

Pilgrimage In Tibet:  
An Anthropological Exploration of Intersecting Cultures

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## **Pilgrimage In Tibet: An Anthropological Exploration of Intersecting Cultures**

My proposed research in Tibet focused on Tibetan Buddhist Pilgrimage practice through an anthropologically informed approach to multi-cultural interactions in sacred space. I planned to focus on pilgrimage sites as potentially microcosmic manifestations of the larger global political arena. That is, through observing and participating in pilgrimage practices that involved Tibetan Buddhists, Westerners, and other Asian tourists and pilgrims, I had hoped to discover something in the physical interactions and experiences within the sacred space and ritual of pilgrimage that could lend insight into key elements of Tibetan culture today such as post-Mao religious practice, how Tibetan culture is impacted by Chinese policies, how the relatively recent influx of tourism impacts Tibetan Buddhist practice (specifically pilgrimage), and how interactions between Tibetan pilgrims and non-Tibetan pilgrims work to define “authenticity” in Tibet today.

I was certain that I would find many non-Tibetans engaged in Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage based on two factors. First, the popularity of Tibetan Buddhism in the West attests to a strong interest in the religion. Second, during my earlier travels to sacred sites in India and Nepal I had encountered many enthusiastic Westerners engaged in various forms of religious practice, leading me to propose a similar situation in Tibet. I anticipated many opportunities to observe physical interactions between Tibetan and non-Tibetan people, as well as the chance to interview Westerners about their perceptions of their own experience in relation to the Tibetan pilgrims they encountered during pilgrimage travels.

On May 25, 2002 I arrived in Lhasa, quite fortuitously two days before Saga Dawa, the celebration of Sakyamuni’s enlightenment. This is one of the most important pilgrimage days in Lhasa itself, and thousands of pilgrims follow three major routes in Lhasa, the Nankhor, Barkhor, and Lingkor, making pilgrimage from dawn until nightfall. Still a little breathless from the altitude, I began my first Tibetan kora (the circumambulation of an object

or place of devotion). I joined thousands of Tibetans along the eleven-kilometer Lingkhok kora that winds through the traffic-laden streets surrounding the Potala and traces the former boundaries of the holy city. Tibetans from all over the country had arrived to make the pilgrimage, but to my surprise, during the three hours that I followed the kora, I did not see any non-Tibetan pilgrims even though many foreign tourists were staying in Lhasa.

Returning to the main traveler's area near the Jokhang Temple, I found that many westerners were aware of the celebration of Saga Dawa that was unfolding throughout the city and some even reported walking along the kora route. However, no one I spoke with had come to Lhasa specifically for the celebration, nor did they describe their participation or observation of the celebration as "pilgrimage." I found this to be especially surprising since this pilgrimage was one of the most accessible and easiest pilgrimage routes in Tibet, and I imagined that many non-Tibetan pilgrims would certainly have seized this opportunity to make pilgrimage with thousands of Tibetan people in such a festive environment.

I had similar experiences on the koras of nearby monasteries. On the first three pilgrimage routes I followed I did not spontaneously encounter any Western pilgrims, and I began to realize that the situation in Tibet was quite different from what I had previously found at sacred sites in India and Nepal. Because of the small number of non-Tibetan pilgrims in Tibet and because of the plethora of pilgrimage routes which are often remote, physically arduous and difficult if not impossible for foreigners to access, I realized that the possibility of spontaneously encountering Western Buddhists and witnessing the interactions between them and Tibetans was highly unlikely.

At this point it became clear that my proposed project required revisions in accordance with the actuality of pilgrimage and tourism in Tibet. As I was encouragingly reminded through email correspondence with Dr. Zivkovic, often what you do not find during research can render as much information as what you do find. With this in mind, I decided to both

expand and refocus my research topic. First I proposed to establish what constitutes non-Tibetan pilgrimage in Tibet including what kinds of pilgrimage are made, what individuals hoped to experience through pilgrimage in Tibet, and how individuals evaluated their own experiences in comparison to how they had previously imagined Tibet. Secondly, of the Buddhist-related travelers who had also made sacred journeys to India and Nepal, I was interested in how their experiences in Tibet compared to previous pilgrimage travels. I hoped that interviews and participant observation would provide insight into what kinds of expectations and motivations are brought to sacred journeys in Tibet, how the imaginings of Tibet are formed, and how these imaginings are strengthened or challenged by firsthand experience of pilgrimage in Tibet.

