



SHIFTING ETHICS AND PSYCHOLOGY: HOW BUDDHIST PRACTICE, EXEMPLARS, AND ROUTINE CAN CHANGE INDIVIDUALS AT GOMDE

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Abstract

Background: Ethical life can be modified depending on the cultural context one is situated within: "Our" good is not the only good, nor, potentially, the good we should aspire to at all. The variety that exists in the domain of ethical life leads to questions about the sanctity of a supposed predetermined morality, hence raising issues for those who adhere to certain ethical conduct because that conduct is believed to be ethical. In Rangjung Yeshe Gomde, a Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist meditation centre located in the foothills of the Upper Austrian Alps, these questions and issues come to the fore. It is a centre that acts as a transition zone for potential self-reformation; One that supplies Western meditators interested in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy a place in which to reset from the dominant values in one's social milieu. Here, students learn that there are alternative ways to realize values that differ from the ones that have been inculcated within themselves. Gomde thus enables Western students to reframe and alter their ethical and psychological considerations; Many individuals I describe in this article turn to Buddhism when life becomes heavy and no longer makes sense, and they subsequently have profound shifts in how they think they ought to be living. The setting, teachings, practices, and exemplars encourage this reassessment. That Buddhist meditation, which allows students to reframe mental phenomena and thus induces a critical reflexivity about their responses to the vicissitudes of life, is clear in a setting like Gomde. Yet this "Universal" capacity for moral reasoning is contextually inflected. Nevertheless, self-formation at Gomde provides an environment for a fruitful analysis of the reflexive efforts people employ to lead an ethical life, even if located in "Pedagogically" oriented forms and embedded in the routines of daily life. Therefore, with ethnographic engagement, I show how Buddhadhamma, in this setting, accompanied by other factors, can lead to ethical and psychological transformation: I enable an anthropological account of how and why some Western interlocutors deviate from societal and psychological norms. To work through this argument, I detail: The role that meditation and Buddhadhamma have in reassessing values; The importance of an openness to new ideals; And how exemplars can



simultaneously allow people to reimagine their ethical conduct whilst enabling a continuation of a culturally divergent set of ethical values in a novel environment.

Involvement to Buddhadhamma: This article analyses how contemporary Western subjects utilize Tibetan Buddhist practices, routines, and relationships to transform their psychological well-being, highlighting a link between Buddhism and the development of wisdom and morality.

Conclusions: The meditative practices, ethical teachings, and exemplars at Gomde allow interested students a chance to diverge from pre-existing values and norms, causing substantial changes in some. Although these techniques are profound, the ability they have to alter people's values depends on other social factors. Hence, underpinning the ethical transformations at Gomde are pertinent social dynamics ranging from the political landscape one inhabits to health factors. The original data of this research is a significant subject matter to engage with because it allows a close connection with a form of social life historically underdeveloped in the anthropological canon. Understanding how people believe they ought to live, the mechanisms that enable these evaluations to change, and what happens when they do change are all topics that have thus been assessed. I therefore provide important material for helping gain insight into the various dimensions of ethics across society. When this can be better understood, how people work and operate in different settings can be better understood: A study of ethics is a study of social life, and vice versa.

Keywords: Tibetan Vajrayana, Psychological Transformation, Ethics

Introduction



Figure 1 Gomde: A Centre of Transition for Western Students of Tibetan Buddhist Philosophy



Rachel, a middle-aged woman from Vienna, first came to Gomde four years ago. She described how life before visiting Gomde, the grounds of which are shown in Figure 1, was one of confusion and uncertainty, going from one thing to the next but not knowing why. One morning, whilst still at her old job in the city, she looked at an elderly employee who had been there for over 30 years. To her, this person embodied her future self, and she resented the fact that she, too, would potentially end up as someone she deemed unhappy and without purpose. In that moment, she decided that this was not the life she desired. After visiting Gomde, she quickly became enthralled by the centre's doctrine, practices, and daily routine: Her internal dialogue (Her Mental Evaluation of Events) had shifted after engaging with the centre's teachings, enabling her to become more appreciative of life. She thus withdrew from her addictions, regularly meditated, and began spreading loving kindness; These changes were endorsed and encouraged by the centre's teachings. Rachel noted to me that she now had new aim, an unshakeable motivation to liberate herself from suffering. This ethical transition exemplifies how Gomde triggers a "Technology of the Self," allowing students to turn an internal dialogue into an object of reflection.

The story of Rachel is common amongst those frequenting Gomde and is important to recognise as it shows how engagement with Buddhist teachings and settings can radically shift the way one perceives one's "Self" and all external events. As I have been visiting Gomde for over five years, I thus couple my personal experiences and relationships with ethnographic fieldwork to principally argue that Gomde and Buddhadhamma can remold Western practitioners' view and attainment of "Ethical Life." This assessment will have a particular focus on the use of meditative practice and the way it shifts ethics (What One Believes to Be a Good/Bad Way to Live).

