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“I Can’t Do All This—This Is Nuts!”: An Ethnographic Account of the Challenges Posed by Vajrayāna Deity Yoga in a Western Context

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Abstract: This article provides an in-depth exploration of the contextual, epistemic, ethical, personal, practical, religious, and socio-cultural factors that sixteen Western practitioners of Vajrayāna Buddhism highlighted as having particularly challenged their ability to learn and engage in deity yoga, including what strategies they may have adopted in attempting to overcome their impact. While these have been largely overlooked by empirical research on meditation, their pertinence to understanding practice efficacy and outcome, as well as the phenomenological unfolding of particularly adverse practice-related experiences, have recently been recognized alongside the prevalence of the latter. In addition, these practitioner testimonies shed light on how the cross-cultural transmission of Vajrayāna Buddhism involves a process in which practice approaches and environments are undergoing adaptation and negotiation in light of the needs and lifestyles of lay practitioners, while meaning is being synthesized through their responses to the experiences that unfold not only from their exposure to teachers and their teachings but also from their engagement in tantric practice.

Keywords: Tantra; Vajrayāna Buddhism; Western Buddhism; deity yoga; *yidam*; meditation-related challenges; guru–student relationship; *ngöndro*; Buddhist faith; Buddhist devotion



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1. Introduction

Recently, there has been an increase in qualitative studies that examine the experiences of Western practitioners of meditation, as exemplified by [Lindahl et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Cooper et al. \(2021\)](#), with a special emphasis on what has been termed “meditation-related challenges” (see [Lindahl 2017](#); [Lindahl et al. 2017, 2019, 2020, 2022](#); [Palitsky et al. 2023](#); and [Schlosser et al. 2019](#)), which refers to experiences that practitioners attribute specifically to their practice and describe as being “[...] challenging, difficult, distressing, functionally impairing, and/or requiring additional support” ([Lindahl et al. 2017](#)). The studies cited indicate that these are a lot more common than has been acknowledged until now. This has highlighted the importance of examining the different resources and frameworks that these practitioners resort to for making sense of and navigating their experiences, as well as ensuring the safety and efficacy of their practice in a context that differs significantly from the traditional ones in which these techniques were devised. More than ever before, researchers are realizing that it is necessary to consider the contextual, epistemic, ethical, personal, practical, religious, and socio-cultural factors that influence practitioners ([Amihai and Kozhevnikov 2015](#); [Josipovic and Baars 2015](#); [Lindahl 2017](#); [Vieten et al. 2018](#)) in order to gain a more accurate understanding of the observable results that neurophysiological research on meditation is obtaining, together with the outcomes that practitioners are self-reporting and their interpretative approaches and responses to these.

It is the above-mentioned factors that the present article aims to explore, as reported by sixteen practitioners of Vajrayāna Buddhism who were questioned about what aspects of learning and practicing deity yoga have proved challenging, particularly due to their Western backgrounds and contexts, and what may have ameliorated them. To be clear, these

are not meditation-related challenges but factors that, in challenging practitioners' abilities to effectively carry out deity yoga in the first place, should be considered for their potential role in the phenomenological unfolding of the former. Following Lindahl et al.'s (2017) categorization of influencing factors, those examined in this study refer more specifically to: their intentions/ambitions, personality/temperament, and worldviews/explanatory frameworks within the practitioner domain; their early life relationships, student–teacher relationship, relationships both inside and outside of their community of practice, sociocultural context, and practice environment within the relationship domain; and the amount/intensity/consistency of their practice, as well as their practice approach, response to experience, stage of practice, and type of practice within the practice domain.

Among the institutions that were contacted via e-mail, staff from Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche's program called Tara's Triple Excellence (TTE) and from Mingyur Rinpoche's Tergar Meditation Community agreed to distribute my call for participants within their networks, leading to a total of seven and four participants being recruited, respectively. The remaining five were contacted individually online and invited to participate in interviews that were held one-on-one via Zoom. Compared to the others, five of the participants offered significantly reduced responses to the semi-structured and open-ended interview questions relevant to this paper on account of either their vows of secrecy¹ or not having as much to share on this theme. In fact, this paper presents only a few themes that were addressed by the interviews within the scope of ongoing doctoral research. Besides two of the participants who preferred to reveal their identities, pseudonyms were used to protect those of everyone else.

Part II of this article will provide an explanatory foundation through which the challenges and the responses to them that are described in Part III can be better understood. However, what the practice of deity yoga consists of will not be explicitly addressed for two main reasons: (1) the participants belong to different affiliations (see Appendix A, Table A1) that approach the practice differently, the breadth and complexity of which cannot be suitably covered here; and (2) it was not possible to obtain data of this nature from the participants themselves due, once more, to their vows of secrecy. Thus, the reader who is unfamiliar with deity yoga is recommended to turn to existing scholarly literature² as well as the endnotes of this article. The themes that are included in this part are rather those that (when not otherwise indicated) all schools of Vajrayāna Buddhism share the same view of and that can be supplemented with the participants' interpretations. To begin with, what exactly the 'deity' of deity yoga is referring to and becoming it implies is touched upon. This is followed by: the role of the teacher; the meaning of faith and devotion and their effects; and the factors that were found to particularly reinforce the participants' faith and devotion.

In Part III, the first category of challenges that is addressed is that of accessibility, referring to the student–teacher relationship, practice approach, practice environment, and community. In this section, participants also refer to the ways in which relationships outside of the practice community and certain aspects lacking in the Western sociocultural context can have a negative impact on their ability to practice effectively. The second category pertains to the challenges of preliminary practices (*ngöndro*), which involve the influencing factors of type and stage of practice, practice approach, the amount/intensity/consistency of practice, the student–teacher relationship, and both the practitioner's intentions/ambitions and their personality/temperament. Then, the third category examines the challenges of belief and understanding that especially address differences in worldviews/explanatory frameworks and sociocultural contexts, in addition to how the practice approach prescribed by Tibetan teachers may sometimes be unsuitable to the capacities, needs, and intentions or ambitions of Western students. Finally, the fourth category of challenges is that of faith and devotion toward the teacher and teachings, which is explored through the detailed narrative or case study of one of the study's participants, spanning the factors of: intentions/ambitions, personality/temperament, worldviews/explanatory frameworks, early life relationships, the student–teacher relationship, relationships both inside and outside of their community of practice, the sociocultural context, the amount/intensity/consistency of practice, the

practice approach, practice environment, response to experience, type of practice, and stage of practice. This case study is the only part of the article to provide examples of meditation-related challenges that were experienced as resulting from deity yoga and its preliminaries, and to highlight how the influencing factors are related to them, which are respectively coded according to [Lindahl et al.'s \(2017\)](#) *Phenomenology Codebook* and *Influencing Factors Codebook*. Throughout each section of Part III, what enabled practitioners to overcome or diminish the impact of the challenges will also be discussed. The THL Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan will be used for specific concepts, with their Sanskrit equivalents appearing in International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) form whenever they are more conventionally known to and used by practitioners; when certain terms have become so common as to be found in English dictionaries, diacritics and italics will not be used, with the exception of proper names.

2. The Practice Context

2.1. Embodying the Yidam

As [Lopez \(2007, p. 16\)](#) has stated, the Tibetan term *yidam* (literally ‘that which binds the mind,’ often referred to as a *lha* or ‘deity’, [Mills 2003, pp. 93, 95](#); [Ray 2001, p. 212](#)), which signifies the tantric buddha that the practitioner meditates upon, directs their ritual acts toward, and identifies with via visualization during deity yoga, is best left untranslated so as not to restrict the breadth of its sense and, I would add, cause any notions of what constitutes a deity in other cultural contexts to be conflated with it. The Vajrayāna Buddhist relationship to deities differs from its Hindu counterpart that centers predominantly around devotional acts of worship, supplication, and placation aimed at pleasing and earning the favor and grace of beings deemed truly able of intervening in one’s life and state of affairs ([Kongtrul 2002, pp. 112–13](#); [Samuel 1993, p. 248](#)). Thus, blessings (THL.: *jinlab*)—defined as experiences that appear to manifest externally and impact one directly in a transformative way, thereby generating a positive change of some sort within oneself—are not believed to result from a deity’s rewarding response to the actions one has committed toward them; it is rather that in working with a *yidam*, its figure and what it stands for is thought to influence the practitioner, as the actions committed in relationship to it generate a shift in attitudes, states, and perspectives that would have otherwise not been activated. This is because *yidam* are approached as forms that embody the distinct facets, qualities, and wisdoms of buddhahood so as to remind, awaken, and enable their potentiality to emerge within those who encounter and work with them. A blessing is therefore *facilitated* by the *yidam* but ultimately achieved on behalf of one’s own efforts, devotion, and faith that have lessened the obscurations (THL.: *drip pa*) that prevent one from knowing reality and one’s true nature as emptiness (IAST.: *śūnyatā*; THL.: *tong-panyi*) and bliss (THL.: *dewa*) ([Kongtrul 2002, pp. 113–14, 117](#); [Mills 2003, pp. 201–3](#)).³

Since the practitioner not only cultivates the above for themselves but also with the intention of directing it toward the betterment of all beings, it follows that embodying a *yidam* means allowing oneself to be a channel through which the ideal feelings, behaviors, and types of cognition represented by it can become actively manifest within society ([Samuel 1993, p. 248](#)). In effect, the way one relates to a *yidam* is just a purified form of how one already relates to others, oneself, and one’s own experiences—by approaching the *yidam* as lord, friend, family member, one’s very own self, or the embodiment of a given quality or state during deity yoga, what is enacted is a reality from an enlightened perspective, unaffected by afflictive emotions and the ego (THL.: *dak-dzin*, ‘self-grasping’). Indeed, the latter become transformed as the practitioner is brought to understand their insubstantial nature that is dependent upon cause and effect, an accumulation of personal associations, and the state of their mind ([Kongtrul 2002, pp. 9–10, 14, 37](#)). Such a realization may allow them to therapeutically effect detachment from things that were previously felt as being bound to the self and instead allow for an abiding in states deemed more akin to ultimate reality. In a sense then, working with a *yidam* brings the practitioner to experience a pre-conditioned state of subjectivity.

Jack used Dzogchen⁴ terms to describe this process of undoing one's normative sense of identification and manner of interacting because it is the tradition that he has taught in for many decades: "The *yidam* practice is a kind of spring cleaning. It's to take the ghost out of the machine [...] it's to empty the body, so that the body becomes like light." Roger also conveyed a Dzogchen perspective while explaining how it took him ten to fifteen years to move from an intellectual to an experiential understanding of the practice. He has been a practitioner of Vajrayāna Buddhism since 1994 and has led a meditation group for the past fourteen years:

[...] teachers and deities [...] put us in touch with what's already in us that's so covered over [by our] conditioning [...] *yidam* practice is a means to recognize who we really are, which is: aware, compassionate, kind, loving [...] your *yidam* is just another part of your mind, the *yidam* exists in your mind [...] the idea behind deity practice is to be able to see everything as a projection [...] In the end, things just dissolve and reappear [and] are not as solid as they appear [...] I had heard this teaching [...] [but] it wasn't my experience that "you know what? I am it. It's my projection, whether I'm depressed and anxious or whether I'm centered, kind, and loving [...] it's just my projection, it's all me."

Henry, who is seventy years old and first became interested in Vajrayāna Buddhism in 2000 but was not formally initiated until 2014, which was around the same time period that he joined Tara's Triple Excellence program, explained that, to his understanding,

The deity is only a support [...] It's an idea because we are working with the mind and the mind is nothing more than ideas. It doesn't matter, only the result. We can imagine the deity or we can imagine yesterday's news—they are all ideas. But we put ideas to work to our benefit. The problem is that ideas hurt us. Here, we are cleverly choosing the ideas. From all these ideas, I will choose to stay a little more in this, the deity. So, it's like a decision, a conscious decision. But I cannot say, "yes, in this moment, I feel good because the deity surely came and gave me the blessing." No. I develop a nice idea, and this idea works [...] We need these [ideas] because we cannot go beyond object, subject, and action [...] deity practice works in this way: we have object, subject, and action. But we have an observer of this, which is awareness, which makes the difference because it's what says everything is in the mind. The main thing is to look for the meditator and see if you can find it and if you can't, then you've arrived at the point. What can make samsaric experience⁵ not so samsaric is that you're aware [...] You train to get in touch with something that cannot be touched. And so, we use all this reasoning and words and ideas to try to get acquainted to something that cannot be described or spoken about but that we can have some logical ideas about. It's very logical and close to us, the idea that mind is inexpressible. It's a matter of building acceptance toward the idea that there is nothing to the mind. All this very nice visualization and practice, deity yoga is so sophisticated and full of details, all this is only a means. We are not creating anything, we are just uncovering something that was always there and will *always* be there. If someone in the West comes up with a good strategy to doing this that is not called Buddhism but it works in the same way, it will be good also. There is nothing special about Buddhism but one thing: that it works. If someone creates a methodology for training the mind and it also works, no problem.

Yidam are therefore the primary source of mediation in this tradition that bring to the foreground the human tendency of projecting a given, flawed perspective of reality. Meditating on them brings one to momentarily encounter how things could be through a mode of perception deemed truer to the practitioner's real nature according to the tradition's ontological view. They transform subjectivity as working with them both *affects* the practitioner, in the sense of teaching them to become disposed in certain ways, and *effects* them by changing their experience of the world and themselves (Latour 2004, p. 210). All of

this does not, however, mean that the *yidam* is solely an abstract symbol indexing something else; it is rather that as *jñānasattva* (THL.: *yeshe sem-pa*, ‘wisdom beings’), they “[...] are enlightened form, and they are an intrinsic part of buddha nature [...] an integral part of awareness” (Kongtrul 2002, p. 10). They are thus both the path that leads to the discovery and actualization of the ‘ground’ that is one’s innate buddha nature (IAST.: *tathāgata-garbha*; THL.: *déshin-shek-pé nying-po*), and yet, at the same time, also that very ground itself. That is to say, that from the perspective of non-dual ultimate reality, *yidam* may not be said to exist apart from oneself, while from the dichotomous experience of conventional reality, they can be interacted with and invoked as though inhabiting a realm external to oneself (Ray 2001, pp. 213–14, 216). As Mills (2003) cautions, by over-emphasizing the symbolic or ritual function of the *yidam*, scholars have been dismissive of the fact that “Tibetan Buddhists clearly do see such deities as being real in some sense” (p. 113), and that this is even a necessary component for making sense of how the practitioner’s sense of ‘divine pride’ (THL.: *lhe ngargyäl*)⁶ is consecrated by their encounter with the *jñānasattva*. In other words,

[a] tantric yogin cannot simply ‘reconstruct’ his view of himself and his lifeworld simply by his own authority. Rather, if the meditator wishes to invest such ethical/symbolic transformations with the necessary sense of being ‘true’, he must orient his visualisations towards a source of *authoritative legitimisation* which will transform those imaginings into an authorised ‘reality’. (Mills 2003, p. 118)

Those sources of “authoritative legitimisation” are both the *jñānasattva* and the lama who is adept at voluntarily accessing the level of reality that the *jñānasattva* can be directly encountered on. It follows that Henry’s descriptions of the *yidam* as merely a means and an idea are not sufficiently nuanced for a discussion of its broader implications, especially within a traditional setting.

In fact, a few of the participants of this study described the influence of the *yidam* in ‘paradoxical’ terms, which is to say, as acting upon them both from within and without themselves. This includes Henry, who explained how chanting Tārā’s mantra protected his family and home in the midst of a very stormy night that caused all of the trees surrounding them to fall. Similarly, despite Roger’s testimony above stating that the *yidam* exists in one’s mind, he described an experience of receiving a “clear message” in his head from Tārā⁷ while visiting a temple that is dedicated to her in Nepal, as well as tangibly sensing the energetic presence of Vajrayoginī⁸ entering and overcoming his body “like a lightning bolt” while sitting in front of her statue in the same context. Indeed, among the participants of this study, it was not uncommon for such seemingly spontaneous occurrences to reinforce their sense of conviction in the reality of the tradition’s principles and the meaningfulness of their practice. Clara, who is a retired Jungian psychoanalyst and described herself as having been a “book Buddhist” for twenty to twenty-five years before formally taking refuge with Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche in late 2000, explained how she became a practitioner after Green Tārā was introduced into her life through a dream prior to any knowledge of her existence. As she was flying to Kathmandu to meet a friend, she dreamt of a dark green hand gently wrapping itself around her back and telling her, “I will help you with your anxieties.” As her friend was a student of Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, they consulted with him about the dream’s meaning and Clara was instructed to engage in Green Tārā practice, which would later come to be a source of great support and relief to her in a time of significant worry. Prior to feeling very connected to Green Tārā as her principle *yidam* or developing a firm sense of her as “an inner wisdom part” of herself that “was always there” guiding her, Clara was also extremely touched by an experience that a patient of hers, a Protestant minister, had. After taking this patient through the process of guided imagery to “meet their inner Christ,” the patient stated,

You know, there was something really weird. I met my Christ, and then he turned around, and there was this green figure coming toward him and they shook hands; they just knew each other and were loving toward each other. And I have no idea what that means.

At the time, Clara simply replied, “wow, that’s interesting” because she did not want to overstep the doctor–patient boundary by sharing anything personal about herself. However, as her patient kept bringing it up after every session, she eventually decided to validate their experience by showing them a set of images of sacred Buddhist and non-Buddhist figures that she possessed and asking them, “do you see anybody that you know?” to which the patient immediately responded, “oh, there she is!” while pointing at Green Tārā. This patient was blown away when Clara explained that the imagery they had seen in their mind seemed to represent that their “Christ, the figure dear to them, their inner *yidam*” knew of Clara’s own inner *yidam*. For Clara, this experience further validated the truth of the nature of the *yidam* as being something that is both inherent to herself and an external reality that others can recognize and connect to. She qualified it as a sacred story that she holds close to her heart.

As a final example of how the *yidam* can be related to in both an external and an inherent manner, Yara, who has been following Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche’s teachings since 2012 and took refuge with him in 2016, described how she arrived in the position that she is currently on in her path of practice with statements like, “it seemed like Tārā had another plan” and “then Tārā came in and said ‘ok, you’re gonna work for me and work for my program’.” In addition, while explaining something, she once paused to look at her *thangka* (painting) of Tārā to reassure her by stating, “and of course, I still think that you’re super precious, don’t get me wrong.” Yet, her first experience of witnessing Tārā’s image was portrayed as encountering an innate and familiar part of herself: “It was like coming back home [. . .] ‘oh, hi, this is where you’ve been, oh hello again’.” She explained that, essentially,

[i]t’s both and everything. It’s outside, it’s inside. It’s everywhere. I just need to think about her and she’s there [. . .] You know Tārā, her main color is green, and she’s super connected to the earth. So, Mother Earth is in certain ways Tārā. And I love nature, so sometimes I’m walking and I’m like, “Oh, I’m in the pure realm with Tārā.” So, it’s inside, it’s outside; it’s a quality in me, it’s a quality in you [. . .] It is anything, anywhere.

This reference to Tārā’s connection to nature was also made by Clara when she stated the following: “When I’m in nature, I just walk as Green Tārā [. . .]; when I trim my roses and weed my flowers you know, I’m just blissed out.” Other interpretations of the *yidam* will be further discussed in Sections 3.3 and 3.4.

2.2. The Lama as Embodiment, Transmitter, and Enabler

In Vajrayāna Buddhism, the lama plays a central role in transmitting the lineage’s teachings and practices and enabling students to successfully carry these out to their intended end. As Samuel (1993, p. 244) notes, while lama is used as the Tibetan equivalent of the Sanskrit term ‘guru,’ which implies ‘personal religious teacher,’ it can carry wider connotations, referring sometimes to “[. . .] the principal ‘teacher’ around whom the gompā [monastery] is organized” (ibid., p. 280) or “[. . .] someone who is a properly qualified performer of Tantric ritual” (ibid., p. 281) as a result of having completed a three-year retreat.⁹ Moreover, lamas may be identified by different titles that reflect their status or relationship to their students. Among those of the teachers referred to in this study are *rinpoche*, meaning ‘very precious’ (ibid., p. 285); *tulku*, which most commonly implies someone who is deemed to be the reincarnation of one or more realized beings—when the latter refers to a lama whose passing was recent, then the *tulku* is one who has, more specifically, inherited the affiliation, office, and status of their previous incarnation, including the duty to carry out their interrupted work (Ray 2001, pp. 360–62); *khenpo*, meaning an ‘abbot’ of a monastery (Samuel 1993, p. 280) or a monk who has proven themselves sufficiently knowledgeable, disciplined, and benevolent after having formally studied Buddhist philosophy for nine years and, in some traditions, also taught for three years (Rigpa Shedra Wiki 2021); and *gyalwang*, a title particularly used in the Kagyü lineage to refer to lamas who are very highly esteemed (Rigpa Shedra Wiki 2018).

