Khoshut Khanate (Tibet), officially conferred the fifth Dalai Lama supreme political and spiritual authority over Tibet. At the same time, Tibetans themselves were already consolidating religious and political supremacy upon the figure of the Dalai Lama. While there have been other important political and religious offices since then, the Dalai Lama has remained the most important religious and political figure for Tibetans (Nakane 1978).

As Michael Lempert (2012) points out, “modern Buddhism” promoted by the Dalai Lama and the Gelug sect¹¹ specifically seeks to distance itself from “unmodern,” “undemocratic” practices in “traditional” Tibetan Buddhism, such as traditional debate and corporal punishment,

¹¹ Even though the *gonpa* in central Utah is of the Nyingma tradition, practitioners still regularly drew on the teachings of the Dalai Lama and even from prominent figures in other types of Buddhism, for example Vietnamese Zen Buddhist, Thich Nhat Hanh.

so that it can more easily appeal to Western audiences (see also Knauft 2019).¹² Recalling the discussion on the invention of culture, in some ways this “modern Buddhism” could be considered “inventive.” Jean Jackson (1989) warns, “When we do speak of people as political actors who are changing culture, we run the risk of seeming to speak of them in negative terms, the implication being that the culture resulting from these operations is not really authentic” (127). However, for many Tibetan Buddhist practitioners (see Joffe 2015 for a counter example) it is the exact opposite case. The Dalai Lama is so representative of Tibetan Buddhism that for the practitioners in Utah he becomes the epitome of authentic practice.

Due to this historical, social, and political context, questions of authenticity are particularly salient in Tibetan Buddhism. Big picture questions about Tibetan Buddhism like, “Who will be the next *real* Dalai Lama?” or “Who has the *real* authority to lead Tibetan Buddhists?” are prevalent in the media and scholarship on Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism, making international news with headlines like, “U.S., India Step Up Fight With China Over The Next Dalai Lama” (Sen 2021) or “When the Dalai Lama Dies, His Reincarnation Will Be A Religious Crisis. Here’s What Will Happen” (Westcott 2021). While these are interesting and timely questions that certainly invite discussion of what authorizes authenticity, they cannot be answered in the scope of this paper (nor do I imagine that they can ever be definitively answered). However, I bring them up because it is within this broader world context that we are exploring how Tibetan Buddhist practitioners in Utah think about authenticity and make sense of their practice.

¹² As Lempert (2012) argues, this modernist discourse also has political motivations. Messages of universal compassion geared toward Western audiences are “as reminiscent of Hume and Smith as of the historical Buddha, which, crucially, suggests that those who hear his message should come to Tibet’s aid, just as one should aid any human, or sentient beings, who suffer” (9).

As is assumed in the headlines above, if the Dalai Lama is the figure of Tibetan Buddhism, then are those who do not practice according to his teachings (for example some in Tibet or his critics in India) not practicing authentic Buddhism? The question becomes even more complicated when we consider the differences and relationships between authenticity, authority, and sameness. Even though the first part of this paper has demonstrated how Tibetan Buddhism maintains substantial Christian influence in Utah, as I explore below, for Western Utah practitioners, authenticity is established through some sameness with practices in Nepal. By sameness, I refer to a correlation with more visible and tangible elements of Tibetan Buddhism such as language, dress, content of practice, etc. However, when that sameness cannot be maintained, authenticity hinges on a lineage relationship with teachers in Nepal.

Can You Really be a Tibetan Buddhist in Utah?

On the “About” section of the *gonpa*’s website it states, “With the intention to provide support to our teachers in Nepal, ... we honor their teachings here by educating and spreading authentic transmissions of Buddhism.” Practitioners in Utah, unless adorned in their red and orange robes, do not look like the Tibetan Buddhists from *Seven Years in Tibet*, and even then, they may come across as someone dressing up. Authenticity is important to Tibetan Buddhist practitioners in Utah precisely because they are in Utah, not Tibet. Many students told me that they were initially attracted to these specific Buddhist communities because they seemed the most authentic. When I first started this research, I was surprised that almost all of the practitioners in these groups were white Americans, and as far as I know were born and raised in the US. At the same time, at my first Puja practice (as documented in the introduction), I was intrigued by an “exoticness” of the practice that fit my imagined stereotype of what Tibetan Buddhism should look like. I was impressed by the regular usage of Tibetan ritual language and

physical objects during practice. Even Rinpoche's whimsical voice added to my expectation of some kind of mystical spirituality. Divorcing Tibetan Buddhism from my ethno-religious expectations, I began to understand how practitioners fulfilled the desire to be authentic. Through group practice with the bells (literally) and whistles of what one may see in Tibet and individual practice in front of at-home shrines, practitioners were doing Buddhism as best they could.

