

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/257527264>

# Vocational discernment among Tibetan Buddhist monks in Dharamsala, India

Article · January 2009

---

CITATIONS

0

---

READS

296

2 authors:



[Alvin Thomas](#)

Palo Alto University

13 PUBLICATIONS 35 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE



[Gar Kellom](#)

Winona State University

5 PUBLICATIONS 7 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

# VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT AMONG TIBETAN BUDDHIST MONKS IN DHARAMSALA, INDIA

*Alvin Thomas*  
University of Michigan

*Gar E. Kellom*  
St. John's University

*A major historical shift is taking place in Tibetan Buddhism with the relocation of large numbers of monks from Tibet and the establishment of monasteries in Dharamsala, India and other parts of South Asia. This has created a shift in the way that young men are joining these monasteries and leading this age old religious tradition. Fifteen college men from Saint John's University in Collegeville Minnesota, founded by Benedictine monks who have a long-standing relationship with their fellow monastics in India, traveled to Dharamsala to conduct interviews, to hear the stories of young monks their own age, and discover the prevailing answers to the question of why they were becoming Tibetan monks in this turbulent time in history.*

**T**his study is undertaken at the intersection of several fields. First, Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan Culture, as carefully studied by religious studies scholars (Tucci, 1980), is now undergoing a dramatic change since the relocation of the Central Tibetan Administration of the Dalai Lama to Dharamsala, India in 1959. Throughout its history as one of the world's great religious traditions, Buddhism has adapted as it moved out of India where Siddhartha Gautama first envisioned the "middle way" to Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia, and the West. The world is witnessing a period of significant transition with the movement of a large refugee population, the destruction and reconstruction of monasteries

(Department of Religion and Culture, 2000), and a significant new impact of Tibetan Buddhism, heretofore hidden away in the high Himalayas. Few are now unfamiliar with this tradition as it has often been at the center of international media attention.

Second, there is a convergence of Eastern religious traditions such as Tibetan Buddhism in America (Eck, 2001; Queen, 2000) with the establishment of colleges such as Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, centers for the study of Tibetan Buddhism in most major metropolitan areas, and several large refugee communities. The second largest of those is in Minneapolis/Saint Paul, Minnesota and has resulted in rituals such as the creation of the sand mandala and performances of traditional dance and music being easily accessible to large numbers of college students (Gandhi, 1974).

Third, the Lilly Endowment has been facilitating a national discussion of the vocational discernment processes of college students by funding 88 programs on college campuses for the theological exploration of vocations. Assessment of the success of these programs is well underway

---

Alvin Thomas is a doctoral student at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Gar E. Kellom, Ph.D., is Executive Director of the Center for Men's Leadership and Service at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to [gkellom@csbsju.edu](mailto:gkellom@csbsju.edu).

(Clydesdale, 2007). Our participation in that project arose by querying gender balance in those 88 programs and the discovery that there were consistently fewer men involved in these programs (Brooks, 2008). Previous research indicated that men's spirituality was significantly enhanced with the establishment of all men's groups when certain standard practices such as confidentiality, skilled facilitation, and deep personal sharing were emphasized (Kellom, 2004).

Saint John's University (SJU) was founded by Benedictine monastics who have developed close connections between the Benedictines and the Tibetans about the common experience of monastic life for men (de Dreuille, 1999). Brother Aaron Raverty, an anthropologist who has traveled to Tibet, Dharamsala, India, and Nepal is one example of the ongoing exchange between men of different faith traditions who share a common monastic lifestyle. This project is now expanding to look not only at the vocational discernment patterns of Tibetan monks and Benedictine monks, but also the patterns of sisters in both religious traditions and a cross-cultural analysis of both. The present study focuses on the vocational discernment choices of Tibetan monks in Dharamsala, India as one illustration of what is happening with this cutting edge of Buddhism as it again migrates across the Himalayas. This study also utilized the particular expertise of American college students from Saint John's, who are familiar with the monasticism upon which their school was founded, as researchers to conduct the interviews. A review of the present literature showed a paucity of published studies addressing the vocational discernment of Tibetan Buddhist monks and none that is cross-cultural in comparison.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

We arranged for 15 students to interview 35 monks as part of the month-long Service/Research Trip to India and Nepal. The monks ranged from ages 21 to 40 years old, and most had family origins in various parts of Nepal and India, with Amdo (one of the three traditional provinces of Tibet and the birthplace of the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso) being a very commonly reported birthplace. All the monks are presently in Dharamsala, some sent there by their head monasteries located in other parts of India or Tibet. The monks for this study were chosen by a Tibetan from Dharamsala who is a volunteer coordinator

from Volunteer Tibet, an organization aimed at sourcing and organizing aid and assistance to Tibetans living in refugee status in India. He recruited those monks who wanted to learn English and had the time to do so within the brief window during which our small team would be visiting.

### *Design and Procedure*

We approached the research from a constructivist epistemological perspective (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to facilitate the kind of understanding that this stance espouses, we used the ethnographically based interview whereby the interviewer provides limited direction and prompting to the participant, allowing for an uninhibited exploration of their experiences. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) hold ethnography to be a covert or overt process through which the researcher is ". . . watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research" (p. 1). According to Manning (1992), this kind of investigation is aimed at gleaning a ". . . depth of understanding about a particular topic or experience . . ." (p. 12). Since meanings are often best understood and explored through reflection, according to van Manen (1990), we furnished the students with a list of overall questions enhanced by some guiding inquiries. Thus, the interviews were semi-structured. The structure and aim of the practices follow closely the work of Johnson (2000) which characterizes ethnography as ". . . a descriptive account of social life and culture in a particular social system based on detailed observations of what people actually do" (p. 111). This is also in keeping with the caveat demarcated by Merriam (2001) that such methodologies bring into sharp focus ". . . the essence or structure of the experience" of the participant and allow readers clearer insight into this lived experience (p. 15).

### *Interviews*

We employed creativity for this project that would allow the students to meet both goals—that of data collection and teaching English to monks. Each student worked with two monks separately each day to produce individual writing samples for each of the monks. The general guide to the writing sample was divided into three parts: (1) Tell me about yourself, (2) How did you become part of the monastery? and (3) How did becoming a monk affect your life? This kind of

partitioning allowed for manageable examination of the issues during the discussions, as well as provided ample time for immediate feedback to the monks, bearing in mind the language barriers. Thus, since people generally employ unique and personal methods of constructing meaning of their lived experiences, this method would help better capture the perspective of the participant.

We drew the interview questions from a pool of questions developed during a planning session with the student interviewers and the researchers. In multiple separate sessions, we briefed student interviewers on the process of data collection via ethnographic interviews. These sessions served as a training program that helped infuse some standardization into the data collection process. Students worked with their respective monks to help them improve English competency, and they eventually emerged with the requested writing samples. The students also kept journals of their experiences. These journals were our windows into the relationship that developed between the monk and the student, and it also served as a kind of touchstone to the final writing sample that the monk provided. Each student journalized his own thoughts about what the monk was saying or attempting to communicate during their meetings, especially regarding nonverbal cues. Thus, the logical progression of data collection had the teaching and conversation becoming the interview, the writing sample serving as the transcribed interview, and the students' journals serving as the data collector's reflections.

### *Data Analysis*

We divided the data between two researchers, one of whom took part in the collection process, and who therefore brought his understanding to bear on the limitations and difficulties in the data collection process. We each read the samples and the journals and met together subsequently in keeping with procedural guidelines suggested by Coffey and Atkinson (1996), to discuss the findings, rectify possible discrepant themes and factors, and eventually tease from the data central themes or concepts common to the transcripts/essays. This appraising of the data revealed themes that represented the commonalities in the lived experiences of the participants, thus uncovering ". . . meanings and intentions that are hidden in the text" (Crotty, 1998, p. 92). Ambiguities we thought may have resulted either from cultural or language barriers were discussed with

the individual student who had collected the data. This cross-checking and proxy-member check best approximated Lincoln & Guba's (1985) suggested methods for maintaining trustworthiness of the findings.