It is common for practitioners to have multiple teachers and for their refuge lama, who first introduces them to the Buddhist path, to be different from their root (THL.: *tsawé*) lama, who later initiates them into tantric practice and becomes a central focus of it. Taking refuge consists of making a formal declaration in front of the lama with the purpose of becoming a member of the sangha (THL.: *gendiin*), which is “[...] the collectivity of committed Dharma practitioners” (Samuel 2005, p. 323). By taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma (THL.: *chö*, ‘doctrine’ or ‘teaching’), and the Sangha (which are collectively referred to as the Three Jewels), one confirms that, after careful consideration, they have arrived at the conviction that these sources offer the highest chance of guiding one to salvation or awakening and that they will wholeheartedly pursue this goal for the benefit of all sentient beings (Powers 2007, pp. 294–98). When refuge is taken in the context of becoming initiated into tantric practice, the three-fold formula becomes a four-fold one, with the lama occupying a primary position. This highlights how the tantric practitioner is expected to perceive all lamas but especially their root one as being embodiments of all three (Mills 2003, p. 53).

Indeed, as “[r]ole models of awakened behavior” (Powers 2007, p. 312) or “living examples of realized beings” (ibid., p. 311), lamas and the lineages of practice and sangha that they perpetuate through oral teachings are the mediums through which the enlightened experience of the Buddha and the possibility of attaining it for oneself have been continuously transmitted over centuries. The practitioner is instructed to regard their lama as being even more important than the long-since deceased Buddha Śākyamuni because it is through the lama’s personification, life experience, and the grace and kindness of their devotion to transmitting the teachings that the practitioner’s own enlightenment will be enabled in the present (Mills 2003, p. 99; Powers 2007, p. 310; Samuel 1993, p. 254). Thus, the lama is meant to bring the student to realize the presence of their mind’s innate buddha nature (Samuel 1993, pp. 252, 256), which as “[...] clear light, [and] pure luminosity untainted by any mental constructions” constitutes “[...] the source of all intelligence and good qualities, and is the ground of every being’s personality” (Powers 2007, p. 269). A significant part of the authority that underlies relating to the lama in these ways is founded upon their ritual expertise that is believed to transform their body (THL.: *ku*), mind (THL.: *tuk*), and speech (THL.: *sung*) into those of a buddha (commonly referred to as the *trikāya* or ‘three bodies’ of a buddha in Sanskrit) through the completion stage (IAST.: *saṃpanna-krama*; THL.: *dzok-rim*) of deity yoga,¹⁰ which is what the student must aspire to one day achieve themselves in a present or future incarnation.

2.2.1. Faith and Devotion

Intense faith in the teacher and devotion toward them are considered to be key elements that ensure the efficacy of tantric practice. Tantric scriptures repeatedly emphasize that buddhahood is not within reach for those who do not possess “[...] faith in the three jewels, in the guru, and in one’s chosen practice” (Powers 2007, p. 298). The function of this in the case of the guru or lama is not to praise them (ibid., p. 315) or deny that they possess conventional faults (Berzin n.d.-g) but rather to cultivate an attitude toward them that will enable one to transcend one’s normative sense of self and its limitations (Traer 1991, p. 101). It is not necessary that the lama actually be perfect but that the practitioner construct them as being such in their perception and have unwavering faith in them being so (Kongtrul 2002, p. 92; Mills 2003, p. 100) because it is only on this basis that the lama as a meditational device can enable one to perceive these perfected qualities as being reflected in oneself and accessible for further development (V.G. Rinpoche 1996, p. 67; Powers 2007, p. 313). Put differently, when faith is exercised as an attitude, it results in much stronger concentration that is more likely to enable the realization of the object of one’s focus, such as the teacher and one’s own innate buddha nature, as it leaves no room for afflictive thoughts that contradict this nature to emerge (Mills 2003, p. 203).

While discussing the role of the teacher, Henry brought up how developing a connection to and sense of confidence in the teacher is central to undergoing transformation:

This doesn't come from me but from the teachings that say [. . .] teachers are everything because human beings learn from their teachers. Imagine a human being born in the world with no teacher at all—he will be more or less like an animal, no? So, we are what we are owing to our teachers and the practice depends on our teacher. It is said that Dharma is so far away from the usual way we think that things are, it's so alien, that we never can imagine it. We need someone to come and say, "what you think is reality, is not what reality is—you are wrong, you need to see things from another point of view." If you make the connection to the teacher, which is confidence in the teacher, you need to build confidence because without it, you may be interested and learned. But if you have no confidence, all this knowledge doesn't go ahead from intellectual knowledge. It's not practice at all. And without practice, there is no Dharma, there is no transformation. Knowledge by itself does not transform.

In response to this, I asked him whether by using the term 'confidence', he was implying 'faith', as His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama (2003, p. 96) uses both interchangeably. However, Henry stated that given the layers of meaning that the term 'faith' has acquired in the West through its strong association with belief in the Christian tradition and prayer, he does not find it to be well-suited to capturing the subtleties of what is implied by the Tibetan term *dépa sum*.¹¹ He considers 'confidence' and 'trust' to be more accurate and specified that "this is a connection based on trust." He compared it to the "compelling confidence" one has in a doctor and their diagnosis, and the expectation that following the actions they prescribe will improve one's condition, even though one does not possess first-hand knowledge of their credentials. In this case, adopting an attitude of faith is a relinquishing of the self's hold in a different sense—it is an entrusting of oneself to the teacher that supersedes the typical tendency of relying on oneself (Traer 1991, pp. 100–1). This is possible because faith in the Buddhist tradition is also an experience of that which is given, meaning that it "[. . .] is grounded in a power within us that must be awakened or activated" (ibid., p. 104). Jack described this from a Dzogchen perspective in the following terms: "[f]aith and belief are not the same—belief has an object, whereas faith is a quality of the heart; it is the undefended heart, and the undefended heart is awareness, *rik pa*." In other words, to have confidence or trust in the teacher is to put into practice acting in alignment with and experiencing one's true nature (ibid., 107).

Henry's comparison of the lama–student relationship to that of the doctor–patient one was referring to a well-known analogy within Buddhism that likens the Dharma to a strong medicine and the Buddha himself to a skilled physician—having 'diagnosed' the root cause of suffering amid humanity, of which disease is a part, the teachings offer not only the necessary awareness but also the means or practices required to ultimately transcend it (Lopes 2015, p. 117; Sihlé 2014, p. 236; Vargas-O'Bryan 2011, p. 81). For example, texts like the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* suggest that the student of Dharma consider themselves as being the patient of their teacher, who as physician and embodiment of the Buddha's wisdom and compassion, imparts medicine through their teaching. When the student puts the latter into practice, it constitutes a treatment (Pordié 2007, p. 94; Samuel 1993, p. 228; Sihlé 1995, p. 39; Vargas-O'Bryan 2011, pp. 82–83). This act of the patient following the prescribed actions of their doctor is what Henry refers to as 'devotion', another "very tricky" term that he defined as

respect and understanding, a real commitment to following the instructions. I follow instructions because my teacher told me to and I trust my teacher. So, I look at [imagine] my teacher during a visualization and I feel that my teacher is supporting me, which builds the force of the practice.

As a Tibetan–English translator who has been a practitioner for seventeen years, nearly a decade of which he spent in India and Nepal, Markus felt that it was important to specify that devotion is not deistic in this tradition. He explained how the Tibetan word for it, *mögi*, can be understood by dissecting the meaning of the two terms of which it is made up, as follows:

möba means you have a striving or wish to receive teachings from the teacher and *güba*, you respect what they're teaching and who they are. It's like active interest in the teachings basically and respect for having a teacher. And then of course, in the tantric tradition, it has a different nuance or emphasis, where it's not so much about the persons anymore, it's way more about the non-dual experience that is introduced and strengthened, also through the relationship with the teacher. So, you're not devoted to someone out there but more to the recognition of who he truly is and who you truly are.

Thus, faith in the Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition is not merely an attitude that one holds toward something or someone but is expressed through practice, the devotion of which generates transformation, which is ultimately amenable to enlightenment; as such, faith and devotion play a salvific role (Mills 2003, pp. 202–3; Traer 1991, pp. 104, 109).

Furthermore, Henry's explanation reflects how the Vajrayāna Buddhist concept of 'faith,' which is also likened to "[...] a reasoned conviction—based on one's own observation and reasoning" (Powers 2007, p. 299), is contrasted to "blind faith", which is held "[...] in spite of empirical evidence or common sense" (ibid.). That is to say, that it heavily emphasizes the possibility of directly accessing the truthfulness of what one is required to have faith in oneself, which distinguishes it from the Western notion of the "leap of faith" that is normally associated with a belief in something that is essentially unknowable (Traer 1991, p. 100). In the *Pramāṇavārttika*, Dharmakīrti, the sixth or seventh-century Indian Buddhist philosopher and scholar of epistemology, explains that blind faith does not lay a stable foundation upon which to develop "[...] trusting faith in the Buddha and what he teaches" (Berzin n.d.-d). Rather than taking the words of a figure or scripture at face value due to their seemingly authoritative status, one should examine, analyze, and directly test those claims out for oneself, and then arrive at a conclusion that is based on personal experience. In doing so, one curtails engaging with the tradition out of misplaced desires and expectations as well as the likelihood of one's faith being shaken when something fails to meet or contradicts these (Berzin n.d.-d; Dalai Lama 2003, p. 96; Ray 2001, pp. 154–56). This process is facilitated by engaging in the preliminary practices respective to both sutra and tantra (see Section 3.2 and endnote no. 30).

In light of the above, faith in this tradition has also been compared to deduction and said to be founded on the understanding that there are three criteria according to which a person can evaluate the validity and reliability of a statement: (1) direct proof obtained via immediate observation, as in the case of a practitioner who experiences the effects of what they are putting into practice; (2) "indirect, inferential proof of the sort that makes it possible to assert, for example, that if there is smoke, there must be a fire" (Ricard 2003, p. 272); and (3) valid testimony "[...] in the absence of physical proof," which is "[...] supplied by spiritual teachers, those unusually accomplished contemplatives who in all aspects of their character and behavior are manifestly worthy of confidence, of whose words everything that can be verified through our own experience, is found to be true" (ibid.). Therefore, Henry's analogy is an example of having confident faith based on valid testimony.

2.2.2. Factors That Reinforce Faith and Devotion

Across the data gathered from the discussions that my participants and I had regarding the student–teacher relationship, several factors that can be said to reinforce their faith and devotion toward their teachers and the teachings emerged. First, is the manner in which the teacher appears to naturally embody that which one is taught to actualize within oneself, or to have "[...] domestic[ated] realization as something habitual [...] and lived" (Gyatso 1999, p. 141), thereby providing and substantiating the link between the conventional and ultimate realities. During our interview, Dr. Pilar Jennings, a practitioner of Vajrayāna Buddhism in a Sakya lineage for the past twenty-five years and psychoanalyst who focuses on the clinical applications of Buddhist meditation and leads retreats,¹² emphasized the importance of the lama as living proof of the efficacy of practice and source of motivation for it, as follows:

[...] it's very tough to feel sufficiently inspired or just to imagine that these methods are going to be helpful, without a teacher who seems to model the ripple effects of having engaged in the practice over the course of years [...] most practitioners, they'll have tons of doubt, or there'll be a variety of things that pull them away. And so, to have a teacher who is just encouraging, inspiring, supporting, is really very important.

Sharon, who took refuge with Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche in the 1990s and later joined Tara's Triple Excellence program, has felt influenced by the manner in which her teacher embodies the teachings. In this regard, she stated:

I mean, you can't really separate his teachings from his personality. He incorporates [them]; I've never ever seen him angry, scold anybody, or shout at anybody. This is very inspiring—he lives what he teaches. He's so humble.

In particular, her understanding of devotion and the possibility of cultivating it herself have been greatly facilitated by the direct proof of it that she has received through observing the devotion that he exemplifies toward his root lamas and the compassion that he offers his students:

The teachings say that to get enlightened, to see the nature of mind, you need two things, or at least one of them: boundless compassion or boundless devotion; it's not possible to look behind the curtain and realize what our true nature is without either one of those. And it really touches my heart to see [...] how he devotes all his life to being this person who is just so perfect and wonderful and full of love and compassion and care, that it's easy for us to be devoted to him. And I think this is all his intention, to make it easy for us students to feel this feeling, have this devotion that we need, because if he were a nasty guy or made mistakes, then people would say, "ah, but in this respect, he's not so perfect." But I think it's just he gives all his life to being this perfect, caring being who cares for *every* being who touches or crosses his life. For sure, he knows that without devotion for him, we would never reach what he lives for us to reach and that I think is very, very special [...] I mean, he hardly ever has time for himself, no holidays. I remember when we were in Denmark, he so much enjoyed the horses, and he was used to horse-riding during his early childhood in Tibet, and then you realize how much he enjoys riding a horse or swimming. But then, he was always surrounded by hundreds of students, he was never on his own. I mean, what a life, huh? And very often he has said he would wish so much to do retreats, he is really longing for that for himself. But then, high lamas always said: "No, your job is to teach." And then, I thought, "wow, what a kind person" because he wants to save our lives and our minds, he devotes all his life.

Nathan, who took refuge with Lama Ole Nydahl, a Western teacher of the Karma Kagyü lineage, in 1998, emphasized that observing his teacher's behavior in many different contexts over the years has had more of a significant impact on him than any one-on-one exchanges or public teachings have:

It's just being close to him, seeing how he works, seeing how it is having worked a lot with your mind and not needing privacy but being there all the time for your students. That's, woah, amazing. I think I never really saw Ole disturbed by anything. There were sometimes really strange situations, but he always made the best out of each one—he found a way to really handle it smoothly and easily. And I thought, "okay, that's also possible to do in life, twenty-four hours a day." That's why the lama in Tibetan Buddhism is so important because he's your teacher in the way that he behaves, you see how it works as a person.

Terri fondly recalled how she felt a sense of trust in her *khenpo*/lama of the Karma Kagyü lineage and was moved to take refuge with him at the age of about thirty, when she knew very little about Buddhism, in 1985:

I was just very impressed with his compassion; you could see the compassion. And his movements were so graceful, and the way he would clean his glasses—he was so present; he would take his glasses off, and his mind was *right there*; it blew me away.

Yara has been particularly moved and inspired by the compassion that Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche exudes. Having grown up in an abusive and Catholic home environment as a child in Mexico, she struggled for many years with understanding how people could be so cruel to one another. She underwent therapy and could not bring herself to believe in a god who would allow things to be this way. When she had the opportunity to live close to Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche in Nepal for approximately three months in order to receive teachings and become a volunteer for Tara's Triple Excellence program, she witnessed how living compassionately together with others is possible and that it can create "a different environment and sphere of life. Everything around him [Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche] is just precious, it's great, it's flourishing, and blooming all around." She began to cry as she explained how the practice and her teacher's "amazing compassion" saved her life on multiple occasions, such that no matter how difficult things might be, she now knows that she has a way out of it. To her, true compassion is the look she has seen in his eyes when she consulted him for advice throughout different periods of hardship in her life. It is a look of sincere understanding and determining what one can do at that moment to enable the other person to have the good that one has. Although it is extremely difficult to extend this to everyone, her teacher is proof that it is possible to do so. However, to be able to do this, she explained that it is necessary to be compassionate toward oneself in the first place, which she has also learned to cultivate from him. This has enabled her to release herself from harsh self-judgment at times and forgive herself "from the bottom of the heart." Now, she plays various roles within the TTE program. Diego Hangartner, the co-founder and director of Mind & Life Europe until 2014, defined self-compassion as "being curious, open, warmhearted, and benevolently accepting of ourselves for who we are and not what we try to be, with the aim of overcoming our own suffering and its causes." He also learned how to be this way through the compassion, openness, and non-judgment that his teachers exhibited toward him. He had the privilege of living with his main teacher, Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche, who gave Nyingma and Dzogchen teachings, while he spent eleven years in Dharamsala learning Tibetan and serving as an assistant and translator to him. This enabled him to witness first-hand what embodying the teachings through one's everyday actions looks like. He recalled:

[...] having a great master, he could be sitting in front of anything and he was basically just enjoying the play of his own mind [...] how he reacted in challenging situations where I was sort of freaking out or annoyed or stressed [...] was certainly very inspiring. He was a family man on top of that but a really profound practitioner of the Dzogchen tradition. He could always go back to that state and talk from it, not about it. So, that's a big difference. In my case, I talk about it, but he was talking *from* it. And that was certainly a big learning, that "wow, it is really possible." And he had this incredible demeanor of radiance. People were always saying, even up to his high, high age, he was always this soothing presence [...] by the way he was holding himself, he was chipping away at my grasping and I found that very powerful in hindsight.

Second, is the teacher's ability to "[...] perceive the needs and predilections of individual students" (Powers 2007, p. 269; see also Samuel 1993, p. 430) and respond to them,¹³ sometimes in a manner that even seems to defy spatiotemporal boundaries.¹⁴ According to Florence, who took refuge with Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche fifteen years ago and joined Tara's Triple Excellence around a decade ago, 'mind-reading', such as telepathy and clairvoyance, is a *siddhi* (THL.: *ngödrup*, supernatural ability/'attainment'/'accomplishment') that is easily and commonly acquired through meditative practice. In the past, the questions that she had for her teachers would always be answered without having to ask them, so now she

simply sits and listens while in their presence. In fact, some of the scholastic literature of the Pāli canon¹⁵ classified telepathy (*cetopariyañāṇa* or *paracittañāṇa*) and clairaudience (*dibba-sotu-dhātu*) more specifically as *abhijñā*, ‘super-knowledges’ that accompany advanced meditative and spiritual states (Clough 2012, p. 77; Fiordalis 2012, p. 105). Not only has extrasensory perception been considered a “[...] valid means of scientific verification” (Wallace 1995, p. 158) since the early Buddhist tradition but its display “[...] as a means of generating faith” (Fiordalis 2012, p. 99), converting people to the tradition, and alleviating the suffering of others (Fiordalis 2012, pp. 121–22; Gellner 1992, p. 288) has also been commonly referred to.¹⁶

Roger recounted several occasions that proved the “omniscience,” as he called it, of his teachers to him. Once, while he was on a one hundred day-long retreat, he received repeated and contradictory complaints from the retreat master, along the lines of chanting either too loudly or not loudly enough during the *pūjā* (worship ritual). Feeling highly irritated by this, he confronted the retreat master about it. Two or three days later, after His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa had just arrived and everyone had chanted prayers with him for the first time, Roger was shocked that he stopped at his seat before exiting the room to tell him, “you’re the best chanter because you have the deepest voice, the lowest voice.” This caused everyone, including the retreat master, to erupt into laughter. According to Roger, “what he was really doing is saying that so nobody could pick on me anymore. He took away my suffering.” Roger was so moved by this that he took refuge with him on that retreat as an act of faith and cried profusely while doing so. He explained that “whenever I chant now, I develop that low, guttural range.” He also attributes the *gyalwang*’s visit with having undone “psychic knots” that were within him, which enabled him to improve his breathing technique after many years of engaging in hatha yoga.¹⁷

I could inhale for four, hold for sixteen, exhale for eight, trying to get to inhale for five, hold for twenty, and exhale for ten, which I could never do, no matter what. But three or four days after His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa came, I could do six, twenty-four, and twelve, respectively, for at least three rounds.

In Roger’s opinion, these occurrences exemplify how “a realized master gets into someone’s energy or mind [...] and has a way of opening you up to where you weren’t open before.” During the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, Roger’s ability to connect to the *gyalwang*’s presence and be effected by it was not hindered by the virtual format of the encounters. While speaking about how his faith has particularly deepened during the past two years, he corrected himself to emphasize that this has also been the case recently:

But even the last two months, the things that I get from connecting to His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa through his *pūjās* that are streamed on Facebook—I feel things moving in me, like: things opening up in me that weren’t there before [Roger moves his hands move outwards from initially being placed on his chest]; how free my central channel is [he moves his arms from the lower half of his torso upwards above his head]; and how big my heart is [he extends his arms to the sides].