As I continued regular attendance at practices, the question of authenticity was repeatedly posed to me as I conducted my fieldwork. Friends and family regularly (and cynically) asked me if I thought these practitioners were "really Buddhist?" I think it was the fear of accidentally answering this question, and thereby getting "embroiled in issues of identity and authenticity" (Gellner 1990, 109) that made me initially anxious about considering authenticity as a topic of study. Recognizing that teachers and practitioners in Utah are aware that their practice is not identical to that of someone in Tibet, a skeptic may ask, "How can you really be a Tibetan Buddhist if you are changing things?" or "How can Tibetan Buddhism *here* be different from Tibetan Buddhism *there* but still be just as legitimate?" That is, the question of sameness arises. Given that "Tibetan" is in the name "Tibetan Buddhism" it was expected that practitioners would be thinking about how to be *Tibetan* Buddhist in Utah while not being in Tibet or Tibetan in Utah. Of course, these questions all presuppose that there does in fact exist a pure Tibetan Buddhism. However, just like any other religious tradition, there is variation across time and space. On an even broader scale, Buddhism itself originated in India and has taken on many forms as it was adopted across Asia. Even within Tibet, there are variations in practice depending on region and school.

When speaking of authentic, both for these practitioners and for the general population, there are at least a couple of ways to think about the original or real thing that is being compared to. Sometimes, we speak of authenticity as being corresponded with history, ethnicity, geography, or language. In other words, practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism in Utah are *authentic* if they are Tibetan, speak Tibetan, have Tibetan teachers, travel to Tibet, etc. Or they are *inauthentic* because they themselves are not Tibetan or perhaps lack in these other culturally corresponding categories. The second way we can think about authenticity is in something's correspondence or relationship to a cosmological truth or realness, or the efficacy of a practice. In this second sense, Tibetan Buddhism practitioners in Utah can understand themselves and their practice as authentic because they are true to the true nature of the universe. It is an understanding of authenticity that corresponds with cosmology as opposed to geography, history, language, etc. For practitioners in Utah, both of these ways of understanding authenticity are important.

Josh, a classmate from the introduction class, was initially skeptical when he began practicing with the *gonpa*. He said, "In a way, authentic is a weird word when talking about this because I don't know if we're necessarily practicing authentic Buddhism... I'm speaking whatever looks like or sounds like Tibetan. It's really hard ... And I'm like, I know this isn't right. And any Tibetan is not gonna know anything I'm saying." For Josh, the authenticity of Buddhism was associated with Tibet and its language. He had already told me about his research on other Tibetan Buddhist groups in the US, and his discovery of a controversy where "some bad things are happening" and "all this stuff started coming out—misogyny and sexual abuse." He even described a practitioner from that group who he talked to as a "tattooed punk rock guy in LA." Since Josh is not Tibetan himself and was concerned about, "where do you find something that

just is like, it's very legit and authentic,” he cautiously judged his practice based on his pronunciation of Tibetan words.

Josh also described to me how his concerns were relieved after speaking with Lama: “[Lama] acknowledged that if you were to repeat this or recite this in front of somebody who is Tibetan, they probably would either laugh, or they might not understand you at all. He’s like, it’s not the point. The point is that you are picking up this idea of compassion.” Josh concluded, “I also see the benefits of meditating and going through the process and sort of dedicating myself to be a better person and a more compassionate person, and I don't see any harm in that.” Even though Josh initially felt apprehensive and even awkward about the practice, he came to realize that for him, “authenticity,” in the sense of being the same as what is practiced by ethnic Tibetan Buddhists, should not be his main concern. Instead, it was more important for him to focus on the consequences of his practice, which he described as developing compassion, positive change, and feeling better. In this sense, his practice could be considered just as authentic as that of ethnic Tibetan Buddhists because it was true in a cosmological sense, which is evident by the results of his practice.

The fact that practices were conducted in Tibetan had the benefit of feeling “real” (or perhaps, exotic enough to be real), but could also make practitioners feel uncomfortable or self-conscious since they were repeating sounds and syllables that they did not understand or know how to pronounce. Even though practitioners are given translations of some chants, all practices are primarily conducted in Tibetan (with English romanization). Lama himself does not speak Tibetan, and another classmate from the introduction class pointed out that he sometimes feels frustrated because different teachers use different pronunciations, and therefore he is not sure how things are supposed to sound. It is worth noting that while most practices are in Tibetan, as

far as I know, no one in Salt Lake City or St. George speaks proficient Tibetan. In fact, the language barrier between teachers in Utah and visiting monks from Nepal was a reoccurring topic in stories, often with the moral being that the practitioner was still able to learn from the visitor despite the barrier.

While not often explicitly stated, the teachers in Utah recognized that their students were thinking about authenticity. At the first session of the introduction to Buddhism class, we all gathered in our Zoom room for the first time. Lama introduced himself and said, “Those of you who haven’t met me probably thought you were going to meet a little oriental guy. But I’m a big white guy.” Lama recognized that his large tattooed-mechanic physique did not fit the stereotype of Tibetan Buddhism and consequentially may at first seem off-putting to beginners. However, throughout the classes, Lama justified explanations of his physical appearance with his experiences learning from his teachers. He would talk about visiting Nepal¹³ with Rinpoche and joke about how out of place they looked, “He’s big and black and I’m big and white,” but also described how regardless of appearances, they sat in meditation with their lineage masters.