### **Results**

This research project was guided by thoughts and themes nestled in the overall topic of vocational discernment. The project aimed at examining the factors, patterns, and commonalities that emerged from ethnographic interviews. We hypothesized that particular themes such as family, educational, and political issues would be of interest to the research; however, the analysis of the data for revealing the most common concepts would be the final determinant of what themes would be examined in this presentation.

From this data, we formulated six themes. We based the themes on the frequency with which they appeared in the writing samples and the stories of the monks as reflected in the students' journals. After an analysis of the demographic data of the sample, we analyzed these themes in the following order: (1) study of Buddhism, (2) religious altruism/realization, (3) monastery life, (4) good education, (5) family issues, and (6) political issues.

In this sample of 35 monks, ages ranged from 5 to 21 years for the chronological age at which they joined their monasteries. The data on present age and age when they joined the monastery were recorded for 25 participants. Of these 25 monks, 15 joined in their pre-teenage years (12 years or earlier) and 22 joined before their 18th birthday. Of the 25 monks, 9 joined monasteries in their teen years, with 6 of that number in their middle to late teens.

### *Monks' Location and Age of Affiliation*

Information regarding the monks' location and age of affiliation proved to be revealing. The volunteer coordinator explained that: "The basic starting point of becoming a monk is giving up everything or renouncing." The respective monk accepts that not even he was ready yet for that kind of sacrifice and commitment. One young monk's story begins even before he was born, and we retell it because it demonstrates the intricate links between religious devotion, family issues, and regard for tradition, among other factors. Sometime during her pregnancy, a mother in a small village had a dream about her unborn child and

his possible religious past and future. A group of traveling lamas visited her. Lama is the official title for a Tibetan teacher or religious leader—much like a guru—and his duty is to instruct others in the Dharma or the religious and moral dogma of the rights and duties of each individual. Word of the dream may well have initiated the visit, and religious devotion may have birthed the dream. These suppositions aside, the story continues that she was admonished by the lamas to take special care of the young child in her womb as he would be very important someday.

The natural course of life continued and the little boy was born. While he was still very young, a separate group of lamas appeared at his mother's door, much to her surprise. They had come to collect the little boy to take him back to their monastery. Once a child has been identified as a possible reincarnation of a lama, a chosen group is dispatched to ascertain the veracity of that proposition. They study the child and eventually will subject the child to numerous tests. Thus, a little boy, independent of his own choice, is made part of a tradition bigger and older than himself. Fast forward a few decades and we sat with this young monk who, despite having been placed in a monastery at such a young age, has grown much attached to the life and philosophy of Buddhism and the monastery.

For many boys who are placed in monasteries at young ages at the will of their parents or that of the family, it is an imposed sacrifice. The coordinator pointed to disparities in a few points of interest between the boys who are sent to monasteries and those who join of their own volition. He estimates that, in Tibet, of the boys aged between 7 and 9 years old who are put into monasteries by their parents, 90% remain true to their vocation and stay for life. In India however, he points out that, of the same category of boys, 90% disrobe or go back home. Speaking on the topic of teens who join monasteries of their own volition, he estimated that in Tibet approximately 90% remain as lifetime monks and of teens in India, 80% to 90% remain. He stated emphatically, therefore, that it is far better to have boys join monasteries later rather than earlier if they live in India. It also evidences that, if the boys are in Tibet, the rate of attrition may not differ substantially.

On the other hand, the estimates seem to suggest that there is some underlying issue that may help explain these disparities, besides the ability to make one's own choices and the maturity and capability to reason abstractly, which favors teens

in the decision-making process. Both the young boys and the teenage boys from Tibet who join or are made to join monasteries have very low rates of disrobing, while their cohorts born or raised in India show dramatic differences. The coordinator summed up the truth of his estimates in this way: "When it is our choice we are more likely to stay." One could venture further, though, that young Tibetan boys are influenced by the stark reality and immediacy of their social, national, and political situation and, thus, are readier to make the sacrifice or the "renouncing" of which the coordinator spoke. The boys in India are more removed from the naked reality of the "national and cultural crisis" and may not identify as readily with this level of sacrifice or even the culture or the attempts at preserving what is left of it. Thus, it may begin to become apparent that the national and cultural identity of these young Tibetans is being slowly diffused. Further, the coordinator pointed to a dramatic decrease in the rate of boys joining monasteries in regions with which he is familiar. He estimated that in 2008 there may be only one monk from any one family or none at all, a departure from the norm of the 1960s and 1970s when there were many monks because each family had one or two monks. In the 1980s and 1990s, fewer boys were becoming monks, and there were fewer every year as boys opted to seek higher education.

Traditionally, the first son is not the one to take up this religious duty or calling, as he inherits the responsibility for the economic welfare of the family and continuing the family name. In cases where the family has only one son, especially if there is also a daughter, that son often has to forgo the monastic calling. One monk would provide understanding as to why boys were accepted into monasteries at such a tender age as 5 years. He stated: "When a child is young, the thinking is easier to teach; when you get older it is harder to change thinking." In the early childhood years, true to the monk's statement, children are more malleable and thus easier to teach. During that developmental period, the child is still forming lasting impressions of the world while becoming increasingly convinced that he or she is a part of that world. Social norms are learned, and laws regarding basic morality and social cues are passed on during that period. Hence, it would stand to reason that, if one wanted to preserve a way of life or some important custom, then it would be prudent to provide deliberate, direct, and long-term exposure to young children. Of the 25 monks whose ages were reported, 9 had joined in their

teenage years, but before their 18th birthday. Most of these ranged from 13 to 15 years. Only two joined at 17 years and one at 18.

The middle to late teenage years often are characterized as periods of intense inner turmoil and are marked by efforts at establishing independence as teens seek to define themselves separately from the identity of their parents and family. In light of the Tibetan political, national, and social situation, as well as the tenuous nature of the Tibetan identity, one could posit that an adolescent growing up with “Refugee Tibetan” status may have an additional layer of identity issues or stressors that he has to overcome in an attempt to carve out his identity.

Having achieved gender permanence and thus a semblance of gender identity at about 6 to 8 years old, and coming to an understanding of his position and varying identities (brother, son, etc.) in the family, the next aspect of identity is that of nationality. A Tibetan boy would be hard pressed to come to some conclusion regarding his national identity even as he attempts to spread his own personhood over these sub-identities. The Tibetan national context may therefore serve as another possible influence on identity development and rate of enrollment in monasteries. If the young Tibetan boy could source an avenue that would truss his threatened Tibetan identity, while also allowing for a safe and acceptable method of determining and consolidating his personhood, then he might gravitate readily to it. Monastic life presents itself as an option in this context. Thus, during the middle to late teen years, this life of discipline and selflessness may grow ever more appealingly to the young Tibetan boy.

The data support the idea that it is in teen inductees into monasteries rather than child inductees that vocational discernment occurs more credibly. As a result, we will, for the duration of this presentation, focus primarily on that teen category of monks and launch our examination of the data from that point of view. This breaks out into our six themes.

### *Study of Buddhism*

In conversation with the General Secretary of the Tibetan Government in Exile, one researcher sought clarification of the first theme of the study of Buddhism as a reason why young men join the monastery. He was told: “Monks should join with the purpose of benefiting other human beings and making them happy. That is the point—to

live to benefit the world—other sentient beings.” Many of the monks who were interviewed cited the opportunity to study Buddhism as their primary motive for choosing monastic life. This avenue was viewed as far nobler and more beneficial both to the individual and to all sentient beings than merely being a lay Buddhist. One monk suggested: “If you want real happiness, you have to become a monk.” He went further to espouse a profoundly simple thought. He added: “Nobody wants suffering—not even killers and robbers.” In the West, people often label and devalue criminals to the point where society almost negates their humanness. To these monks, however, every sentient being deserves happiness. Moreover, to be of any assistance to these and other beings, the individual who would embrace this philosophy has to be willing to renounce everything, because as a monk: “You can’t have a wife and children because you can become jealous and kids can give you problems.” A monk has to be willing to live above all these influences, as his vocation is no part-time affair that can be picked up and laid down according to the currents and flights of fancy that often govern daily secular living.

