

Special Focus: Bad Buddhism

Beyond “Bad” Buddhism: Conceptualizing Buddhist Counseling in Ulan-Ude, Buryatia

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In Ulan-Ude, the multi-ethnic, multi-religious capital of Buryatia, most laypeople make use of “Buddhist counseling” (Rus. *priyom u lamy*), or various ritual, medical and other services that ameliorate illness and misfortune. Laypeople consult lamas about a range of issues from economic to familial matters, from imp attacks to joblessness. Such Buddhist counseling is one of the most common kind of interactions with Buddhist institutions and practices in Buryatia. At the same time, it is a deeply contested practice, as local critiques refer to the rise of “consumerist”, “commercialized”, “utilitarian” or “bad” Buddhism. This article explores Buddhist counseling as a site of value-laden negotiation of post-Soviet Buddhism. It looks at normative emic notions of good Buddhist practice and their translocal sources as well as social and historical context.

Keywords: Buryatia; Buddhist counseling; divination; ritual; post-socialist Buddhism

In summer 2015, I was starting fieldwork in Ulan-Ude, the capital of Buryatia.¹ On one of my first days there, a Buryat friend invited me to his family outing to a Buddhist *datsan*² outside of the city. On the way there, I talked with his grandmother Zoya,³ a Western Buryat who had lived in Ulan-Ude for most of her life. Like many Western Buryats in Ulan-Ude, she frequents Buddhist temples, but does not define herself as strictly Buddhist, identifying partially also with shamanism

¹ The Republic of Buryatia is a federal subject of Russia located to the East of Lake Baikal in the Russian Far East. It borders Mongolia to the South and is a multi-ethnic region where over one third of the population are Buryats, a Mongol ethnic group, and almost two thirds are Russians. The region was incorporated into the Russian Empire in the late seventeenth century.

² *Datsan* (pl. *datsany*) is a term in local Russian that refers to Buddhist temple complexes (Bur. *dasan*). I use this term instead of “monastery” because lamas in Buryatia usually do not reside in *datsany*, so the word “monastery” seems not entirely fitting. *Datsan* is often also used to refer to single temples (which are also called *dugan* in both local Russian and Buryat, as well as *khram* in Russian).

³ Informants’ names have been changed unless they are public persons such as the Khambo Lama.

and atheism. Arriving at the site, Zoya, like the rest of us, circumambulated the temple and stupas, prostrated thrice in front of multiple sacred objects, carefully spun prayer wheels, placed many offerings of coins, and repeated mantras. As we walked around and talked after finishing the tour around the temple, Zoya quietly split off from the group and wandered off for a private consultation with a lama⁴, who was sitting in his yurt-office nearby to ask him for the horoscope as well as to “read a book” (i.e., read a sutra, Bur. *nom unshakha*) for our well-being. On the way back to the city, Zoya shared her positive emotions after the temple visit, and told me that she felt calm, relieved and inspired. Several days later, I asked my friend if we could visit his grandmother as she had invited us to her home. I wanted to talk to her about her visits to temples and consultations with lamas. The friend, however, was firmly opposed to the idea, saying that his grandmother was “not a real Buddhist” (Rus. *ne nastoyashchiaya buddistka*) and therefore should not be included in my research, as, in his words, she only practiced superficially and did not understand what she was doing when she visited temples, despite the fact that she did so rather regularly.

While such a statement surprised me in the beginning of my fieldwork, throughout the following year I heard time and again people calling themselves and their local co-religionists a “bad” Buddhist (Rus. *plokhoy buddist*), an “incorrect” Buddhist (Rus. *nepravil'nyy buddist*) and other similar terms. These kinds of self-criticisms would come from both men and women, and regardless of their age. How often they visit temples and consult lamas was also not a very significant factor in labeling oneself a “bad” Buddhist. What mattered more were two factors: the knowledge about Buddhism that one commands and the occasions on which one turns to rituals. Both lamas and laity, self-ascribed “bad” ones and aspiring ones alike use similar labels such as “mechanical” (Rus. *mekhanicheskiy*), “utilitarian” (Rus. *utilitarnyy*), and “consumerist” (Rus. *potrebitel'skiy*) Buddhism not just as self-criticism, but to describe other laypeople or the laity in Buryatia in general.