He further explained that it is through accumulating many experiences of this kind over the decades that he came to understand the teaching that “the mind of one buddha is the same as the mind of all buddhas” and to have faith in it. He once put this idea to the test by asking a *rinpoche* with whom he was unfamiliar and whom had joined a twenty-five day-long retreat led by Mingyur Rinpoche that was nearing its end, to tell His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa that he says hello. At the time, he felt guilty about being connected to and under the tutelage of multiple teachers, even though the Buddhist tradition was accepting of it compared to the Hindu ones he had previously practiced in that required exclusivity to one’s guru. After making this request to the *rinpoche*, he sat down and immediately beheld a “twelve-foot holographic image of His Holiness” that was vivid and telling him, “whatever Mingyur Rinpoche tells you to do, it’s like I’m telling you.” When I asked Roger if he meant that he saw a vision in his mind, he stated,

No, it was not just in my mind, it was out here [he motions in front of himself]. Just me. My eyes were open. He was superimposed [. . .] they are all connected. They can just talk to each other, they're all omniscient. Like, we need a telephone, we need *Zoom*—they don't. They're telepathic [. . .] They just know. They are developed enough in themselves that they know [. . .] They just want us to wake up.

For Yara, the intersubjective nature of the student–teacher connection and the lama's ability to transcend space and time through their awareness has been proven by the efficacy of a prayer known as “Calling the Guru from Afar” that she performs when she experiences a lack of motivation to do her daily practice and feels disconnected from it due to being overwhelmed by other responsibilities. It involves requesting the aid of her teacher in reconnecting her to her practice until she feels able to restart again. She added that these also manifest in unexpected ways when she does not call out to him, such as when she finds herself in a moment of difficulty and need, and receives a teaching from him that happens to offer perfectly timed advice or the answer she was seeking, even though it is not specifically directed at her. This may be in the form of an image, message, or video that is shared in the sangha's *WhatsApp* group. The recurrence of this has reinforced her faith in him:

So, first time for me was like, “this is so weird, what is happening, really?” After the second time, it was like, “hm, okay, nice.” After all these years, it's like, “thank you; I know you're here, I know you hear me, and that you are way beyond any limit that I can think of.” That's the kind of teachings and teacher that we have and that is kind of the tantric results that we can get. Truly devotion, when you have faith that your teacher is a real buddha, that's the kind of blessings that you have. That's something that I hear from all the teachers every single time. If you think that your teacher is just a regular person, the blessings or accomplishments that you will get from them will be like from a regular person. But if you think that your teacher is actually the Buddha in person, then those are the kind of accomplishments or blessings that you will get, directly from the Buddha in person.

The coinciding of a statement or teaching with what one needs to hear in that very moment was also brought up by Henry when I asked him whether he feels his teacher's presence through the pre-recorded videos that guide practice in Tara's Triple Excellence program:

The teacher is there and you know what? If one day you come to your meditation with something in your mind, the teacher will say exactly what you need to hear. And you'll say, “no, it's impossible, how can it be?” But any session, you feel like the teacher is saying exactly what you need to hear or receive this day specifically.

Gavin, who took refuge with a Gelukpa *tulku* in the early 1980s, believes that sometimes these timely statements or teachings are actually unexpected initiations occurring in plain sight:

They could say something deliberately to have a very powerful effect on *you*, in the middle of talking to a very big group of people; and you know this is happening, when all of a sudden, the teacher says something and all of a sudden, something happens, some realization happens; and then, you look at the teacher and they're looking right at you. And you *know* that that thing that was said that was just a piece of information for everybody else, was meant for you because the teacher knew you were ready for it, and so you're given an initiation that way [. . .] it isn't always a formal ceremony.

Markus mentioned that devotion unfolds naturally when one arrives, through direct experience, at such a genuine understanding of something that the teacher has imparted:

Something switches on, something changed. I went through a lot of doubt, but after these experiences, even though the doubt was there, something happened that I couldn't doubt.

In this sense, ‘understanding’ implies not a primarily intellectual or cognitive grasping of something but rather “[...] a far more experiential awareness of the teachings, a ‘realisation’ within their own experience” (Mills 2003, p. 204) that is newly gained.

Third, is the teacher’s ability to transmit, via sensory contact, the blessings that are associated with the *yidam* with which they have merged in deity yoga, meaning its transformative power or positive spiritual energy, to others (Gayley 2007, p. 466; Samuel 1993, p. 267). In this case, the potency of the *yidam* is not only generated into the lama’s body but also often into ritual objects (e.g., consecrated liquids, pills, cords, vases, arrows, etc.) that will serve as points of contact between the sacred and devotees, making the former tangible to the latter (Gayley 2007, p. 466; Gerke 2010, pp. 431–32). That is to say, that such sanctified ritual objects and substances are not only symbolic of the lama’s realized experience but that they actually carry it out into the world, rendering experience itself into a form of currency that mediates the exchange between master and disciple, where the lama is dependent upon the devotee’s patronage and the entire process is dependent upon the devotee’s faith in the lama’s claim of ritual competency (Gyatso 1999, p. 141). As participants adopt the perspective of relating to the lama as an enlightened being and are touched by him or the ritual implements that he has sanctified, ingest consecrated liquids, or wear consecrated accessories on their bodies, the power of the *yidam* and lama is experienced as being real because it is in the form of something that can be taken within themselves. Barbara Gerke (2010) argues that it is the hierarchical gap between roles and levels of practical and formal knowledge respective to this relationship that allows a space through which multiple vocalities or interpretations of what is effected by rituals can emerge across different participants. This also allows the encounter between the artificial agent (ritual objects, liquids, pills, etc.) and the participant to produce an unpredictable and spontaneous experience or impact upon first contact. As the meaningfulness of the transaction is interpreted by the devotee in a manner that can be integrated into their personal life-narrative, the ritual act can be made to accommodate their needs, thereby ensuring its efficacy, relevance, and survival (Gerke 2010, p. 431; Gerke 2012, pp. 256–58; Samuel 2010, p. 310).

Gavin’s first *mālā* (rosary) was gifted to him by his Gelukpa *tulku* after the latter had chanted “mantras all over it and really charged it up,” which he was surprised to vividly sense upon touching it. This similarly occurred to Roger when Mingyur Rinpoche asked him to hand over his *mālā* among a crowd of two hundred other people. After Mingyur Rinpoche held it in his hands for twenty to forty seconds and returned it, Roger felt stunned: “It felt different [...] he charged it with soft love. I would describe it as ‘this is what love feels like’.” On another occasion, Gavin experienced a ‘hand empowerment’ (THL.: *chak-wang*)¹⁸ when his teacher suddenly placed his hand on his shoulder and he realized, “I just got zapped; I just got something from him, that was no casual tap.” He explained that the effects of such transmissions can be felt “if you’re sensitive and open to it”:

Sometimes, it’s a kind of latent effect—you get bonked on the head by something and you might feel it the next day. It can vary and maybe the effect was intended to be long-term and more subtle or maybe the effect was meant to hit you right away [...] certain things can happen that you can really, really, *really* physically feel and other times it’s so subtle and it could be something that opens up later, much later, maybe a few days or a few weeks or maybe a few years. But the seeds are being planted.

Once, Roger received a hand empowerment from Thrangu Rinpoche (a *tulku* of the Kagyü school) when he asked him to bless his practice while he was in Bodh Gaya, India, which is the site where the Buddha is said to have achieved enlightenment. Although Roger refers to Thrangu Rinpoche’s commentary on the *Ocean of Definitive Meaning* for teaching his own students, he is not one of his main teachers. Thus, he was amazed that when Thrangu Rinpoche placed his hand on his head and began praying to bless him, “all these bolts of red light came—it didn’t feel electric, but it was like a brilliant red light in the form of electricity that came streaming into me.” When I asked him whether he perceived its color through sight or feeling, he tried to clarify his experience as follows:

I saw it as red, but I had my eyes closed. And all this red light came into me. Not as a stream but as like bolts of electricity. It didn't feel like I was getting shocked, it just felt good. Like, I've had shocking experiences but this wasn't a shock. It was just an amazing experience [. . .] I just felt all this red electricity going through me.¹⁹

This experience caused him to believe that while Thrangu Rinpoche is not his teacher in this physical incarnation, they must have a karmic connection from another lifetime.

When I asked Henry what his thoughts were about the claim that teachers can transmit healing or blessings to people by having them touch objects that they have ritually charged, he responded:

The explanation is that material things do not really exist and, in a world where everything is inexpressible, anything can happen. So, as anything can happen, it is really very logic[al] that he can bless you or give a transmission with a *dorje* or even his shoe! [. . .] As it is said by Nāgārjuna: "For whom emptiness is possible, everything is possible. For whom emptiness is impossible, nothing is possible."²⁰ [. . .] But I cannot really say that I feel that the emptiness really exists. So, I still depend too much on things that I can see, hear, and feel. But it's not so far away from my intellectual understanding to say, "okay, if we go to a level of existence where everything is inexpressible, there's no problem, anything can happen."

Returning to the three criteria previously mentioned in Section 2.2.1, according to which the validity or reliability of a statement can be judged and thus serve as a basis for faith, Henry's statement here exemplifies both valid testimony and inferential proof. On the other hand, Gavin and Roger's positions on the transmission of blessings are based on direct proof—similarly to the displays of extrasensory perception discussed, the transmission of blessings manifests the reality of doctrinal concepts such as emptiness to practitioners by making the seemingly inconceivable directly experienceable (Fiordalis 2012, p. 122). This, in turn, reinforces faith.

3. The Challenges of Deity Yoga

3.1. The Challenges of Accessibility

Presently, many lamas with a Western following have established tens if not hundreds of centers and monasteries (THL.: *gomde*) worldwide with the purpose of providing their students with a base where they can not only meet as a community to learn and practice under the supervision of specially appointed facilitators, practice leaders, and senior teachers in their absence but also attend public lectures, workshops, and retreats of various lengths given by their lama when the latter visits for a temporary period of time. In this context, the possibility of cultivating a personal relationship with the lama and receiving empowerments²¹ has become rarer, requiring mobility, time, and finances that are not within everyone's reach, especially when the centers and monasteries are located in remote areas. It has also led the supporting role of the sangha to take on greater importance (Ray 2001, pp. 447–49; Samuel 2005, pp. 321–23).

While reminiscing upon how easy it was to gain access to Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche and ask him questions on a daily basis in the 1990s in Kathmandu compared to the period after he began establishing retreat centers in the West, traveling more, and attracting a larger following up to the present day, Sharon stated that she regrets not having been sufficiently advanced in her practice back then to ask the deeper questions that she has in mind now. She also longs to be on retreat with him, which is not possible with his current schedule. However, if there is an emergency, she explained that there are reliable people working for him who will respond and relay the message to him. Henry stated that their sangha is supported by Q&A sessions that occur once or twice a month. Meanwhile, Sharon has grown an appreciation for others who have been appointed to teach in his absence and lead the program and has come to understand Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche's point that

it's not so important to be always close to him [. . .] because you have to be on your own anyway when you want to see the nature of mind. You have to be completely undistracted and not entangled in any daily activities or thoughts.

In the early years of Nathan's practice at the end of the 1990s, when Lama Ole Nydahl had an estimated 280 centers worldwide, he would see him at least ten to fifteen times per year. Nowadays, with approximately 650 centers and many more followers, he sees him only once a year. However, he explained that it does not matter that the opportunities of being in his lama's physical presence are now much fewer than they were before because he has developed such a sense of connection to him over the years that he gets a "relaxed, calm feeling, as if he is here" immediately upon thinking about him.²² Nathan added that "when something gets difficult, I think, 'what would Ole do now?'" and that it is very easy for him to imagine the answer to that. He explained that this has been enabled by observing him in various situations over the years, as described in Section 2.2.2.

As Yara currently only has access to Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche once a year, the sangha plays an important role in giving her a sense that she "belong[s] to something that is truthful." She finds her practice trajectory, experiences, and the changes that she has undergone validated in discussion with her "*vajra* brothers and sisters" (THL.: *dorje-ming-po, dorje-sring-mo*), who have gone through similar things. When I asked her whether she has experienced a difference between doing deity yoga alone at home versus doing it in retreat or in the presence of others, she referred to how the latter reinforces the sense of purpose behind one's actions, whereas the former may allow doubts to creep in:

It potentializes your practice like a million times when you are in a group [. . .] you're just part of a flow [. . .] in retreat, you actually know that you are there doing something [. . .] And when you practice alone, I guess sometimes you don't even know that there is anything to go with the flow with [. . .] you're like, "what am I doing? [. . .] How come I'm Tārā? Why am I doing all of these rituals? [. . .] There's nobody here, it's super silly."

Gavin's answer emphasized similar aspects when I asked him what the importance of belonging to a sangha is and how practicing with one's sangha differs from doing so alone:

I think it's absolutely important; you can't do these things alone, particularly as a Westerner. There's too much coming at you from all around you—your co-workers, your friends, your family, who doubt what you're doing and because of your close relationships with these people, that can cause subtle doubts. But when you're with community, you're reinforced in that and you're not thinking that you're a lone wolf or crazy and doing these eccentric things, you're not. And so, community is absolutely, foundationally important [. . .] it strengthens your conviction that what you are doing is sane and good because you're sharing those experiences with others [. . .] I found in the Tibetan system that practicing with others was more profound. Just sitting in a room with twenty-five other people all doing the same thing at the same time is very reinforcing [. . .] there's just some kind of collective energy²³ that happens when a bunch of people are doing these things together. There's that old saying of Jesus: "Whenever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there with you." And I think there's something there. There's a fundamental, spiritual truth to the fact of getting people together. I mean, that's why churches, synagogues, and temples happen—because there's something about putting people together that are doing the same thing that is greater than the sum of its parts.

When I followed up with the question of whether the use of ritual objects in a group practice setting can help to create this atmosphere that facilitates the unfolding of experience, he responded,

Oh yeah, definitely. I loved it all. I loved the richness of it all. The incense, the bells, the chanting, the *damaru* ['drums']. When it was working really well, it was a very submersive experience. And that's the whole idea to this tantric thing, is

you're totally immersed in this whole *gestalt* thing. Those were the parts of the *sadhana*²⁴ that I loved the best, when we were all chanting together or ringing our *damarus* and bells together. It really propels the experience [. . .] it brings about an almost tactile energy that is really powerful and really positive, it's very uplifting [. . .] both psychologically, emotionally, and physically.

Roger explained that in the retreat setting, "everybody is putting everybody else first, which uplifts everybody; it creates a feeling of love and compassion, and we're not used to a whole community of people caring for ourselves." This is important, he stated, because it can deepen one's own sense of self-love and being worthy of respect, which is essential for being able to cultivate *bodhicitta*²⁵ and extend the same to others. For Dr. Jennings, engaging in deity yoga in a community has enabled her to transition from a conceptual understanding of interdependent co-arising and the "emptiness of any discrete solid self-structure" to a visceral one:

[. . .] to do these practices in community, where it feels like you have everybody under the sun engaging in the same practice—so there's very elderly people, there are children, there are people of every gender identification—and we're all evoking the same image and then experimenting with identification with this image, to me it has ushered in feelings of interdependence that were more conceptual before.

According to her, having access to settings like retreats is important because they offer the ideal conditions for the full effect of practice to unfold. She reasoned that by requiring the practitioner to "unplug from [their] daily li[fe]" and "table all of [their] secular responsibilities and worries," the retreat creates the necessary space and time for the body to relax into a sense of safety and for the mind and heart "to enter into experiences that are healing, are expansive."

Yet, an issue that is commonly encountered among Western audiences is how everything that one has learned and experienced within the temporary and ideal conditions of the setting of the retreat can be integrated into one's daily life. Yara explained that people often end up throwing themselves back into their regular routines after a retreat and feeling lost and confused as to how to proceed with their practice in the starkly different context of everyday life. As Markus argued,

[i]f you're forced to be on your own, in your home, trying to figure this all out, without relative, consistent contact with people doing something similar and teachings, it's *really* hard I think because our culture is not reminding us. If you walk through Dharamsala, wherever you look, it's there. There are old people walking around saying mantras. You see *sadhus*²⁶ doing their practice. It's way easier. I think that's a very, very important part of *any* practice [. . .] I have the sense that to *really* do it [the practice], it has to be the center of your life. In the West especially, you can't just do it a little bit and then the cultural container sort of carries you. So, it's tricky.

Lucas, who comes from a Unitarian Universalist background but took refuge with Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche in 2006 and later joined Tara's Triple Excellence program, also mentioned how the sociocultural context in which he lives and its respective obligations are unfavorable to such integration:

I'm still in a materialistic culture here [the United States] and so this sense of needing to do things that pay the bills and stuff like that is a part of it [the challenges]. And there's no monastic culture, there's no support structure for practitioners like those that exist in India and Tibet and places like that, it's completely different. So, my only choice is to basically try to make my profession my path. Just bring it all on the path.

To avoid dissonance and allow herself to process everything, Clara stated that she makes sure not to do too many things for a few days up to a week after a retreat, which is unprob-

lematic for her because she is retired. Sharon confided that prior to the establishment of Tara's Triple Excellence program, she often felt confused after returning from teachings with Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche that lasted between one to two weeks. She explained that while there were books that were translated for the international community by the time she started participating in such teachings, this did not compensate for the lack of practice guidance at home. After all, "[...] Tibetan Buddhists define themselves as such through practice rather than through study or knowledge" (Samuel 2005, p. 320). Jack mentioned that the enormous quantity of high-quality books on the Dharma available nowadays has not increased or improved practitioners' understanding. In accordance with what the tradition teaches, Nathan argued that no matter how detailed a book might be, "the transmission from someone who is realized" is necessary for grasping the essence and working with its content. That is to say, that the lama's embodied performance and transmission, which constitutes operational knowledge, is believed to be significantly more important and effective at conveying the truths contained within the representational knowledge of literature (Mills 2003, p. 205). Henry warned that when things are left up to one's own interpretation, without the guidance of and connection to a teacher, one "can easily go astray. You can create many artificial ideas that you are doing great things but are really doing nothing."

Ultimately, Jack argued, the absence of proximity to a teacher "requires the emphasis to be moved on the learner and makes people fall back onto techniques." Markus similarly commented the following:

What I'm seeing in the West, is that teachers build structures that take over the role of the guide. I think we are really at a time now where we have to figure it all out. It's two generations. It's gonna take some time to figure out how to teach this in the West. I think Mingyur Rinpoche is doing a great job and found a very good approach.

What he is referring to here is how the Tergar organization under Mingyur Rinpoche, who is a teacher of the Karma Kagyü and Nyingma lineages, has offered Western audiences the opportunity to gradually explore their interest in meditation, irrespective of their religious or cultural background, through the Joy of Living program's three levels, since 2016. In this way, they can make a more informed decision when embarking on a committed path of specifically Buddhist practice, which is what is offered through the Path of Liberation program, and gain the necessary foundation before doing so. The Path of Liberation program is itself split into two possibilities to accommodate people's lifestyles and capacities—the Nectar of the Path track, for those who can spend thirty to sixty minutes per day practicing, and the Ngöndro track, for those who can spend a minimum of one to two hours per day practicing and intend to gain access to advanced teachings in the future. This program is made accessible through the Vajrayana Online portal with a subscription that also grants access to monthly teachings and courses "[...] from Mingyur Rinpoche, webinars with Rinpoche and the Tergar Instructors, as well as readings, [a]udio/visual material, discussion forums, and opportunities for one-on-one interviews with the instructors" (Tergar.org 2022).

Likewise, Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, who is the brother of Mingyur Rinpoche, realized the necessity of adapting his approach to better suit his large Western following. After teaching students in the West for many years, he became aware of their struggle to maintain their practice within the restraints of their daily lives and distance from him, and some of them began requesting that he consider creating an online program that could assist them. Soon after, Lama Tenzin Sangpo showed him a *terma* ('hidden treasure') called *Tara's Profound Essence*, and the concise and practical nature of its instructions struck him as being perfectly suited to the needs of his students. Thus, its translation and careful incorporation into the format of an online program adapted to a Western audience was initiated, which became Tara's Triple Excellence (TTE) program in 2010. Like those offered by the Tergar platforms, the TTE program is set up as a graduated path, comprised of three stages: in the First Excellence, practitioners are taught the philosophical principles of Theravāda Buddhism, such as the Four Noble Truths,²⁷ and slowly led to meditatively examine the basis of their "[...]

negative emotions and [. . .] to abandon harmful beliefs and habits” (DharmaSun.org 2017); through the Second Excellence, which introduces them to the Mahāyāna or bodhisattva path, they learn how to transform their emotions through the cultivation of “impartial loving kindness and compassion” in meditation (ibid.); their initiation into tantric practice then begins with the Third Excellence, during which they are taught how to engage in visualization, mantra, and other ritual and devotional practices (ibid.).