As other important ethnographies have shown in religious settings, employing a Foucauldian "Analytic of Ethical Reasoning and Practice" allows for an assessment of "Different Projects of Self-formation" (Laidlaw, 2014). I therefore adopt this evaluative stance to analyse the unique type of self-formation at Gomde. I show how the meditation practice taught at Gomde is structurally similar to Foucault's "Technologies of the Self" as both require a capacity for working on oneself through reflection. I argue that enabling a student to "Sit Back" and reflect entails the creation of a free, ethical subject (Foucault, 1997). Importantly, I show that when this reflection occurs at Gomde, it can lead to significant changes in the perceptions and aspirations of those who engage with this "Ethical Project."

Another central argument of my paper, however, will highlight how in this setting the ethical shifts that take place occur in tandem with other important social factors, such as rupture to "Being Existentially Comfortable in One's World" (Zigon, 2010) due to health, economic or political reasons: The self-formation in which one constitutes themselves as free subjects by learning how to be ethical (Foucault, 1997) relies on other things to work. Rachel and others like her appear to have been able to utilise the tools of meditation and Buddhist philosophy to shift ethical evaluations as they were already seeking change. I therefore

argue that an "Openness" to new ethical ideas subsequently affects how ethical transformations take place.

Notably, one key factor that I discuss in enabling people to diverge from social norms is the example of Rinpoche. In my assessment of his role, I show that exemplars are more than bridges between what is and what ought to be. How Rinpoche relates to the main concepts contained within this paper is highlighted below in Figure 2.



Figure 2 Key concepts influencing ethical and psychological transformation at Gomde

Ethical and Psychological change through meditation Ethics

I argue throughout my paper that Gomde provides a site for shifting ethical perspectives. But what exactly does this mean, and how does it occur? Ethics has traditionally been understood in the West in a narrow sense (Lambek, 2000), usually as related to rules that stem from unique obligations which are untainted by personal interest (Laidlaw, 2014). Other ways of understanding how one ought to live had historically been swept aside from this dominant "Morality System"



(Williams, 1985). At Gomde, however, meditation, Rinpoche and the centre itself provide an example and setting of self-cultivation or "Autopoiesis" (Faubion, 2001) and a way to realise that there are wider considerations of the ethical. There is now consensus in the anthropological canon that ethics is "Not a Timeless, Trans-historical Concept but Requires to be Understood Genealogically, in the Way that Anthropologists have Learned to Understand the Category of Religion" (Asad, 1993); (Laidlaw, 2023).

As such, I draw on the work of Foucault (1978) and the technologies of the self. These techniques enable agents to effect operations "On their Own Bodies and Souls, Thoughts, Conduct, and Way of Being" (Foucault, 1988) to ensure that they can transform themselves to attain a specific ethical outcome. Although these techniques and processes that affect operations are not created individually and are instead based on "Models that He Finds in His Culture and Are Proposed, Suggested, Imposed Upon Him by His Culture" (Foucault, 1997), this does nothing to remove the active, reflective freedom that is needed to actualise them. For Foucault, this freedom is based on the existence of reflexive thought and the structure that it holds. It is the ability to "Step Back" (Foucault, 1997) from acting or reacting in a certain way and enables one to create a relationship with oneself. Having the ability to reflect upon a part of the self (One's Thoughts or Actions, for Example) means that it can be problematised: It can be reflected upon and thus worked on. Foucault, in his later writings, understood ethics to be this conscious practice of freedom, the form freedom manifests as when shaped by consciously reflecting (Heywood, 2023). I therefore build on this work by highlighting a novel way in which technologies of the self and conscious reflection can be realised; Gomde enables people like Rachel to transform ethically through conscious self-cultivation.

I also employ the work of Laidlaw (2014) as he effectively shows how to mobilise Foucault's ideas into different projects of self-formation. Laidlaw (2014) highlights that for any period or milieu, something will always be problematised, with this being a part of Foucault's genealogical method for understanding ethics. This problematisation applies to Gomde as, through the ethical teachings and practices, students are encouraged to realise that thoughts, emotions, and the physical world are illusory, problematising them to encourage students to no longer attach to these phenomena. Laidlaw (2014) shows that Foucault is a good starting point for moving beyond deterministic social theory by engaging with questions pertaining to the effects of reflective thinking in ethical life, even in contexts traditionally excluded by the dominant morality system. By building on Foucault, Laidlaw broadens ethical understandings (To Places Like Gomde and People Like Rachel) by asserting that topics previously discarded as forms of power and oppression are instead constitutive of agents acting freely. Laidlaw induces us to view individuals as oriented toward visions of human flourishing that are specific both culturally and historically, highlighting how more varied ethical considerations exist in settings of self-formation. His work thus sparked anthropological engagement with contexts of "Ethical Life" that cannot be accounted for in a "Progressive Politics" framework (Hirschkind, 2006), showing