### **Methodology**

In conducting research I followed pilgrimage routes and visited sacred sites all over Tibet. These sites included a dozen monasteries, numerous temples and shrines, and sacred natural sites: lakes, mountains, and caves. In these places I frequently encountered Westerners who were there for a variety of reasons, from adventure tourism to honeymooning to pilgrimage. What I experienced, observed, and gathered as data, and how that data fits into an anthropological framework will be structured as follows. First, I will present some elements of contemporary Western imaginings of Tibet and examine why these imaginings are important. Second, I will analyze the intersection of pilgrimage and tourism. Lastly, I will present some excerpts from interviews I conducted within a framework of a typology of sacred journeys.

### **Western Imaginings**

Western fantasies surrounding Tibet have the potential to elucidate many of the ways in which members of Western cultures utilize forms of the Tibetan “other” in self-creation and self-definition. As explored by anthropologist Peter Bishop, “...the East has succeeded in

evoking a profusion of fantasies. These fantasies are in themselves a most important aspect of the Western encounter with Tibet” (1993: 42). In many areas, Tibet is highly influential in the West because of what it symbolizes; Tibet is popularly portrayed as a center of ancient and esoteric religious wisdom, a remote and pristine wilderness that presents the ultimate physical challenge, a utopia threatened by communism, modernization, and westernization. In contrast to the West, images of Tibet are frequently conjured to illustrate a symbolic purity where the west has become corrupt, a close relationship to the earth where the west had become increasingly distanced from nature, introversion and valuing inner experience where the western ideal of extroversion is dominant, isolation in an era of increasing globalization, and a value on the spiritual where the many in the west are questioning their traditional religious systems (Bishop 1989: 42). Tibet has historically been imagined as a peaceful, wise, and mystical land, and has become, as Bishop notes,

a vital link in the West’s imaginative connection with memoria with the past, with the ancients... Tibet has consistently been treated as the museum of a fantasized past. It has served as a landmark from which the West has struggled to achieve a sense of its own identity (1993: 41).

The anthropological research of Vincanne Adams also analyzes the ways in which Western imaginings of Tibet are part of “a larger narrative about the loss of a premodern and sacred civilization, one among many other narratives that define Tibet in the Western imagination (1996: 514). Imaginings of Tibet have defined and redefined Tibet for centuries, through stories, travel tales, and reports from intrepid missionaries and explorers. Until the early part of the twentieth century, only a few dozen Westerners had ever reached the sacred city of Lhasa. Second-hand information was incredibly valued because it provided a glimpse into a forbidden, remote and highly exotic land. Now, with travel to Tibet readily accessible, many people are traveling themselves to see the land of so many historical and contemporary imaginings.

## **Pilgrimage and Tourism?**

What do people expect from Tibet, why do they expect it, and what do they find when their fantasies meet the physical Tibet? By focusing on spiritually motivated travelers making pilgrimage in Tibet, I focused on one group with potentially similar sources for their expectations. In the sphere of contemporary pilgrimage and tourism, issues of authenticity, modernity, sinocization, westernization, political activism, human rights issues, national identity and nationalism, the role of tourism, and contemporary religious practice by native and non-Tibetan Buddhists are all interrelated, influenced by and occasionally illuminated through the kinds of fantasies westerners have of Tibet

Since my project was focused on East/West interactions in Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage practice, a working understanding of the nuanced relationship between tourism and pilgrimage was one essential key to gaining insight into how sacred space in Tibet is constructed and navigated by non-Tibetans. Alan Morinis's definition of pilgrimage is especially useful in looking at pilgrimage in Tibet. He describes pilgrimage as "a journey undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal" further stating that, "it is the pursuit of the ideal (whether deified or not) that defines the sacred journey" (1994: 2-4). This expanded definition which includes pilgrimage that is not specifically religious in nature is essential because, for many people I encountered, sacred journeys are not necessarily religious ones.