An important part of these discussions of what constitutes correct Buddhism and what falls short is the subject of what I call Buddhist counseling. This is an interaction between a lama and a layperson such as the one Zoya engaged in during our temple visit. In the context of the post-Soviet revival of Buddhism in Buryatia, such interactions become a site of contestation where both new-found and established Buddhists debate questions of virtue and authority, knowledge and belonging. In what follows, I explore the emic notions of “bad” Buddhism, and turn to a discussion of Buddhist counseling and its appraisals as a “consumerist” and “commercialized” form, which, as I argue, follow both from various translocal and modernist influences in the Buddhist revival and from the concern with the discrepancy between long- and short-term cycles of exchange (Parry and Bloch 1989).⁵

⁴ A “lama” (Rus. and Bur. *lama*) is a general term to refer to Buddhist religious specialists in Buryatia. With only several exceptions, lamas are men, non-celibate, and they generally reside outside of *datsany*.

⁵ I conducted thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in and around Ulan-Ude between 2015 and 2019, exploring the ongoing post-Soviet Buryat Buddhist revival. Fieldwork consisted of participant observation in various Buddhist settings (temple rituals, lay gatherings, pilgrimages, etc.), semi-structured and unstructured interviews with laypeople and lamas, as well as other people active in local religious life, following local media, other publications and social media.

Post-Soviet Buddhism, its sources and emic appraisals

Buddhism spread among Buryats, a Mongol ethnic group, over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although some speculate its presence in the region even earlier (Galdanova et al 1983: 12). Gelug school of Vajrayana Buddhism has been predominant among Buryats, and it traveled there from Tibet via Mongolia. In the second half of the eighteenth century, Buryat Buddhism was officially acknowledged in the Russian Empire. It was gradually centralized and institutionalized, especially with the establishment of the office of the Khambo Lama, or the head lama in the region. Buddhism continued to spread over the next century and a half until in the early 1920s, the so-called “golden age” of Buryat Buddhism, there were 9,134 lamas and forty-four monasteries in the Buryat region (Sinitsyn 2013: 37). Soon afterwards, attacks on the Buddhist Church started. By 1937, there remained only 900 lamas and 15 monasteries (ibid: 103). By 1940, there were none (ibid: 108). This was the result of an active and aggressive anti-religious campaign, which involved propaganda via various means (media, public meetings, etc.), demolition of monasteries and repressions against lamas, many of whom retreated to lay life or were executed or sent to forced labor camps and prisons. Among the laity, Buddhism was then largely “domesticated” (Dragadze 1993), that is, practiced mostly secretly and privately. While two monasteries were opened after the Second World War, they functioned only on a very limited and strictly supervised basis, and they did not attract many laypeople who feared the consequences that temple visits may have with the militantly atheist authorities.

It is only in the post-Soviet period that Buddhism has regained its public presence in Buryatia. Today there are dozens of Buddhist religious organizations and temples across the region, including the Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia (Rus. *Buddiiskaya Traditsionnaya Sangkha Rossii*) with the Khambo Lama as its head, recognized by many as the successor of the pre-Soviet Buddhist hierarchy. While some value the Tibetan sources and connections of Buryat Buddhism and strive to strengthen them in the religious revival (cf. Sinclair 2008), others promote the Buryat Buddhist Church as autocephalous and distance it from its Tibetan and Mongolian links (Bernstein 2013). The latter position is especially promoted by the current leader of the Traditional Sangha and by extension Buryat Buddhists, Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheev—an extremely influential figure who shapes religious, social, and political life in the region (Amogolonova 2015). Moreover, it is of course not only Tibetan and Mongolian networks that are present in the Buryat religious revival, but also other translocal and global organizations, ideas and practices that add to the eclectic and diverse Buddhist scene in the post-Soviet revival, especially in the urban setting (cf. Elverskog 2006 and Abrahms-Kavunenko 2012 for Ulaanbaatar). Such translocal sources of post-Soviet Buryat Buddhism materialize through education and institutions, but also visiting teachers and monks, as well as literature and online groups, and various kinds of international gatherings and personal connections.