What is Lineage?

Respect and deference to Tibetan teachers was common during practices and classes. At the *gonpa*, when practicing in person, Rinpoche sits at the head of the room and is seated higher than everyone else. In turn, when teachers from Nepal visit, they sit in the highest seat. When Rinpoche and Lama visit Nepal, they sit in deference to their teachers. During Zoom practices, practitioners do not interrupt the teacher and only ask questions at the conclusion of practices or when invited. Practitioners refer to their teachers with their titles, such as “Rinpoche” or “Lhamo.”

¹³ The Tibetan masters of the lineage now live in Nepal.

During my fieldwork I quickly encountered this idea of lineage, and it became a recurring theme. While I had heard prayers to and for lineage masters before, I first learned about the concept while reading the introduction to a translation of one of the fundamental tantric texts in *The Torch of Certainty* for one of the first homework assignments for the introduction to Buddhism class:

A sect within Tibetan Buddhism is identified by several factors. According to Tibetan teachers, the most important is the multidimensional phenomenon known as ‘lineage.’

The central lineage of a sect includes the succession of teachers—from the Buddha, through the Indian masters, up to contemporary Tibetans—who transmitted the oral and written teachings. (Kongtrul 1977, 1-2)

In Tibetan Buddhism, lineage is an ancient tradition. June Campbell (2002) describes how lineage was passed on in Tibetan society: “In ancient times, in most societies, royal or sacred lineage was determined through kinship and sexual reproduction, but in the Tibetan case the lineage was determined through kinship and sexual reproduction, but in the Tibetan case the lineage was created solely by the oral transmission of the Buddhist teachings, within which the tulku system played an integral role” (76). Tulku Thondup (2011), a *tulku* himself, explains, “*Tulkus* are the principal standard-bearers of the Buddhist tradition of Tibet and the providers of spiritual and social guidance for both the ordained and the laity” (1). *Tulkus* are recognized by a lama when they are children and then trained for twenty or so years (Thondup 2011). According to Mills (2003), “[Religious and ritual authority] are primarily interpreted in Tibetan Buddhist culture as the words of Buddhahood itself, and thus most clearly reified in Tibetan Buddhist cultures in the figure of the *tulku*, the ‘manifestation-body’ of the Buddha” (240). While the concept of *tulku* and the reincarnation of historical lamas is sometimes problematic for American

practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism to accept (Lavine 1998, 109-110), practitioners in Utah had immense respect for the *tulkus* of their lineage.

I came to realize that for these practitioners in Utah, recognizing *their* lineage was an important part of every practice and foundational to continued advanced practice. Every practice I attended included multiple prayers to the lineage masters. In the brief description of a more advanced practice that I was not allowed to attend, a practitioner from St. George explained, “It's rather lengthy. There's just there's a lot of prayers and acknowledgement of teachers throughout the lineage and things like that.” The various *pechas* (a loose-leaf book with written prayers and accompanying images distributed to practitioners to be followed along with during practice) also included images of lineage masters. Other lineage iconography was common on the shrines and meditation rooms of teachers and practitioners. In addition to attending regular practices with the community, practitioners were also supposed to practice on their own. During their home practices, and while group practices were being held online, practitioners prayed towards the images of lineage leaders in their home shrines. Sue, a practitioner from St. George, showed me her shrine and the images she has of Lhamo and Rinpoche (the closest teachers on our lineage tree) as well as deities and figures such as Shakyamuni Buddha and Guru Rinpoche. Above Lhamo's shrine hangs a photo of her teacher's (Rinpoche) teacher, a *tulku*, and behind her desk is the framed antique painting of her lineage that I previously described.

In response to a question about why he first became interested in this community, a new practitioner in Salt Lake City named Jeremy said, “And on the website of [the *gongpa*], when they show the lineage...I was like, ‘Wow! This is crazy!’” Jeremy was immediately attracted to this community because of the lineage. He was impressed that Tibetan teachers were only a generation away. For newer practitioners, having teachers that are Tibetan fills the mystical, and

perhaps exotic, expectations of practicing Buddhism. Jeremy was excited about the lineage teachers because being connected with teachers in Nepal felt more authentic. Even though Jeremy had explored other Buddhist and Tibetan Buddhist groups, he chose this one because of the lineage. The lineage commanded a kind of authority and authenticity that he was looking for and felt was lacking in other groups. As cited on the website above, making the connection between *gonpa* in Utah and “*our* teachers in Nepal” [emphasis added], helped student practitioners feel like they were somehow connected to “real” Tibetan Buddhism.

While the lineage helps establish a relationship with Tibet, it is also important for establishing authority. Mills (2003) describes how the concept of lineage perforated Tibetan religious and daily life:

In the lay context, as with the monastic one, the emphasis on lineage (*rgyud*) acted as the criterion for most kinds of ‘authoritative’ discourse. People were empowered to act in certain ways, to speak or act on behalf of a household or on behalf of a religious tradition, *if and only if* they were legitimate inheritors of the lineage associated with that tradition.