When Westerners arrive in Tibet in pursuit of ideals incubated in the western imaginings of Tibet, these ideals are sometimes specifically Buddhist, but when interviewed, these ideals were more frequently defined as "spiritual," incorporating personally adopted elements of Buddhism into a more individual framework. Many non-Tibetan pilgrims I interviewed incorporated some of the following elements of Buddhist practice: the study of Buddhism, reading works by contemporary Tibetan teachers, maintaining personal meditation

practices, and/or participating in a Buddhist sangha in their home city. However, many were not ready to identify themselves as “Buddhist”. Encountering situations that become spiritual or seeking spirituality through the process of journeying itself are common themes among travelers I spoke with, whether the individual is a Buddhist practitioner or not.

Another element of contemporary pilgrimage as it overlaps with tourism is the increasing popularity of mass-tourism for native pilgrims. Indian Hindus are able to make the arduous and politically difficult trek to Mount Kailash in Western Tibet through Delhi and Kathmandu-based tour companies which offer all inclusive, twenty-one to twenty-eight day, pilgrimage overland tours. (Visas and permits for this region are extremely difficult to obtain and only a limited number are allotted to Indian citizens. This pilgrimage is a life dream for many Hindus, but only the wealthiest are able to afford these expensive organized tours). This degree of diversity illustrates that a broad spectrum of experience can fall into the category of pilgrimage while incorporating a variety of tourism elements, and the distinctions between pilgrim and tourist frequently become blurred as secular elements of journeying overlap with sacred. Who is a “real” pilgrim, and who is “just a tourist”?

Morinis states that

in most cultures pilgrims tend to be self-labeling as such. Length of journey or the nature of the destination are lesser factors compared with the individual’s view of the activity he sees himself to be undertaking (1994: 7).

In conducting research I generally adhered to this assessment, considering individuals as pilgrims who had a sense of their journey as pilgrimage, although many non-Tibetan people I interviewed frequently described their journey by saying, “It’s a *kind* of personal pilgrimage,” or “It’s a pilgrimage *of sorts*,” revealing a degree of hesitancy to identify fully with the label of “pilgrim.” Even people who were traveling with a group of spiritually motivated travelers frequently emphasized the individual nature of the pilgrimage experience.

## **Classifying Sacred Journeys**

Some people I interviewed were able to find precisely the kind of spiritual journey they had anticipated. Others, however, expressed extreme disillusionment with what they found when they reached the land that held so many expectations for them. In analyzing the broad spectrum of pilgrimage experience I encountered, I categorized these experiences using a typology of sacred journeys as outlined by Morinis. This useful framework focuses on individual motivations and the characteristics of sacred journeys, rather than the destination or length of pilgrimage. Most of the pilgrims I interacted with can be categorized in one or frequently more of these six types of journeys which include: initiatory, wandering, devotional, instrumental, normative, and obligatory journeys (Morinis 1994: 10).

### **Initiatory**

“This category includes all pilgrimages that have as their purpose the transformation of the status or the state of participants. Important here is the “journey” that a seeker undertakes to work a transformation of self” (Morinis 1994: 13).

Many pilgrims I interviewed described their journeys in initiatory terms. One Greek man in his early 30's named Alexander was actively making pilgrimage in Tibet. He had previously made pilgrimages to sacred sites in India where he had been living for the past four years. Although the focus of his years in India was studying and practicing Buddhism, he describes himself as “not really a religious person.” In Tibet he made pilgrimage to the Jokhang Temple, Sera Monastery, Drepung Monastery, Nam Tso Lake, and was in the process of planning a pilgrimage to Mount Kailash when I met him. He describes his pilgrimages as highly individual, being “more of a personal pilgrimage and a pilgrimage of nature” in which he tries to realize three levels of pilgrimage: outer pilgrimage, incorporating rituals such as mantra recitation and the physical act of walking; inner ritual which is “tantric

ritual”; and “sacred pilgrimage” in which he strives to “keep one mind and meditate on pilgrimage.”

Alexander makes these sacred journeys with a concise understanding of what he hopes to experience, and his overall goal is spiritual growth and transformation. His knowledge of Buddhism was more profound than many pilgrims I encountered, and his perception of Tibet as based on his previous experiences with exile communities in India seemed to be reinforced ideologically by his present travels in Tibet. Although he felt that Tibetan communities in India were very spiritual and unique, his impressions of the exile community compared to Tibetans in Tibet provides insight what he perceives to be the core of Tibetan culture and spirituality. He felt strongly that:

Tibetans in Tibet seem happier, more in their element... Tibetans in Dharamsala are sad, like they are missing something essential to their beings... Of course the government influence is sometimes visible (in Tibet), the oppression. But outside cities like Shigatse and Lhasa you can really see the Tibetan way of life. This is where Tibetans are really Tibetan, not in exile where they are away from their homeland.