The post-socialist resurgence of religion in the region is fraught with both enthusiasm (Højer 2009, Abrahms-Kavunenko 2013, Humphrey and Ujeed 2013) and uncertainty (Fagan 2001, Buyandelgeriyn 2007, Bernstein 2014). Loss is an especially prominent theme in the religious revival. It is not only the physical and institutional Buddhist structures that have suffered, but also translocal links with other Buddhist centers as well as much knowledge, expertise, and its transmission. This loss has led to the increased prominence of collective and mediated ritual practice in the late Soviet

and post-Soviet periods (Gerasimova 1980, Humphrey 1983: 427, 432, Jonutytė 2019). Relatively few now conduct offerings and rituals on their own, and even an altar at home, although commonplace, is no ubiquity in the urban setting. Religious professionals have therefore been key to the religious revival. During public rituals and private consultations, lamas sometimes throw in an explanation about the meaning and significance of the performed rituals as well as instruct the laity as to the correct conduct.

Yet even though the demand for religious mediation has valorized the role of the sangha, such reliance on them has also been met with ambivalence, and both members of the sangha and laypeople often critique it. Among the critics is Lama Erdem, a *geshe*⁶ monk educated in India who regularly gives open lectures on Buddhist philosophy and practice in Ulan-Ude. In his lectures, Lama Erdem often stresses the importance of reading and thereby acquiring as well as critically evaluating knowledge of Buddhist philosophy. He highlights that while this is important for any practitioner, it is particularly needed in his native Buryatia. Having lived in India for a decade and a half, now residing in Buryatia and regularly visiting Moscow where he has a group of followers, Lama Erdem contrasted practitioners in the latter two places. An ideal Buddhist layperson, he argued during a lecture, is somewhere halfway between a Moscow Buddhist and a Buryat. While the former boasts superior knowledge and spends extensive hours reading texts and meditating on them, the latter has strong faith and appreciates the value of ritual. While the former lacks genuine belief and undervalues ritual, the latter does not read at all and believes everything uncritically (or has what many refer to as “blind faith”, Rus. *slepaya vera*). Even though Lama Erdem did not use the normative terms of “good” and “bad” Buddhist practice employed by many laypeople, his observations touch upon similar key concepts: ritual, mediation, knowledge, and faith, and ranking the kinds of Buddhist practice according to the combination of these elements.

The tension between “good” and “bad” Buddhism stems in part from what others have called the rise of “modernist” (McMahan 2008) or “Protestant” (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1990) Buddhism. As David McMahan (2008: 5) characterizes it, this is a trend in Buddhism that has become especially prominent in the West and among the educated middle class in Asia that “involves fewer rituals, deemphasizes the miracles and supernatural events depicted in Buddhist literature, disposes of or reinterprets image worship, and stresses compatibility with scientific, humanistic, and democratic ideals”. Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere (1990) explore an early movement of this kind in Ceylon, led by Anagārika Dharmapāla. They argue that such Protestant Buddhism emerged in a dialectic with not only the colonial government but also Protestant Christian missionaries as the relevance and value of Buddhism had to be substantiated to both the colonial regime and to the educated middle classes who were turning to Christianity. Not only Dharmapāla’s movement but also similar ones elsewhere have been extremely influential in rethinking what Buddhism is and should be, and have fed into understandings and practices of Buddhism worldwide.

⁶ *Geshe* is a high academic degree in Gelug monastic education, conferred to those who completed the full curriculum (which usually takes between twelve and twenty years) and passed an exam.

Some authors have argued that two distinct strands may be distinguished in post-socialist Buddhism roughly along the lines of “modernist” and conservative practitioners. Tara Sinclair (2008) describes two kinds of Buddhism in Kalmykia in the early 2000s: “revival” among those who continued their practice throughout the Soviet period passed on to them by the older generations, and “reform” among émigré Tibetan monks and their local followers. While the first group focused on public rituals, the second emphasized knowledge of texts and private Buddhist practice. Similar tensions between conservative lay practitioners and those influenced by global Buddhism are described by Johan Elverskog (2006 on “localist” and “transnationalist” Buddhists) and Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko (2012 on “cultural” and “reform” Buddhists) in the context of Ulaanbaatar.