Tara’s Profound Essence is said to have originated from Tārā and to have been discovered by the *tertön* (‘treasure discoverer’) Chokgyur Lingpa in the nineteenth century (DharmaSun.org 2017). *Terma* are considered to be revelatory teachings, texts, and artifacts that were concealed with the purpose of being discovered at a time when circumstances necessitate their guidance and humanity has progressed sufficiently to understand them. They were hidden by tantric adepts such as Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche), who is credited with having converted the land of Tibet to Buddhism and facilitated the dissemination of its teachings. They continue to be found by *tertön*, who are deemed qualified to interpret and transmit them due to being ritual specialists mastered in attaining identification with a *yidam*, such that they act not on their own account but as representatives of the *yidam* on Earth. The Nyingma and Kagyü lineages to which Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche belongs have adopted the institution of *terma* as a counterbalance to the oft-inevitable outcome that despite their enlightened origin, the essence, strength, and relevance of Buddhist teachings may become muddled over time due to being understood, expressed, and transmitted by humans, who are limited mediums (Jamgön 2012; Obeyesekere 2012, pp. 94–96; Powers 2007, pp. 379–83; Samuel 1993, p. 294). Overall, the timing at which *terma* are discovered and then put into practice may be said to revitalize lineages by preventing them from falling into stagnation and becoming obsolete. In this sense, they reflect “[. . .] the Mahāyāna ideal of skill in means, the ability to adapt teachings to changing circumstances” (Powers 2007, p. 383). Thus, the shift in Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche’s approach may be said to be an example of this and does not discredit the perceived authority and efficacy of his previous one.

Finally, it is worth noting that while some of my participants, as described above, benefit significantly from practicing in group settings, others were indifferent toward it or preferred practicing on their own. As a “solitary practitioner” and “not really the social kind of guy,” Henry interacts with the sangha only to a minimal degree. He enjoys how the online, pre-recorded format of the lessons provided by the TTE program allows him to have the teacher to himself, so to speak, as opposed to being in the company of hundreds of other people who want to be first in line to be seated up-front nearest to Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, which can be chaotic and confusing. For these reasons, he mentioned that he was not inconvenienced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lucas mentioned that while it is possible to “practice various sadhanas with people online” in the TTE program, he tried it a couple of times and found it to be less effective than doing so on his own. He does enjoy group practice but does not find the online format to be the best. In Florence’s case, she has been so focused on progressing in her path that she has preferred being solitary and very selective about the few people within her sangha with whom she cultivated relationships over the years. Although Saya also qualified herself as being solitary in the sense of having been a “loner” and “outsider” since she was young, she highlighted that the sangha definitely helps in terms of having people who inspire her and that she can trust and confide in. Besides, both Nathan and Roger raised a point that Berzin (n.d.-b) makes, which is that the disadvantage of group practice settings or retreats is how they can lead to distraction and annoyance. Nathan stated that while meditating together with the sangha can be nice in some regards, it can also be disturbing because “maybe there’s someone making strange words or singing the mantra too explicitly,” so he prefers practicing on his own. Likewise, Roger mentioned that the quality of the group experience “depends on who you’re sitting next to.”

3.2. The Challenges of Ngöndro

Prior to engaging in tantric practice, practitioners are usually required to complete a set of five preliminary practices called *ngöndro* that are believed to progressively uproot the afflictions that one has accumulated throughout numerous incarnations, thereby reversing one's negative conditioning (Powers 2007, p. 294). The practices achieve this by enabling an accumulation of merit, that is, "[...] virtuous deeds and attitudes, which produce corresponding good karmic results and positive mental states" (ibid., p. 93), as well as the development of wisdom, meaning a deep awareness of emptiness and what it implies at the levels of conventional and ultimate reality (Berzin n.d.-e; Cozort 2005, p. 24). By clearing out obstructions in this way, these purificatory acts re-orient the practitioner's focus from the mundane and the self to the soteriological and the well-being of others, while making them mentally and physically receptive to what is expected to emerge through advanced tantric teachings and practices (Powers 2007, p. 295).

As a cumulatively reinforcing process, each *ngöndro* must generally be repeated 100,000 times,²⁸ which can initially be startling and discouraging to practitioners, as the following participant testimonies will demonstrate. According to Berzin (n.d.-c, n.d.-e), such numbers were not intended to be taken literally, as though they are magical and completing them immediately brings something into effect, but rather to signify 'a lot' and broaden the practitioner's capacity to conceptualize on a very large scale, which is necessary for grasping notions like the extent of the effects of karma, reincarnation, and the number of sentient beings that one's practice ought to be dedicated to benefitting. He suggests that it is also meant to encourage practitioners and build up their self-confidence, in the sense that reaching enlightenment and undoing countless years of negative conditioning may seem less out of reach once one has proven oneself capable of doing something as difficult as completing so many repetitions. For example, he states, "[...] if we think that if we recite a particular mantra that it will take care of at least 60,000 of these [eons of negative force], we can make a dent in this large number. That gives us encouragement" (Berzin n.d.-f). Once the sequences of 100,000 *ngöndro* are completed in preparatory fashion, the practices of which they are made up continue to be performed as integral parts of longer *sadhana* throughout one's path before "[...] some stable level of realization" (Berzin n.d.-d) is attained.

During her first five years of practicing in Kathmandu, Sharon struggled with overcoming her "laziness" and meeting the exigencies of the *ngöndro* as a mother who had to live by a certain schedule. As she was faced with having to engage in this elaborate process, she questioned whether its hardship, complexity, and time-consuming aspects were really necessary for understanding the nature of the mind as claimed. While this prevented her from completing more than half of the *ngöndro* she was initially instructed to perform, her experience of *ngöndro* became of "a totally different quality" after ten years of participating in the TTE program, which places the *ngöndro* much later in one's practice trajectory. She feels that her appreciation and understanding of the purpose of *ngöndro*, as well as her ability to detect its effects, have been significantly enhanced by the program's graduated learning process. Although Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche has been her teacher in both cases, his approach prior to the development of the TTE program was, like many other lineages, to begin with the *ngöndro*.

Lucas commented that beginning with *ngöndro* can be challenging for Westerners because a part of it, such as Vajrasattva meditation,²⁹ requires the practitioner to take on the identity of the *yidam*, without having first gotten used to the concept of it and developed faith in it, let alone reached an understanding of how oneself could possibly be compared to and become it. He added that by performing the *ngöndro* later and prior to the more advanced tantric practices, practitioners undergo training that enables the perceived gap between themselves and the *yidam* to be closed. He explained that this involves first engaging in outer Tārā *sadhana*, during which one looks up to Tārā more as a "parent figure or something similar," and sings praises in recognition of what one is learning from her. This is followed by inner Tārā *sadhana*, where "you are almost equal but not quite because you still need

to have some sense of [providing] offerings and praises but you're becoming more like the deity." Thus, engaging in *ngöndro* at a later point may allow the practitioner to first develop an understanding of "[...] the states of mind that will accompany the physical and verbal repetitions" (Berzin n.d.-a), which, in turn, strengthens their motivation and prevents them from enacting them in a rote and ineffective manner. In Henry's opinion, the 'secret' to the success of the TTE program is indeed "this graded, very well-organized sequence of teachings and the pace."

In Terri's experience, completing the *ngöndro* (including the Four Mind Changings)³⁰ prior to engaging in deity yoga was necessary for establishing a foundation for the latter, without which she stated it would have been meaningless. However, she felt very overwhelmed upon learning only after taking refuge with her first teacher that being his student meant one is eventually required to undertake *ngöndro*:

You have to do 100,000 prostrations and then you have to do 100,000 Vajrasattva mantras; you have to do 100,000 offerings, and 100,000 guru yoga offerings. So, here I am, I don't know anything about Buddhism, I'm reading all this and thinking, "what? I can't do all this—this is nuts!"

After a year or two of focusing on *śamatha* ('calm abiding')³¹ meditation, she finally felt prepared to receive the empowerment for the *ngöndro* and came to develop a sense of gratitude toward it, as she perceived its slow pace as offering an opportunity "to work through [...] all kinds of physical problems and obscurations and sicknesses that were coming up." This point about its purificatory efficacy was also emphasized by Markus, who stated:

Every Westerner I met who did the proper *ngöndro*, the 500,000 accumulations, they are *way* more relaxed because they worked through their bullshit and weird energy stuff. You become way more rock solid and then you can really engage with these more subtle practices [...] It gets rid of a lot of stuff, so it's very transformative.

Nevertheless, after receiving the beginning level of *Mahāmudrā* ('Great Seal')³² teachings from a Karma Kagyü *rinpoche*, Terri's overly zealous, fast-paced nature as a "go-getter" led her to over-practice:

I was so anxious to purify myself and get to where I was supposed to be, that I over-practiced. I did about four hours a day and I practiced so much I wore out my Zafu cover. I'll never forget this. I mailed it to Samadhi Cushions and they freaked out and asked how much sitting am I doing and they gave me a free cover.

When she met Mingyur Rinpoche in 2006 and had already completed three-quarters of the guru yoga *ngöndro*, she learned "about the middle path, which means that you don't push things [...] you do things gradually."

This proclivity to race into practice to gain a sense of progress is one that Diego Hangartner commented upon when I asked him about his approach as a meditation teacher. In his opinion, the Tibetan tradition's emphasis on deity yoga being the most ideal, profound, and expedient means of overcoming affliction has largely led it to gloss over *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* ('insight')³³ meditation, which he perceives as being essential in a Western context, where

we want to have the Highest Tantra practices; we want to be the quickest and the fastest, without recognizing that [...] the biggest affliction is that the mind is not stable, and that the quickest and the fastest is to learn to guide the mind: self-management [...] This element is key—without that, it's hopeless and therefore, we need to become aware of a neutral reference system. We are so conditioned to this self-sabotaging process of good and bad [...] this kind of inner dialogue that we're constantly having is the source of most of our suffering. But between good and bad, there is neutral, and we completely blank that out.

And this is what I really appreciate from exposing myself to the early Buddhist tradition—there, *vedanā* or feelings are much more present and not just good and bad or pleasant and unpleasant. There is so much more neutral. And so, *śamatha* practices really help you to stabilize your mind as a foundation. But that's often not taught.³⁴

Dr. Bruce Alan Wallace (2011), a leading Western scholar-practitioner and lama of Vajrayāna Buddhism, has similarly problematized this “[...] mad rush to ascend to more advanced forms of meditation” (p. xi). He states that despite the fact that “[...] the Buddha himself strongly emphasized the importance of developing shamatha and uniting it with vipashyana, it is remarkable the degree to which this key foundational practice is marginalized or overlooked entirely in all schools of Buddhism today” (ibid.) both “[...] inside and outside Tibet” (Wallace 2006, p. xii). He speculates that this must be due to how rare the appropriate conditions to practice it in have become, namely, “[...] a supportive, serene environment, good diet, proper exercise [...] very few preoccupations [...] minimal desires, few activities and concerns, contentment, pure ethical discipline, and freedom from obsessive, compulsive thinking” (2011, pp. ix–x).³⁵ In his opinion, the benefit of working through *śamatha* prior to the *ngöndro* is that it enables one to apply the refined attention cultivated during the former to the latter, making it significantly more efficacious. However, he adds that “[o]n the other hand, if you complete your preliminaries first, this will purify your mind so that you encounter fewer obstacles in your practice of shamatha” (2006, p. 147).

Roger also heavily emphasized how *śamatha* and basic practices are essential to understanding and deriving efficacy from deity yoga in the first place. He echoed the Dalai Lama's point that “Westerners are impatient—they want results too quick; they don't like that it's a graduated approach.” When I asked him if he believes that Vajrayāna practice is more direct in obtaining results, he replied:

No, and I'm gonna say I'm 98% sure that you can't really do a Vajrayāna practice if you can't do *śamatha* because your mind is not concentrated enough. How can you concentrate on a deity, if you can't concentrate on a marble? If you can't stay with awareness, how can you concentrate on your projection, on your deity practice? You can't. It's a joke. Seriously. I'm strict on this point—you think you're doing something, but you're not. You're distracted half the time and don't even know you're distracted. At least when you practice *śamatha*, you'll be able to see when you're distracted and when you're not [...] people do deity practice and they *loove* it because it takes them out of their ordinary reality—it's like an escape, but they still can't keep their mind calm and clear, they're still confused [...] There are basic Buddhist practices: to put other people first, to have compassion, be kind and patient, to develop concentration. Vajrayāna comes *after* that because you're trying to be Vajrayoginī or Tārā but you don't know what that is, you're just escaping your own pain, but it might not work at the end of the day [...] Like if you really want to be a musician, you have to play scales. But if you just want to play a song, you play a song, so you get good at playing songs [...] but if someone says “come play in our band,” you can't, you're not a musician, you can only play songs. So yeah, you can do Vajrayoginī, but you're still an asshole.

Wallace (2011) also refers to how in the absence of this foundation, not only is one likely to “[...] hit a plateau” (p. xi) and experience stagnation in one's practice but “[...] authentic Vajrayana realizations” (p. xv) will also not arise. Diego Hangartner added that *śamatha*, in combination with *ngöndro*, laid “a solid foundation, so that anything, be it the bus being late, or something breaking down, or a situation coming up that wasn't to my liking, did not make me feel fussed.” He described this journey as follows:

I said: “Give me the *ngöndro*, I'm gonna do it as quickly as possible and where would be a good place to do it?” And he [his lama] said: “every day. No retreat.”

I said: “Darn, I wanted to do it as quick as possible so I could get to that bigger, higher stuff, you know.” I was traveling quite a lot then and I was really doing my prostrations in the dirtiest possible places. Hotels in India. I mean, wherever I could. I was so determined. I felt it took me ages to do the 100,000 prostrations. And then, “okay, done!” And then I went back and he said, “now, *sem kye*,” which is generating the mind of enlightenment, *bodhicitta*, “ANYWHERE, not in retreat.” I sighed and said “okay,” and I did that. And the third one was Vajrasattva! “Okay, I can do a retreat for that!” No retreat. He specifically said, “you can do retreat but not with that.” And it was a bummer because I wanted to get it done as fast as possible. And so maybe after four years of that, I went to him and I said, “this is done, so what’s next now?” And then, the mandala. “Now, you can go on retreat.” So, for me, I didn’t even ask ‘cause I knew he was gonna say, “forget it, you’re gonna do this anywhere, any place.” But because I was able to struggle through, when it came to the mandala, that went relatively fast compared to the other stuff and I remember telling him at one point, “I’m never gonna finish with this.” “Doesn’t matter, do it.”

He explained that while the process was arduous, it was overall very helpful and a necessary means of integrating the practice into his daily life and enabling his potential to gradually emerge. His experience may also be said to exemplify how a graduated approach can serve to prove to the teacher that the student is successfully cultivating the necessary qualities to engage and benefit from tantric practice, such as commitment, discipline, and perseverance (Berzin n.d.-a). According to Gavin, when a student demonstrates “exceptional dedication and consistency with their practice,” the teacher takes them aside and confers more advanced and secretive teachings to them. He pointed out that when lamas began recognizing how Western students are “fickle in their dedications” and “unable to even just do their daily commitments,” they began warning them to keep their commitments low so that they can keep up with them. While Berzin (n.d.-a) explains that this is important because practitioners are required to do *ngöndro* on a daily basis without any break in their continuity and to restart from the beginning if the latter occurs, Gavin stated that one is expected to do the amount that was missed in addition to that of the present day, which can also be overwhelming.³⁶ Yara explained that the busy schedules of most Westerners make it very challenging for them to maintain a habit of dedicating time to practice on a daily basis, which hinders the development of devotion and discipline. Yet, she believes that reaching that point “is just a matter of wanting to have that. It’s a decision that you make every morning.”³⁷ Thus, dedication, consistency, devotion, and discipline may be regarded as indicators of a student’s serious intentions toward the practice. However, if a student is perceived as having developed pride and arrogance about the number of *ngöndro* they have completed (Berzin n.d.-e), a teacher may question whether they qualify to move on.

Roger’s experience of trying to gain access to advanced teachings such as the Six Yogas of Naropa³⁸ is illustrative of some of these points. Prior to leaving on a five-year retreat, Mingyur Rinpoche told him that if he would finish the *ngöndro* during his absence, he would teach him the Six Yogas upon his return. This greatly motivated him to finish the *ngöndro*, as he had already completed 40,000 prostrations by then, and he decided to go to a Western lama’s retreat center to complete the rest of them. When he got there, he discovered that this lama was going to start offering a four-year program that taught the Six Yogas, but they told him that experience in deity yoga was required to participate. After Roger told them that he had already begun doing the White Tārā sadhana that Mingyur Rinpoche conferred to him, the lama offered to continue instructing him in it, which included five types of visualization, each of which was accompanied by 100,000 mantras. After teaching him how to do the first three, they told him they would arrange to meet again when he completed them and was ready to receive the next two.

When that time finally arrived and he had only a year’s worth of practice left to complete, he was shocked to hear the lama say, “you need to do Vajrayoginī; White Tārā is not wrathful enough for you,” to which he responded, “what do you mean? Don’t

you think I'm wrathful enough?" The lama answered, "that's not the point. You have to start from the beginning," and instructed him anew in the procedure. However, this was far more complex: while Tārā's mantra is made up of only ten syllables, Vajrayoginī's consists of eighteen, and the visualization of Vajrayoginī is also more symbolic and detailed, which means that it can take twice the amount of time to complete. The lama asked him to complete either 500,000 mantras or 500 h and he chose the latter. By then, Mingyur Rinpoche had returned from his retreat, so Roger arranged to meet him and ask his opinion as to whether he should stick to White Tārā or complete Vajrayoginī, and Mingyur Rinpoche concurred with the other lama. Surprised once more, Roger asked, "are you sure?! Really?!" but was comforted by the fact that Mingyur Rinpoche said this would grant him access to any retreats he offers in the future. Thus, Vajrayoginī became his *yidam* and after completing the *ngöndro*, engaging in more retreats, and gaining access to and completing the other lama's four-year program, his devotion and persistence were rewarded by being certified the title of *drupon* or practice master in the Karma Kagyü tradition. He was very honored to receive this title, as he does not perceive himself as being necessarily as advanced or on the same level as others who typically hold this title.

When I asked Roger why he thought that this lama made him change his practice and start from scratch, he answered that he does not know exactly why but that they must have seen something in him that called for its necessity. In the end, he found it to be better suited to his personality as a "semi-wrathful human being," meaning that he possesses a similar balance of soft and stern qualities as Vajrayoginī does. By focusing on the more wrathful qualities respective to Vajrayoginī that Tārā does not possess, he learned better how to distinguish between when he is responding with aggression from the position of his ego, which will be to his detriment, and when it is simply unfolding from his essence and inevitable. This, in turn, enabled him to cultivate a greater acceptance of when things do not go his way and to calibrate his response to these events as well as to step back and examine the larger picture to determine what he can learn from it.

3.3. The Challenges of Belief and Understanding

The focus on direct experience and how to attain it in Vajrayāna Buddhism may sometimes be at the expense of discussing the 'why', making it difficult for Western practitioners to engage the culturally specific and ritualized aspects of practice with a mindset that is receptive to their efficacy. Gavin explained that in a Western educational context,

if you want an adult to change their behavior or to take on something new that they haven't done before, you *have* to give them the 'why'. Adults *will not* buy into anything until you give them the 'why'.

He emphasized that enabling Western students to grasp the purpose behind the steps of practice and their sequence is often pivotal to enabling them to ease into the process and benefit from it. While this possibility for discussion and demystification is one that Dr. Jennings has rarely come across in her Sakya sangha, she stated that the Nalanda Institute for Contemplative Science where she teaches in New York deliberately dedicates time to explaining "the history of tantric practice, the methodology, [and] its clinical applications," which comes as no surprise considering the predominantly neurological, psychological, and psychotherapeutic expertise of its faculty. She highlighted how deepening practitioners' understanding is all the more essential considering the "time-intensive and demanding" nature of the commitment to such practices and that direct experience without reflection and understanding "will typically not reap much benefit." As the following practitioner stories reflect, understanding plays an important role in maintaining motivation when faith and devotion are in the early stage of being developed.

In the 1990s, Sharon had to move from Europe to live in Kathmandu, Nepal, for some years. This was her first exposure to Buddhism, and she began immersing herself in its culture by visiting monasteries and attending *pūjā* ('worship') services, lectures, and retreats, despite lacking any formal or foundational training. In the early days of her

encounter with Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche's teachings, she would drop into informal sessions that were open to the public, and found herself puzzled:

Rinpoche taught us about suffering, that life is suffering and the Four Mind Changings. And I thought: "These Buddhists are so depressive, so negative—life is suffering? My life is not suffering! I'm not suffering. I live in Nepal and have a husband and a daughter and we have enough money, I can travel. Why do they talk about suffering all the time?" So, it took quite some years I would say before I dropped my skepticism.