also that freedom can be chosen despite potentially authoritative norms. I therefore draw on the work of Laidlaw (2014) to "Take Seriously" the form that ethical life takes in a novel Tibetan Buddhist setting, enabling an understanding of a distinct mode of human flourishing whilst simultaneously describing a "Diverse form of Ethical Reflection and Practice so as to Bring its Distinctiveness into Focus" so we can "Learn not Only About but Also From" those engaging in an ethical project at Gomde. These insights allow us to understand better how a unique form of meditation and Buddhism can enable Western interlocutors to change habits, thoughts, and considerations of how one ought to live. That Gomde encourages the use of self-technologies, which require freedom and reflection to work, highlights how modes of self-making, that is, how the ways through which human agents constitute themselves alter views on topics like how one ought to live, "Depend on Historically Specific Social Relationships" (Laidlaw & Mair, 2019). I therefore use ethics in this broader sense, encompassing more than a narrow morality system premised on rules and obligations. I can therefore show: How people ethically transform themselves; The role of exemplars that people aspire to emulate; And the relationships these depend on. The work people undertake at Gomde is an example of an ethical project because the practices and teachings are premised on the idea that people can, do, and should improve themselves through cultivation and "Problematisation" in order to be free from suffering. And, as Laidlaw & Mair (2019) highlight, cultivation is a core tenet of Buddhist ethics: Humans can be fashioned through practice. Techniques like meditation exist at Gomde to enable this to occur and can be recognised by exploring the life stories of people like Rachel.

One final introductory note on ethics: Consent was gained from all participants in this study, and any distinguishing features have been altered to ensure anonymity, other than for Rinpoche.

Gomde

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche is one of the greatest living Tibetan meditation masters and the seventh reincarnation of Gar Drubchen, an emanation of Nagarjuna, who is widely regarded as the second most important Buddhist philosopher after the Buddha (Westerhoff, 2022). He is also the spiritual figurehead of Gomde and eight other international meditation centres.

Due to expansion into a Western setting, the founders believed it was necessary to cater to the tastes of Western people to attract and retain them. As shown in Figure 3, Gomde is thus a unique site: Its manicured lawns, alpine location, large estate, luxurious rooms, natural swimming ponds, and decadent food provide a spa-like environment. Yet this scene is juxtaposed with Buddha statues, stupas, prayer flags sprawling between the trees of the grounds, and, of course, dedicated meditation halls filled with "Typical" Buddhist articles ranging from pictures and ornaments of realised masters to singing bowls and decorated protectors. The collection of diverging assets ensures the environment of Gomde is unlike the myriad Tibetan monasteries I have stayed at and visited across the Himalayas. Yet this is to be expected given that Buddhism is best understood as grounded in localised social practices and that "The Continuities and



Constant Reinterpretations of Buddhism" entail "A Set of Socially Located Traditions" (Cook & Diemberger, 2021).



Figure 3 The pools of Gomde

Gomde thus appeals more to the middle classes, as it has been "Transplanted" (Baumann, 1994) in such a way that it appeases certain Western sensibilities. I had conversations with a Lama close to Rinpoche to discuss why these bifurcations from "Typical" Tibetan customs were allowed to occur. The Lama detailed how a monastery, or any other Tibetan setting to learn of the Buddha's teachings, is merely a different form in which to hold and transmit dhamma. Dhamma is conceptualised as "Truth" that actualises in accordance with its surroundings, and I was advised to focus on the "Truth" itself. Yet this novel Tibetan Buddhist environment is exactly what requires anthropological interpretation, so that we can grapple with the "Lived Experience" of Western interlocutors engaging with philosophies that may subsequently cause radical shifts in ethical perspectives. Gomde should be analysed because it holds unique relationships and social interactions that, once understood, can allow for a better comprehension of how ethical transformations can take place. However, the Lama is right: There should be an engagement



with Buddhist texts and teachings, but this needs to be in context, underpinning "The Importance of Buddhist Living Settings" (Cook & Diemberger, 2021).

Meditation

To understand how meditation entails ethical and psychological transformation, I outline in this section what exactly happened at Gomde whilst I undertook fieldwork and how this impacted students. I argue that this shows Buddhadhamma-infused self-cultivation to be active and potentially radical.

On weekday evenings at exactly 19:00, students at the centre attended a class where fundamental concepts of Tibetan Buddhism were taught. For this, students gathered in the meditation hall, the largest room of Gomde. Before entering, individuals had to ensure they were appropriately dressed. On some occasions, I noticed that unaware individuals who wore shorts were told that this could not be repeated, and although told gently, it was a command that must be adhered to, or else continued practice would be forbidden. In the meditation hall, students sat on the floor in assigned rows facing a large Buddha statue and pictures of revered masters. The Lama who ran the session sat in a separate row and often detailed how humans should "Liberate from Samsara, the Constant Cycle of Death and Rebirth," with meditation being the tool to enable this to happen. The reason it was taught that this needed to occur is that only through liberation can one be free from suffering. To accomplish this feat, the Lama anchored the Four Noble Truths within the canonical framework of the "Four Dharma Seals" common to Mahayana and early doxographies: Namely, that all conditioned things are impermanent, all defiled emotions entail suffering, all phenomena are empty of inherent self, and nirvana is peace. Rather than using these scriptures for dogmatic theology, however, Gomde deploys them as highly practical psychological templates to shift what people value.