Such license arises out of having received the lineage from the previous legitimate holder, and thereby back to a single apical ancestor. (160)

In the context of non-ethnic Tibetan practitioners, the lineage’s authoritative role also functions as authenticating. Aligning oneself with the lineage became a way to assert authenticity and refute accusations of appropriation or distortion. As articulated by Lhamo in the opening, the lineage provides the authority for teaching: “You break away from the lineage and run the risk that your ego is the one doing the teaching.” On another occasion, she said that while training she was taught not to read for seven years, and instead rely on the teachings of her teacher.

When considering the role of lineage, it is important to differentiate that the teachings are true not just because the lineage teachers are Tibetan, but because the lineage is a direct line of descent from the Buddha that carries authority and knowledge of truth that is passed down through it. In other words, teachers who cannot trace a direct lineage are not teaching “authentic” practice. In essence, Lhamo is saying that not being connected to a lineage, and therefore teaching from your own authority falls on the side of appropriation, not authenticity. Those who practice Tibetan Buddhism without the guidance and authority of a lineage are not practicing authentically. To the contrary, these communities in Utah are the exact opposite—they are part of a direct lineage: student, to Rinpoche, to the Tibetan lineage masters, and then to the Buddha.

Additionally, even though practitioners in Utah are not connected to the same lineage as the Dalai Lama, investing time and effort in understanding his life and teachings was another way that practitioners could reassert the authenticity of their practice. Many practitioners were fascinated by the Dalai Lama and regularly exchanged recommendations for documentaries, TV shows, magazines, etc. that explored his life and teachings. Connection and allegiance to *the* figure of Tibetan Buddhism equates to a connection with *real* Buddhism.

Authority of the Lineage

There is a strong connection between authority and authenticity, and one can often influence the other. Lama, who had received authority from Rinpoche and the rest of the lineage, told the introduction class students how some traditional texts or interpretations may be outdated. It was not that the texts were wrong, but that things have “changed” and it is therefore more important to listen to current teachers. For example, one of the five precepts to avoid after taking refuge is sexual misconduct and is traditionally interpreted to be a ban on male homosexuality (Cabezón 2017). On multiple occasions Lama told us, “Remember the book is written in

1800s...Buddhism changes with the times.”¹⁴ Instead, according to Lama, the precept is actually about all sexual activity being consensual and not bringing mental or physical harm to self or others. Sexual orientation is irrelevant. Because the teachers in these communities are descended from a direct lineage, such “changes” were accepted and did not seem to deter practitioners.

Other beginning practitioners and I experienced the authority of the lineage firsthand as we progressed through the introduction to Buddhism course. Taught by Lama, this once-a-week course walked us through the basic teachings and practices of Tibetan Buddhism. Through oral transmissions, Lama conferred upon us the authority to practice: “By hearing me recite it to you, you have permission to do it.” This authority had been given to him by Rinpoche and to Rinpoche by a *tulku*, and from that *tulku*, a whole ancestry of teachers can be traced back to the Buddha. Like other practices, during a transmission, the teacher in charge would lead the practice and students would follow along by repeating what the teacher said and following any verbal instructions. Such instructions included guided visualizations of deities, mantras, flowers, etc. The teacher explained what the student should be visualizing during each part of the practice. After the student did the practice with the teacher, the transmission was completed. For novice practitioners, transmissions occur frequently as students need to be given permission to practice on their own as well as during class. On more rare, though not infrequent occasions, more seasoned practitioners also receive transmissions from the teachers.

During the transmission of a mantra called the Seven Line Prayer in the introduction class, Lama told his students the story of Guru Rinpoche, the founder of the Nyingma tradition. He began by sharing his screen and showing a picture of a rock with a handprint pressed into it. This was one of the few times that visual aids were used in the class, and I could see my

¹⁴ The five precepts that one vows to avoid after taking refuge include killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false, harsh, and idle speech, and intoxicants that cloud the mind.

classmate's eyes on the screen widen and their heads lean forward when Lama said that the handprint is over 1,000 years old and can somehow match every person's hand size—and he knows this because he has tried it himself. The handprint was left by Guru Rinpoche in the 770s CE. He was born in India about 20 years after the historical Buddha's death, by whom his coming had been foretold. Guru Rinpoche was ordained by the historical Buddha's attendant before traveling to Tibet where he subdued demons in order to establish Buddhism in the region: "So he is kind of like a Christ figure, but not in the same sense." I could see my classmates nodding along to the familiar analogy of a religious hero. Lama continued, "He is considered the second Buddha of our time ... The embodiment of the same energy, but different people." Lama concluded his story: "He never died but rode away on a tiger. This was witnessed by thousands of people. He was a powerful practitioner and yogi and is always there for those trying to practice the dharma. ... So, basically I am repeating this to you in Tibetan to give you the power to do these prayers." He then rehearsed the prayer in Tibetan, and we followed along to receive the transmission, during which Lama instructed us on how to visualize Guru Rinpoche.