This interpretation of Tibetan authenticity as grounded in Tibet is one that is not shared by all the pilgrims I met. In fact, many people expressed the opposite belief.

For example, Henry is a sixty-two year old Buddhist traveler from The Netherlands who had an experience that very negatively compared with his expectations of Tibet. A long-time Buddhist practitioner, Henry had traveled to dharma sites in India and Nepal many times over a span of fifteen years. He had made an “official” pilgrimage in 2001 to several Buddhist sites in India including Lumbini and Bodh Gaya. This trip to Tibet was his first, and he had planned to make the pilgrimage to Mount Kailash as the highlight of his trip. However, because of altitude related health problems, he was unable to make the arduous journey and eventually left the country earlier than he had planned.

Through extended experiences with Tibetan Buddhist communities in Dharamsala and in Holland, he felt that he had a strong base of knowledge about the politics and current situation in Tibet. However, based on his 12 days in and around Lhasa, he felt that the image of Tibet projected by Dharamsala Tibetans was highly inaccurate. He had expected a heavy military or police presence in Lhasa with visible signs of severe oppression of Tibetans. What he found was that most Tibetans were, in his opinion, “simple, agriculturally-based people” who seemed to have an improved standard of living based on what he had read about pre-Mao conditions in Tibet. He didn’t find much “spirituality,” and found only one monastery where he experienced “a feeling of peacefulness.” He concluded that

...when Tibetans in Dharamsala talk to me about what ‘Tibet’ is, I don’t think I’ll have the same response as I did before... now that I’ve seen it for myself I’ll have my own stories to tell about the conditions here. I don’t think the reality is so black and white anymore.

Henry didn’t observe any violence or oppression during his trip to Tibet, and he believed that many of the sophisticated political and spiritual elements that he identified as “Tibetan” were creations of the exiled Tibetan community rather than “real” elements of the Tibet he encountered in his journey.

This one interview delves into several elements I frequently encountered in Western experiences of Tibet. Many people come to Tibet expecting to encounter overt evidence of political oppression and resistance, and expecting all Tibetans to be devout practitioners of Buddhism. As Adams asserts, visible oppression and religious devotion can become a Western criteria for Tibetan authenticity. Many popular images of Tibet portray:

a place that has been destroyed by Chinese communism and where Tibetans are universally engaged in acts of covert and overt political resistance. The outcome of the merging of these images is the view that authentic Tibetan-ness is found in religiously devout Tibetans whose resistance to the Chinese government is always present and always articulated in terms of religious devotion” (Adams 1996: 515).

These two characteristics, religiosity and the desire, whether acted upon or not, to resist Chinese politics in Tibet, were fundamental expectations expressed by Henry and many others I interviewed. These expectations were frequently based on previous contact with Tibetan communities and activist groups in India, Nepal, the United States, and Europe.

I think there are a number of factors that could lead a traveler in Tibet to question the degree of political oppression and resistance among Tibetan people. On a daily basis, Lhasa seems to be a relatively normal place without visible tension or violence. Also, because of severe restrictions on foreigners traveling in Tibet, many stay on a well-beaten path of regulated travel routes. Getting away from the more frequented areas requires time, money, and patience in navigating the endless bureaucracy (or one can travel in forbidden areas without required permits, with the potential of endangering oneself and Tibetans encountered). Most westerners I spoke with had not seen any visible oppression or even tension between Tibetans Chinese, and military or police in Tibet. However, some people who stayed in Tibet for a longer period of time told stories of violence they had witnessed.

One Thai woman witnessed two policemen assaulting a Tibetan woman who was selling fruits in a Lhasa marketplace. The Thai woman was outraged, shocked, and sickened at the scene she witnessed, but neither she nor the Tibetans present could intervene in the police brutality. This overt violence in front of foreigners was very unusual during the two months I was in Tibet.

I had one experience myself which gave me a glimpse of one form of oppression that is present but not readily visible. One day, a Tibetan man I had limited contact with spontaneously took me aside and told me his life story. Raised in an exile community in India, Tashi returned to Tibet four years ago as part of an underground independence movement based in Dharamsala. When he arrived in Tibet, he was arrested for possessing anti-government literature and was sent to prison for one year. His family in Tibet was also

imprisoned. Upon his release, he was forced to live in Lhasa and, in order to keep him from returning to India, his passport was taken away from him.