In Ulan-Ude, comparable trends may initially be apparent as well. Locals there also refer to “traditional” (Rus. *traditsionnyye*) Buddhists and contrast them with those “advanced” (Rus. *prodvintyye*), “neophyte” (Rus. *neofity*), “Buddicising” (Rus. [colloquial] *buddanutyye*), “fanatical” (Rus. *fanatichnyye*), “nontraditional” (Rus. *netraditsionnyye*), and the like. While the main characteristic distinguishing the two trends is heritage—does one come from a Buddhist background and practice it in a similar way to his or her elders?—there are also other features that set them apart. Here, “traditional” Buddhists are generally Buryats who revere the local Buddhist hierarchy, turn to religion on lifecycle or other important occasions (naming of children, funerals, etc.), at least occasionally partake in rituals, and generally do not strive towards their detailed intellectual understanding. In contrast, variously called “non-traditional” Buddhists are not restricted by ethnicity, and they highlight knowledge as well as dedication as essential to religious practice. They generally tend to gather in lay groups (often but not always led by a lama) rather than temples, although they may frequent the latter as well. Given the context of Vajrayana Buddhism in the region, these active, modernist-leaning lay Buddhists are usually aspiring practitioners of tantra, and instead of rejecting rituals they place emphasis on understanding them. While a division of lay Buddhists into two groups may initially seem applicable in Buryatia as well, and labels of one kind or another are sometimes used emically, I often found the two trends hardly separable, and more present as leanings or layers of beliefs and practices rather than as two distinct groups. I want to convey some of this complexity through a brief biography of an urban lay Buddhist.

A layman in his mid-forties, Rinchin grew up in a Buryat Buddhist family in a remote Northern region where his parents worked. Having moved to Ulan-Ude to study, he stayed there, and religion played only a marginal role in his life. He attended Buddhist rituals in the company of his parents and later wife and enjoyed them, but did not understand much of what was happening there. As he explained, he was always curious as to what all the beautiful sights and prayers in temples meant but when he tried to “dig deeper”, that is, quiz Buryat lamas about their underlying meaning and significance, but he would be ignored or sent away for asking too many questions. He occasionally read materials about Buddhism on the internet and came across a lay Buddhist group in Ulan-Ude, which he subsequently joined. The lay group is a local branch of a large transnational organization and their practices and ideas are quite different from what is popularly called “traditional” Buryat Buddhism, but he sees the two as complementing each other and continues to take part in both kinds of activities. While the lay group activities focus mostly on the “modernist” Buddhist staples of

meditation and ethics, the “traditional” ones are largely about partaking in public rituals, especially calendrical ones like the Buddhist New Year, and honoring the clerical hierarchies. Even though some members of the lay group feel strongly about the superiority of their practice compared to that of most Buryat Buddhists, Rinchin identifies firmly with “traditional” Buddhism, partakes in its activities, and sees the lay group as helping him practice it better. He explains that lamas in Buryatia are not very knowledgeable today due to the Soviet repressions on Buddhism, but the situation is getting better and soon Buryat lamas, especially those who studied in India, will be able to better explain Buddhist philosophy to people like him. Even more, such commentary will soon be less vital since well-educated lamas will be able to perform highly efficacious rituals. That is, he does not see knowledge of Buddhism as a virtue in itself but rather as a necessity in a situation where Buddhist expertise is generally lacking, as is the case in post-Soviet Buryatia. He thus understands his own quest for knowledge as rather unusual among the laity and does not think that such striving is necessary for a good Buddhist practitioner.

Rinchin is by no means an exception in the Buddhist milieu in Buryatia, especially its urban sort. Buddhist practice here tends to be eclectic and its sources range from direct interaction with local lamas, teachings of Buryat, Tibetan and other Buddhist specialists both lay and professional, various translocal religious networks and literature, as well as the internet. It is difficult—and hardly productive—to draw a line between “revival” and “reform”, “traditional”, and “global” or other similar categories of Buddhism in Ulan-Ude. It is more accurate to see the two trends—or rather their separate elements (such as the role of study and meditation, the approach towards ritual, the attitude towards religious professionals and so on)—as layers that constitute religious practice in complex combinations and unexpected entanglements.⁷ So while emphasizing knowledge over ritual or critical reflection over faith is rather widespread among Ulan-Ude Buddhists, this is not to say that such practitioners form a separate identifiable group. Instead, the same person may rely heavily on ritual and be self-conscious about it at times while justifying it and even seeing it as a virtue at others. It is in this context that the ambivalence towards Buddhist counseling should be explored.