After these teachings were given, the Lama explained a meditative technique suited for all experience levels, such as Chenrezig. In Chenrezig (Buddha of Compassion) meditation, students are told to focus solely on receiving loving compassion from the visualised Buddha, with thoughts about things other than this "Beam of Infinite Loving Wisdom" to be "Let Go." When other thoughts arise, which they often do for novice meditators, students are told to accept them for their "Unreality." After the Lama gonged the singing bowl, the room fell silent as the meditation began. Due to a large proportion of meditation neophytes present, the space, which is shown in Figure 4 below, quickly became alive with sounds of itching, awkward shuffling, and swallowing.

After another gong that signalled an end to the brief practice, which clearly came as a relief to many, the Lama asked if there were any questions. Typical queries that arose were, "What should We Do with these Random Thoughts that Keep Occurring?" The Lama explained that they should be applied to the accompanying Buddhist teachings about the three key characteristics that underpin all phenomena: Thoughts are impermanent (Anitya), inherently unsatisfactory (Dukkha), and empty of a permanent self (Anatman). This framework traces directly



to authoritative Mahayana scriptures like the Samadhiraja Sutra (King of Samadhi Sutra), a text central to the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages taught at Gomde. Rather than engaging in textual philosophy, however, practitioners deploy these canonical schemas as live psychological tools to navigate how they think they ought to be living.



Figure 4 A typical meditation session in Gomde's great hall

By attending more sessions (There are at Least Two Daily, Starting Promptly at 07:30 and 17:00), students learn that their attachments to impermanent things only perpetuate dukkha because one cannot successfully attach to ever-changing phenomena. Through these attachments, one remains in samsara, as both are underpinned by karma (Deeds Driven by Intentions). Gomde's teachings thus look to enable students to liberate themselves by detaching from their thoughts and actions to have a "Right View" of these concepts.

Daniel, a lanky blonde from France, was living full-time at the centre when I met him, and he provided an example of how Gomde's routine and practices forge ethical transformations. He worked towards liberation by embodying the presented teachings and by constantly reassessing his thoughts and actions throughout the day so that he could reduce attachments, though the repetitive reflection that Daniel said he engaged with was tricky, as his mind easily wandered. Daniel often downplayed the extent of his experience in this way, humbly remarking that these were just a layperson's views. Through understanding that liberation is the only route to salvation he also aimed at liberating all other sentient beings, actualised through his vegetarianism and great care he takes to be kind to all whom he meets; His friendly attitude, warm smile, and patient demeanor made conversing with him enjoyable. Daniel also regularly worked on spreading loving kindness through a meditative practice known as Tonglen, a visualisation whereby one takes



on the ills of others whilst simultaneously sending them loving wisdom. In a conversation after daily chores had finished, Daniel noted that his utilitarian reasons for attending Gomde were met quickly, as meditative tools enabled a calming of his mind.

However, these benefits became only secondary in importance as to why he thought he should stay. Daniel detailed how he realised that to truly be free from suffering, he must continue to work on himself, cultivating the ethical quality of non-attachment that aids liberation. He subsequently left his hometown to stay at the centre, leaving behind a girlfriend and a well-paying job as he realised that his goals and life were not going to bring lasting happiness and were merely boosting the false ego that was not really him, a reflection of the substantial shifts that can occur in ethical outlook after frequenting Gomde. Daniel's abandonment of capitalistic career markers demonstrates Foucault's conscious practice of freedom. By "Subjectifying" his mind as an object of ethical cultivation, his radical transformation is explicitly negotiated through the centre's doctrine and practices, rather than occurring in isolation.

I argue that the meditation practices that encourage ethical shifts at Gomde are akin to Foucault's reflexive thought and are an example of an ethical project: It is an "Active Process of Reflective Self-Formation" (Laidlaw, 2014). This is because the meditations are not limited to just the content of thinking, "Which is Recognised as Cross-culturally Variable" (Cook, 2015). Speaking on reflexive thought, Foucault (1997) states:

It is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its condition, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem.

Interestingly, the emphasis of both Foucault and teachers at the centre is on the capacity for stepping back. Despite this form of stepping back being a culturally and historically specific occurrence, it nevertheless acts as a form of reflexivity that Foucault argues is universal. Importantly, the reflexive analysis of thoughts and emotions means that students are "Subjectifying" themselves to themselves. They are doing this to "Problematise" a certain aspect of oneself in order to change it. This process at Gomde involves acknowledging that thoughts are illusory and suffering-inducing if attached to; Meditation is a type of training that enables the skill of detachment. The ethical principles that are actualised through meditation at Gomde are thus ethical projects and similar to Foucault's thought. However, by introducing the students to Tibetan Buddhist soteriology, at Gomde meditation goes one step further than what Foucault describes: It manifests as an understanding that thoughts are not a true depiction of reality and instead should be seen as something impermanent. At Gomde, students learn to "Step Back" during meditative visualisations to realise that thoughts that are unrelated to the practice are not real and merely create suffering. Yet one is still able to choose to do certain things based on thoughts, though one now acts with a new perspective that acknowledges that these thoughts are not a true depiction of reality.