In this example, Lama connects himself (and his students) to the lineage in a couple of different ways. First, Lama has a physical experience with a 1,000-year-old relic. Since everyone's hand can fit inside the handprint, the object still contains some kind of transcendent properties. The class's intrigued response to his story shows how they were impressed by this connection. Second, Lama clarifies the connection between Guru Rinpoche and the historical Buddha: he was foretold by the Buddha, he was ordained by the Buddha's attendant, and he is the second Buddha of our time. It is also important to note that Guru Rinpoche is the founder of the Nyingma tradition. While this is not explicitly stated here, it had come up before and would come up again. Therefore, the connection between the historical Buddha and Nyingma teachers

who followed after Guru Rinpoche (i.e., our teachers) is established. Third, Lama creates an analogy between Guru Rinpoche and a religious figure that the class would likely have been more familiar with, Jesus Christ. His assumption is probably based on living in the US, especially in Utah where, as has been established, Christianity is very prevalent. Fourth, he invokes the authority of Guru Rinpoche by explaining that he will give us the power to do these prayers. He then instructs the class to interact with Guru Rinpoche through visualization.

On the surface it seems like lineage is about historical/cultural/ethnic/linguistic relations with Tibet. While these are indeed important, establishing the lineage also has a cosmological importance. It is not lineage for lineage for lineage's sake, but rather because the lineage carries truth within it. Explaining the lineage relationship with Guru Rinpoche when transmitting the Seven Line Prayer is not just to share interesting photos of a rock with a handprint, rather it also shows how an association with lineage carries permission to practice. Students being excited by the mystical qualities of a handprint is like Jeremy's excitement about the lineage, which was described earlier. In both these examples newer practitioners are initially intrigued by the mystical elements of Tibetan Buddhism. As a seasoned practitioner and teacher, Lama understood that his students are interested by these elements, but for him, the importance of a lineage relationship is about authority and authenticity of practice, not necessarily showing off how exciting or interesting Tibetan Buddhism is.

Authority of Teachers in Utah

During the introduction class, whenever students tried to ask questions about more advanced topics, Lama told us to do as he says and not to look things up on the internet. He explained that doing so would be confusing and potentially dangerous. In this way, the lineage mirrors the hierarchical structure of Tibetan Buddhist practice in which practices are tiered, and

the basic practices that are learned in the introduction class provide the foundation for subsequent practices. According to Bruce Knauff (2019), “These higher level practices carry absolutely no benefit whatever – and produce great harm – if they are not based on a complete foundation, and consistent daily practice, of renunciation of craving, on the one hand, and unreserved compassion for all living beings, on the other” (579). For students in the introduction class, upon completion we were given the opportunity to receive the transmission of the Ngondro practice, a more advanced beginner level practice that was held every Thursday evening.

At my first Ngondro practice I logged into the meeting through Zoom like I had been doing while attending the introduction class and other open practices. There were more people in attendance than the introduction class (which had about 6 regular attendees) and less people than Sunday Pujas (which have about 50 attendees). About 20-30 people logged into the Ngondro Zoom meeting. I recognized my classmates from the introduction class and some practitioners from St. George who were able to Zoom in as well. The new students stood out as we were the only ones not wearing red and orange robes. Our white robes meant that we were novice beginners and had not taken refuge. Most people sat on the floor, but some older people were sitting in chairs or on couches. No one spoke and we all started at our screens in silence until the practice began.

Before the practice Lama had sent each of us a *pecha* for the Ngondro. While practicing, everyone followed along in their own *pecha* as the teacher guided us in recitation, meditation, and visualization of deities. As I sat on a pillow on the floor, the *pecha* sat on the table in front of me along with my *mala* (prayer beads), that was gifted to me by a woman in St. George. When needed, I spun the *mala* through my fingers and used it to count recitations.

Lama had told us that Rinpoche sometimes leads this practice, but today it was Lama. He welcomed us and told the new students:

For all you new people, don't go hunting on the internet for the text you have been given. You will find either crap or things not fully explained. This particular Ngondro was passed through our line directly to Rinpoche. You won't find this same thing. What you will find is like 40 pages long and a bit different...Don't screw with tantra. It can be scary if you delve into things that you don't have the instruction or empowerment to do. It's all psychological. It can be very scary.

He then began the practice and we followed along with his chants and instructions for visualizations.

Lama's comments are interesting for a couple of reasons. First, in the context of Utah, this comment is reminiscent of typical Mormon discourse about the internet, and Lama was raised Mormon. The idea that the internet, or other non-religious-authority-approved places where knowledge is available, holds problematic interpretations of the truth is very common in Mormonism and is often cited as a reason for why people leave the religion. Lama's repeated warnings against the internet may have been related to how he had been taught to think about the internet versus religion while growing up, or even heard about while living in Utah as this is a very common theme. Again, this is another example of the semiotic ideologies of local Christianity influencing Tibetan Buddhist practice.