Buddhist counseling

In Buddhist counseling,⁸ laypeople see a lama to ask whatever questions they may have, be they related to economic matters, life cycle rituals, travel, interpersonal relationships, or other topics. The lama replies to these questions drawing on a number of sources such as divination, astrological calendars, common sense, and own life experience. The means selected depend on both the question

⁷ Indeed, McMahan himself recognizes the fact that elements of “tradition” and “modernity” are often intertwined, calling them a “variegated continuum” (2008: 57). However, such a continuum presupposes clear-cut distinctions on both ends and a possibility to categorize each practitioner along the continuum. I would argue that such a continuum would hardly be productive, and also that the influence of certain “modernist” forms of Buddhism may often be rather ambiguous, for instance, when such forms remain absent from one’s religious practice but sometimes emerge as desirable in discourse.

⁸ Usually referred to in Russian as *priyom u lamy* (“lama’s reception”) or *konsul’tatsiya*. People also refer to the practice as *pogovorit’ s lamoy* (“talk to a lama”) and *posovetovat’sya s lamoy* (“to get advice from a lama”).

and the preference of the lama. Rituals and sutra readings are often performed during a consultation as well, depending on the issue in question. Such counseling takes place in temples, either in designated spaces in the main prayer hall, or in other premises within the temple complex. Fewer lamas are based in either shared or own “offices”⁹ that specialize in consultations. These are premises in a business and/or shopping center or similar spaces where public rituals are not usually held. Yet other lamas receive people at home or offer home visits to the laity without a fixed base. Temple-based lamas spend much of the day counseling laypeople: most temples run a one to two hour open-to-public service in the morning and some also do the same after lunch, but the rest of the time is generally devoted to private consultations. This is partly a matter of devotion to the laity and a wish to help them, and partly a necessity, as remunerations for consultations constitute a substantial part of any lama’s income.

Laypeople tend to consult lamas when they have a specific question, a decision to make, or when they need a ritual or a divination to be performed. To give some examples, it might be a query about where to study, whether a particular destination and time is auspicious for a holiday, what decision one should make at work, or a need to bless a new possession. Some commission such sessions every several months, while others have only done this a few times in their lives. Some, particularly those who are critical of religion in general, do not turn to Buddhist counseling or do so very infrequently. Others visit lamas yearly at the start of the Buddhist New Year to get an astrological prognosis (Bur. *zurkhay*) and learn what rituals are due that year, in addition to one-off problem-oriented consultations. While Buddhist counseling can take the form of one-on-one sessions with a lama, it is also common to bring along family members or friends.

Such consultations are one of the main occasions of lay engagement with Buddhism in Buryatia, thus also important sites where Buddhist institutions and ritual efficacies are experienced. Moreover, unlike public religious service, this engagement is mutually constituted, active, and less formal.¹⁰ Not only does the layperson actively incorporate Buddhism into their lives by requesting help, advice, or giving offerings, but they also learn more about Buddhism in an encounter with a lama who in a conversation can approve of or condemn one’s actions and shape one’s lifestyle, choices, and opinions, as well as teach and advise—although in-depth teaching of Buddhist philosophy or ethics is extremely rare in this setting. As such, consultations are exercises in mutual legitimation between the sangha and the laity, and in mapping out the potentialities of such exchange. After all, as David Zeitlyn (2012: 537) argues, “the evaluative test for diagnosis (and divination generally) is not whether it is correct but whether it helped”. These everyday interactions and the mutual feedback system they provide is therefore a good entry point for the study of the revival of Buryat Buddhism, its efficacies, exchanges, and sources of authority.

Consultations with lamas are not unique to Buryat Buddhism, although they seem to be especially common here, and there are significant local specificities. Similar kinds of engagements

⁹ Some locals refer to as these spaces as “offices” (Rus. *ofisy*, *kontory*), while others avoid the term due to its market connotations.

¹⁰ This is not to say that ritual is a one-sided kind of communication, but simply to highlight that the encounter with representatives of religion and the exchanges with them happen in a very direct way in consultations.

with Buddhist specialists exist in differing forms throughout the Buddhist world, although they have not always received much attention in the literature on Buddhism. Overall, in Buryatia, consultations seem more institutionalized and impersonal compared to most Buddhist contexts where one has to make special arrangements to consult a particular Buddhist specialist, rather than drop by a temple and talk to any lama during opening hours. Moreover, in many Buddhist regions, unlike in Buryatia, there are more lay diviners and ritual specialists, so interactions with the sangha may be less common. In many Buddhist contexts, too, at least part of the sangha can devote themselves to an explicitly scholarly, ascetic, tantric, or other pursuits and only rarely interact with the laity.