Now, he says that the police are always watching him. If he doesn't come to work for a day, they will come to his house and question him. Because he was a "political prisoner" he is stigmatized and is not eligible for many of the more lucrative jobs in Lhasa. He dreams of returning to the freedom of the exile community, but for now he knows that this is impossible.

This side of Tibet is not immediately apparent, and many travelers I spoke with left Tibet feeling that it was really a better place than they had previously imagined. In the limited circumstances in which most foreigners experience Tibet, it is common to come away from Tibet with positive or possibly mixed feelings about the experience. As Alexander explained, "It seems like there are so many layers to what is happening here, but so much of it we don't see." I had the same experience of feeling as though the Tibet foreigners have access to is a tightly layered bundle of predominantly covert politics, with the immediately visible only representing a small part of what actually occurs. From each perspective another piece of the political complexities can be revealed, but much is hidden from the outside gaze.

### **Wandering**

"This type of pilgrimage has no predetermined goal. The pilgrim sets out in the hope that his feet will be guided to a place that will satisfy his inner craving"(Morinis 1994: 13).

This category of pilgrimage is especially applicable to Western travelers I encountered. Seeking an ideal through the physical act of wandering is a theme frequently expressed in traveler tales. As Morinis poetically explains, "We know that here is incomplete and unsatisfactory, and so we set out, hoping to find the Other through the act of going forth itself" (13). One compelling factor is the imagining of the wilderness of Tibet, with wide-open spaces and breathtakingly majestic mountains, that entices many wandering pilgrims

who seek to find the embodiment of an ideal, whether deified or non-deified, through their explorations of remote regions of Tibet.

I met some wandering pilgrims who had experiences that matched their expectations, but not all pilgrimages turned out as desired. One wandering pilgrim named Suzanne is a South African woman in her thirties who came to Tibet to explore the “sacred wilderness.” However, after three weeks of struggling to arrange permits and tours, and being caught in endless bureaucratic complications, she was furious with her experiences in Tibet. Feeling restricted from traveling in the free manner which she is accustomed to, Suzanne expressed that from her perspective, “The real Tibet isn’t in Tibet, but in places like Zhongdian” in the Yunnan Province. Suzanne felt that in this region outside the political boundaries of Tibet, ethnically Tibetan people live without such severe restrictions by the Chinese government making it much easier for Westerners to freely explore and experience the culture, religion, and natural beauty of the region. She felt like all her experiences in Tibet were difficult and negative, summarizing her experiences by saying, “All I wanted was to be free to explore the sacred places of the Tibetan wilderness... (here) it’s always a fight.”

### **Devotional**

“Devotional pilgrims have as their goal encounter with, and honoring of, the shrine divinity, personage, or symbol...” where “... the goal is often the accumulation of merit that can be applied in this or future lives” (Morinis 1994: 10).

All self-identified pilgrims I interviewed were making devotional pilgrimage. One twenty-eight year old Japanese man named Kenji was raised Catholic and converted to Buddhism in his early twenties. He had been living in Nepal for the previous three years, studying Tibetan Buddhism under the guidance of a Tibetan Rinpoche teaching in an exile community in Nepal. Kenji was living in Tibet to study the Tibetan language in order to further his Buddhist studies. He only left his studies in Lhasa to go on pilgrimage to sacred

Buddhist sites, such as one pilgrimage he made to a sacred cave where Milarepa is said to have meditated.

Another devotional pilgrim I interviewed was a Japanese woman in her 30's named Sachiko. She had made a few trips Tibet, and her present journey was based around an extended pilgrimage to Mount Kailash and the surrounding areas. A self-identified Buddhist practitioner, her trip to Tibet was for the sole purpose of making pilgrimage.

These two Buddhist pilgrims were interesting examples of non-Tibetans adopting specifically Tibetan practices. Kenji always carried prayer beads with him, both recited mantras, meditated, and made their sacred journeys as Buddhists. However, these two were the exception rather than the norm among non-Tibetan pilgrims I met, in the sense that they fully identified as Buddhists and as pilgrims, they had each been practicing Buddhism for a number of years, and each seemed to have highly realistic ideas about what they would encounter when they came to Tibet for spiritual reasons.