These different reactions students now have to their thoughts and emotions enable them to reduce stress and anxious tendencies (Teasdale, 1999). For Daniel, this had noticeably improved and altered his day-to-day life, as he stated he was happier and aimed at spreading loving kindness. Yet enjoying these utilitarian benefits is not where the student is left. The aptitude to skilfully detach from thoughts to relieve suffering leads to the cultivation of certain attitudes. This conduct differs markedly from previous ways of being, given the newfound aim of liberation. To attain salvation goals acts that promote nonattachment, like Daniel's humility (So He is No Longer Attached to The Illusory Self), his move to live full-time at the centre (So He is No Longer Attached to Relationships and Possessions), and attempt to have complete meditative awareness (So He Merely Perceives the World Rather than Attaches to How They Think it Should Be) are all therefore brought into fruition by the centre's encouragement and individual cultivation efforts. This leads to a drastic change of ethics, values, and psychology, given that students like Daniel were previously set on gaining wealth and status. As the interest here is in training individuals so that they may have skills and certain attitudes to attain a specific state, this relates well to Foucault: This training comes from the ability to look at the self in order to mould it.

Clearly, meditation at Gomde is therefore an example of a "Self-technology." To have this capacity also entails someone creating a relationship with oneself and others, subsequently making them an ethical subject (Foucault, 1997). This thus implies freedom, as the individual can decide how they ought to behave. This is important to note because I am therefore describing ethical change here as a choice. However, from my discussion of Gomde thus far, it may instead seem like the center works in a repressive way, as somewhat strict schedules and rules (On Clothing, Timings of Sessions, and Where One can Sit) stem from authoritative Tibetan Buddhist structures. Yet I, like others (Mahmood, 2011); (Faubion, 2011), am showing that ethical ways of being do not necessarily have to be seen through a lens of progressive politics: There is freedom in actively choosing to encompass perhaps authoritative norms. Hence, in this context, I argue that shifting away from ethical ideals that are dear to liberal readers of anthropology not only sometimes entails radical changes within a practitioner but also that this different form of ethical life is a mode of human flourishing: The Western agent is a free subject despite having to follow moral codes that are set by potentially authoritarian Tibetan Buddhist hierarchies. The conscious self-formation to become a virtuous subject at Gomde manifests through meditation. And although this meditation is institutionally prescribed, it is also voluntary. The institution of Gomde states what to do and students are set within hierarchical systems whereby teachers instruct in a top-down manner. However, the student can decide when and for how long to attend Gomde, and for which practices they engage with. The process of meditating shapes the student into perceiving herself differently as she realises the thoughts that constitute her are not actually her, generating what Cook (2010) describes as "A Special Kind of Constitutive Knowledge of the Self." Meditation is thus the training that shifts ethical perspectives, but also the tool that enables students to make themselves ethical subjects: This "Technology of Self" is therefore a manifestation of freedom as the individual



is able to decide how to behave. Importantly, therefore, this process at Gomde that changes Western interlocutors into aspiring to a different and particular type of human flourishing is an example of an ethical transformation as opposed to adherence to authoritative hierarchies.

Meditation?

Aoife is 45 but has the energy and playfulness of someone much younger. Quick to laugh, conversations with Aoife were rarely downbeat, but whilst cleaning the centre's hallways, we discussed her reasons for coming to Gomde. She initially arrived at the centre after leaving her home due to the unfulfilling life she was leading in Dublin. She came to Gomde with the hope of finding something new, as her life had been plagued with mental health woes. Just before coming to Gomde, she had also recently been made redundant. This sudden and forced change gave her a chance to reflect on what she had valued. Moreover, a long history of family instability had been coming to a head, and Aoife felt like she needed to escape.

Most questions I put to Mark on Tibetan Buddhist doctrine he could readily explain, given his years of devoted practice. I thus found it surprising when he told me that he begrudgingly followed his wife to Gomde for the first few times after I asked him a question on karmic ripening. During a drive to the local supermarket, he said his choice to come to Gomde was solely to support his wife's aim of deepening her meditative practice. After a pause in his story to let some cars pull out of a junction, he described that his karma was clearly ripening as "Why Else Would I have Come to Gomde and Met the People I have?" The influences of others had made a profound impact on Mark and he found the passion people had to change for the good inspiring. Mark spoke about how he previously had strong and opposing ethical values to those taught at Gomde, based on a self-described secular and scientific worldview. However, these strong "Anti-religious" values that he held were challenged as he spent a considerable amount of time with people he saw as courageously compassionate.

Joan is a young, quiet woman from Kyiv. One evening, she told me that she had a profoundly revelatory near-death experience that drastically changed how she thought she should be living. Her life of drinking and partying was radically altered after this out-of-body event. It also made her reflect on the negative way in which "Friends" and a partner had been treating her. She thus started engaging with religious teachings as she was looking for answers that could explain both her "Supernatural" episode as well as provide solace from her troubled relationships. This desire to realise something deeper was exacerbated by her disillusionment and unease with the war against Russia, which caused her to leave Ukraine. When arriving at the centre she said she quickly felt at home due to the welcoming nature of those who stay, a feeling she had not had for a long time.