In this example, Sharon is referring to the Four Noble Truths, an understanding of which is necessary in order to effectively contemplate the Four Mind Changings. Lucas believes that understanding the Four Mind Changings requires Westerners to get through "a lot of Eastern thought." He had a slightly similar experience, as he received pointing-out instructions³⁹ from Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche while on a pilgrimage, prior to taking refuge with him. When this happened, he was not aware that he "needed to believe in something like reincarnation," and upon later learning about it, felt that "it became one added belief structure that I didn't necessarily feel the need to add to the pile." Although he still struggles "with having a pure sense" of reincarnation as a part of reality, he has grown to find the concept helpful "because it adds motivation to what's the whole purpose behind this anyway." He explained the hindrance that this aspect of a Western upbringing has on practice as follows:

The big hurdle is that if I grew up in a country that believed in reincarnation, it would be one where I probably would have more fear about the consequences of what I did now [. . .] I don't have this huge sense that, "oh, I'm gonna become an animal or hell being in my next lifetime and the pain is going to be so excruciating if I don't practice every moment of the day."⁴⁰

When I asked him whether his lack of a firm sense of the reality of reincarnation has posed him any issues with believing in the authority of his lama as a *tulku*, he answered:

There are no issues; the issues are with me, not him. If there's any time that there's a thought that comes up that's any doubt related to him, it's immediately purified because in the beginning, we associate everything as being impure. We see people are impure, this stuff is impure, the world is impure—there's always concepts we put on things. And so, if I put any concepts on him, it's my failure. But I don't feel bad about that, it's just something that I need to work with. And the thing about basically seeing your guru as the Buddha himself is key to all of this and the end result is that by having one person that you see that as, it breaks the spell of seeing things as impure. You start with that one person, but eventually, you can see everyone as the guru.

By responding in this way, Lucas is adopting the perspective that the tradition has instructed him to, which states that "[i]n case one eventually doubts the master's knowledge, capabilities, or behavior, it is necessary to think, 'These defects are without doubt not within the master, but in my own way of seeing'" (Ray 2001, p. 168, citing Kalu Rinpoche 1995, p. 29). This is in alignment with cultivating pure vision (THL.: *daknang*).⁴¹ Kalu Rinpoche (1995), one of the first Tibetan teachers to have taught in the West, stated that while the Western cultural environment, with its emphasis on critical thinking in education, makes it such that most practitioners of this demographic are likely to first relate to the tradition's concepts based on assumption, they are undoubtedly capable of reaching an understanding that eventually shifts into certainty (pp. 108–9). According to Henry,

someone who grew up in a Buddhist environment will accept easily the idea of the continuity of mind after death. For us, we need to go through a long process of reasoning and observation to arrive at that [. . .] In the Tibetan culture, people accept it without reasoning, as their parents taught that to them, they don't think much about it. As we need to talk and think more, maybe when we arrive at this

conclusion, it's something more grounded because it's accepted after analysis. And the Dharma works in that way. Dharma needs reflection, thinking [. . .] Once you see it's logical that your mind cannot die because mind is nothing, I think culture means nothing because you arrive at the core of the thing. It's like the deities who are not from our cultural background. They are dressed in very nice silken garments—what do those mean to us? It doesn't mean anything to me. But it gives an idea, no? And it's very nice. Imagine them dressed in a good brand and it will be the same. When you make the connection with the symbolism, everything makes sense. Everything in the deity has a meaning but, in my case, I need to go through years and years and years and years of not knowing to come to know a little about the symbolism of the deity. The deity is a language, a cluster of symbols, and this is what really matters.

Clara also explained how understanding the concept of the mind's emptiness dispels how seemingly foreign the *vidam* may appear over time. She described the misunderstandings and reactions of non-Buddhists in her surroundings to the Vajrayāna Buddhist iconography in her home as follows:

Particularly with the fierce deities [. . .] I just said, "well, when was the last time you were *really* pissed? I think you were probably very fierce!" [. . .] when you go in Tibetan Buddhist temples you see these fierce and loving deities and they're just a reflection of who we are [. . .] sometimes we need to be a little fierce, not out of being pissed but to set things straight.⁴² Often times, when people first come and they see my deities, the *thangkas* I have, etc., they say "God, they look so young, and I'm 50 or 60"—or however old they are—"that's not representative of me." And then I say, "you know, in your essence, you're *always* young, you're never born and you never die," and people get these BIG eyes. And you *are* that, that is a representation of your inner essence, which is always young and always there, has never been born and will never die. It gets clearer and deeper for people as they work with the practice; they get to understand, "yes, there's really a part of me that never dies and is never born." And then, "Woow. This is just an old wreck of a body; I'm sinking to the earth."

She believes that we currently possess the scientific data to prove that this practice works and gave the example of mirror neurons.⁴³ In Roger's case, he explained how his realization that "all traditions have a trinity" helped him to go through the difficult adjustment of moving to the Bible Belt of the Southern United States:

In Christianity, it's the father, son, and holy ghost; in Buddhism, it's the *dharmakāya*, *sambhogakāya*, and *nirmāṇakāya*⁴⁴ or the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Or, in Hinduism, it's Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, the creator, sustainer, and destroyer. So, for me, everybody's talking about the same thing with different words. It's the trinity. Like God is the *dharmakāya*. The Holy Spirit is the *sambhogakāya*. It's that energy. And the *nirmāṇakāya*, it's Jesus, it's Guru Rinpoche, it's the same. We all have buddha nature, we're all God's children. It's in the Bible: "Seek ye the heaven within." That's Buddhism. So, Buddhism has no contradiction because it's not for God and it's not against God.

With regards to symbolism, Lucas thinks that the time he spent on pilgrimage in Nepal and Tibet for three and a half years facilitated his capacity to conceptualize and understand its meaning to a significant degree upon returning home to the United States. He compared his experience of exposing himself to monasteries and their foreign contents without any explanations accompanying them to how the illiterate in Tibet came to internalize the meanings of Buddhist iconography through being shown *thangkas*. A symbolic part of ritual practice that Sharon resisted was the use of the bell, the purpose of which eluded her for ten years. When seeing others use it during gatherings and experiencing its noisiness, she felt lucky for not having to use it herself. However, to participate in a three-week-long retreat, she was eventually required to purchase one and learn how to use it among twenty

other beginners. After getting tinnitus from it, her aversion toward it felt justified. Yet, once she was taught its function of enabling the cultivation of divine pride, she began to enjoy using it and now derives strength from doing so. In Vajrayāna Buddhist imagery, buddhas or bodhisattvas are often depicted holding a *vajra* in their right hand, which is “[...] a five-pointed scepter that represents the method aspect [compassion] of a buddha’s realization [...] that is imperturbable and indivisible” (Powers 2007, p. 250), while a bell is held in their left hand to symbolize their wisdom that is in union with their method/compassion or the “[...] non-dual unity of the awakened mind” (Williams and Tribe 2000, p. 219). Thus, the physical use of the bell and *vajra* is a means of enabling practitioners to familiarize themselves with the embodied experience of emulating the deity’s otherwise abstract mannerisms and qualities in a concrete way. Through repetition, the experience becomes solidified and voluntarily retrievable via memory, allowing for such an act to eventually be replaced by visualization alone. According to Markus,

If you don’t know what you’re doing, it’s just a headache, it’s true. I think you have to spend *a lot* of time and effort to understand these practices, for them to be worth your time. And then, they’re *really* worth your time [...] I think many of the confusions wouldn’t happen if Westerners spent more time studying with good teachers and reading the right books and being guided by a more scholarly pursuit. Most misconceptions vanish, and then it’s not alien at all. It’s universal. It talks about human universal things, like duality, being, consciousness—the most basic, primal states of consciousness. It’s the form in which it’s expressed that may be culturally very different or strange. But also, I don’t agree with that. It’s like basic things. You have the mandala, its center, and the four directions, which you find everywhere, even in Christianity; it’s an archetypal image, which I think has to do with our embodiment. It’s only alien because people didn’t spend the time studying the tradition properly.

He added that the entire structure of practice, including all of its symbolic and ritual elements, “are there because they have a meaning [...] It’s very important, all the details, you can’t leave anything out, basically.” He compared his experience of visualizing and imaginatively entering a mandala to that of visiting the Sistine Chapel in Rome, the colors and patterns of which are also intended to have a certain effect.

Saya credited her study of Buddhist philosophy through the traditional training curriculum of a Tibetan *shedra* in Nepal and the gradual approach of Tara’s Triple Excellence Program with assisting her process of understanding:

I really wonder how other students who didn’t go through the four philosophical schools and really study emptiness more deeply do it [...] for me, [...] the study of emptiness and dependent arising and all of that really helped to unpack it; otherwise, I don’t think it would have the same efficacy.

She mentioned that she is in agreement with Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche and Tsoknyi Rinpoche (a *tulku* of Drukpa Kagyü and Nyingma lineages), who have expressed that most people in the West are not ready for deity practice because it is a ritual practice. She perceives the Western mindset as being “just so realistic,” materialistic, and less prone to believing and trusting in rituals and “powers that are outside and unseen.” Yet, Henry emphasized that with the right perspective, the efficacy of ritual can be understood in a pragmatic way. Although we may not understand the science of why rituals work, he stated that it is our common experience that “reality works in this way,” and it is necessary to trust that the teacher is transmitting these practices because they have been proven to have a function and work over time:

If the teacher says it works, it works [...] Everything is a support for the practice [...] Exactly like when you are preparing for something special. Human beings like to build things in this way, so I think that what these rituals do is go with our usual way of being. If you do not build something, it’s difficult to feel that it is special. But, in essence, there is no difference. The Tantras say you must

develop pure vision, which is to see everything very extraordinarily. So, you help your mind by having some support. They are only supports for the mind, but they work, we need these supports [. . .] In theory, you can only sit and imagine everything and it will work exactly the same. As it is stated, everything is mind,⁴⁵ so you can make everything in your mind they say. They told stories of great practitioners who had nothing—no bell, no offerings, only stones and water and with this, they did everything and they became enlightened, no problem.

Following from that last point, Henry later added that he appreciates teachers who stress that less is more when it comes to ritual because he is “very lazy.” He prefers focusing on maintaining “awareness and a clear mindfulness” and believes that the fewer rituals there are, the less one needs to do, think, and worry about.

Marshall, who has been a practicing Buddhist for nearly twenty-five years, hypothesized that Mingyur Rinpoche likely stresses simplicity in his approach because he is aware that spirituality in our times is often being consumed and treated as just “another trip.” He specified that nowadays, in the East and West alike, there appears to be a craving to obtain the most advanced teachings and progress rapidly through them so as to reap their purported benefits, while lacking the necessary perseverance to do so in a sufficiently consistent manner. In some cases, this is related to how keen people are to also chase after “extreme experiences,” such as kundalini and out-of-body experiences, which Marshall has found attendees of Mingyur Rinpoche’s public teachings frequently ask about. Roger mentioned that Mingyur Rinpoche advises students not to pursue “woohoo” experiences because

“woohoo” goes away [. . .] the best awareness is normal [. . .] If you can just be calm, clear, undistracted, compassionate—normal, not special. He says that’s the best kind of awareness. This awareness exists all the time, we just don’t recognize it. So, *yidam* practice is just another way to recognize your own awareness, which has everything that you need.

This perspective allowed Roger to significantly relax and open up in his practice in a manner that he could not when he was the student of a Western Dzogchen teacher for over thirteen years who

introduced you to the nature of mind even though there was no stability [. . .] He gave pointing-out instructions from the get-go and that’s why I didn’t like Buddhism at the beginning—there was so much to it.

Marshall believes that in this context, in which our minds are “already so full,” the experiential dynamic needs to be reduced. Thus, he considers Tergar’s approach of teaching deity yoga in the last stage of its curriculum to be ideal as “simplicity, simpler forms of practice, are much more conducive.” On a personal level, he finds deity yoga to be “so stressful because you have to do so much” and stated that “most of the time, nothing can even emerge because there’s no space for it.” He contrasted the Western context in which “everything is already so full” to the Tibetan one in which the practice traditionally developed and is most practiced by pointing out that the latter’s relative emptiness justifies the highly colorful and detailed quality of its temples and their content.⁴⁶ This was similarly brought up by Gavin while he commented upon how tedious and drawn-out tantric practice can be, as follows:

I’ve heard people say: “I just can’t fit all this in my head!” One of the high yoga practices in Tibetan Buddhism is Yamāntaka,⁴⁷ and he’s got sixteen arms and sixteen legs and his head is the head of a bull and every one of those sixteen arms has an implement in it that means something. And this one friend of mine who took the Yamāntaka initiation described the practice as “Yamān-drive-me-right-outta-my-mind! I can’t do it. I’m lucky if I can get one hand, never mind the other ones! Sixteen?!” He said that in a very joking way, but there’s a profound truth in that and over the years I came to realize that for most Westerners, it’s just adding more in there [. . .] This, to me, is the great failing of Tibetan Buddhism, as far as it being transmitted to Westerners. Because all of that stuff, all of that visualization, is just more head-stuff, more mind-stuff. Westerners are *already* overwhelmed

in their minds—overstimulated, too much information. Westerners' heads are like a pot with popcorn in it. Their thoughts are just all smashing around in this pot and it's just chaos. For somebody who's Tibetan and living in a traditional community, without the media, radio, television, all its advertising, and all that sort of stuff, the mind isn't so busy. So, it's like Westerners in the nineteenth century who could read those giant books like *Moby Dick* and *Les Misérables* and so on, that are like 1500 pages long because the mind then was so much calmer and less busy, so it was able to move into something like that and not have trouble. Westerners now have the concentration span of gnats because there's so much coming at them.

However, it is worth noting that the majority of Tibetan practitioners whom Gerke (2010, p. 433) spoke with during her fieldwork, including young monastics, also found visualization to be very challenging and did not engage in it. Gavin went on to compare how he has had much more of a transformative experience “going directly to the body” through kriya yoga⁴⁸ and concluded that

a practice that is based in the body is better for Westerners than deity practice because it's something that Westerners need. They need to be grounded; they *need* to go into their bodies. They are walking around like floating heads, with all this stuff going on all the time, and they're not grounded [. . .] as Westerners, we're so cut off from our bodies; we over-indulge our bodies with excesses of food and drink, and sex and drugs, and extreme sports, and stuff like that. We love to do things to our bodies, yet we're so cut off from them [. . .] If we were really, really, *really* in touch with our bodies, we wouldn't [do those things]. So, it's funny, Westerners are obsessed with their bodies, but I think that is because they are desperately trying to get back into them. I think it's an intuitive, almost instinctive kind of recognition that we're split—we're a bunch of talking, floating heads for the most part, or, as one Cambodian teacher once said, “Westerners are all head and crotch and nothing else.” And this has to do with our conditioning, our Christian, Islamic, or even Judaic upbringing—the body is bad, the body is dirty, original sin.

Marshall and Gavin were not the only ones to emphasize the importance of simplicity and an embodied approach for Western practitioners. Roger recounted the time when His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa stated during his presentation that the Dharma should not be taught to those who do not request it.⁴⁹ When Roger had the opportunity to go up to him and ask a question afterwards, he stated, “a lot of people could really benefit from these teachings but they don't even know enough to ask a question. There's just so much suffering, do you really think we should wait to be asked?” In response to this, the *gyalwang* answered: “Keep it simple.” Roger internalized this advice as he moved forward with his own teaching. He explained that while “[m]ost teachers explain things over and over and over and they give examples and it gets very intellectual,” a teaching by His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa tends to last only twenty minutes and is straightforward and simple. He later added that he is also in agreement with Tsoknyi Rinpoche, who recommends that Westerners engage in practices that bring them in touch not only with their minds but also with their bodies, from which they are disconnected:

Tsoknyi Rinpoche talks about how Westerners are [. . .] not really okay with their feelings, with what's happening kinesthetically in their body [. . .] [he] says we have to be honest with ourselves about how we feel [. . .] You have to learn to be okay with yourself when you're really not feeling well [. . .] you have to be okay with not being okay.

Saya stated that one example that Tsoknyi Rinpoche recommends is called the ‘hand-shake practice,’ which she herself sometimes performed as an alternative to deity yoga:

He says that if you can't be the deity, then stop being the deity and do the hand-shake practice with the very thing that you can't do. With hand-shake practice,

you feel the blockage in your body or where you're stuck and then you bring your hand of awareness to whatever is stuck, and then the thing bounces back, so you keep gently touching and going with it. You don't try to change it, you don't make a thing out of it in any way, you just keep sending your awareness to that very thing that is blocking you—we call it a beautiful monster, like some emotional story that just keeps coming up. So just keeping that awareness and then it will transform.

She specified how this practice is especially helpful given the tendency in Western culture of identifying with our wounds and wearing them as badges, as it enables one to acknowledge them without reifying and becoming attached to them. When she does engage in deity yoga, the visualization process tends to challenge her in the following way:

I totally have self-judgment about not being concentrated. I sat in a [monastery] for ten years hating myself for not being concentrated for forty minutes [. . .] Ultimately, I could just accept that, like you said, some people are just not visual. But part of me is just not content with it and I think it has a lot to do with my being ambitious, that part of me is like, “yeah, I *feel* her [Tārā], BUT, I need to *see* her” [. . .] some people are perfecting it so much that she's in the room, in front of them. So, being goal-oriented, I can see that my ambition is not good medicine.

This exemplifies an aspect that was problematized by Jack, namely, that the Tibetan approach to teaching deity yoga does not take into account that people have “different inherent capacities and natural aptitudes.” He stated:

I think a lot of people don't visualize clearly and they spend a lot of time trying to work out many of these processes [. . .] if you make a formalized package that requires an even level of skill base, most people are excluded. If you're a teacher in anything now, you learn how to do mixed-ability teaching, which means different strokes for different folks.

He added that this weakness in terms of how Tantra is imparted is part of what leads people to become overly focused on method and to mistake it for what it is meant to achieve,⁵⁰ which is unpacking and bringing one to encounter “the richness of the mind itself.” He referred to a figure of speech frequently used by his Tibetan teacher, who was “very cosmopolitan,” namely, that the leather bag in which Tibetan butter is packaged will become less hard the more the butter is massaged into it. The question is how these teachings and practices (the butter) should be massaged into the minds (leather) of Western practitioners. He stresses to his students that they be as gentle and kind as possible toward themselves and that they allow the necessary time for what they learn to be massaged in and give way to understanding. Saya confessed that she, like other Westerners, tends to fall “into some consuming posture,” where completing *x* number of methodological steps and obtaining a certification of it, so to speak, becomes the focus. She has to remind herself that “it's not about finishing these numbers, it's about what I've accomplished.”

3.4. Challenges of Faith and Devotion

The following case study sheds light on the kind of challenges that Vajrayāna practitioners may face in a Western context when their faith and devotion in the teacher, teachings, and practices are still in the process of being developed and negotiated with personal, religious, and sociocultural views and values that conflict with them. In addition, it provides specific examples of what aspects of deity yoga, its preliminaries, and other influencing factors caused meditation-related challenges to arise in one participant.

Saya grew up in a Christian context and studied theology extensively in a formal setting. However, a deep sense that “this is all made-up” eventually crept in, the frustration of which steered her toward exploring other spiritual avenues like “feminist theology, [. . .] mysticism, [. . .] embodied faith,” and then Buddhism. She took refuge in an East Asian Mahāyāna tradition and resided in a monastery while still believing in God and being “deeply rooted in Christianity.” Three years later, she realized that the concept of

God had “just melted away” and that it did not apply to her perspective of the world anymore. After training with several non-tantric Mahāyāna teachers within a decade, she felt like she was “hitting another wall” and began doubting that “just sitting” and thinking was working.

When circumstances required her to move, she left the monastery and discovered a center that transmitted the *ngöndro* teachings and began practicing those as she had always had a desire to. After eventually attending a workshop on *thangkas*, during which she learned how to paint a Tārā mandala, she learned that Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche’s Tara’s Triple Excellence program had just been announced. She interpreted this as a sign that Tārā was trying to enter her life and signed up immediately. Feeling inspired by the kindness and wisdom of the organizers of the program, she developed a deep longing one year later: “I was like, ‘I need to study where those people learnt that course, and just do what they’re doing’.”