Some monks seemed to suggest that they have proven the overarching Maoist idea false. One monk, whose first exposure to Buddhism was through his grandmother, explained how he initially considered Buddhist education as no good because it was not allowed by the Chinese government under whose rule he was raised and lived for quite some time. He expressed: “Mao said, ‘religion is poison,’ and a waste of your time and no good.” His is an almost allegorical, but very real, story of one young man’s quest for redemption and spiritual catharsis. He confessed: “I got into a lot of trouble as a child. I would fight with teachers, the Chinese children, and even the Tibetan children, too.” His behavior forced him to drop out of school at the young age of 13, but his troubled ways did not change. He yearned to learn about Tibetan culture, especially since it was censored in his Chinese-run school. He knew that many people believed in Buddhism socially and he wanted to learn more too, but he could not find anyone to teach him. He met a *Geshe* (title conferred upon a monk who has devoted usually 12-20 years of study of Tibetan Buddhism through text memorization and debate) who promised to teach him if he was serious, but his seriousness would be judged by whether or not he was willing to move to a monastery in South India. He acquiesced and, although his parents doubted that he

really had what it took to saddle such a gargantuan commitment and sacrifice, they supported the idea. He studied for 6-½ years from the age of 14, and it was during his studies of Buddhist philosophy that he began to learn how to be a master of his emotions, specifically his anger, jealousy, and hatred. His friendships began to blossom as did his number of friends. He discovered that, when one becomes angry, it does not help others. He concluded his story with a very poignant quotation from the Dalai Lama: “You are your own master or you are your own enemy.”

The discipline and the stoicism involved with monastic life, coupled with the philosophies of peace, contentment, and coexistence characteristic of the Buddhist way of life, provide potentially cogent avenues to young Tibetan men who are seeking answers to the existential questions—who am I, and why am I here. The General Secretary’s words assumed a ring of Socratic wisdom when he said:

You only have 100 years. If you spend your life making others miserable and causing pain, what is that? Your life is no use. But if you spend your life making things better for others, that’s a life well spent. We are here such a short time.

In light of this statement, one might expect that a torrent of young men wanting to be monks would be a welcome occurrence, but the General Secretary was quick to post a caveat to his position. He cited the Dalai Lama when he says that they are interested in the quality of the potential monks rather than the mere quantity. He added: “A lama must be realized. It should be that when he speaks his words bring happiness to others.”

The attempt by monks to inform others of their culture and philosophy becomes apparent in their dedication to the goal of benefiting all sentient beings when one considers the voracious appetite that has been developing in the realm of knowledge and the languages, especially English. The intention for most of these students of the language is to become sufficiently proficient so as to be capable of sharing the Buddhist teachings and the intricacies of the accompanying philosophy with Westerners. To appreciate how free these monks are to undertake this task, one is reminded of the “renouncing,” the austere sacrifice that the monks take willingly unto themselves. One monk explained:

If I had left monks and had a family, I would have to (provide) give food, shelter, clothes. If I stay a monk I can pray

and have myself and education. I want good works and good advice. I can meditate, love others, and still be a monk, but I could not do it if I have a wife and children.

While through Western eyes the confession may seem almost self-serving, it proves to be anything but that, as it constructs the spiritual and emotional space that makes a commitment to the happiness of all sentient beings possible.

### *Religious Altruism and Realization*

Monks acknowledge: “The Buddhist monk’s duty is to help another person, kindness, affection, love, good ideas, [and] good leadership.” This religious altruism, often along with some form of religious realization or change, was another key factor in the decision-making process that resulted in monastic life for these monks. Those who cited study of Buddhism as key to their decision to take monastic vows relished the study of Buddhist philosophy and the ritual-related sutras and scripts, while those who cited religiously altruistic factors seemed more honed in on the service aspect of the philosophy and the practical and immediate benefits to human beings and all other sentient beings. It should not be understood, however, that either one of these paths is philosophically or religiously superior to the other. In fact, both these characteristics of the Buddhist monk’s life are so carefully intertwined that in this discussion it may often seem that there is no concrete difference; and, if one takes that stance, it would not be an incorrect one. The two are symbiotic, though for the sake of this presentation we have examined them separately, but only as it pertains to their function as factors that influence the decision for monastic commitment.

Some monks spoke of a call to the monastery, while others told of having a burning passion for others and for sentient beings, but both seemed to have found their answer in Buddhism. “I had many questions and no answers,” one monk simply stated. While another, still in keeping with an almost existential theme, declared: “I became a monk this life to get good knowledge this time and to help other people and animals in this life. I can benefit all people and animals in this life.” Here, referencing his belief in rebirth and, thus, his past life or lives, the monk seemed on a mission to prepare himself to be of service, not just in this life, but also in his successive lives as well. The aim here is not at learning sutras or scripts for

the sake of learning or for spiritual self-efficacy but, rather, for mastering those rules and thus being reborn in a position that would be of ultimate benefit to all beings in their quest for happiness.

The monks believe that life as a monk will help them be reborn as a human being in the next life, since monks follow the rules of Buddhism more strictly than do laypeople. Hence, if one is gravely concerned with the afterlife or afterlives, then it would not be a far cry from logic to expect that many would seek this monastic lifestyle, even with all its stoicism. Referencing the estimates of the Volunteer Tibet coordinator, however, one could conclude that many young Tibetan boys and men are not as particularly concerned with afterlives as much as they are with the numbers of those seeking monastic life continuing to dwindle. It simply is not possible for a layperson to be able to devote the requisite time and energy that the monk is able to do on a daily basis. The demands of secular life make an already difficult task seemingly impossible. Thus, it becomes the vocation of the monk to gird up those in the rest of society and the world at large who, in their quest for happiness, have chosen more secular means, which paradoxically leads to even more unhappiness and suffering, according to the monks' explanation of their philosophy. To be a monk is to be happy, and to be happy one has to be a monk, these devotees seemed to say.

In individuals' search for happiness, people can get so engulfed with what they perceive as differences that they end up using their lives to cause misery and pain to others and, to quote the words of the General Secretary: "What is that? Your life is of no use." One monk explained that the red robes they wear as monks are only a small difference from other people saying: "Skin does not matter; inside all humans are the same." Many people seemingly never come to this realization, according to the monks, going on their chosen paths to perceived happiness, often leaving in their wake a field of wasted lives, wrecked spirits and dreams, and crippled souls. Some monks, it seems, have an innate passion for people and other sentient beings even before they are fully immersed in Buddhist philosophy. Many of the monks confessed that they ". . . became a monk because I have compassion for people. I wanted to make people happy." They believe that their chosen vocation was the best way to make people happy, the best way to reduce suffering, and the best way to get closer to Buddha.

Did these men feel the compassion (they reported) before they joined the monasteries? Is it a result of their embracing of the teachings and philosophy of Buddhism? Or, even more, is their behavior an environment-seeking one? By environment-seeking behavior, we ask whether these men have actively or passively sought out an environment that was most conducive to their aptitudes and passions. Either of these could be true but, because most of the monks indicated that their compassion toward all beings was a driving force behind their decision to become monks, we conclude that theirs seemingly is environment-seeking behavior in most cases. These young men are a more compassionate, more emotive, gentler, peace-loving, and nurturing kind of individuals who, understanding the paradoxical state of human beings and the interrelated fates of all sentient beings according to karma and rebirth, seek a path that allows them to intervene, as it were, on behalf of paradoxically entwined people. Their compassion either drives them to Buddhism or, maybe inversely, Buddhism draws them in with the opportunity to express their compassion for all beings in a structured and socially acceptable way. Most monks can usually point to no other way of helping people and animals in this life or the next than through being a Buddhist monk.

The stories that led many of these monks to pursue this path of "renouncing" in order to best benefit all humankind were quite intriguing. Some were tales of desperate slaves to anger, rage, jealousy, and hatred seeking redemption and, in achieving this redemption, they found a profound purpose for their lives. Such is the story of a previously mentioned monk whose meeting with a Geshe would become the catalyst that changed his life forever. He now described himself as being transformed from a confused, hateful, violent teen to a peaceful, content, and compassionate monk. Yet others were drawn down this path as a direct result of some introspection that led to a cathartic decision to change one's life and worldview. The resultant decision to join the monastery became part of a relatively logical progression to what can be described as a spiritual chain reaction.