The ways in which people develop themselves as ethical subjects at Gomde are, quite naturally, shaped by social context and historical specificity: "Self-cultivation" practices are here clearly an aspect of social life. That this and other modes of "Subjectivation" are culturally shared is thus unsurprising (Cook, 2023). As Laidlaw (2014) aptly states, "The Reflective Motion of Stepping Back is Not Negated by The Fact that in Order for This to be possible You have to



Be Standing Somewhere in Particular to Begin With." As such, understanding where individuals are situated before stepping back is important to analyse if a full connection with this unique project of ethical transformation is to be realised.

As can be seen through the above ethnographic cases, people often come to the centre during a time of "Moral Breakdown" (Zigon, 2007). This is a period that forces one to reflect and make choices about what they want in their life. These occurrences help attract people to Gomde because they encounter a moment "Of Freedom and Creativity in the Exercise of Choice" as to which ethical considerations they should uphold (Laidlaw, 2014); (Zigon, 2008) describes moments like Joan's near-death experience, Aoife's job loss and Rachel's health conditions as important "Ethical Moments" because they are a chance to leave the "Equilibrium" of everyday moral life.

Although Zigon's formulation locates ethical reflexivity in unique moments of "Moral Breakdown," thus being structurally dissimilar to Foucault's "Problematisation" as the "Standing Back" "Is an Inherent Dimension of All Human Conduct, Thus Ordinary in the Sense" utilised by (Das, 2007); (Lambek, 2010); (Laidlaw, 2014), it is useful for my analysis as it enables an outline for why a subject may choose to start the transition to upholding different values and ethical outlooks. Yet although Zigon's argument falls short because "Moral Breakdown" is clearly not the only moment of "Ethics" (Gomde's Students Strive for A State of Meditative Awareness Even During Moments of Everyday Social Life) Zigon (2008), it is helpful to analyse as oftentimes unordinary moments of uncertainty lead people to the Gomde. Many students like Rachel, Aoife, and Joan arrive at the centre because they have already had a shift away from their usual ethical habitus. This reflects an important criterion for Buddhist teachings at Gomde to be effective for some people: Students need to be open to new ideas and ways of being. Without this "Openness," I argue that students are much less likely to engage.

Importantly, I must state that I am not here trying to argue that a specific interlocutor's circumstances necessarily entail a specific ethical shift at Gomde, nor that coming to the center at a time of moral (Un)certainly will mean the discrediting (Or Uptake) of Buddhist teachings and practices. However, I am also not trying to highlight that simply the self and its reflection, which can be encouraged through Buddhist teachings and practices, are a determinant of profound self-liberating "Self-directedness" (Seigel, 2005). Instead, I reject this binary of competing and opposite theories of self-cultivation that claim it either reproduces "A Normative Social Order" or is based wholly on "A Matter of Individual Choice" (Cook, 2023). Clearly, Gomde shows that the way in which people "Reflect Upon Themselves and Seek to Act" is "Informed by the Particularities" of specific contexts (Cook, 2023): informed, not decided.

Moral lives at Gomde, much like elsewhere, are intricate and seldom homogeneous. The way in which people employ self-cultivation techniques that stem from Tibetan Buddhism, and the ability these have to shift ethical perspectives, are shaped by the institution itself as well as other factors that affect individuals, such as Mark's awe of others, Joan's meaningless partying, and Aoife's family difficulties. The specific type of self-cultivation at Gomde, therefore, manifests within the



moral pluralism of diverse, tangled social relations. Hence, self-cultivation in specific lives cannot always be reduced to "A Thin Analysis of Either Atomistic Individualism or Social Determinism" (Cook, 2023). Gomde and the changes it fosters within individuals show that even in a somewhat intense setting of personal ethical training, people are still bound by sociality: How ethical transformations occur is both self-directed and socially determined.

Rinpoche

On the day of his arrival at Gomde, which happened by chance during my fieldwork, a shining Land Rover pulled into view at the edge of the estate and gradually ploughed up the long, meandering gravel lane.

When the car arrived, the passenger-side door was slowly opened, and out stepped Rinpoche. As he descended from his chariot, a devotee shielded the sun from him with a large umbrella. The expectant crowd stood in awe as he proceeded to acknowledge each person who stood in the glaring sun. Dressed in typical Tibetan Buddhist monastic attire of the highly spiritual deep reds and maroons, Rinpoche exuded a simple way of being. Yet surrounding this man was quite the opposite situation: Some people in tears, some people ecstatic, many clearly anxious. All members of the community followed him as he proceeded to walk around the grounds. One of his first acts after arriving was to pause at an ant mound. Although seemingly inconspicuous, Rinpoche spent a considerable amount of time blessing the busy pile of earth that the ants had created, as shown in Figure 5.