In comparing their preconceived ideas in relation to their actual experience, both reported highly positive experiences in Tibet in general and in their sacred journeys specifically. They both had based their earlier ideas of Tibet on extensive contact with Tibetan exile communities. Again, this level of previous exposure to Tibetan religion, politics, and geography was uncommon among the travelers I interviewed.

### **Instrumental**

“Instrumental pilgrimages are undertaken to accomplish finite, worldly goals...” such as curing an illness, finding a marriage partner, conceiving a child, and so on (Morinis 1994: 11).

I didn't meet anyone who described the reasons for their journey in these terms. However, my ability to speak with Tibetan pilgrims was obviously limited by my lack of language skills. No westerners I met described specific earthly goals they hoped to accomplish through their spiritual journeys.

## **Normative**

“This type of pilgrimage occurs as a part of a ritual cycle, relating to either the life cycle or annual calendrical celebrations... certain times of the month or year, a particular period in the agricultural calendar, or a juncture in an individual life cycle are turning points when people commonly embark on sacred journeys” (Morinis 1994: 12).

This type of pilgrimage was especially apparent among Tibetans who made pilgrimage on specific holy days such as Saga Dawa. The year 2002 is the Year of the Horse, so this was considered an especially auspicious time to make pilgrimage to Mount Kailash based on the larger calendrical cycle. Thousands of Tibetans and Hindu pilgrims from India came to Kailash at this time and many Tibetan pilgrims I met at Mount Kailash were dedicating weeks or years to circumambulating Mount Kailash. Mount Kailash is the axis mundi of Buddhist and Hindu cosmologies, and the circumambulation of this remote mountain is considered one of the most sacred pilgrimages in Asia. The completion of three, thirteen or 108 circuits around this holy mountain are especially auspicious achievements. During the Year of the Horse, each circuit carries the karmic merit of thirteen circuits during any other year.

Many Tibetans make the pilgrimage in one arduous day. Awakening before dawn, they begin the thirty-three mile circuit that reaches elevations of over 18,000 feet at the highest mountain pass, returning near nightfall to the pilgrim-tent town of Darchen where they sleep a few hours and begin the pilgrimage again before dawn the following day. Less hardy pilgrims (including myself) commonly make the journey in three days, but with the added burden of carrying heavy supplies to guard against the sub-freezing night temperatures, potential snow or rain which can descend at these elevations without warning even in the summer season, and food supplies for the three-day journey. Some pilgrims I met had made the pilgrimage twenty or thirty times, and some pilgrims continue this holiest of koras for

years on end. For some Buddhists, extended pilgrimage shapes a stage in the life cycle that allows a high level of dedication to spiritual practice.

Among the western pilgrims I interviewed, one woman was making what could be considered a normative pilgrimage. Helen is an American in her mid-60's who has been studying Buddhism for several years. She is part of a Buddhist sangha in the United States, meditates, studies the contemporary Buddhist teachings, makes "unofficial" pilgrimages to sacred Buddhist sites, and generally tries to live a life that is in harmony with Buddhist principles. She especially enjoys chanting and meditating with nuns in different nunneries across Tibet. She described this point in her life as a time of increasing detachment from worldly things, and expressed that at this point in her life cycle, is an important part of her spiritual growth.

Helen was very satisfied with her experiences in Tibet and the level of spirituality she found. She was uniquely able to get away from many of the restrictions that inhibited other pilgrims I met because she is extremely independent. Preferring to spend her time in more obscure but not highly regulated areas of Tibet, she was able to pursue her own spiritual journey relatively alone and unimpacted by the Chinese regulations that pervade many westerners' experiences.

### **Obligatory**

This includes, "a set of prescribed rites that are performed at fixed times at assigned locations," such as the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, and also pilgrimages, "imposed by ecclesiastical or secular authorities as a punishment or penance" (Morinis 1994: 12).

I only met one Western pilgrim who described her journey as partially obligatory. Melissa, an American woman in her mid-20's, was traveling in Tibet in part to make pilgrimage. She was most drawn to physically challenging pilgrimages in remote locations, which she approached half-jokingly as a kind of "self-imposed penance". She described the

journey as important to her spiritual growth because, “There’s something incredible about the combination of wide-open spaces, spiritually charged landscapes, and the physical sensation of pushing your own limits, when I’m walking through really remote areas... I feel like I can let go of so many things, it’s a kind of purification... It helps me find peace within myself.” To Melissa, the structure of Buddhist pilgrimage allowed her to pursue a specific kind of spiritual growth. But she was also disillusioned with many aspects of what she experienced during her first exposure to Tibet.