Consultations are not a new phenomenon in Buryatia, although they appear to have changed compared to the pre-Soviet period. Previously, it was common to establish a long-term relationship with a lama who would be one's "teacher" (Bur. *bagsha*, Rus. *dukhovnyy nastavnik*). That is, a layperson or a whole family would turn to one lama regularly with questions, requests for rituals and offerings. He would be a guru-teacher throughout one's life. While having such a guru-lama is seen today by many as virtuous and desirable, this practice is rarely followed. In the urban context, some laypeople have one or several lamas that they prefer over others and turn to when in need of a consultation. Such lamas may be relatives, *zemlyaki*,¹¹ or those who have proven pleasant and efficacious in the past. However, many laypeople simply drop by a temple and consult any lama there, or rely on advice from friends and relatives to find a powerful (Rus. *moshchnyy*) lama on each occasion.

In the religious market of Ulan-Ude, people rely on not only Buddhist specialists, but also those of other religions. Lamas are popular and easiest to approach, but shamans have become prominent in the city in the post-Soviet period (Humphrey 1999, Shaglanova 2012). Just like lamas, they consult clients and provide ritual services in private consultations,¹² and several shamanic centers have opened in Ulan-Ude for this purpose. Timur Badmatsyrenov and Sanzhida Dansarunova (2015: 53) list the most common questions in consultations with shamans in Ulan-Ude that seem to mirror those in Buddhist counseling: family, work, financial issues, personal life, spiritual matters, studies, important events, alcohol abuse, and the death of a relative.¹³ Most of my informants consulted a shaman at least once in their lives but turn to lamas more often. As they explained, many consult a shaman with a "more serious" issue, one where they felt a lama was unable to help, usually something related to spirits and non-human beings: terminal illness, curses, and spirit attacks are some examples. This was usually a personal interpretation of the skill-sets and abilities of these specialists, as both lamas and shamans typically deal with a wide range of issues, although their diagnosis and suggested course of action in a given situation may differ (e.g., a lama may interpret a misfortune as a fruition of bad karma while a shaman may instead relate it to a dissatisfied spirit of an abandoned ancestor). It is also popular to see several religious specialists with the same issue. Many consider shamans more

¹¹ That is, come from the same village or region in Buryatia or other areas where Buryats live.

¹² For a discussion of shamanic consultations among Buryats in Mongolia, see Buyandelger (2013), among Buryats in Inner and Outer Mongolia, see Swancutt (2012), and in Tuva, see Lindquist (2005).

¹³ While from an emic point of view Buddhist and shamanic consultations may seem very similar, both their diagnostics and their approaches significantly differ: shamans tend to relate issues to the client's ancestors and social relations, as well as to local spirits, while lamas pay more attention to karma and Buddhist ethics.

powerful but also more hit-and-miss: gossip of fake shamans and “not-quite-shamans” (Pedersen 2011) is abundant. Unlike lamas, they are regarded as dubious in morality, dangerous and greedy. In contrast, most consider lamas as predictable and perhaps less powerful, but harmless and reliable. While some laypeople feel strongly about choosing a religious specialist of one kind or the other, many are flexible and even forget what specialist they consulted on a past occasion. Religious specialists may also refer clients to one another.¹⁴ Other ritual and religious professionals are less popular, although some locals do consult Russian folk healers (Rus. *babki*), and in Orthodox Christian churches I saw people discuss their problems with priests and offer them donations afterwards. In newspapers and street advertising, one also finds magi and other non-traditional healers, who are overall rather marginal.