The story that follows is of one such monk who, moved by a personal lesson, gleaned from turning his eyes inward, which led to a spiritual chain reaction that culminated in his enrollment in a monastery at a young age. His was a tale of woe that moved quickly past the physical and led to a religious realization. His story started when

sometime in the sixth grade he was forced out of formal education due to a severe illness. To remain useful to the family, he was occupied in his sister's business where soon the routine became a mundane dance of existence (to him) rather than an abundant life. He would wake up early, eat breakfast, tend to customers, have lunch, nap, conduct more business, eat dinner, go to bed, wake up the following day and do the same all over again. The monk believed his life was destined to be that of a businessman which, though potentially lucrative, was very mundane.

This routine was disturbed by the death of a family friend and fellow businessman. It was at the subsequent cremation ceremony following the funeral, the monk explained, that he had his epiphany. Like him, this man had been working for most of his life, and now that he was dead, all his humdrum daily routines, along with all the money he had earned, were useless. Now that he was dead, all of it, all the energy expended in the chase of money and power, this young boy had calculated and appraised as a waste. He did not esteem that fate for himself and, now more than ever, he regretted all the lying that seemed an inextricable part of doing business. At this point, a boy stood on the cusp of a spiritual epiphany as he assumed the role of the other and saw himself, his life, and possible lives, in the lifeless body displayed on the ceremonial pyre. He was 11 years old, yet very capable of abstract thought. He also was far less egocentric than a typical 8-year-old would be. Thus, the monk described himself as being ready (and without coaching), to assume the role of the other, seeing himself through others' eyes. This phenomenon described by the monk elucidates why a decision made at this stage of development and, even with these or like conditions, would have greater potential durability than if it were imposed upon a young child.

Standing on the cusp of spiritual and religious realization, the 11-year-old boy reflected on the afterlife (or afterlives) as he glared at the harbinger of thought that coursed through his brain. He was unsure about the afterlife and he was very concerned that, if he did nothing with his life and there really was an afterlife, he would be in a quandary. However, if he was able in his work to find balance and peace and improve his mind, then he would be secure either way. Consequently, he decided to join the monastery. This monk opined, in sum: "A calm mind is what is most important in life."

Religious realization is often coupled with religious altruism—but is the monk's story demonstrative of a boy saving himself or of a boy seeking to serve others? If the intent is to save oneself for the sole purpose of saving oneself, then we can argue that little altruism is present. But if there exists a greater goal, one that expands to include many others, and the salvation of the individual becomes merely one action in a sea of actions, then there is the potential making of an altruistic act. The young neophyte monk originally sought a greater purpose for his life, one that did not entail his having to deceive and mistreat others in order for him to achieve perceived happiness. He instead renounced these actions and was remorseful. In the stead of this old life he resolved to live one that now is beneficial to others—one that predominately gives rather than takes.

### *Monastery Life*

Monastic life is one way to give much of oneself without the prospect of hoarding anything material in return. Consider: Up for breakfast at 6:00 a.m.; 6:00 to 8:00 a.m., temple; 8:00 to 10:00 a.m., meditation, Dharma, teaching; 10:00 to 11:00 a.m., debating about Buddhist compassion, reading books; 11:00 a.m., lunch; 2:00 to 4:00 p.m., teaching Buddhism and grammar; 4:00 to 5:00 p.m., relax, bathe, and take a walk; 6:30 p.m., debate group. This is the typical daily routine that one monk described regarding his life in a monastery. Though not every monastery has exactly the same routine, most likely would not differ drastically. Those monks who were not affiliates of any particular monastery in the area had more relaxed schedules and more free time, which they often spent by taking English classes or learning to use the computer. What was explained previously regarding the virtual impossibility of living the true Buddhist monk's life becomes clearer when one examines the very circumspect schedule that governs the life of the monk in the monastery.

Monastic life is characterized by discipline and control. Asked why he decided to stay in the monastery after many years of life there, a monk gave an answer that was similar to what most of the others proffered. He said that he had an initial attraction to Buddhist philosophy and that interest had guided his decision to join. He would later explain that the discipline and self-control inculcated through the philosophy he learns allow him to resist distractions and temptations to leave. This stoic life of self-control and discipline moves

very quickly for young monks, from being taught Buddhist philosophy to what one monk described as an “art of living.” Monks cited the development of control over one’s mind as a welcome benefit from this vocational choice, and thus they argue that their lives become more meaningful. Modern lay Buddhists cannot make such a strong definitive claim because they, according to these monks: “. . . pray for good business but monks do not pray for worldly things but take refuge in the wisdom of god.”

We differentiate between modern and older lay Buddhists because, according to one monk participant, in order to be a serious practitioner of Buddhism, a person must leave home and must have many years of free time, as we have described previously. Monks, therefore, are free to focus all their energy on their vocation, while lay Buddhists have no choice but to divide their energies and attention. In old times, however, there were many yogis and hermits but today there are fewer. To say that sacrifice and “renouncing” are integral parts of the Buddhist monk’s lifestyle, and therefore play a very important role in this vocational decision, is an understatement that we have examined repeatedly. Unavoidably, however, this issue will be reiterated since it is a critical and interrelated portion of the lifestyle and the vocational decision-making process. Talking about part of the sacrifice he embraced, and that many aspiring monks face, one participant pronounced:

Under such circumstances [Chinese policies toward Tibetans and the Dalai Lama] no sensible person, especially a religious person, can survive without ignoring the world around you and your destiny and comfort. Under such circumstances I had to leave my dear parents, dear relatives, dear nomadic life, the monastery setting, and the beautiful grassland behind and come to India.

Like the lotus flower, out of the muck and struggle through which many of these young men often have to tramp, many emerge as beacons of stoicism, perseverance, and peace, thus gaining them the respect and admiration of their communities and their countrymen.

Life in the monastery includes a plethora of statues, teachings, temples, texts, community, chants, ceremonies, sutras, scripts, schedules, rules, and more. One monastery had 3,000 monks, an abbot, a chant master, pilgrimages, novices, the Three Jewels (Dharma, Buddha, Sangha), meditation, prayer in the halls, and mandalas. But what

cogently keeps monks from disrobing once they have settled into the task of shouldering this hefty vocation? The interview data suggest that possibly the most influential factor is the skill level of the monks in relation to the skill-set demands that exist in the secular world. The skills that monastery life and Buddhist philosophy embrace are usually juxtaposed to those that would be critical to successful navigation of life outside the monastery. A monk described monastery life thusly: “Monastery discipline is good and clean. I will never forget my monastery’s kindness in this life.” The seemingly idealistic world that is the Buddhist monastery significantly contrasts the rough and sometimes heartless world outside the monastery. Many of the monks confess that they have “. . . no qualifications to work outside the monastery because [they] join so young.” They argue that, though they love the monastery and the life that comes with it, they really “. . . know no other life besides being a monk . . . didn’t know anything about business or anything outside monastic life.”

It appears, therefore, that most monks either lack the motivation to want to disrobe, or maybe they are too deficient in skills to dare venture into the outside world. Additionally, one could proffer the argument that, after having grown accustomed to the structure and relative comfort of the world of the monastery, it would take an act of personal upheaval or one that challenged very convincingly the life and philosophies that these young men have embraced in order to cause disrobing. Potentially, such a change could be most expected from a monk who had monastery life imposed upon him or one who never began to identify in a personal way with the teachings and philosophies that he was taught. Once accounting for these factors, it would become fairly difficult, if not impossible, to tell whether the love that monks expressed and felt for their monastery and their chosen lifestyle was a function of cognitive dissonance or a love that grew from developmental circumstances.

Whatever conclusion the reader may choose to draw from the question above, it cannot be denied that monks exhibit very strong bonds of love and respect for each other and their monasteries. The monastery is like a commune and the members function like a close extended family. This atmosphere could be an ideal place for anyone seeking persons with similar passions and vocational leanings. It also would be a safe and revered space for exploring one’s culture, religion,

nationality, and personal spirituality. One monk told his story, one of a broken, dysfunctional family torn apart initially by domestic violence, how his drunken father would beat both the young boy and his mother. The family was further stressed and torn when both his parents died while he was still at a tender age. Dispatched to relatives, his own education and care fell secondary to that of his cousins who were now entrusted to his care. Their welfare became just another one of his many chores.