Having imagined a place where she could freely interact with Tibetan pilgrims and where she could spend much of her trip in wilderness areas, she was disappointed by the regulations that made it difficult for westerners to go outside of Lhasa or Shigatse without an organized tour. “I hate having to go everywhere with a big group of people. Usually when I travel the thing I love the most is the sense of freedom. But here I just feel stifled by the permits, the obligatory group travel...” She also felt that the restrictions on interactions between Tibetans and Westerners made it difficult to really understand how Tibetans live today. Chinese law prohibits westerners from staying in Tibetans’ homes, from riding in pilgrim busses or taking any public transport outside of Lhasa or Shigatse, which effectively limits the amount of unregulated contact westerners have with Tibetan people. In some remote areas of Tibet, I personally found that individual Tibetans were not impacted by these regulations, as they invited me to sleep in their homes or to eat with their families. However, in other areas it was clear that to break these rules could carry a harsh punishment, and some people expressed a fear of being reported to the police for unsanctioned interactions with westerners.

### **Out of the Categories...**

One group I had the opportunity of traveling with were far from self-proclaimed pilgrims, and thought of their two week vacation in Tibet as a delightful adventure. However,

they exhibited many distinctive behaviors of pilgrimage as we visited many sacred sites together. Maie, Ka, and Nui are Thai Theravada Buddhists who took two weeks off from their hectic lives in the fast-paced graphics design and marketing firm in Bangkok to travel in Tibet for pleasure. It was the first time they had been to Tibet. We met on an obligatory tour of Lhasa that is part of the PRC requirement for foreigners who arrive in Lhasa without a fixed tour group itinerary.

In the two weeks that followed, they visited several monasteries and temples on the main tourist route. One element that I found the most interesting was the apparent ease with which they approached and experienced Tibetan sacred space. Their attitudes were definitely playful as they unselfconsciously enjoyed being tourists at the monestaries and temples of Lhasa and the surrounding areas. They took photos of themselves in characteristically tourist-like poses along the kora route of Tashilumpo Monastery, but they also received blessings from a monk, learned a mantra for the long-life of the Dalai Lama, and chanted it occasionally as they followed the inner kora of the Jokhang Temple. They were frequently emotionally moved by their experiences, but they never had a dogmatic or overtly ritualistic approach to the sacred spaces they encountered. When Nui's arm was tired from turning the prayer wheels along the kora, she stopped turning them. For her it wasn't important to turn all 108.

Even though they didn't consider themselves to be on pilgrimage, it was clear that they brought elements of Thai Buddhism to their experience of Tibetan Buddhist temples. They didn't prostrate with Tibetan Buddhists, but instead they held their hands together and bowed their heads in the Thai way of showing respect to a Buddha image or a monk. All three expressed that while they weren't seeking "spiritual experience" as the focus of their journey, they felt a wonderful affinity to Tibetan people and religious sites, and they loved being in Tibet. In many ways their approach was much like what I observed among Tibetan

families on pilgrimage, which often embodies the spirit of celebration or playfulness without seeming overly formal or serious.

## **Conclusions**

This broad spectrum of experience in Tibet reflects how diverse the expectations and motivations are which bring people to sacred journeys in Tibet. Some people leave Tibet completely disillusioned about the land that held so many of their hopes and longings. Others seemed to find exactly the Tibet they were looking for. The strand that ties these pilgrims together the longing to journey to discover the sacred.

This research project was an incredible journey for me as well. It provided a glimpse into some of the issues of contemporary pilgrimage practice in Tibet, but it was by no means an exhaustive study. The Luce Foundation grant provided a rare opportunity for me to experience a fieldwork situation while still pursuing my undergraduate degree. Attempting to apply anthropological theories to the complexities of human interaction and experience was frequently a challenging one. It has helped me formulate more concisely what I want to pursue in my graduate studies, and in what areas I need develop my understanding of anthropological methodology and fieldwork practice. This learning experience had been an invaluable one, and I look forward to developing these first attempts at anthropological research into more fully formed research in the future.