Figure 5 Rinpoche's blessing of ants in Gomde's Bodhi Garden



I spoke to Stijn in the gardens shortly after Rinpoche had retired to his private area. He told me, whilst clearly still buzzing over the afternoon's events, that it was fantastic that Rinpoche was here. Stijn, 20, was studying for an economics degree, but he regaled me with how his decision to go to university was difficult: He was initially unsure whether he should obtain a degree in order to get a well-paying finance job, as perhaps it was better to fully devote one's life to meditation. Yet he mentioned that devoted meditation is not what Rinpoche did. He knew that Rinpoche acts to alleviate the suffering of as many beings as possible (Including Those Ants), expanding dhamma so that this can occur. From this understanding, Stijn decided that it was best for him to go to university to study economics because, as he reasoned, he could then use his skills to also spread dhamma.

Mark, too, had his choices influenced by the conduct of Rinpoche. Whilst walking to the evening puja session on the same day as Rinpoche's arrival, Mark detailed how loving and kind Rinpoche was. He informed me that Rinpoche decided to take human form to liberate more beings, even though this is a perilous task, as it is easy to succumb to attachments. Mark was smiling whilst we ambled towards the meditation hall, and he spoke more about Rinpoche's daily work to spread compassion, noting often how noble and inspiring he was. Mark also claimed that when he goes through the day, he aims to act similarly to Rinpoche, which consequently makes him a better person. Stijn's educational pivot and Mark's outlook change show that their ethical evaluations are not governed by abstract text-based rules but are interpersonally modelled on a living exemplar.

Rinpoche is also the reason why Gomde exists: His message and conduct were enough of an impetus for individuals who had met him in Nepal to return home to found the centre. Exemplars like Rinpoche have been understood in the philosophical canon as a bridge between what is and what ought to be. That is, a force of example like Rinpoche enables a chance to reconcile theories of pluralism (Which Anthropology Lies Within) with theories of universal coherence (Such as Marxism) (Ferrara, 2008). However, in this section, I am more concerned with how Rinpoche acts as a bridge between another theoretical divide: That between the collective and the solitary. I argue that this "Tussle Between Agency and Structure" (Evans, 2023) may be better understood by engaging with an exemplar like Rinpoche, and further show how and why free agents may subsequently reproduce or change social norms. By drawing on the work of Humphrey (1997), I detail how Rinpoche provides an analytic that enables devoted students to diverge from previous rules and values by considering their choices with his example in mind. I also detail how Rinpoche acts as an exemplar that reinforces existing cultural forms (Robbins, 2018). Despite these perhaps contradictory statements, Rinpoche simultaneously enables individuals to reframe their ethical perspectives whilst allowing a continuation of diverging ethical norms in a new setting.

Humphrey's (1997) Exemplars and Rules details how rules that guide Mongols are understood outside of "The Sphere of Morality" (Evans, 2023) and conceptualised instead as modes of control. Following rules is not in and of itself moral for Mongols, as rules are merely a form of power, and they do not leave space for any critical moral judgement (Humphrey, 1997). Therefore, Mongols instead decide how to act by cultivating relationships with exemplary figures (Humphrey,



1997). What Humphrey's article effectively points to is that when people question which moral rules they should follow, they are also asking a question of what kind of person they wish to be. Exemplars thus become items of contemplation because they enable individuals to engage with sometimes conflicting and often complex entanglements of values and ethics (Evans, 2023).

Students at Gomde, like Mark and Stijn, thus contemplate Rinpoche's example to know how to act as taught by Buddhist ideals of detachment juxtapose with "Typical Western" ideals of attachment to things like the ego, property, and status. Without his example, Mark and Stijn would have been confused about what to do: How would Stijn have decided whether or not to attend university? How would Mark know how to act day-to-day? A different case where interlocutors do not know how best they should live is raised by Robbins (2007) in his study of the Urapmin: The interlocutors here are trying to be good Christians whilst simultaneously attempting to uphold traditional Urapmin values that contradict this new way of being. At Gomde, people also often have to reconcile two sets of moral ideals and two systems of personal virtue that contradict one another, such as wanting to go to university but not wanting to attach to this status-boosting activity. Despite the Urapmin cultural context differing from Gomde, it seems that both cases lead to what Robbins describes as a state of moral torment, whereby interlocutors are caught between two ethical modes. The situation at Gomde, much like with the Urapmin, is that many undergo a radical but incomplete transition to accepting only Buddhist ethical perspectives. This means individuals must navigate between competing values.

Due to these conflicting values that arise when Western students embody Buddhist teachings, many turn to Rinpoche in order to understand how they should act. This happens because people want to know what virtues may look like in physical form, enmeshed within an individual as opposed to only embedded within an abstract morality system (Evans, 2023). It can be easier to see and copy than to understand and perform. Rinpoche epitomises the goals and teachings of Tibetan Buddhism as he is believed to be a fully realised being, one who has escaped the wheel of samsara and attained liberation.

Stijn therefore knew how to act when deciding whether to go to university. He managed to uphold his desire to go to university by creatively reinterpreting Buddhist teachings. The conflict between career goals and Buddhist philosophy was resolved by emulating Rinpoche so that the university became a means to spread dhamma more effectively. Similarly, when Mark looks at how to act each day, he tries to diverge from his old self by asking how Rinpoche would act. His conduct is altered by knowing that to be a better person, he must work to spread loving compassion like Rinpoche.