With a life that seemed to begin so dimly, one might have negative prognostications, but this young boy's life was changed when he joined the monastery with the support of his aunt (who may have been more than willing to have one fewer mouth to feed and one fewer burden to bear). The fledgling monk sought the warmth of a place where he belonged and could feel genuine affection. He told the story of finding this at his monastery and admitted that it was key to his vocational decision. The monk also admitted that his main interests as a monk were compassion, affection, and love of Buddhism. With such an emotional and personal commitment to the vocation, the seemingly pure devotion and construction of personal identity makes sense, with the monastic life elements of the larger monastic identity as its building blocks.

### *Good Education*

It cannot be denied that monasteries provide some form of education. One could suggest from the stories and comments of the monks that the level and content of the education provided may be somewhat circumscribed within a very religious and Buddhist foundation. In spite of this fact, while many of the skills and much of the knowledge may be appraised as devalued capital in the outside world, for many of these monks this may have been one of their few opportunities to receive an education. This "good education," or at least the opportunity to earn one, was yet another of the decisive factors in the vocational discernment process for many of the interviewed monks.

One of the data collectors commented as follows regarding the enthusiasm of the interviewed monks assigned to him: "It was awesome to see the two monks when they got something or understood it. Their faces would light up and they would kick their feet. Their thirst for knowledge is almost enviable." This exhilaration with and for

learning was a phenomenon that would be played out many times over as other data collectors returned with similar stories of monks for whom the learning process seemed almost a palpable and honest experience—one that as a teacher I could visibly observe with little difficulty. If one were to compare these reactions to the stories of wholesale woe and disappointment sometimes reported by Western teachers, the situation would seem to suggest a devaluation of the educational experience in the West at the expense of the results, which society often demands instantly. One could venture to conclude that the West values the destination more so than the odyssey, while the monks in the study, at least from this limited vantage point, savor the educational journey far more than Westerners typically do. Of course, we could be charged with overly romanticizing the monks and being overly critical of our own culture, not to mention being guilty of stereotyping.

Generalizations and all culturally romantic notions considered, the monks in our study conveyed a deep love for knowledge and learning that generally existed among themselves and often in the families from which they came. At age 13, one young man was urged very strongly by his mother to join the monastery. For him, monastic life: ". . . is [was] the only way to get an education." Another was sent to the monastery at age 8 by his parents for the primary purpose of obtaining an education. These kinds of scenarios manifested themselves in numerous monk stories and, in most cases, the children were offspring from poorer nomadic villages that allegedly offered very rudimentary education. If one had aspirations beyond, say, the herding and nomadic lifestyle, then an education beyond that level was necessary. More often than not, the best local alternative for that kind of education was the monastery.

Describing an environment of extreme poverty in his nomadic East Tibetan province of Amdo, a monk relived his desperation to get out—to escape the poverty and seeming desolation. He remembered always reading children's books as he tended to the animals on the farm, a testament to his love for learning. Becoming a monk was always a thought, and it always seemed in his estimation like something that would be a beneficial undertaking. To find a more altruistic slant to such a story, or to at least be able to find what Western minds (such as ours) would term a Buddhist motive requires some interpretation. There were various stories, however, that would need far less interpretation to reach the same ends.

For example, one monk narrated: “One day I was reading a story about Tibetan kings, and my aunt scolded me for not doing my work.” This love for learning continued to be tested as he would later spend 3 years at a small monastery close to his nomadic village. There were no teachers there, so he would leave for Lhasa with the intention that he would become educated and be able to return to help another group. The monk had taught many young Tibetan monks the Tibetan language before, but he thought he could be of far greater use if he had a firm grasp of Buddhist philosophy, so he sought to continue his education in that direction. In his case, the desire for self-improvement assumed a symbiotic relationship with the desire to return and be of service to others; hence, the hybrid of the two desires is an altruistic act and one that, from this vantage point, was rooted in Buddhist teaching.

Yet another story illustrated how restriction sometimes served to fuel the desire for what life seemingly restricted. A monk disclosed: “At age 15 I left my nomadic life in Amdo and became a monk. I studied Buddhist philosophy and ritual-related sutra and scripts.” This monk’s story continued as a carbon copy of many of the other stories that we have examined. The difference is that this monk reminisced to a time period spanning when he was 8 years old to when he was 15, when he studied only Chinese because it was a compulsory subject at school (local public schools). To this young Tibetan, seeking both national and personal identity, such a parochial action became a vehicle for rebellion. He decided to learn all he could about Buddhism, Tibetan culture, and its religion—all which he felt had been denied. The monastery provided the opportunity for an education that had been disavowed by the authorities and the governmental system. Another monk with a more “evangelical” motive moved to Dharamsala in order to learn English because he deemed it a critical skill for operating in the contemporary world. His intent, like many of the monks who sought to learn the English language, was to be able to articulate the teachings of Buddha and the intricacies of Buddhist philosophy to Westerners. Education, thus, is not merely acquired for its own sake but, rather, it is undertaken with a higher charge of service in mind.

The monk whose story of being scolded by his aunt for reading while he was supposed to be tending the herd later revealed a few more of the hardships that sometimes befall those questing educational opportunities. He told of his

unsuccessful attempts at becoming admitted into a Tantric monastery in Lhasa but that, while he awaited an eventual change in fortune, he stayed with a poor family where he read Buddhism and performed puja. In a stroke of providence or good karma, one may say, the family had good business relations in India, so he was able to find a way out of Tibet. He was asked to take the children with him. They traveled as part of a larger group until he dropped the two children off at a Tibetan school and then continued along with his quest to South India and educational opportunity. Alongside his physical odyssey the man had done his own “renouncing” as part of the expectations of the philosophies that he was about to make his lifestyle. The monk reflected: “If I marry, I wouldn’t have a good education, would not know about Buddhist reason.” One monk furthered the statement to comment didactically that marrying a wife equaled suffering. From a Western lens, the reasoning is obscure and almost callous, but suffering may be a slightly different concept in non-western eyes and may have many different connotations. If having a wife does keep one from the ultimate religious, personal, and natural calling, then it potentially could be paralleled with suffering of the worst kind, from the monk’s perspectives.

### *Family Issues*

Does struggle and suffering of any kind serve to strengthen the resolve of the monk regarding his vocational choice? Does this suffering serve merely as hardship and a hurdle to be overcome, or does it perform character-building actions? Does the resolve that is supposedly built by suffering weaken over time? Many of these questions were answered by the research participants, in varying degrees, as we examined the interview data. The impact of family issues on the monks’ decision was a critical category of inquiry. In some cases, family issues of various kinds drove young boys into monasteries while, in other cases, the strong emotions connected with familial ties threatened to undermine the vocational choice.

With 1 older sister and 2 younger brothers, aged 15 and 8 years, one 21-year-old young man decided to take up monastic life because he felt a calling to that vocation. We met him shortly after he had made his decision and the monk was newly arrived at his monastery. As noble as the intention was, it conflicted with long-held tradition that the eldest son inherited the responsibility of

caring for the family and continuing the lineage. There was immediate conflict with the family patriarch, described as a quiet man who works in the army. While the father eventually quietly acquiesced to his son's decision and supported him, the situation raised the question: What happens when traditional duty and one's calling seemingly conflict? Judging from the resolution of the impasse, it seemed in this particular case that the calling wins out, if the devotee is intent to embark on the noble undertaking. It may be possible that, although tradition had to bend to personal religious passion in this case, the presence of two other sons, though younger, may have softened the conflict caused by this assault on tradition. The young monk talked about being continually wracked with guilt because his family has to support him financially through his decision. He made it clear that, in his culture, it is important to honor one's parents and care for them, but he had no idea how he was going to repay them following his monastic decision.

Although, or maybe because, the young monk was still such a neophyte in his chosen vocation, he seemed torn by the very duality that led to his initial decision to join the monastery. He described a perpetual paradox: to follow what he felt was his calling contrasted with following noble tradition. He must dispense with it or at the very least break tradition. This was a conundrum that will have to be resolved as the monk continues repeatedly to reevaluate his decision. He offered one assessment where he examined the possibility of working in the "real world" and concluded that he does not have the qualifications for such a job. At the time of our interview, the monk was still: ". . . questioning whether or not to remain a monk because of his family," wrote one data collector.