Second, the idea that the teachings of this tradition are intentionally unique/specialized is similar to some Mormon beliefs. According to Lama, the Ngondro was specifically changed for this audience, and this is why it may seem contradictory compared to what may be found on the internet. In the Nyingma School there is a tradition of discovering "hidden treasures," or

practices that have been semi-recently discovered but are attributed to ancient teachers (Gyatso 1993). The text used for our Ngondro practice has one such origin story. The Ngondro that we were practicing was a hidden treasure that was passed down to Rinpoche from his teachers and is therefore unique to our specific lineage. I was surprised by the similarity of the ideas of continued revelation in Mormonism¹⁵ and discovering hidden truths in Tibetan Buddhism. Both of these practices left room for new religious information to be given in the present day, either through discovering previously written but hidden texts (such as the Book of Mormon or our Ngondro text) or through authorized persons writing/changing new ones. I propose that the acceptance of both of these practices indexes similar semiotic ideologies concerning religious texts and transcendent entities—that is that these entities (be it the Christian God or Buddhist deities/figures) are capable of enacting change in this lifetime, not just in the historical origins of these belief systems and their associated texts.

The Ngondro that we learned has been changed even more as it has been passed to Americans. Practitioners in these communities are fully aware that their practice may not be totally the same as a contemporary practice in Tibet, and that exceptions or changes need to be made to accommodate American lifestyles. Many of the practices that we used were considerably shortened, which I was told this was to accommodate busy American schedules and a lifestyle and culture that does not already incorporate Buddhism. Returning to the question of sameness, these changes in how Ngondro and other practices are carried out shows how Tibetan Buddhism in Utah does not look the same, even during the official group practices. That being said, difference in practice does not necessarily mean that Western practice is not authentic.

¹⁵ For example, several of the texts from the Mormon canon, including *The Book of Mormon* and *The Doctrine and Covenants*, are either recently discovered ancient texts or newly transcribed teachings from God through a contemporary prophet.

Lama recognized that curious students may want to compare what they are being taught with the “real” that can be found on the internet—that is, wanting to be authentic in the cultural, historical, geographic, and linguistic sense. This is problematic because it 1) side steps the important hierarchical order of study, and 2) could be dangerous since these “superstitions” are real, or authentic in a cosmological sense. At the end of this lecture, he said “Don’t screw with the tantra. It can be scary if you delve into things that you don’t have the empowerment to do. It’s all psychological. It can be very scary.” Throughout the introduction class Lama alluded to such “scary” or surprising elements of Tibetan Buddhism. On numerous occasions he explained that trying to learn or practice without proper training and transmission could be confusing or even dangerous. Unsurprisingly, this left many of us students curious and we often asked him questions about these seemingly secretive practices. Lama always responded by telling us to be patient and wait for his teachings.

Second, this example shows Lama’s understanding that, “Tibetan Buddhism maintains powerful features that are anathema to many ‘modern’ Western Buddhists: with tutelage constituted through a system of guru-worship, it is profoundly hierarchical and respect-oriented with ritualized behaviour, shamanic visions and extensive ‘superstitions’ of demonology and exorcism” (Mills 2003, xv). Mills identifies these more un-modern parts of Tibetan Buddhism as being potentially problematic for Western practitioners. However, I believe that it is the feeling of replicating “real” practices from Tibet, and therefore the expected “superstitious” things as well, that attracted many of these practitioners who are seeking “authentic” Buddhism to this community. Notably, Lama discusses these beings as “psychological” not as “spiritual.” Again, even though Lama is a long-time practitioner, his characterization indexes Western ways of understanding.

Relatedly, the emphasis on structured and organized religious practice, as undemocratic and hierarchical as it may seem, resonates with the expectations of what religion typically looks like in the US. A practitioner from St. George named Annie told me about her process of discovering Tibetan Buddhism. Annie had originally started practicing Buddhism in the 1980s when she became interested in the integration of body and mind which she studied at a meditation center in California, though she considered Buddhism as more of a philosophy than religion. Even though she attended some Buddhist retreats, she never joined any groups: "I never got in with any of those groups. But they were mainly meditation groups, as far as I know. And you know, so much of Western Buddhism is mindfulness practice. And I get so sick of hearing that word mindfulness over and over and over, because I like the devotional aspect." When Annie was first introduced to the *sangha* in St. George a few years ago, she initially resisted the hierarchical and devotional aspects of the practice: "I had this thing in my head that I was very independent person, which I am. And I could do all of this without, you know, wearing the robes and stuff like that. ... And not realizing that just the act of doing it is beneficial and gives [you] this whole thing of how we accumulate merit and we accumulate blessings that hadn't occurred to me too much before that." After taking refuge and officially joining the *sangha*, she reported, "I could see blessings in my life from it ... And I very rarely miss [practices], as you probably noticed, because it's very meaningful to me. It's a huge part of my life now. And I do a considerable amount of malas every week." Speaking more to the devotional aspect of a structured Tibetan Buddhist practice she added, "And let me, you know, [make] a note of the blessings that come from doing. I guess it's my old Catholicism, but it's just richer and more personal." Even though the structure and hierarchy of Tibetan Buddhism can be off-putting to Western practitioners like Annie, she eventually found that this kind of practice is efficacious.