Buddhist counseling and “bad” Buddhism

It is in reflecting upon Buddhist counseling that the concerns with “bad”, “utilitarian”, and especially “consumerist” Buddhism in the Post-Soviet religious revival come into focus. On the one hand, Buryat Buddhists, especially those with more “traditional” leanings, consider the sangha as an esteemed authority, so they deem consulting them and following their advice as appropriate and virtuous. To others, the sangha is in some ways only a representative of Buddhism more generally, so conferring with them is like consulting “Buddhism” where one does not have sufficient knowledge and skill for it. On the other hand, both laypeople and lamas often appraise consultations negatively if people over rely on the sangha, approach their interpretation and advice uncritically, and expect to purchase success and fortune rather than exert own thought and effort to achieve them. My interlocutors often spoke about excessive dependence upon lamas in Ulan-Ude. Many, as one critic put it, “summon a lama’s opinion each time before relieving themselves”. Others stressed the “blind faith” involved in consultations where people expect the lama to make the right decision for them or the ritual to effortlessly solve the given issue.

In Ulan-Ude, people relate the prominence of consultations to the socio-economic precarity in the post-Soviet period. With the fall of the Soviet Union, many in Buryatia lost their jobs as factories closed and the economy transformed. Many in the region continue to struggle to make ends meet due to very low wages as well as poor working conditions or job security. It is in this context that laypeople are said to seek extra support to ensure good fortune so needed in the predicament that many are in. Lama Amgalan, for instance, stressed two factors that lead people to frequently visit lamas: the difficult life in post-Soviet Buryatia and the lack of decision-making skills and self-reliance. As he sees it, during the Soviet period, one was cared for and had to make few choices in life. The state made most decisions for people and the life path was clear: school, studies, family, work; most people had similar earnings and lifestyles. In the post-Soviet decades when subsistence is precarious and dependent on one’s skills, background and choices, many are at a loss as they do not have the

¹⁴In a conversation, a shaman told me about how he instructed a client to call a lama to exorcise his new flat. When I asked why he felt that a lama should do it, the shaman saw the question as excessive concern with detail: it did not matter who was to perform it, as long as the person could control the spirits.

skills that determine their livelihood. Hence, Lama Amgalan suggests, people rely on lamas to make decisions and solve problems for them. I often heard similar explanations from my interlocutors in Ulan-Ude, and although they may link socio-economics and religious services too directly, it is indeed questions related to work, income and the vicissitudes of urban life that dominate consultations, especially labor migration, work-related issues, and loans.

Importantly, however, Buddhist consultations bring out mixed feelings in many lay Buddhists precisely because of their close connection with post-Soviet socio-economic uncertainties and the inequalities related to them. One usually remunerates Buddhist counseling by donation, and my interlocutors often stressed that one should be able to pay as much or as little as their financial standing allows.¹⁵ This way, the well-off should give larger remunerations to sustain the lamas and thus enable their poorer co-religionists to access their services. At the same time, many recognized that while in theory the size of donation does not influence the outcome, in practice this is not always the case, and people try to give more if the consultation and its desired effect are especially important. The widespread expectation that larger remunerations will bring better outcomes therefore results in a situation where people who are better-off are also more able to conjure the assistance of the sangha and through it also divine help and more merit.

Such concerns are often referred to as the “commercialization” (Rus. *kommertsializatsiya*) of Buddhism or a “consumerist” (Rus. *potrebitel'skiy*) approach to it. On the part of lamas, this points to money as the guiding motivation in a lama's pursuit, which is not just undesirable but also puts into question his skills and the efficacy of his ritual work (cf. Abrahms-Kavunenko 2015 for similar concerns in Ulaanbaatar). In contrast to such mercantile motivations, most Ulan-Ude Buddhists expect lamas to have chosen the religious path out of a spiritual calling and a wish to help people regardless of any return. On the part of the laity, this critique of “consumerist” Buddhism implies excessive reliance on the sangha and on rituals in order to achieve a desired result—usually without putting in much own effort. That is, instead of religion as a spiritual and cultural pursuit, laypeople in this case are said to use it as a means to achieve their desired end, effectively purchasing ritual support for it. The usual remuneration-cum-donation that follows Buddhist counseling effectively becomes a payment in such instances—deemed inappropriate in the local religious context. Such an approach of the layperson renders not just Buddhist expertise, ritual activities and divine help as commodities, but also the health, well-being and wealth that they bring as goods to be acquired. Consequently, the richer one is, the more benefits one will reap—a predicament far from desirable in the moral economy of post-Soviet Buryat Buddhism.