It took the collective efforts of the young neophyte monk and some of his neighbors to convince his disapproving parents that he should be allowed to answer what he felt was his spiritual call. The questioning of his vocational decision potentially could have been compounded by boredom, coupled with the stress of having to acclimate to a new area without the normal social support systems to which he had grown accustomed. With that much external and internal stress, it is possible that all the tension and resultant issues could be generalized to the decision that brought him to that point. There was an optimistic sense of hope regarding this torn young monk. Just before we left, he received news that some of his

friends from his old monastery were moving to the same region where he presently was based. They were going to share an apartment and, although he was elated by that prospect, the monk was still questioning his decision because of his family.

Another young monk seemed to have similar misgivings about his decision to join the monastery. His came from an agrarian family, having seven brothers, one of whom was a soldier. Sent to the monastery at age 6 by his father, this sibling was meant to bring honor to the family, as it was thought honorable to have a monk in the family. Additionally, like some Western parents who sometimes try to live vicariously through their children, the young monk's father had always desired the life of a monk, but he never felt that he had the chance. This man was determined to have one of his sons become a monk, and the lot fell to this young man. This monk, having entered at 6 years old, now confessed that he stays because it is not possible to return home, if he were to disrobe. He seemed less happy than most monks about the monastic life and he was less excited to talk about Buddhist philosophy. If this attitude is, in fact, due to the aforementioned factors and his overall displeasure, and not merely a cultural misunderstanding, an anomaly, or miscommunication between the monk and the data collector, then there are interesting questions and subjects to raise here regarding the lifetime calling of monastic life.

There is seemingly considerable external social pressure that intends to keep young boys true to their vocation, whether or not they made the choice freely. The pressure of knowingly bringing dishonor to one's parents and family, as opposed to the honor for which they hoped, is a considerable weight to bear. Likely, it functions as a very powerful deterrent to those who would consider disrobing. However, to reference the astounding estimates that the coordinator of Volunteer Tibet had provided, how does one reckon these two disparate occurrences? The story of the eldest son who, against tradition, took up monastery life may provide an interesting explanation. In both cases there seems to be a weakening of social sanctions' potency. Could it be that the younger generation of Tibetans do not feel as guided or bound by tradition and customs as do the older generations? An explanation along these lines would, if only parsimoniously, begin to account for the stark differences in the estimates given for the number of young Tibetan boys who,

put into monasteries from 7 to 9 years old, disrobe, as opposed to their cohort who grew up in India. There may yet be life in this explanation as many monks in this data set provided support for the idea that there is an eroding of cultural tradition and, with it, the waning of the power of social sanction, norms, and mores by which the old guard lived.

One older monk leveled a few indictments against the younger generation of Tibetans, saying: "Some young people think that we lost our country because we have been too passive." This was a response to the indictment that some of the young—more than likely the lay Buddhists—have leveled against the old guard. This denunciation contrasts tradition and the essence of Buddhist philosophy thus serving as a telling sign of the potential erosion of social sanctions' power and traditions that we discussed earlier. An older monk added: "In old times a man who could spread peace and compassion was considered masculine. Now, focus has shifted toward money and materialism." No matter what the outside culture believed, the monk thought, it was always best to work toward peace and compassion. In that light, then, the structure and discipline of the monastery become even more important, if it is to be the last bastion of Buddhist and Tibetan culture and tradition. If one does aim at protectionist policies regarding culture, then a minimization of interaction, or at the very least a controlled interaction with other cultures, is advisable.

The family still remains the ideal place for conveying culture and tradition for Tibetans, but, when families do not function normally, the monastery often seems to fill in the position as surrogate. In the instance of domestic violence, the family structure is compromised and dysfunction ensues. One monk, whose story of domestic violence we have examined under a separate theme, underwent a kind of Cinderella story. Following the death of his father, who was "not a good man," and the subsequent passing of his mother, the monk spoke of providence leading him to a monastery. There he experienced the love, acceptance, compassion, and nurturing for which he had been longing. The family atmosphere of the monastery served as a haven from cruel fate for yet another monk. At 12 years old he was still reeling from the death of his father, at which time 2 of his 7 siblings, aged 2 and 3, also passed. The monk recounted: "When I saw such a very sad situation, I decided my own self to become a monk, my mother was very happy." With the

family being assaulted by tragedy, the monastery became a refuge for both the young monk and the honor and hope of his mother. In these types of situations, the family structure and the congenial, nurturing atmosphere of the monastery become a welcomed and very capable surrogate for the young boy who is leaving the besieged family.

It appears that most monks, regardless of the circumstances under which they joined the monastery, eventually grew to love and appreciate it. "Pressure from [my] parents" was the reason for joining the monastery, a monk wrote, but he would allude to his love for the Buddha, his respect for the Dalai Lama and his teachings, and Tibetan Buddhism as the key reasons for his decision to stay. He was 13 years old when he joined, but he has: ". . . obviously grown to love his life as a monk even though he did not choose it," a data collector observed. The teachers and uncle of one monk agreed that he should become a monk, and soon he was in a monastery. The monk's present view of the decision: "It is OK. Yes, it is. Not wrong. I like being a monk and doing a monk's job." A possible drawback to putting boys into monasteries at a very young age is that they have no frame of reference when they do become old enough to question the decision that was made on their behalf. One monk has no memory of life before the monastery, since his grandmother decided to enroll him in a monastery while he was still in kindergarten. He has grown into the decision, though, and reported that he enjoys his present life and lifestyle.

### *Political Issues*

To attempt to examine the concept of vocational discernment regarding Buddhist monks without including the political situation and its effects on that process would fail to aptly represent the findings from our data. The monks describe the political situation in Tibet as one in which it is difficult to freely practice one's religion. This lack of religious freedom is underscored by the physical destruction of the temples or, in other cases, the detaining of the abbots and other leaders, the terrorizing of the monasteries through repeated ransacking and raids, the usurping of the rule of the monastery by the Chinese government, or a combination of these and other tactics. Relating his experience with the political situation, one monk communicated: "I could not join my local monastery because it was destroyed by the Chinese invasion. Only two monks remain because of Chinese

occupation.” Another monk added: “From the late 1990s the Chinese policy toward the Tibetans and Dalai Lama became intolerable.” They served to echo what we had heard so many times on our trip from many different sources that were supportive of the Tibetan plight. A young monk proposed: “This makes it impossible to live an ideal monk’s life . . . under such unjust laws and orders no sensible being, especially a religious person, can survive without ignoring the world around you and your destiny as well as your comfort.” Anyone still living in Tibet or Lhasa who seriously desires to take up monastic commitments has to be willing to face what many of the monks described as almost insurmountable odds, often to the extent of being prepared to bleed and possibly die for that choice.

Even those monks who have, through craft or providence or both, managed to get out of Lhasa and into India to join monasteries, say they have to worry about the families they left behind as these families often suffer physically the brunt of the young man’s decision. One monk was very near tears as he told us of his aged parents whom he had to forsake. He related not being able to communicate with them because all communication channels were monitored by the Chinese government and the family could face serious penalties for that action. Not only communication, but movement also was especially restricted. A young monk told of how he skirted restrictions in order to take up his monastic life, explaining: “I could not go to Lhasa without permission of the Chinese government. My uncle was a very clever and smart man and bribed the official in the area with cheese, butter, and fruit.”

A monk told his story of coming to India to be a monk. It turned out to be such a powerful account of suffering, determination, and fortune that it seemed to parallel only the plot of a very well-written movie. The indomitable spirit of the narrator is what shone through most brilliantly as he retold his trials, before commenting that his journey really was not completely terrible, considering the fact that he was lucky to have come through alive while many other Tibetans did not. He related the severe poverty that his older brother experienced as he escaped in his village. His brother excelled in Chinese at school and was thus able to secure a job from the Chinese government in a law office. While his older brother worked in the secular world, this young man sought a vocation as a Buddhist monk.