She sees “blessings” in her life and considers this kind of practice “richer and more personal.” Interestingly, Annie comments that it may be her Catholic background which has prepared her for acceptance of a ritual-focused, organized practice. I did not see any resistance to lineage authority throughout my research and this may be related to Christian ideas about religious authority that Annie hints at here.

4 | Discussion: Dealing with Deities

I argue that these Western practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism may not recognize how deep-rooted semiotic ideologies of the West and Christianity seep into their practice, though many do recognize that becoming Buddhist requires trying to think and experience religion differently. Collin, a student in the introduction class who had been practicing for about two years tried to work out how his understanding of good and bad has changed:

Killing isn't wrong, because of the action of killing itself. But because of what killing will do, which is what is different from with Christian morals, because God said in the ten commandments, 'Thou shalt not kill,' which makes killing wrong. But killing is wrong, because it is intrinsically wrong. Whereas Buddhism says that, well, nothing even really intrinsically exists. So rather, why is killing wrong? Because of what killing will do to other people. So on one side of it, killing is wrong, because of course, it's just going to do terrible things, people are going to be depressed, it's going to tear away families, harm every aspect of life, it'll harm you. Because if you kill you know, that's actually bad for your own karma and could lead to a low rebirth. But at the end of the day, when you really get down to the nitty gritty of it, killing is wrong because it creates a world that is not conducive for the enlightenment of all sentient beings.

As illustrated in Chapter 2, more advanced practitioners apply less Western and Christian ways of understanding into their practice. In contrast, many beginning practitioners (and sometimes seasoned practitioners) cannot help but understand Tibetan Buddhism through a somewhat Western and Christian lens. Sometimes practitioners are aware of this disconnect, but other times the clashes are less self-recognizable.

In dealing with the obvious differences between Tibetan Buddhism in Utah and Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet (or at least what practitioners imagine Buddhism looks like in Tibet), practitioners recognize differences in “sameness,” but still assert their authenticity of practice. Rather than relying on how similar the superficial aspects of a practice are, practitioners look at the origins and effects of practice. The hallmark of these communities is their short, direct lineage line to Tibetan master teachers, and from them to Guru Rinpoche and Shakyamuni Buddha. Since the teachers in Utah have been ordained with authority through the lineage, the students likewise are given permission to practice through empowerments and transmissions. Citing the lineage becomes a way to show that the practice is real, authentic, and legitimate. Recognizing the lineage is not a show-off move, but rather a way to remove attention from the self. As Lhamo said, “You break away from the lineage and run the risk that your ego is the one doing the teaching.”

As for the effects, practitioners find their practice authentic because it leads to changes in their lives. These effects of practice and the reality of Buddhism can be seen in how practitioners talk about their experiences with deities. In the earlier discussion of belief and interiority, I explored how Christianity requires a sincere and believing self. In contrast, such ideas about the self are not necessarily the same in Buddhism, and therefore nor is there necessity to testify of inner convictions. When practitioners told me about their experiences with Buddhist deities, while not speaking in terms of belief, their comments show a clash and negotiation of these ideas.

Annie told me her experiences with a god named Green Tara, for whom we did a practice every Friday morning:

I bought [the painting of Tara] and took it home and had it framed. And I have it right next to my altar. And I would say within a year or so after I had that hanging, and I would say the mantra sometimes, we had a real crisis, and I was sort of at my wit's end. And I didn't know what to do. And I sat down in front of that *thanka* and I recited the mantra over and over and over. And things just cleared. The changes occurred. I would not have known how else or what else to have done, you know. I've been pretty devoted ever since. When I went to the introductory class, and [Lhamo] announced that the Tara class was on Friday morning, and anybody could come, well I said, 'I'm going!'"

I was just so filled with the richness of having been in contact with some part of myself in the world that I can't contact very often. And I would just feel so amazingly refreshed, so there was no sense in missing that class after I started going.

Kyle, a practitioner from the Salt Lake City introduction class, admitted to trying to research more advanced practices and deities online without permission. He said, "I don't like the internet anymore." During a later interview, I asked him about his experience trying to explore Buddhism outside of the boundaries given by Lama. He told me, "There are practices that are tantric, secret, and should not even be researched by people that don't have the proper training in them. Specifically, the wrathful deities." He then told me what happened when he attempted this himself: "I was looking into this one specific wrathful deity...and it completely freaked me out. I was essentially just terrified by it. Extremely uncomfortable."