However, six months later, she decided to visit the non-tantric Mahāyāna teacher whom she had been closest and most devoted to for approximately six years in order to resolve the lack of clarity that she felt toward the current status of their relationship. The latter was caused by the distance that had developed between them, not only as a result of her having moved away and changed traditions but especially due to her sense that the training had not been “leading to a desired result.” During this visit, she also intended to seek his advice about “a lot of spiritual pain” and “resistance” that she was experiencing while performing *ngöndro* prostrations because he had helped her many times in the past. To her disappointment, he interpreted the situation as an indication that she was finding it difficult to prostrate to him in particular and suggested that she take a break from meeting formally with him until she gained clarity and was able to relate “to the ultimate in a way that is free of fear, hesitation, and doubt.” At the time, she resented this response and felt as though she was being “sent away.” Although he expressed shortly after this meeting that his suggestion was intended to be helpful, she was unable to see how it could be. The separation felt like the “loss of an intimate, devoted relationship” to her, which caused her a significant amount of grief that she would carry and work through for nearly eight years. While they did cross paths on several occasions during that span of time and “were always honest, kind, and welcoming to each other,” the “social shame in face of this discontinued relationship” and sense of failure in her training that she felt prevented her from re-initiating their formal contact.

Thus far, it can be seen that the type of practice, including the relationship with her teacher and her unmet expectations (which are coded under ‘intentions, motivations, or goals’ by Lindahl et al. 2017) were influencing factors of meditation-related challenges, namely: an increase in doubt in her ability to be a successful meditator (coded under ‘change in doubt, faith, trust, or commitment’) and in self-conscious emotions; a decreased sense of trust in the teacher and belonging (coded under ‘change in relationship to meditation community’); and grief.

Three weeks after this break, Saya felt as though the “breathing room” that it introduced permitted her to go to India on pilgrimage, where she met Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche. One year later, she took refuge with him and also began receiving Dzogchen instructions from Tsoknyi Rinpoche. When another year had passed, she officially asked Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche to be her guru, and he inquired about the status of her relationship with the East Asian Mahāyāna tradition. After explaining her situation and clarifying that her teacher allows her to have others, Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche answered: “Let’s not fool ourselves.” Reflecting upon this advice over the years would assist her in coming to terms with what had happened between her and her non-tantric Mahāyāna teacher. She believes that it was meant to encourage her not to “put the issue on the shelf” and avoid dealing with it by taking on this other path of practice,⁵¹ as the tendency to categorize the guru–student relationship and identify with a sense of pain, failure, and doubt, rather than accepting it as a part of her experience, would only continue to increase attachment and cause suffering

in the long-term. A year later, she went to Nepal, where she completed three years of the traditional training curriculum of a Tibetan *shedra*.

The following paragraphs will examine more specifically what the difficulties that Saya faced in performing certain parts of *ngöndro* and deity yoga and their influencing factors were, as well how she worked through them to finally arrive at a reconciliation with her non-tantric Mahāyāna teacher.

According to Ray (2001), it is not uncommon for the practice of prostration in Vajrayāna Buddhism to rouse “[...] a surprising amount of resistance and emotionality” among contemporary Westerners who are accustomed to an “[...] ideology of equality and individualism,” especially considering how as a physical act, it is “[...] inherently humiliating” (pp. 180–82). By paying respect to the assembled beings of one’s Refuge Tree⁵² with one’s body, speech, and mind during prostration, it is believed that these bases become purified. Moreover, through requesting the assistance of these beings in becoming more like them, confessing one’s transgressions, and vowing to prevent oneself from cultivating any such negative thoughts and acts again, it is thought that false pride is counteracted and that one is eased into surrendering to something that is greater than one’s ego (Powers 2007, pp. 299–301; Ray 2001, p. 182; Rinbochay 1986, pp. 120–21). Saya’s impression at the time of our interview was that the practice shared certain dualistic similarities to what she had known in Christianity, causing old issues of low self-esteem to re-emerge in her and building up a resistance that prevented her from surrendering herself to the practice:

[...] this blockage [...] in many ways is still the residue from my Christian faith [...] I remember being very little and being at school hearing about Jesus and feeling this deep pain, wondering, “why is he better than me? Why would he be better than me?” So, I really see that blockage as being part of being raised in a shame culture, in which Judeo-Christian religion requires you to be righteous before God.

In other words, Saya specified, a “belief of being dirty” was at odds with “the practice of seeing [her]self as clean.” This exemplifies Ray’s (2001) point that “[...] Western practitioners, with a cultural heritage of ideas of original sin, evil, and inherent human imperfection” may find the exercising of pure vision to be “[...] a blatant challenge to fundamental ways of viewing self and world” (p. 187). When Saya was learning and performing the first quarter of the inner Tārā sadhana, this struggle to reconcile her perceived imperfection with that of a perfect being hindered her capacity to successfully merge her identity into that of the *yidam*, realize that she is no different from it, and cultivate divine pride. This issue is one that Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche acknowledges may result from the difficulty in not projecting “[...] our conventional idea of deity” onto that of the *yidam* and allowing it to make us feel like “[...] an inferior, benighted being” (Kongtrul 2002, pp. 90–91). In this case, type of practice, worldview, and sociocultural context can be understood as influencing factors resulting in an increase in self-conscious emotions and a negative change in faith or trust. At the time of our interview, Saya was still attempting to reach a clear distinction in her understanding between the Christian concept of God and the Buddhist *yidam* focused upon in practice. Similarly to Saya, Yara initially found the aspect of identifying with the *yidam* to be in conflict with her sense of distance from the divine that had been engrained by her Catholic upbringing:

When I started my practice, I needed to think that I was Her [Tārā] and it was like, “no, this is against everything that I know. I cannot be Her, She is just the most precious being ever, how can I be Her?” [...] It was difficult because for me, it was even disrespectful, like, “no, I can’t do that; no, no, no, no, no.”

Dr. Jennings stated that there is often a concern, especially among Western practitioners, that as in their prior religious experience, what they’re being asked to do is to submit to an external deity, which is, of course, not what this practice is for, and it’s also why people are usually encouraged to really take time to study the Dharma,

so that they understand foundational teachings like no-self and emptiness, so that when they're practicing with a deity or visualization, they understand these are not external, inherently existent deities that they are submitting to—these are images that we evoke, we use our psyche.

While working on grasping the doctrines of emptiness and interdependent co-arising helped Saya to better understand and become accustomed to the concept that there are multiple *yidam* embodying different qualities, she still preferred the Indian approach to Tantra “of having one deity that you stay with for life and really immerse yourself in.” Her choice of language in describing her relationship with the *yidam* Tārā during our interview may be interpreted as reflecting where she was at in reconciling her practice and understanding of it with her theistic background, as is possibly the case with Yara as well, as observed in Section 2.1. Certain statements that Saya made conveyed a sense that Tārā's reality expresses itself through an agency that intentionally intervenes in or influences her life in a personal manner, such as: “she wants to come into my life [. . .] she wants to be a part of me”; “Her coming into my life just accelerated so many things”; “Tārā's arrival was a turn in my road and I am attributing anything that came thereafter to her presence”; “Tārā came into my life and opened it up and furthered me beyond my own imagination”; and “gratitude for all the ways I experience Tārā as being providing, kind, and caring toward me in my life.” On the other hand, others reflected the kind of “both and everything” understanding that Yara was also shown to have, such as in the following statements:

I don't feel her as other. But I also don't say, “she's here,” “she's not here”—you know? It's just like this kind of new elephant in the room, so to speak—it's a mental event primarily but also emotional; that's why it's not just conceptual. So, I would definitely say it's larger than conception, but it's about me tuning into her. I don't think it's about her tuning or needing to show up or not [. . .] there is indeed a subjective sense of the presence of Tārā in my life that I can acknowledge [. . .] [it] is not dramatic, and, yes, it's also not really ‘other’ but also not self-generated (and it is also not different in essence from Guru Rinpoche, my teachers, the *dharmakāya*—but that is already more of an intellectual understanding). Now, I would describe our relationship as being that she is truly always there and it is up to me to tune in or not.

At the same time, it was explained in Section 2.1 that “[i]t is not inconsistent [. . .] to consider tantric deities as actual external entities” (Williams and Tribe 2000, p. 226). Ultimately, while it is not possible to determine with any certainty the extent to which the interpretations of this study's participants may be unconsciously influenced by their Judeo-Christian backgrounds or exposure to other systems of thought, it is nonetheless important to refrain from passing judgment as to how ‘Buddhist’ and ‘valid’ they are. As Mills (2003) argues, to do so would be to make the mistake of assuming, as early Christian scholars did, that an individual's religious identity is contingent upon how accurately their beliefs reflect those within their tradition's sacred texts, thereby privileging written over oral and performative forms of religiosity (pp. 177–78). To adopt such an essentialist or normative approach, as Tweed (2002) calls it, is also to engage religion as a static phenomenon, rather than the ever-shifting one that it actually is in a lived sense, which prevents us from detecting significant historical expressions, trends, and cultural patterns that are emerging through the dynamic cross-cultural transmission and adoption of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Moreover, it ignores the fact that the religious identity of individuals “[. . .] can be multiple or ambivalent” (ibid., p. 18), as demonstrated by Saya having remained “deeply rooted in Christianity” while training within an East Asian Mahāyāna tradition.

By listening to her teacher's advice to simply continue with the practice, Yara was able to gradually overcome her sense of discomfort toward identifying with the *yidam*. Madeline mentioned that not being able to become the *yidam* is a natural part of the practice and that Mingyur Rinpoche has taught her not to react to it. Like devotion to one's teacher, he reassures his students that it cannot be forced and that if one lacks the ability to do so, it

is fine to “fake it until you make it” because becoming overly concerned with it will only generate an unhealthy attachment to the sense of failure. Although she does not always feel devotion or herself becoming the *yidam*, recalling the moments when she did reinforces her faith in the practices. The same applied to Saya at the time of our interview, as she countered her doubts by reminding herself of the non-dual experiences and progress that she had undergone over time:

For the last ten years, I had glimpses of non-duality through the practice enough that I’ve had faith and I’m giving myself to it further. But what is it that still blocks? I think that maybe I perfectly understand it intellectually but that emotionally, I’m just still the seven-year-old who is thinking, “why is Jesus better than me?” And I just don’t see it.

Yara’s example of responding to a difficulty that is rooted in an incompatibility between the worldview of her upbringing and that of the tradition with repeated acceptance and persistence in the practice until it dissipates reflects Lindahl et al.’s (2022) finding that the experiences of many practitioners “[...] came to be more aligned with Buddhist teachings and doctrines” (p. 7) over time through the course of practice. By contrast, Saya’s response of qualifying and fixating on her difficulties as ‘blockages’ and allowing herself to become frustrated by them seems to have enabled their persistence. Furthermore, response to experience as an influencing factor can be closely related to that of personality or temperament, as exemplified by Saya’s statement in Section 3.3 that being overly ambitious and goal-oriented prevented her from letting go and being accepting of her struggles. During our interview, it was not possible to address all of this study’s research themes because her focus kept returning to her challenging experiences, which she exhibited a clear need to process through our discussion. In an e-mail exchange following the interview, she thanked me for how it served as a learning opportunity to realize the degree to which she focuses on these “habitual, obstructing formations” and to work harder on addressing them by immersing herself further in the teachings and engaging more frequently in the hand-shake practice described in Section 3.3.

Two years after our interview, Saya communicated in an e-mail that she had come to realize that the above-mentioned difficulties that she had experienced stemmed from her inability to fully grasp “the unity of the ultimate with the relative” on an intellectual and experiential level at that phase and to deal with “the dominant negative emotions” that she felt toward herself:

I feel uncomfortable putting it all on the fact that that I was raised Christian because my Christian upbringing was very liberal and kind to me. Church was my refuge [from] socio-cultural challenges [...] At that time [our interview], I was musing if this had to do with my Christian upbringing and liked this thinking, as it was rolling my personal responsibility over to a larger pattern outside of my control. Then, I was probably going on a crusade [against] the imperfections of my religious background, ignoring the deeply personal issues that needed to be looked at. This pattern is a layer of pride that was wishing to avoid the painful and obvious conclusion: I was “not getting it.” I was not understanding the practice of meditation in [the East Asian Mahāyāna tradition], or the practice of deity yoga, on an emotional level. I got it intellectually to some extent but [did not have] the tools to be with my inadequacy, my low self-esteem, my social awkwardness. The hand-shake practice [...] has helped in working with this, but [at] the time [of our interview], I was rather new to applying it.

Here, we see that a change in type of practice and practice approach led to a change in worldview, narrative self, and response to experience. The shift between her interpretation of her challenging experience at the time of our interview and that which she currently espouses two years later is also an example of how practitioners may adjust their interpretations of their challenges as they advance through meaning-making and coping processes (Lindahl et al. 2022, p. 11). During our interview, Saya referred to the impact of negative

emotions when she confessed that she feared that the deepening of her faith and devotion through deity yoga could result in a loss of a sense of reality, self-identity, belonging, and acceptance by others, the latter two of which always caused her issues with self-worth and self-esteem, suggesting that early life relationships may also be an influencing factor of her meditation-related challenges:

I want to continue being this person that lives in a dual world because it's something real, something that I know and am familiar with [. . .] There's a certain fear to not function, to not perform, to not be able to be part of a group anymore.

This is something that Dr. Jennings also raised in terms of the challenges posed by deity yoga:

[. . .] it can be very complex because it evokes, for lots of people, some sense of anxiety about not knowing who they are if they do this—losing a part that they're very identified with.⁵³ Thus, the need to take things slow and be able to study and reflect.

Back then, Saya considered herself to be on what Tsoknyi Rinpoche calls the “path of healing” and to be “taking these teachings kind of as medicine,” rather than pursuing the “path of liberation” (THL.: *dröl-lam*), as the latter requires a step of renunciation that she was not ready to take:

I'm just too engrossed in the story that I chose [. . .] I'm just shocked by how often I'm like, “no, it does matter to me what I'm doing next year; no, it does matter to me what I'm eating.” There's just so many things that I'm hooked up with [. . .] when I look at these deity practices, they're not about healing, they're all about liberation. They really assume a layer of concentration and determination for liberation, that one would be happy to chant four million mantras in three months—it's just no hardship if you want that liberation. And to notice that I'm just not there. Those people who conjured up this [practice] in Asia, in Tibet, these were minds that were free of the whole layers that we are still working through.

However, as her “faith and trust [in] the deity and the guru” has deepened over the past two years, she has now developed a longing for the path of liberation and has found herself able to better undertake renunciatory steps:

At the time of our interview, I had not studied much on Buddha nature teachings and only tangentially took note of them. Yet, they are so central for the understanding of deity practice and have been a very helpful medicine toward my ambition and striv[ing] within my practice. Together with the daily Tārā practice, something “clicked” and a deeper understanding of the practice path together with my confidence in it arose in me. It wasn't a one moment event but the result of continued effort and working through challenging moments in my practice and relationships that led me to not be afraid of my awkwardness anymore. I am less identified with these feelings of low self-esteem, etc., and feel on a heart level that I am not alone with those feelings. That doesn't mean they are gone, more that they are not so dominant and loud at this time. I find myself working through them faster, although I still need plenty of support from my teachers and spiritual friends.

Thus, a change in type of practice, practice approach, consistency of practice, and relationships within the meditation community seem to have led to a change in motivation or goal, a decrease in self-conscious emotions, and a change in faith and trust. The above statement also exemplifies Lindahl et al.'s (2022) finding that “[. . .] study, learning, and context” (p. 3) can play a role in diminishing the secondary distress that might accompany meditation-related challenges. Besides, it is worth noting that Saya attributed the intensity of her practice at the time of our interview, which was three to four times per day, to the magnification and intensification of her negative emotions at the time.

This brings us to discuss a final aspect of *ngöndro* and deity yoga that challenged Saya, that is, guru yoga (THL.: *lamé naljor*). During this practice, one's teachers are visualized as embodiments "[...] of the pure, exalted wisdom of buddhahood" (Powers 2007, p. 310), while the manner in which their good qualities are expressed through their thoughts, actions, and speech are reflected upon as a reminder that it is possible to emulate and achieve their state for oneself (Berzin n.d.-a, n.d.-c, n.d.-e). To successfully engage in guru yoga, it was thus necessary for Saya to reach an understanding of how the "unity of the two truths [the ultimate and conventional] in a person" not only applies to her teacher but also to herself. In the course of our interview, she conveyed her thinking process about the seemingly paradoxical nature of this principle in the following manner:

[...] nobody's ever high if they are not made high. The *tulkus* are being made high from the very beginning and taught to be comfortable being high while others are low. There's a certain training that's happening there with giving people authority. And at the same time, one can't go around it, that anything that's made large, is beautiful [...] Music and cathedrals are tools to demonstrate something, like a dress that has fifteen extra feet of fabric [...] [A] sense of power, grandness, vastness—why do we always fall for it? We fall for it because it's true, there is something larger to our lives that is there.

When she underwent her training in the East Asian Mahāyāna tradition, she was in awe of how her teacher was "so full of trust" and "confidence" that he was "resting in the ultimate," and once asked him:

"How can you trust what is coming out of your mouth?" [...] To just sit there and have the authority to respond to someone's vulnerable heart without thinking about it first [...] These teachers have some kind of self-confidence, self-trust, that it's not in them as this limited person—they know something large is using them. And how is that?

Two years later, she clarified that at the time of our interview, she was "still walking in the dark and haunted by fears [of] open[ing] [her]self to the divine in a person" because of the tendency within the West of being wary of the guru and "falling prey to abusive relationships." This is a concern that she found to be shared among Western friends within her spiritual communities and one that her parents had strongly emphasized because she had "always [...] been a very gullible kid and easily devoted to a great cause." It led her to be very vigilant about "who and what situation to trust, when to step back and be more rational." This meant that it was not only difficult for her to understand "how the student's impure mind can merge with the pure mind of the teacher or deity" toward the end of the practice but also to perceive "the guru's mindstream as pure" in the first place. Hence, the sociocultural context and worldview respective to people both beyond and within the meditation community that conflicted with those of the tradition can be considered influencing factors that had a negative impact on Saya's trust and faith in her teachers.

Nathan mentioned that although one's teacher is more relatable to oneself as a human being, some people may find it "easier to project perfection on a non-human being" such as the *yidam* instead. During our interview, Saya estimated that eighty percent of the time, when she tried to visualize Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche as the embodiment of the *yidam*, she would only be able to perceive the deity. Yet, this process improved as her trust in her teachers grew deeper. Similarly to the cases discussed in Section 2.2.2, one aspect in particular that cemented her trust and confidence in them has been their capacity to seemingly read her mind by describing the "very experiences" she has undergone in response to their instructions. She added that at the beginning of one's path, proximity to the teacher helps one to develop trust in them, which is difficult while residing on an entirely different continent. Therefore, the lack of accessibility to her teacher in her practice environment was also an influencing factor of the meditation-related challenges that she experienced.

In addition, since the thought of Saya's non-tantric Mahāyāna teacher had come to be associated with the sense of shame, pain, and failure that she carried, she intentionally

excluded him from the following steps of guru yoga: the visualization of herself surrounded by the succession of her teachers as perfected embodiments of the Buddha; the generation of devotion toward them; the invocation of their aid and bestowal of blessings; and the merging of them into the *yidam*. She explained the reasoning behind this as follows:

Why would I put pain together with something that I want to keep as sublime?
But that's again my sense of dualism, like, "no, no, I want my purity to be pure,
and I don't want the pain that I experienced some other place to be there."

Put differently, her feelings were not consonant with her rational understanding that, from an ultimate perspective, "pain and impurity are pure." She explained that even though Buddhism is not asking practitioners to "give [them]selves to a person" but rather to trust the teachings that the teacher is a vehicle of on an ultimate level, her fear that the efforts and devotion that she would cultivate through the Vajrayāna tradition and its practices would also yield "no result," "let [her] down," and not "really help," was hindering her faith and trust in the teachings and her teachers. This issue, which is part of what she had turned to her non-tantric Mahāyāna teacher to seek advice about, is one that she could not address until developing the acceptance of herself described earlier and understanding "that these outer teachers and deities are not forces that take these difficulties away from me. There is no other 'more holy' self to get to." This shift in her worldview, practice approach, and response to experience came to fruition especially as she advanced into the Third Excellence stage of practice of the TTE program, "which consists of doing Tārā sadhanas that dispel fear and work on the inner channels and winds within one's body."⁵⁴ She believes that it is "no coincidence" that her engagement in this type of practice has occurred in tandem with her ability to re-establish her relationship with her non-tantric Mahāyāna teacher, who is presently aware and accepting of her Vajrayāna practices and teachers, and teaching her "a practice of 'not trying to get anything' from the guru, which is important if non-duality is to be realized and buddha nature is to be actualized." Overall, she normalized the challenging period that she traversed until arriving at this point as "a step on the learning path." This combination of faulting her incorrect practice approach and normalizing the difficult experiences she underwent through the framework of purification demonstrates Lindahl et al.'s (2022) point that "Buddhist interpretations of meditation-related challenges applied by practitioners and teachers alike" (p.11) can include both "blaming" and "redemptive" elements (ibid.). Saya is currently pursuing graduate studies in the Tibetan *shedra* curriculum remotely and intends "to nurture this respect for both traditions within [her]self and in those around [her], helping to demystify the[ir] differences and celebrat[e] the[ir] similarities."