It would take four arduous attempts before the monk successfully made it to India. His first attempt was made with a group of 15 people. After a long trek through the Himalayas they arrived in Nepal, where there was a bridge guarded by a Chinese camp. Just across that river laid his desires for religious freedom. No sooner had they begun to cross the bridge than they were seized. The rest of the night became a nightmare that they would all have to relive for the rest of their lives. They were held for the entire night and tortured throughout their detainment. He told of being forced to hold their arms outstretched in front of their bodies while they supported the weight of heavy, flat, metal objects. To ensure that the torture had its intended effect, cigarette lighters were positioned directly under their outstretched arms, so that when their arms inevitably grew too fatigued to support the heavy weights, they were burned.

Early the following morning the group was loaded into jeeps and transported to another prison camp. They were issued a stiff warning, as it was their first offense, but they received some leniency and were released. They were sent back to Lhasa. After about 4 or 5 months, the monk made a second trek with another group. A jeep took the group to the base of the mountain from which they hiked for 13 days through the Himalayas until they came to Kathmandu. The individuals were identified by police in the area and taken to a detention center. Through a translator they explained to their captors that they were only trying to see the Dalai Lama. The police discussed the situation among themselves and then told the group that they would be put on a bus that would take them to see the Dalai Lama. So strong was their conviction and desire to escape and take up monastic life and start a new life in a Tibetan community that they naively believed the story without question. Along the way to the supposed destination, two detainees who were familiar with the route realized that they were heading in the wrong direction. They were headed for Tibet.

They were handed over to the Chinese police and spent two days at a prison camp before being returned to Tibet. Utterly disillusioned, the young man joined a monastery in Lhasa and abandoned his hopes of ever being free to practice his religion. It was a full year before he tried again. His time at the monastery did not hold the best of memories. There was very little food, the educational opportunities were very poor, and the building suffered frequent forays from the Chinese police.

With a group of 47 Tibetans he began his third escape attempt, and this one, like the others, was set for failure. Packed in a truck, they drove to the mountains before beginning a 20-day march through the Himalayas. This attempt was made during the winter and they encountered the season's harsh conditions. They slept during the day to avoid the worst of the winter conditions and walked all through the night. One of the nuns who was with them fell ill and a monk broke his leg. Both seemed like harbingers of the eventual failure of this trip. The group had to take turns carrying the injured until they happened upon a small village where they left the sick with a bit of money to cover their care.

After another lengthy hike, there was one mountain peak left to cross, and the group could see their promised land. They spied what they thought was a small village of nomads in the distance and made their way toward them hoping for some desperately needed rest and recuperation. The encampment turned out to be Chinese police who had been tipped off by the injured members of the group when the Chinese had raided the small village. The young monk-to-be was taken into custody and again returned unceremoniously to Tibet—a third failed attempt. Why would one not have simply quit?

His lengthening criminal record made it difficult for him to return to his old local monastery, so he lived with a family in Lhasa for one year. During that time, he was informed by some Tibetans that there was an alternative route where chance of success was far greater than those he had been taking before, but it would be longer. He made up his mind to try yet a fourth time in order to reach India and left with three other monks. Again they set off by jeep for the mountains, and after 7 days of driving they hiked for 30 days through the mountains. Falling on hard times, they traded with some nomads, giving some of their warm clothing for food since, after only one week, their supply had run out. They reached Nepal safely, and again their attempt at escape seemed like it would be foiled when they were discovered by police. One of them managed to elude capture, but the others, including the monk whom we interviewed, were taken to a detention center and interrogated.

The escaped monk did not forsake his spiritual brothers but, rather, alerted the Tibetan agency of the capture and imprisonment of his three fellows. This action may have tipped the scales of providence in their favor because the agency

promptly dispatched a representative to ascertain the circumstances under which they had been detained. Jaded by prior negative experiences, they believed their aide to be an undercover policeman and thus refused to converse with him. A second representative was sent, and this time the group, strained and stressed by the situation and the history that gave it birth, broke down, explaining among their tears the difficulties of their journey to Nepal. A bribe from the representative to the guards ensured safe passage to India for all the travelers and, at last, what felt like a miracle seemed to have occurred for the monk. Finally, after three fruitless attempts, the young monk achieved his wish to worship and learn in a Buddhist monastery that was not censored by the Chinese government. He “. . . looked so peaceful sitting in front of me. Speaking with him helps me keep perspective, and will for a long time,” said the data collector as he looked almost in awe at the narrator of an autobiography almost too incredibly genuine, human, and touching to believe.

### **Discussion**

The human element of decisions often is the most complex factor to decipher in any situation. There are often so many variables, and they frequently interlace each other in such a complicated network of relationships that no singular exploration would suffice. There is always room for more inquiry, more questions born of the original question that remain unanswered, and still more angles from which the issue can be surveyed. With vocational discernment, the above analysis aptly applies. There are still many questions posed by our examination of these monks' vocational discernment. Here we distill the issues and examine as well as broach a few of our own questions intended to further burgeon research in this area. Of the 6 themes, religious altruism and family issues seemed the most decisive factors in the decision of the monks, although all themes possessed relative strength throughout the analysis.

The 6 reported themes continued to interlace each other as we at times seemed irrefragable, finding that more questions surfaced. When faced with the study of Buddhism theme as a salient factor, the question of inception age into the monastery became an area of particular interest. Was it better to enter the monastery as a child at the behest of one's parents or as a teen and of one's own accord? We cited an absence of identity navigation in children and, instead, saw identity construction and consolidation as characteristic of

the teen and young adult developmental periods. What must be considered, too, is that assumptions regarding abstract thought and identity navigation in younger children, in comparison to teenagers, may be tainted with the flaw of Western bias. We noticed that the relationship between fathers and sons in these communities involved a kind of apprentice model where the young boy was attached to his father and, by role playing and direct involvement, learned much that we have not yet begun to examine or fully understand. Does this apprenticeship relationship between father and son account for or otherwise impact the fact that young boys before age 9 typically are not capable of engaging in abstract thought?

What of the Tibetan boys who are born in India and the high incidence of disrobing when put into monasteries at young ages? Is it possible that a widening of the generation gap is occurring? Is the political situation exacerbating the normal situation of generational differences? Or is there an even more historical cause—the diffusion of the Tibetan national identity? We suspect that all of the above may be active in varying degrees at various times and situations. Generational differences are normal, representing the current cohort's reaction to the prevailing social conditions and their attempt to negotiate and reconcile their cultural differences with the external and internal pressures brought to bear in their social and economical development. Sometimes this results in a more fortified cultural identity, a stronger people, and the evolution of that society. In other cases, the culture and the people are weakened and may even disappear altogether. The political situation with regard to the Chinese occupation of Tibet may be placing additional stress as the younger generation becomes resentful of the older generation, making them and the traditions that they represent responsible for the present situation. These boys, seemingly of mixed identity, may lean more toward the majority culture in which they have grown up, causing a kind of atrophy with regard to the Tibetan identity.

The study of Buddhism seems intricately linked to the preservation of Tibetan culture and nationality. Young men keen on learning about their own culture and on preserving that culture find that the monastery and the philosophy that it espouses are avenues holding special interest. Much of the Tibetan culture seems like an extension of Buddhist philosophy. The number of people, for instance, who visit the temples daily and the many people who can be seen at any time of

the day counting their prayers on beads or turning prayer wheels demonstrates the link between these two entities. Monks want to study Buddhism to live a better life both now and beyond, as well as to be able to benefit others. In order to achieve any of those goals to a significant degree, a solid, thorough study of Buddhism is necessary because this sort of life must be lived via Buddhist philosophical teachings. The diligent study of Buddhism lends itself to an evangelical and apologetic function as well. A well-studied monk is able to defend and discuss his life of choice. He also is better able to share the intricacies of his life's philosophy to those who are new to it.

Some monks came into monastic commitment through a religious realization. Often, these were a result of personal introspection or an internal scrutiny prompted by an incident. Others came to monastic life through altruism. This was characteristic of decisions that put the good of the community or others before that of the individual. Many of the monks who exhibited such altruistic intentions spoke of being compassionate or seeking avenues to be compassionate. Culturally, men appeared to be far more emotionally comfortable with other men. Men holding hands and standing with limited personal space between them was a common sight. Are these men more innately compassionate, emotive, and nurturing than others in the natural population? Do they therefore gravitate to the monastery because it represents a place where their uniqueness is celebrated and rewarded? Mathematically inclined persons gravitate toward engineering and banking, and didactic people to teaching positions. Maybe, in like fashion, a certain kind of person gravitates toward that vocation.