The comparison of Kyle's and Annie's recounting of their experiences shows how practitioners experience Buddhism differently. For Kyle, his experience as described was very psychological and self-focused: *he* was "freaked out" and "terrified." Annie on the other hand described her experience as more spiritual, where a transcendent entity caused a change in the

world: “And things just cleared. The changes occurred.” At the same time, Annie makes an interesting comment about the self: “And I was just so filled with the richness of having been in contact with some part of myself in the world that I can't contact very often.” While part of Annie’s experience asserts the authenticity of practice through external effects, she also justifies her conviction with a statement about internal changes and selfhood.

Additionally, both students referred to their teachers. Kyle did not listen to his teacher and Annie followed her teacher’s practice. I should note that Kyle is a young, dedicated, and curious practitioner who asks a lot of questions. He does not openly defy his teachers, however by not listening to Lama’s instructions not to search advanced practices on the internet, he did not follow the established structure of practice and then faced the consequences. In sharing his experiences with the introduction class, Kyle was a warning to other students of what happens if you do not listen to the lineage. Additionally, asserting effectiveness of these “terrifying” deities (by Lama and Kyle) helped students feel like they were more part of the Tibetan Buddhism of Tibet—and therefore authentic in sameness and realness—than a watered-down American version.

Conclusion: Authenticity, Belief, and Lineage

Lama once told the introduction class, “As you practice for a while, you’ll shift to understand things in a different way.” In this paper I have shown how some practitioners are further along on a kind of scale of becoming and understanding of Tibetan Buddhism. In other words, some practitioners have made this “shift to understand things in a different way.” Most practitioners recognize that there is a lack of sameness between practicing Tibetan Buddhism in the US and Tibet. The differences seem superficial and are due to the cultural differences of the two places. These differences are things like language, length of practice time, lack of corporal

punishment, etc. However, the teachers in Utah are more able to recognize how deeply rooted differences, which I have identified as semiotic ideologies of the West and Christianity – specifically those concerning the self and personhood, are perseverant amongst practitioners.

While it may not have been immediately clear to new practitioners, the teachers all knew that new practitioners would need to shift to a new way of understanding the world. This ontological shift that Lama refers to in the quote above, and that he and other more entrenched practitioners have experienced can be seen in subtle shifts in semiotic ideologies. For example, more seasoned practitioners have adopted a rather different view of the self, such as when Lhamo told her class about Rinpoche commenting on her body weight. The different perspectives between seasoned and novice practitioners are especially clear when semiotic ideologies clash. During such clashes, practitioners react with surprise (positive and negative), such as when all the students shook their heads disapprovingly at Lhamo's retelling of Rinpoche's comments.

Overcoming ontological disconnections that are due to different semiotic ideologies is not as easy. In this paper I have begun to show that practitioners can adapt to a new way of seeing themselves and the world. Subtle shifts in world view that have been undertaken by practitioners such as Rinpoche and Lhamo can be detected and unpacked in a more nuanced way by pointing to how the ontological grounding has shifted, thus shifting the indexical frameworks in which they are making meaning.

On a more surface level, beginning practitioners were often concerned with questions about the authenticity of their practice in comparison to Tibetan Buddhism as practiced in Tibet. Practitioners of all experience levels are able to resolve the problems of sameness (or rather not sameness) through citing the lineage. Since the teachers are directly connected to a lineage

hierarchy that extends to the Buddha, they have authority to adjust things. This does not mean that they can do whatever they want as they are still subject to their teachers and lineage masters in Nepal. As Lhamo explained, recognizing and honoring the lineage is how one practices authentically. Rather than just being a way to connect or associate with the exoticness of Tibet and Buddhism, establishing a lineage connection is an act of humility for practitioners in Utah. However, for new practitioners, the emphasis and importance of lineage is due to the close connection with Tibet, not necessarily the cosmological significance that the lineage carries.

The emphasis by newer practitioners on “very legit and authentic” illustrates how Tibetan Buddhism in Utah is heavily influenced by Western Christianity. In a Western Christian semiotic ideological understanding of self, acts such as bearing testimony or professing belief and inner conviction, are understood as reflections of an authentic religious person. In contrast, such acts are not necessary in Tibetan Buddhism and were not demonstrated by more experienced practitioners.

In this paper I have demonstrated some of the superficial and more deeper differences between novice and seasoned practitioners in Utah and how those who have practiced longer and deeper are more able to transcend this difference in the course of committing themselves to Tibetan Buddhism. For those who were raised in a Judeo-Christian environment, the transition to Buddhism can be different than they expected. One of the biggest challenges to overcome (once they realize it is something to overcome) is getting past the interiorization of religion that is so prominent in Western Christianity. While the anthropological study of religion has already pushed back against taken-for-granted interiority by anthropologists studying religion, I believe the next step is to further explore the dynamics of how people themselves push past interiorized ways of thinking and experiencing the world (and vice versa). What are the processes for

overcoming interiorization? While Tibetan Buddhist practice in Utah has provided particularly fertile ground for investigation of these processes, I imagine that there are many other settings which would allow us to better understand these processes as well.

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