Hence, Rinpoche acts as an inspiration for moral action that entails a divergence from "Old" values towards those found in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Morality and ethical transformation here is thus highly individualistic too because the change in how one acts occurs not only due to rules or insight from mediation, but also through an individual's attempt to reckon with moral judgements, modelled on an exemplar's behaviours (Humphrey, 1997). This individual aspect of deciding how one should act again helps in diverging from social norms because it is the person's



navigation of what it means to be living a good life, as opposed to the rules that come from society (Humphrey, 1997). Hence, the ethical transformations that occur in Western students are often shaped by Rinpoche's example.

Importantly, Rinpoche as an exemplar entails the relative uniformity of Buddhist ideals and virtues. He is seen as someone to emulate because he embodies dominant Tibetan Buddhist values in pure form. Robbins (2018) argues that exemplars like Rinpoche can emerge because they "Realise Specific Values to The Fullest Extent Possible in A Given Cultural Setting." Most people and their actions are unable to "Realise" the most important values despite their aim to do so. This is true for almost all Buddhists globally because only a select few beings are liberated, and it is especially true in a centre like Gomde as Western students typically have little lived experience of how a Buddhist should act. What is interesting in Robbins' argument is that he outlines exemplars to connect human actions to a realm of values, showing people how they should and could live. This means that Rinpoche is key in understanding why Buddhist values can be reproduced in a novel setting like Gomde, highlighting an important relationship between individual and social life. For students like Rachel, Mark, and Stijn, this gives them an opportunity to understand why and how they should transform, and what this may look like. Rinpoche and other exemplars like him can therefore explain the reason for relative cultural uniformity because they highlight how values emerge within, and then go on to order, social life (Robbins, 2018). This implies, contrary to Humphrey (1997), that exemplars exhibit a force to maintain rules and norms because they are chosen for the virtues people aspire to have, ones which are valued in the cultural setting. Hence, due to Rinpoche's example, the students of Gomde can imitate and reproduce Tibetan Buddhist values that are ultimately at the heart of students' ethical shifts. His teachings, as shown in Figure 6, enable this to happen.



Figure 6 Guidance from Rinpoche by Gomde's pools



Interestingly, though, Rinpoche is maintaining the relative uniformity of a conflicting set of moral values in a unique location for Tibetan Buddhism. Although norms are being upheld in one tradition, they are being simultaneously transposed into another. This necessarily means a conflict of values, one where the student must decide for themselves how to engage. Although Robbins (2004) never explains what happens when the "Cultural Setting" shifts whilst the exemplar remains, I argue that it creates a new system whereby those of the "New" setting aim to emulate that of the "Old" setting via an exemplar. Those at Gomde work hard not only to attain the same virtues as those that are dominant in Tibetan Buddhist strongholds, but also to uphold similar traditions, such as blowing conch shells for a great master's arrival. This creates a unique context that simultaneously causes shifts in ethical perspectives whilst leading to the continuation of the norms that the exemplar embodies.

Hence, I argue that Gomde and Rinpoche provide a new way of understanding the effects that exemplars can have on society: A combination of shifting and maintaining ethical perspectives.

Rinpoche's status aids in allowing students at Gomde to realise different sets of norms and values from those previously embodied. This is because people can use him to bridge the gap between "Abstract Moral Cosmologies and Lived Ethical Action" (Evans, 2023). The impact he has on the lives of students at Gomde ultimately shows us that in certain Buddhist settings, shifting how one thinks they should be living can incorporate modes beyond meditation.

For Humphrey (1997) & Robbins (2018), exemplarity is an important feature of morality systems, helping people decide how they ought to live. However, Robbins seeks to explain relative uniformity with exemplars, almost replacing "Culture" as an explanatory factor in this process, whilst Humphrey (1997) instead shows that students can stray from moral norms because they can be reflexive, determining how to live based on an attempt to creatively reimagine how an example like Rinpoche would act if he were in their position. I argue that with the example of Rinpoche, both theories can exist in tandem. This helps us understand how people come to relate to virtues that stray from cultural norms through an exemplar of a different origin. Studying an individual like Rinpoche, thus, is not just about the individual; It's also a way to see where values occur, shift, and mutate in the social domain, and what people think is a proper relationship to have with these values (Evans, 2023).

Conclusions

Gomde provides a distinct site for mapping how ethical considerations shift through lived practice. This article advances the "Ethical Turn" in the anthropology of religion by challenging the theoretical dichotomy between radical individual choice and social determinism. While conventional textual scholarship treats Buddhist ethics as an internal or scriptural rule-following exercise, my ethnographic account demonstrates that ethical transformation is an inherently relational process. As observed among interlocutors like Rachel, Daniel, and Stijn, Western practitioners do not cultivate ethical subjectivity in psychological isolation; Rather, they achieve



moral agency precisely by embedding themselves within highly structured and communal relations. By treating scriptural concepts like *anitya* and *dukkha* as living social objects rather than static dogmas, this study illuminates how contemporary subjects mobilise external traditions to navigate localised crises of meaning. Ultimately, the moral revisions taking place at Gomde reveal that the cultivation of the self is inextricably bound to daily sociality.

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