Often the family, especially the parents, was a focal point for future monks as the young man pondered his decision. In many cases the decision was made for the young man and, in keeping with the traditions, he would respect the bidding of his family. In some other cases, the monastery, with its strong familial atmosphere, became a surrogate (of sorts) for young men who may not have had the most positive beginnings. The complexity of the commitment becomes that much more bearable when a safe and supportive atmosphere exists. "Monks practice an art of living" and if this is as true as it sounds, then one has to appreciate the arduous nature of the task, as it is not one that can be assumed and laid aside at the convenience of the monk. There are distractions and temptations; we must refrain from romanticizing

monks. Thus, the very structure of monastery life serves not only to better the Buddhist practitioner, but to help make the spiritual journey more manageable.

The monastery, in addition to providing Buddhist teaching, affords a chance to gain valuable education. The Dalai Lama has encouraged monks to learn a trio of languages: Chinese, Spanish, and English. Many of these monks may never have had the chance for this otherwise. It seems, though, that most of the education that the monks receive points toward another end, which itself fits with the goal of benefiting all sentient beings. But for those monks who decided to join the monastery because of the desire for education, is their vocation tarnished because of what seems like a selfish motive? The "selfish" motive seemingly becomes transformed in most cases as new monks learn and accept the Buddhist philosophies. In the final analysis, however, even the education for which some monks made this vocational decision is insufficient. By the monks' own admission, the teachings of the monasteries do not adequately prepare them to operate in the outside world, and why would it since they are not concerned with those things that the outside world values so highly. For those young men who grew up under Chinese rule, where their Tibetan culture and religious freedoms were denied, the monastery is a haven from oppression. There they can examine freely these critical parts of their identity and become the preservers of this history.

The family remains, along with the monastery, the last bastion of Tibetan culture, history, identity, and religion. Many young boys joined monasteries as a result of tradition, but it is apparent that tradition may have become more fluid through its clash with duty and increased modernity and an exercising of choice. The duty of the eldest son is sometimes called into question when he decides to exercise personal choice. There is an apparent weakening of the power of social pressure as young men seem less distraught by the prospect of disrobing, especially when they were put into monasteries before they were able to contribute to that decision. Traditionally, the process of making that decision was never one that elicited or expected the input of the young man, and it would be remiss of him to renege on the decision once it was finalized.

Family dysfunction was often healed or its effects at least mitigated once the young man entered the compassionate, family atmosphere of the monastery. A few monks, however, in reassessing

their decision to join the monastery or the decision that was made on their behalf, showed evidence of a kind of disillusionment and disinterest, not with Buddhism itself, but rather with the vocational choice. Thus, it becomes apparent that their present position is a possible result of poor fit rather than a failure of the monastery or the individual in any way. Most of these particular monks belonged to the category of those who were placed in monasteries as children. Other monks seemed to have grown into their situation and expressed love for monastic life and everything it represented. Though they lamented the fact that they lacked the requisite skills to operate successfully in the outside world, they had come to embrace Buddhist philosophy and monastic life. Have these monks embraced the philosophy without question? Have they bowed to social pressure and tradition? Or is Buddhism itself providing an explanation, as well as the necessary support system that makes bearing this vocational weight possible?

The entire issue of monastic life in Tibetan culture has become so tied into the political situation, if not through the many demonstrations in which monks participate, then because monasteries have become conservatories of Tibetan culture. Many of the monks have taken up the commitment almost as a kind of rebellion against the Chinese occupation and, in some cases, the Chinese stifling of Tibetan religious freedom has led to an increased lay appreciation of monks and all they represent. The Himalayas, a common path taken by those seeking escape from Chinese-controlled Tibet, seem emblematic of the insurmountable odds that young men face when seeking to practice their religion. While this route remains a daunting task, the numbers who continue to risk everything to try to stay true to their vocational choice is inspiring.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The present study, while illuminating in its findings with regard to vocational discernment in Tibetan Buddhist monks, informs the structure of future research on this topic. The language limitations of the researchers, while overcome by constant use of native volunteers working in the Tibetan villages, was a challenge especially vis-a-vis cross checking the journals with the writing samples. We believe the idea of using writing samples in this kind of research helped reduce possible stress and discomfort between the data collector and the participant, while also providing a useful

structure to guide the participant in recounting their stories. The process of allowing participants to treat the interviews as assignments for which they received assistance from fellow monks could have weakened the richness of the stories told, as this review process may have led to some censoring of some elements of the stories.

While data collectors were exposed to the ethnographic techniques before their interviews, exposure to teaching techniques, especially teaching English as a second language, may have proven helpful. That, coupled with greater prior exposure to Tibetan culture and language, may have served to improve the quality of the data and the collection process. We felt however, that the quality of the stories in this study were more than sufficient in both depth and detail to allow for this first exploration into this concern.

While the small sample of Tibetan monks in Dharamsala has produced interesting findings, it remains yet to interview monks from other Tibetan communities, most notably in Nepal, where most refugees first land after leaving Tibet. Our next student research group will be traveling there in order to conduct interviews in Nepalese monasteries. There is likewise the need to gain information from the sisters who are in monasteries in the Tibetan communities in India and Nepal, consequently, our next group will include female student researchers in order to engage in collecting the stories of women in monasteries.

There is also a need to ensure that all of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism are represented in research samples. We attempted to have a broad representation from these schools in the present study, but greater attention to this is needed in future research follow-ups. We are also beginning an ambitious project of asking the same vocational discernment questions of Benedictine monks regarding why they joined monasteries. We believe this may lead to a comparative analysis of potentially affiliated themes between Benedictine and Tibetan monastics.

### **Acknowledgments**

Original conceptualization of the project in Tibet and India and initial interviews in 2008 was done by Meagan Kellom and Kolleen Kellom. Interviews in 2009 were conducted by Michael Arnold, Jay Ranfranz, Patrick Sitzer, Nicholas Smith, Jacob Hvidson, Ethan Wang, Benjamin Hansberry, Kevin Crane, Ryan Crane, Ryan Millis, Michael Radtke, John Van Rooy, Matthew C. Johnson and Benjamin Briese. Father Mark Thamert, a SJU

Professor and monk from the Saint John's Abbey was invaluable in organizing this group. Brother Aaron Raverty consulted on the project and very special assistance came from Iris Cornelius and her grand-daughter Kayla.

### **References**

- Brooks, C. (2008, February). *A study of gender imbalance in PTEV (programs for theological exploration of vocation) programs*. Paper presented at the 2008 Conference on the College Male, Collegeville, MN.
- Coffey, A., & Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data: Complementary research strategies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Craft, K. (2000). New Voices in Engaged Buddhism. In C. S. Queen, (Ed.), *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (pp. 485-512). Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Clydesdale, T. (2007). *The first year out: Understanding American teens after high school*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- de Dreuille, M. (1999). *From East to West: A history of monasticism*. New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company.
- Department of Religion and Culture, Central Tibetan Administration. (2000) *Destruction and reconstruction: The story of the rebuilding of monasteries of India, Nepal and Bhutan*. Dharamsala, H. P. New Delhi, India: Indraprasta Press.
- Eck, D. L. (2001). *A new religious America: How a "Christian country" has become the world's most religiously diverse nation*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Gandhi, R. S. (1974). *Locals and cosmopolitans of little India: A sociological study of the Indian community of Minnesota*. Bombay, India: Popular Prakashan.
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1995). *Ethnography: Principles in practice, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed)*. London: Routledge.
- Johnson, Allan G. (2000). *The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed)*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Kellom, G. (2004). *Developing effective programs and services for college men*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Manning, K. (1992). The ethnographic interview. In F. K. State & Associates (Eds.), *Diverse methods for research and assessment of college students* (pp. 91-103). Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Merriam, S. B. (2001). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tucci, G. (1980). *The religions of Tibet*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching the lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.