4. Conclusions

To summarize, in the present context, in which teachers of Vajrayāna Buddhism are frequently traveling to cater to their global following, making direct access to them difficult to come by, and the socio-cultural and even economic settings and conditions of the West are not conducive to a lifestyle of fully dedicated spiritual practice, practitioners must rely on networks composed of human, material, structural, and virtual intermediaries for support. The development of these networks has, in turn, required teachers to adapt the accessibility of teachings and practices, as well as the approaches that they take in transmitting them. This format was problematized by some as fostering an attitude of consumption and a focus on technique or methodology, as opposed to the kind of embodied learning and direct experience that is idealized by the tradition. However, some found that this could be countered by practicing together with their sangha, which also reinforced their sense of the meaningfulness, validity, and purpose of deity yoga.

Since the student–teacher connection plays a central role in ensuring the efficacy of deity yoga, some practitioners were shown to further compensate for the absence of their teachers by cultivating a sense of their presence, as well as faith and devotion in them through: observing, recollecting, and attempting to emulate their behaviors; indirectly requesting their aid (as through prayer) and communicating with them (as in telepathically), and

then interpreting certain events as trans-spatiotemporal responses to this; and cherishing ritual objects that have been blessed or gifted by them and are thus felt to transmit some part of their enlightened experience. Although those who had the opportunity to be in frequent proximity to their teachers and/or formed a close bond with them in earlier times expressed less of a need for it anymore, some suggested that it was still desirable given the complexity of deity yoga and the kinds of personal experiences, challenges, concerns, and realizations that can unfold from it. To make sense of and deal with these, the practitioners interviewed in this study exhibited a strong tendency to rely upon the explanatory frameworks provided by the tradition and the resources of their networks within it, rather than selectively doing so on the basis of what may seem compatible or incompatible with the beliefs, values, and epistemological standards of their Western context, as tends to be common (Wallace 2002b, p. 46). This may be due to the importance that is placed on cultivating the ‘right view’ (Pāli: *sammā-ditṭhi*) in Buddhism, which refers to how practice consists of viewing and engaging with the world through a Buddhist perspective to a significant degree (ibid., p. 35). Yet, this can be problematic insofar as it can lead to self-blame—as was seen, some of the participants attributed certain difficulties to their own “[...] inadequate preparation or understanding, incorrect practice, insufficient acceptance of an experience, or insufficient surrendering” (Lindahl et al. 2019, p. 17), which may cause these to be underreported and certain deficiencies respective to the formal transmission of the practice and the practice environment in a cross-cultural context to be ignored rather than addressed in open dialogue. This seems to be something that teachers are becoming increasingly aware of and making efforts to prevent, as the change in approaches or development of programs better suited to the needs and lifestyles of Westerners made by Mingyur Rinpoche, Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, and Tsoknyi Rinpoche seem to indicate, as well as their encouragement of an attitude of acceptance and patience toward one’s struggles.

On the other hand, being forced to comply with certain aspects, such as the graduated structure of gaining access to deity yoga, was demonstrated to be beneficial in the long-term despite its initially deterring impact. This is because it helps practitioners to adjust their expectations toward the practice more realistically, as well as to develop the necessary understanding, qualities, and states of awareness required for committing oneself to the complexity of tantric practice, integrating what is cultivated through it into one’s daily life, and actually being changed by it. Indeed, since Western practitioners generally do not already possess a shared worldview or basis of belief and culture with Vajrayāna Buddhism when they are introduced to it, investing time and effort into developing their understanding was shown to play a significant role in strengthening motivation and efficacy, which, by extension, supports the development of faith and devotion over time. As the testimonies demonstrated, the process of overcoming challenges of belief, understanding, faith, and devotion is highly variable and subject to contextual, epistemic, ethical, personal, practical, religious, and socio-cultural factors that span across practitioner, relationship, and practice domains. While some feel that their practice is hindered by their cultural conditioning and attempt to distance themselves from it, others draw comparisons of resemblance that universalize or render the abstract concepts of Vajrayāna Buddhism more familiar; while some find their practice sustained by direct proof in the form of sporadic and seemingly spontaneous experiences that, in some cases, enable the achievement of an embodied understanding of the concepts hinted at and states aspired toward in the tradition, others rely on inferential proof and valid testimony by contenting themselves with the practical benefits that they derive from suspending doubt, examining the logic of the tenets on their own terms, and achieving an intellectual understanding of them through practice, and so on.

Altogether, it is hoped that the testimonies of this article have highlighted the significant influence that these oft-overlooked factors can have on practice outcome and thus help to direct future researchers in their attempt to better understand the phenomenology of meditation-related challenges. Just as importantly, this study aspired to contribute to ongoing efforts within the field of tantric studies to better understand how tantric traditions

are evolving through their cross-cultural transmission and what the lived experience of contemporary practitioners undergoing this process is like. Finally, it is hoped that by providing a platform through which the voices of practitioners can be heard, this study will assist in opening up avenues of perhaps necessary discussion within their communities.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Participant Profiles.

Participants	Main Teacher/Affiliation and Years of Vajrayāna Practice
Clara	Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche (Nyingma and Kagyü) in 2000
Diego Hangartner	HH Dalai Lama (Gelug) since 1991, Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche (Nyingma) since 1992, etc.
Dr. Pilar Jennings	Khenpo Pema Wangdak (Sakya), 25 years
Florence	Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche (Nyingma and Kagyü), 15 years
Gavin	Geluk since the 1980s, recently Nyingma
Henry	Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche (Nyingma and Kagyü) around 2014
Jack	Nyingma since the 1960s
Lucas	Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche (Nyingma and Kagyü) since 2006
Markus	Geluk and Nyingma, 18 years
Marshall	Mingyur Rinpoche (Nyingma and Karma Kagyü), 25 years
Nathan	Lama Ole Nydahl (Karma Kagyü) since 1998
Roger	Various Nyingma and Kagyü teachers since 1994
Saya	Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche (Nyingma and Kagyü) since 2011
Sharon	Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche (Nyingma and Kagyü) since the 1990s
Terri	Karma Kagyü in the 1980s, Mingyur Rinpoche (Nyingma and Karma Kagyü) since 2006
Yara	Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche (Nyingma and Kagyü) since 2012

Notes

- ¹ The question of how the present study navigated the issue of secrecy with its Buddhist participants has yet to be written and will be included in its forthcoming complete form. Suffice to say, that the boundaries of secrecy in terms of what topics and degree of detail were regarded as acceptable to discuss varied across the participants. For an example of how I proceeded with the practitioners of Śākta deity yoga whom were also interviewed by this study, see [Perkins \(2021\)](#). The reader may also turn to [Davidson \(2006\)](#), [Panchen and Gyalpo \(1996\)](#), [Sparham \(2018\)](#), and [Tsongkhapa \(2005\)](#) for insight into the vows that Vajrayāna Buddhists undertake upon becoming initiated into tantric practice, which include abstaining from discussing the esoteric teachings and practices with non-initiates.

- ² See, for example: Cozort (2005); Gray (2006, 2014, 2021); Hopkins (2008); Kongtrul (2002); J. Lingpa et al. (2006); Padmasambhava et al. (2016); Ray (2001); Rinbochay (1986); V.G. Rinpoche (1996); Samuel (1993, pp. 230–43); Wallace (2001); Williams and Tribe (2000, pp. 208, 225–26, 229–31).
- ³ The interpretation of emptiness (IAST.: *śūnyatā*; THL.: *tong-panyi*) has been a matter of controversy across the schools of Vajrayāna Buddhism, with the two most influential being the doctrines of ‘other-emptiness’ (THL.: *shen-stong*) and ‘self-emptiness’ (THL.: *rang-tong*) corresponding respectively to the philosophical positions known as Yogācāra and Mādhyamaka. While the former was mainly adopted by those within the Nyingma and Kagyü schools and the latter was mainly adopted by those of the Geluk and Sakya schools, there are notable exceptions. The reader is recommended to turn to King (1994) and Williams and Tribe (2000, pp. 140–60) for detailed comparisons of these positions. It is important to note that “[...] all schools agreed upon the centrality of *pratītyasamutpāda* even if they did not agree upon its precise implications” (King 1994, p. 669). *Pratītyasamutpāda* is the Mahāyāna doctrine of interdependent co-arising according to which the ‘suchness’ (IAST.: *tathātā*; THL.: *dēshinnyi*) of all appearances, persons, things, and phenomena may be qualified as empty in the sense that their existence is entirely dependent upon external causes and conditions or a chain of cause and effect that is operating through them. This is related to the ‘two truths’ doctrine (IAST.: *dvasatya*; THL.: *denpanyi*) that distinguishes between conventional/relative truth or reality (IAST.: *samvṛti-satya*; THL.: *kundzob-denpa*) and ultimate/absolute truth or reality (IAST.: *paramārtha-satya*; THL.: *dondam-denpa*). The implication of *pratītyasamutpāda* is not that things on a conventional level are entirely false, as they do indeed function and allow us not only to navigate through the world but also to reach a realization of the ultimate truth. Thus, the conventional and ultimate are mutually supportive, co-existent facets of a single reality, which means that there is no objective difference between the realm of samsara (cyclic existence) and nirvana (liberation). Practitioners must strive to grasp this in order to achieve buddhahood (Mills 2003, pp. 89–90; Mullin 2005, pp. 129–31; Powers 2007, pp. 362–63).
With regard to bliss, it is a *nyams*—“[...] the *what* that is being experienced [...] when the subject enters a state of focused meditation” (Gyatso 1999, p. 119). In some cases, it has been described as a pervasive sense of joy, great happiness, inspiration, or confidence. It is said to be inseparable from emptiness because the manner in which it blurs the distinction between subject and object or experiencer and experienced is amenable to a realization of emptiness. Therefore, it is also a quality of innate buddha nature (Berzin n.d.-g; Cozort 2005, pp. 76–79; Gyatso 1999, pp. 122–25; Ray 2001, p. 313).
- ⁴ The Nyingma school considers the Dzogchen (‘Great Perfection’) perspective and its approach to transcend even those of the Highest Yoga Tantras (see note no. 6). It does away with all visualizations and subtle body practices, focusing instead on directly experiencing the spontaneity and immediacy of the ‘ground’ that is enlightened awareness by ‘cutting through’ (THL.: *trekchö*) discursive thought and having a ‘direct vision’ (THL.: *tögal*) of how it “[...] arises from nowhere, abides nowhere, and goes nowhere” (Powers 2007, p. 391). In other words, the Dzogchen practitioner achieves self-liberation once their ability to recognize and abide in this ground, that is also called the ‘natural state of the mind,’ enables them to see that everything is a “[...] projection of one’s own mind and the emanation of one’s energy” (Arizaga 2022, p. 31), thereby transcending the limitations of a dualistic perspective. According to Gyatso (1999), “Dzogchen meditative traditions were well-established in Tibet by the eleventh century [...] Scholars now think that Dzogchen represents a set of innovative Tibetan appropriations of practices that were entering Tibet from a variety of sources” (p. 130).
- ⁵ Samsara refers to the pattern of reincarnation into the cyclic existence of conventional reality (see note no. 3) and its suffering that one’s karma and ignorance thrusts one back into. Karma refers to the actions one has committed and their resulting effects, while ignorance refers to being unaware of this cycle’s existence and how it is perpetuated, as well as not realizing the empty nature of the self. The mistaken sense of a distinct self is deemed one of the most powerful causes that bind one to samsara as it reinforces grasping and attachment, leading, in turn, to harmful actions. Ultimately, one should strive to escape samsaric existence because it is illusory and the fleeting nature of everything within it that one craves and aspires to attain will always be a source of suffering (Powers 2007, pp. 64, 72, 259).
- ⁶ ‘Divine pride’ (THL.: *lhe ngargyäl*) refers to the practitioner’s confidence in their identity as the *yidam* or of their inherently pure and perfect buddha nature. It is a state of awareness that is thought to be achieved during the generation stage (IAST.: *utpattikrama*; THL.: *kyérim*) of deity yoga respective to the Highest Yoga Tantras, when their normative identity becomes subsumed into that of the *jñānasattva*, leading their clinging to the former’s substantiality that prevents any realization of the illusion of subject–object duality to become eroded. Over time, this is believed to enable them to effect detachment from the limitations that normally hinder them and facilitate their ability to transmit compassion and wisdom in a boundless way (Cozort 2005, pp. 57–58; Hopkins 2008, pp. 49–51; Kongtrul 2002, pp. 16, 101; Mills 2003, p. 119; V.G. Rinpoche 1996, p. 84). The Highest Yoga Tantras (IAST.: *niruttarayogatantra*; THL.: *naljor-lanamépay-gyü*) represent the most advanced class of tantric practices that are said to enable practitioners to achieve buddhahood within one lifetime if performed in an integral manner (Cozort 2005, p. 26; Kongtrul 2002, p. 41; V.G. Rinpoche 1996, p. 19). The generation stage of practice is named as such because one only imagines things to be a certain way and that one attains states akin to the body, mind, and speech of a buddha during it. This is in contrast to the completion stage (IAST.: *sampanna-krama*; THL.: *dzok-rim*), through which the practitioner is said to directly experience and actualize these states (Cozort 2005, pp. 113, 539; Kongtrul 2002, pp. 49, 90; Ray 2001, pp. 220–21).
- ⁷ According to Connolly (2007), “[in] Buddhism, the composite goddess Tārā came to be regarded as a primordial female energy, sometimes consort of Avalokiteśvara and also as the personification of perfect wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā)” (p. 187). The late eighth-century *kriyā* text titled *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* (‘The Root Ritual Instruction of Mañjuśrī’) may be her earliest textual appearance

(Williams and Tribe 2000, p. 206). Some of her qualities include being nurturing, loving, healing, and protective, which are put into action through her swift readiness to come to the aid of others who are in need (C. Lingpa et al. 2015, pp. x–xi).

8 As Gray (2021) explains, “Vajrayoginī is the central goddess in the Yoginītantra traditions deriving from the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*, and she became one of the most popular and influential female deities in Newar and Tibetan Buddhist tantric traditions” (p. 10). Essentially, Vajrayoginī is a goddess of wisdom whose wrathful appearance is suggestive of the transformation of one’s passion through the severing of one’s ego and the support of others’ well-being (Sarbacker 2005, pp. 119–24). See English (2002) for an extensive analysis of Vajrayoginī’s historical development, textual and visual representations, and descriptions of the ritual and meditative practices that are focused upon her.

9 A three-year retreat (THL: *lo sum choe sum*) consists of a period of seclusion of three years, three months, and three days during which practitioners intensively train their minds through a series of meditative and ritual practices to make them apt for engaging in more advanced practices with a *yidam* and conferring empowerments (see note no. 21) to others (Berzin n.d.-h, n.d.-i; see also Mills 2003, p. 276). This format was designed by Marpa Lotsawa, the eleventh-century Buddhist teacher and translator who is credited with having transmitted many Vajrayāna teachings from India to Tibet (Mullin 2005, p. 52). As Ray (2001, pp. 448–59) describes, the traditional format has been revised by some in contemporary times and offered in a manner that is more feasible for Westerners, such as by dividing the three years into different segments.

10 See note no.6 for a brief explanation of what the completion stage implies and notes no. 14 and 44 for explanations of the *trikāya* theory.

11 *Dépa sum* refers to three levels of faith, namely, “[...] inspired faith, which arises upon recalling the noble qualities of the lama and the Three Jewels; emulating faith, which is the wish to achieve those same qualities; and convinced faith, which is single-pointed devotion” (Panchen and Gyalpo 1996, p. 121).

12 As Berzin (n.d.-b) states,

Contemporary Western Buddhists often use the term *retreat* for any residential meditation course, even if for only a weekend, and for any period of time taken out of their busy daily lives and spent in secluded meditation on any topic [...]. Some Westerners also call a “retreat” secluded time spent studying and familiarizing themselves with a particular practice.

For a description of what the retreat purpose, setting, procedure, and experience was traditionally like within India and Tibet, as well as what Tenzin Palmo—an English woman who later became an ordained nun and teacher within the Drugkpa lineage of the Kagyū school—experienced while first on retreat in Asia and how she compared it to the retreat setting in the West, see Ray (2001, pp. 428–47).

13 For another example of this besides those of the participants of this study, the reader can turn to Ray (2001, pp. 157–62).

14 According to the *trikāya* theory, the lama is to be regarded as existing on and interacting both with and through three planes at once (Obeyesekere 2012, pp. 92–93; Sumegi 2010, p. 451). As Sumegi (2010) perfectly put it:

The lama, in identifying with the cosmic *sambhogakāya* form, cognises the ineffable nature of being, the *harmakāya*, and in his ordinary body actualises the compassionate emanation of enlightened mind, the *nirmāṇakāya*, through whom the participant in the ritual is able to communicate and know the ineffable. (p. 456)

Since the *dharmakāya* is said to be omnipresent and beyond space and time, while the *sambhogakāya* is the field in which the luminous awareness of celestial buddhas and bodhisattvas manifests, the extension of the lama’s awareness and being to these planes of existence not only implies that he is capable of transcending spatiotemporal boundaries but that he is able to relate to humans and cosmological beings on an intersubjective basis (Zivkovic 2014, pp. 105, 112). This means the lama can take on a manifold of expressions (Zivkovic 2014, p. 112) and that the manner in which the connection that is established between student and lama—which is qualified as a true or mutual meeting of two minds (Powers 2007, p. 269; Ray 2001, p. 162)—is experienced, is also not limited by their physical positions in conventional space and time. This understanding enables the student to approach, engage, and be affected by their lama in a multitude of ways (Zivkovic 2014, pp. 112, 125), as observed in the present section. Although the participant testimonies shared in this section do not refer directly to this concept, most of the participants indicated a familiarity with it throughout other parts of the interviews, which suggests that it underpins the interpretations shared here.

15 The Pāli canon is the earliest collection of scriptures that describe the life, enlightenment, and teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha Śākyamuni). They were written in a vernacular form of Sanskrit known as Pāli and maintained and imparted by those of the Theravāda (‘Way of the Elders’) school (Connolly 2007, p. 67).

16 Jacobsen (2012) has noted that there are also examples within Buddhist texts of those who were not in favor of the display of powers because they did not consider them to be “[...] in themselves expressions of Buddhism” (p. 11) and non-Buddhists were also showcasing them at the time. To address this, the term *abhijñā* was used to distinguish the superior powers that unfold from “[...] the liberating knowledge of the Buddhist teaching and the liberating activity of the buddhas and bodhisattvas” (ibid.) from the mundane “[...] ‘marvels’ or ‘magic tricks’ [that] were claimed on behalf of rival ascetics, religious teachers, and their followers” (Fiordalis 2012, p. 100).

17 As Singleton (2010) explains, “[t]he techniques and philosophical frameworks of the Śaiva Tantras form the basis for the teachings of hatha yoga, which flourished from the thirteenth century CE and which entered its decline in the eighteenth” (p. 27). Its goal is

to achieve a “[...] transmutation of the human body into a vessel immune from mortal decay” (ibid., p. 28), as well as the state of samadhi (consisting of mental equipoise, including absorption in and contemplation of the Absolute) that, in turn, leads to moksha or liberation. This is achieved through multiple techniques, including breathing exercises (pranayama) that are intended to work directly upon the subtle body and manipulate its energies. However, what has been labeled and transmitted as hatha yoga in the modern and transnational context is most often focused exclusively upon only one of its aspects, namely, asana or postural practice, with the intention of achieving improved health, fitness, and well-being (ibid., pp. 29–33).

18 A ‘hand empowerment’ (THL.: *chak-wang*) is a type of blessing (Gayley 2007, pp. 494–95), not to be confused with the ‘empowerments’ (THL.: *wang*, see note no. 21) that lamas confer.

19 Cooper et al. (2021) qualify such phenomenon as “energy-like somatic experiences” (ELSEs). Among the ninety-two participants of their study, the use of electrical and hydraulic or pneumatic metaphors to describe these, as Roger’s statement exemplifies, was not uncommon.

20 It is worth noting here that Henry’s explanation of emptiness is based on the Mādhyamaka view founded by Nāgārjuna, whose treatises titled *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (‘The Dispeller of Disputes’) and *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (‘Root Verses on the Middle Way’) he is likely paraphrasing from.

21 ‘Empowerments’ (THL.: *wang*) consist of initiatory acts that transfer the lama’s knowledge, power, and blessings to the student, thereby granting them permission to engage in a practice cycle that establishes a relationship with a particular *yidam*, and setting the foundations for their understanding of its textual transmission that will support their independent practice (Mills 2003, p. 97; Samuel 1993, pp. 244–45). As the instructions and essence of tantric texts were written in a cryptic manner that is meant to be undecipherable to the uninitiated and only realizable through direct experience, the authority of the lama’s empowerment supersedes them in importance and is considered to be indispensable for the practitioner’s understanding of them (Mills 2003, pp. 97–98, 178–79; Powers 2007, p. 310; Ray 2001, p. 165; Samuel 1993, pp. 250–51). In addition, these empowerments are intended to not only activate the student’s capacities but also to render their body, speech, and mind in the necessary states of purity to reflect those of the *yidam* and break away from habitual tendencies (Bentor 2000, p. 329; Mills 2003, p. 121). Terri described it as follows:

So, for instance, [...] if I’m singing and nobody can hear me and they give me a microphone, the empowerment is the microphone. Now, everyone can hear me, I can hear me. So, that’s given to me to help amplify what I already have inside.

See Panchen and Gyalpo (1996, pp. 106–8), as well as Kalu Rinpoche (1995, pp. 47–54) and Williams and Tribe (2000, pp. 231–35), for a more detailed description of what exactly is enacted during the different empowerments.

22 In their survey of 1120 meditation practitioners, Vieten et al. (2018) found that 17% of respondents had felt a sense of connection to their teacher who was not physically present two to five times, while 23% had “many times” and 5% “almost always” (see Table 3 of their publication).

23 Vieten et al.’s (2018) study also found that 23% of respondents reported having sensed a collective energy two to five times, 39% “many times”, and 8% “almost always.”

24 Sadhana is the Sanskrit term for *druptap* (‘means of accomplishment’) and refers to the ritual and liturgical texts that “[...] guide the tantric practitioner through a sequence of practices focused on a particular deity” (Williams and Tribe 2000, p. 229) and aim toward “[...] the transformation of the mundane into the transcendental” (English 2002, p. 30). The sequences in question vary across traditions and according to the level one has attained (Kongtrul 2002, p. 14).

25 See note no. 30 for a definition.

26 The Sanskrit term ‘sadhu’ is derived from *sādh*, meaning ‘to lead to the goal.’ It refers to one “who has reached the goal” and saintly or holy men, as well as “[m]endicant monks and wandering renunciants” (Levy 2010, glossary).

27 The Four Noble Truths define and problematize suffering while outlining its cause, the possibility of its transcendence, and the path to follow to achieve the latter (Powers 2007, pp. 65–71).

28 Among the many Vajrayāna teachings that Marpa Lotsawa, the eleventh-century Buddhist teacher and translator, transmitted from India to Tibet, was that of the “500,000 preliminaries” that became the standard across most schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Mullin 2005, p. 52).

29 For detailed descriptions of this practice, see Rinbochay (1986, pp. 141–53) for the Nyingma approach; Kalu Rinpoche (1995, pp. 126–30) and Ray (2001, pp. 183–87) for the Karma Kagyü approach; and Mullin (2005, pp. 227–31) for Tsongkhapa’s Geluk interpretation.

30 The Four Minding Changings (THL.: *lodok nam shyi*, also known as the ‘four thoughts that turn the mind to the Dharma’) is the Kagyü term for what Nyingma lineages refer to as ‘external *ngöndro*,’ meaning preliminary practices that are common to both sutra and tantra. By repeatedly engaging in contemplation of the following four points, one’s mind is said to be turned away from ignorance and brought toward the Dharma: (1) human rebirth is precious because it offers a degree of freedom and opportunity that allows us to work toward achieving a state of enlightenment that is unavailable to other sentient beings; thus, we should cultivate a positive outlook of appreciation toward our lives, despite the difficulties we encounter; (2) since life is impermanent, meaning that everything is subject to change, we should make good use of the precious opportunity and time that our life affords us by engaging in Dharma practice, which, in contrast to everything else, is reliable and stable; (3) the laws of karma,

meaning cause and effect, make it such that our behaviors and actions will shape our experience of life through the interminable consequences that they have upon others and both our present and future incarnations; therefore, we should discriminate between wholesome and harmful behaviors and actions and cultivate the former as much as possible; (4) if we do not do the latter and continue to generate the five poisons, which are anger, attachment, ignorance, jealousy, and pride, then we will perpetuate our experience of samsara, which is disadvantageous because it inevitably leads to suffering and hardship (Berzin n.d.-c, n.d.-f; P. Rinpoche 2016; V.G. Rinpoche 1996, pp. 27–29). Altogether, this ought to provide the practitioner with a meaningful sense of direction and a goal that enables them to then confidently generate not only renunciation, which is the determination to free themselves of the disadvantages of samsara but also *bodhicitta* ('mind of awakening'), which is the motivation to do so for the sake of benefitting all other sentient beings and enabling their awakening, which is possible owing to the principle of interdependent co-arising (Berzin n.d.-c; Powers 2007, pp. 113–14). When this is accompanied by a clear understanding of the Four Noble Truths and a generation of renunciation and *bodhicitta*, a firm foundation is laid upon which to take refuge (for a first or consecutive time) and begin working on developing the 'six perfections' (IAST: *ṣaṭpāramitā*; THL: *parol tu chinpa druk*), which are the following positive qualities: generosity, ethics/discipline, patience, effort/diligence, concentration, and wisdom (C. Lingpa et al. 2015, pp. 36–42; Powers 2007, p. 115).

- 31 *Śamatha* ('calm abiding') meditation is the practice of calming the mind's propensity toward laxity and excitement by stabilizing one's attention, such that the object of its focus remains vivid within one's awareness. This is achieved through the cultivation of two faculties: mindfulness, which refers to sustained and undistracted attention toward an object of focus, and introspection, which, in the Buddhist context, implies monitoring the state of one's own awareness during the meditative process. Put differently, introspection suggests a process of meta-cognition, meaning that one is observing oneself being an observer (Wallace 2002a, pp. 176–78).
- 32 The Mahāmudrā tradition that was developed in Tibet was introduced in the eleventh century "[...] by Marpa the translator [...] and systematized in the twelfth century by Gampopa" (Gyatso 1999, p. 124). To the Kagyü school, it is considered to be the most expedient path for achieving enlightenment. Its instructions, like Dzogchen ones, are intended to enable a "[...] personal, direct realization of truth," meaning "[...] the luminous nature of the mind" (Powers 2007, p. 416), and are normally performed in retreat. See Brown (2006) for more information.
- 33 *Vipaśyanā* ('higher insight') meditation is the practice of analyzing the nature of the object of one's meditative focus and arriving at an insightful realization of its emptiness (Powers 2007, pp. 91, 417). In non-tantric Mahāyāna practice, this is done through logical reasoning and inference, while in Vajrayāna practice, it is done by witnessing the emptiness of the mind directly (Kongtrul 2002, pp. 121–22). When the "[...] baseless, conditioned, and contingent" (Gray 2006, p. 296) nature of one's own body and mind is realized in this manner, our tendency to identify with "[...] our individual, physical bodies, which Buddhists claim leads to selfish and ultimately self-destructive behavioural patterns" (ibid.), is undermined.
- 34 Amihai and Kozhevnikov's (2014) EEG and EKG findings that deity yoga "[...] produced sympathetic activation, indicative of arousal" in contrast to how *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* "[...] produced enhanced parasympathetic activation indicative of a relaxation response" has led them to suggest that both tantric Hindu and Buddhist styles of meditation "[...] could be more problematic for people who are under a high level of stress" (Kozhevnikov 2019, p. 745). As many of this study's participants qualified the Western temperament or their own as being stressed and in a hurry to achieve highly ambitious goals, it is not surprising that learning to cultivate a more neutral and focused foundation in the first place enhances the efficacy of their deity yoga afterwards.
- 35 While this may be one reason that contributes to it, it is also worth noting that the issue in itself is not modern. As Wallace (2006) explains,

Tsongkhapa commented on this oversight in the fifteenth century when he said, "There seem to be very few who achieve even shamatha," and Dūdjom Lingpa commented four centuries later, "Among unrefined people in this degenerate era, very few appear to achieve more than fleeting stability." (p. 147)

To determine the validity of these statements, Wallace asked both the Dalai Lama and other "seasoned recluses" over the years about it and found that

[t]he consensus is that the actual achievement of shamatha today among Tibetan Buddhist contemplatives, both in Tibet and living in exile, is not unknown, but it is exceptionally rare. The Sri Lankan Theravada scholar and contemplative Balangoda Anandamaitreya told me that despite the fact that there were hundreds of Buddhist meditators in numerous hermitages throughout his country, only a small handful had achieved genuine shamatha. Most focused almost entirely on vipashyana, sometimes to the exclusion of shamatha altogether. Shamatha practice predates the Buddha, and some Buddhists dismiss it on the grounds that shamatha practice by itself does not liberate the mind. Some Mahayana Buddhists marginalize it on the grounds that it is common to Theravada Buddhism, which they regard as an "inferior vehicle" of spiritual practice. And there are Tibetan Buddhists who similarly overlook it in favor of more esoteric tantric practices. In all cases, such people disregard the teachings of the Buddha as well as the most authoritative contemplatives in their own traditions. (pp. 147–48)

36 According to V.G. Rinpoche (1996), “[i]t is traditional to make up for all the mistakes you inevitably make when doing your 100,000 recitations by reciting an additional 10,000 mantras at the end. If you have recited only 10,000 of the main deity’s mantra, then recite 1000 extra. If you recite one hundred mantras, then do ten extra. You should always do this” (p. 105).

37 This reflects a common misconception that Arizaga (2022) also noted among her Western participants, namely, one that “[...] overlook[s] the fact that, for example, it may be easier for a modern person to have leisure time than, say, a Tibetan herder” (p. 196).

38 What has come to be called the Six Yogas of Naropa (THL.: *Naro Chö-druk*, ‘Naro’s Six Doctrines’) in the West is a synthesis of six advanced tantric practices, access to which is normally only granted after becoming experienced in the generation stage of deity yoga because as completion stage practices, they involve working directly with, through, and on the subtle body with the aim of securing enlightenment at the moment of death. They are: (1) inner heat yoga (THL.: *tummo*), (2) illusory body yoga (THL.: *gyulü*), (3) dream yoga (THL.: *milam*), (4) clear light yoga (THL.: *ösel*), (5) intermediate stage yoga (THL.: *bardo*), and (6) transference of consciousness (THL.: *powa*) (Mullin 2006; Powers 2007, pp. 405–10; Ray 2001, pp. 235–50).

39 At some point in the practitioner’s trajectory, especially if they are of a Nyingma or Kagyü lineage, the root lama conducts what is known as pointing-out instructions, which is otherwise called an ‘introduction to the nature of mind’ (THL.: *ngo-trö*) (Apple 2020, pp. 170–71; Ray 2001, pp. 191–95). It can take on many forms, consisting of “[...] concise, unsystematic, and perhaps spontaneous, direct verbal and/or nonverbal acts of revealing realization to disciples” (Apple 2020, p. 171). That is to say that the lama does, says, or asks something unexpected, the shock or surprise of which suspends the student’s conventional cognitive process and awareness, laying bare the empty, non-conceptual, unchanging, clear, lucid, compassionate, present, and open nature of the mind.

40 According to Buddhist cosmology, if one fails to realize certain subtle states of consciousness through meditative practice and attain either the ‘form realm’ or ‘formless realm’ during the process of rebirth, then one will be reborn into the ‘desire realm,’ to which the following six classes of beings belong:

[...] gods (mundane celestial beings whose primary mental state is exaltation), antigods (who are predominantly hostile and jealous), human beings (who are influenced by all the five dissonant mental states), animals (who are under the sway of delusion), anguished spirits (who are under the sway of attachment and unsatisfied craving), and hell beings (who are overwhelmed by hatred, anger, and fear. (Coleman 2009, pp. xxx–xxxi)

From the perspective of the Highest Yoga Tantras, these realms are “[...] differing expressions or modalities of energy (*rlung*)” (ibid., xxxiii) and our transition into them is propelled by our karmic energy. Rebirth as an animal is unfavorable because their diminished intelligence and communicative skills, as well as their tendency to be driven by instinct, make it difficult for them to attain enlightenment. On the other hand, hell beings must endure unfathomable pain in either of the thirty-two hell realms that are qualified as being hot, cold, crushing, or cutting, for a period of time that is not indefinite but, subjectively speaking, feels as though it is (Thurman 1994, pp. 29–30). As Thurman (1994) states,

[a]wareness of the possible horrid states is a powerful motivator toward positive development for oneself, and an intense catalyst for compassion for others. It is indispensable for developing the messianic drive to save other beings from suffering that is called the will to, or spirit of, enlightenment. (p. 32)

It is such an awareness that Lucas is admitting to lacking in his statement. Upon realizing that the contemporary Western mindset and its inclination toward a scientific worldview would not take well to such concepts that are reminiscent of its own Christian background, many Tibetan teachers began claiming that they are to be taken metaphorically, as states of mind. However, as Thurman (1994) highlights, from the viewpoint that the world or conditioned existence is ultimately created by and experienced through the mind, even if rebirth into the lesser realms and states of being are ‘states of mind,’ they are experienced as being no less real than the state of mind we currently experience as human beings; thus, fearing them is more conducive preventatively speaking (pp. 32–33).

41 Attaining pure vision (THL.: *daknang*) is the ultimate goal of deity yoga. It consists of perceiving the absolute reality of the world as unity, awareness, bliss, luminosity, and emptiness and engaging with it through this understanding, such that every sound is perceived to be the mantra of buddhas, every visual and spatial landscape a mandala, and every social relation an ideal exchange between buddhas; in this way, one’s transformed state becomes coterminous with everything surrounding it, and nothing is related to as being painful, impure, or imperfect. Essentially, the possibility of pure vision conveys the message that reality and one’s experience of it is entirely dependent upon one’s perspective (Kongtrul 2002, pp. 91–92; Mullin 2005, p. 125; Powers 2007, p. 292; Ray 2001, pp. 255–56; Samuel 1993, pp. 164–65; Samuel 2005, pp. 75, 240; Sumegi 2010, p. 453).

42 Indeed, “[...] wrathful deities are not an expression of anger or wrath, but instead are an intense expression of the ultimate compassion that has manifested in coarse, illusory form to tame sentient beings impossible to tame otherwise” (V.G. Rinpoche 1996, p. 50) and “[...] destroy *nyon-mongs* [S. *klesha*], the afflictions which sentient beings suffer from” (Mills 2003, p. 86).

43 For critical analyses of the different positions that have arisen from the interaction between Buddhism and Western science, see Cabezón (2003) and Vörös (2016). See also Palitsky et al. (2023) for an evaluation of the different relationships between religious and scientific worldviews that arise while Western practitioners navigate their meditation-related challenges.

See note no.14. In simpler terms, the *dharmakāya* (THL.: *chö-ku*, ‘Body of Reality’) can be said to consist of the wisdom or mind of a buddha, while the *sambhogakāya* (THL.: *long-ku*, ‘Body of Perfect Enjoyment’) is the speech/communicative form of a buddha (Lopez 2007, p. 22; Mullin 2005, pp. 34–35; Zivkovic 2014, pp. 106, 110–12) and the *nirmāṇakāya* (THL.: *triül-ku*, ‘Emanation Body’) is the physically manifest form of the *dharmakāya*, meaning the body of a buddha that manifests at a physical level that all sentient beings can perceive and interact with for the purpose of transmitting the Dharma to them and enabling their enlightenment (Gray 2006, p. 298; Mills 2003, p. 275; Mullin 2006, p. 75; Zivkovic 2014, p. 107).

While Henry previously espoused a Mādhyamaka view (see note no.20), he now puts forth a Yogācāra one. This may exemplify how the distinctions between different philosophical interpretations of Buddhist doctrine can become blurred among practitioners with less formal or scholastic training in the tradition, as aspects from both become combined in the process of sense-making.

It is worth noting that while reviewing this article prior to its submission for publication, Marshall stated that his experience of deity yoga has changed since our interview, which was two and a half years ago:

If I relayed to you that deity practice is stressful then I certainly changed my mind in the last year. I engaged in quite a bit of deity practice recently and loved it. So, it seems there is a place and time for everything.

While descriptions of Yamāntaka, the wrathful Buddha credited with having destroyed Yama, the Lord of Death, vary depending on the form that he manifests in, Gavin’s description is slightly off and likely referring to that of Dorje Jiglet (IAST.: *Vajrabhairava*), which rather has sixteen feet, thirty-four arms, and nine faces, making it even more complex to visualize than he implies. See Mills (2003, pp. 86–87) for a lengthier description of Yamāntaka’s appearance, symbolism, and story.

To differentiate the kriya yoga that he is referring to from its different textual representations across Hinduism and Buddhism and make its lineage clearer, Gavin defined it as follows: “Babaji Kriyā Yoga is an esoteric hybrid of various haṭha yoga techniques and post-tantric meditation nested in a Sāṅkhya philosophical context that originated with a few unique transmissions from the Indian *māhasiddha*, Babaji.” The *siddhas* “[...] constituted an alternate locus of authority, positioned outside of the established religious institutions [...] and were] portrayed as powerful but morally ambiguous figures” (Gray 2007, p. 701) on account of having gained siddhis (see p. 12 and note no. 16) and earned their livelihood by performing rituals and teaching others how to achieve the same (Samuel 1993, p. 423). Adding *māha* to *siddha* qualifies the adept as being particularly ‘great.’

This may be related to the seventh common root tantric vow and eleventh root bodhisattva vow, both of which forbid the initiated from disclosing information on teachings and practices to the non-initiated whose suitability for receiving such information has not been assessed by a qualified teacher and who is unlikely to have faith afterwards. One of the reasons for this is that doing so may confuse, frighten, or overwhelm the uninitiated, thereby deterring them from pursuing the Vajrayāna path and delaying their opportunity to achieve full enlightenment. The misunderstandings that this might cause are also thought to potentially lead to the spreading of misinformation (Panchen and Gyalpo 1996, pp. 79, 119, 123–24, 129–30; Rinchen 2000, pp. 138–39; Sparham 2018; Tsongkhapa 2005).

It is likely that Jack is paraphrasing Jigme Lingpa, the eighteenth-century Nyingma *tertön* who promulgated Longchenpa’s (14th c.) *Longchen Nyinthig* (‘Heart Essence Teachings’), which became the most commonly practiced collection of Dzogchen teachings. Jigme Lingpa stated that “[t]o become attached to intellectual models of the experience or meditational states encountered in the course of trying to achieve it is to mistake the path for the goal, whereas the real goal is to turn the goal into the path” (Samuel 1993, p. 535).

Although Saya did not use the term ‘spiritual bypassing’ to describe this tendency, it has frequently been referred to as such and implies the use of “[...] spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep personal, emotional ‘unfinished business’, to shore up a shaky sense of self, or to belittle basic needs, feelings, and developmental tasks” (Buckner 2020, p. 127, citing Welwood 2002).

A ‘Refuge Tree’ is “[...] a vast visualized assembly” (Samuel 1993, p. 254) of bodhisattvas, buddhas, and one’s lineage of gurus, “[...] with the personal lama at the center in the form of Vajradhara, Guru Rinpoche, Ts’ongk’apa, or some other deity or lama” (ibid.).

As Hopkins (2008) paraphrasing the Fifth Dalai Lama explains, the early phase of the practitioner’s realization that both they and the deity are the same in their fundamental lack of inherent existence and that a self cannot, therefore, be found, can be experienced as “[...] losing something” (p. 50).

According to Vajrayāna Buddhism, the subtle body is made up of 72,000 channels or circulatory passages through which the winds move (Cozort 2005, p. 44; Thurman 1994, p. 38). Saya is referring to how practices that focus on the subtle body are thought to clear its channels from obstructions that otherwise prevent the winds from flowing freely and make states of consciousness associated with wisdom and clarity more difficult to access. In Cozort’s (2005) words:

[...] the winds are not merely moving air, but are the vital energies that cause all movement by and within the body, such as muscular movement, the circulation of blood and lymph, defecation and urination, breathing, and so forth. The winds are also instrumental in the functioning of the six consciousnesses or minds (ear, eye, nose, tongue, body, and mental) [...] Because the winds are the medium for the operation of minds, fluctuation in the winds necessarily affects consciousness, and thus it is crucial for tantric yogis who wish to yoke consciousness to gain control over the movement of winds. (pp. 42–43)

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