Such moral economy is of course complex but two of its prominent features are especially relevant here. One is that much of the effort and resources in local social and religious life is aimed at rebuilding Buddhist infrastructures in the post-Soviet period: building temples, sending Buryat

¹⁵The money left after the consultation is usually referred to as a “donation” (Rus. *podnoshenie*). However, when explaining it to me, most laypeople mentioned that it is meant both as a remuneration to the lama and as a donation to the sangha or to a particular temple. I have never heard of anyone attending a consultation just for the sake of donating, thus making merit. At the same time, few suggested that this remuneration was a “payment”, and most felt strongly that it was not a payment for a service.

lamas to Tibetan monasteries, establishing local Buddhist education, cementing religious hierarchies, and so on. As I argued elsewhere (Jonutytė 2019), much of Buddhist giving in the region circulates within this field, which has the rebuilding of Buddhism—albeit variously envisioned by different actors—at its core. As rebuilding Buddhism is a shared undertaking in Buryatia, so should its infrastructures be available to everyone. Many of my interlocutors in Ulan-Ude argued that there should be Buddhist temples throughout the city so that they were accessible to everyone. One even compared them to public toilets as they in her opinion help fulfil something of a basic human need. Local Buddhists also univocally claimed Buddhist counseling should be available to all regardless of their ability to pay. Time and again I heard from both lamas and laypeople that there was no set fee for Buddhist consultations so that even those who are unable to pay anything at all—likely those who most need it—would still be free to make use of it. All in all, then, Buddhism has become a kind of common good in Buryatia that is to be sustained by all but be available to all, too.

In some ways, the Buryat material would seem to lend itself for an “occult economies” kind of reading. The term was coined by Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (1999) to refer to the ways in which local occult, ritual, and magical forms were gaining popularity in postcolonial South Africa and elsewhere around the turn of the millennium (see also Weller 2000, Meyer and Pels 2003). As Comaroff and Comaroff understand it, this was due to the rapid spread of modernity, millennial capitalism, globalization and neoliberalism, and people’s inability to understand the new order, which was both frightening and attractive. The efforts to interpret and subdue the invisible and unpredictable forces led to the perpetuation of occult and ritual, serving also as local critiques of global capitalism.

In contrast, I see the prominence of Buddhist counseling in the post-Soviet period and its corollary discourse of commercialization not as a response to the influx of global economic forces, but as a more general tension between individual and collective well-being, especially the direction of money and other resources towards it. Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (1989) refer to this tension, particularly around money, as the relation between short-term and long-term cycles of exchange. The short-term cycle is associated with economic activities related to individual appropriation, enjoyment and luxury. In contrast, the long-term cycle of exchange refers to the reproduction of the social body and shared values. Parry and Bloch argue that it is not the short-term cycle of exchange itself that is perceived as morally dubious, but its domination over the long-term cycle. Normally, the two are intertwined: individual economic gains are harnessed not just to sustain the individual, but also to be socially productive. However, when the short-term cycle takes precedence, the related economic activities become “morally opprobrious” (ibid: 28).

In Ulan-Ude, debates on “consumerist” Buddhism in consultations in a similar way stem from the conflict between individual gain and collective well-being. On the one hand, it manifests itself in concern with some lamas pursuing own interest over that of the laity, thus propagating “commercialized” Buddhism. On the other hand, this tension is evident in the unease with the well-off laity claiming a larger share of ritual and divine help due to their greater ability to pay. In fact, their attempts to do so are even more disconcerting as they blur the boundary between the common remuneration-cum-donation and the (locally deemed inappropriate) payment for lama’s counseling.

“Bad Buddhism” revisited: Emic and etic notions

It is of little surprise that Buddhists in Ulan-Ude cultivate ideals of what appropriate religious practice consists of, and oppose them to various kinds of “bad” Buddhism. Such appraisals of own religious practice and that of one’s coreligionists exist everywhere, and are oftentimes shared amongst a community. Importantly, however, ideas of what “good” and “bad” Buddhism consists of will vary greatly from one context to another, based, among other things, on the social, political, historical, and economic circumstances. Such ideas are both telling of the local milieu and they are shaping its future as they influence continuously changing religion. Certain evolving forms of religious practice—like Buddhist counseling—can become sites of heightened contestation as they bring out deep lying concerns with fairness, community, and the role of religion.

In Ulan-Ude, appraisals of “bad Buddhism” and “bad Buddhists” cluster around two central tensions. The first one is that around religion, more precisely between what is emically known as “traditional” and “non-traditional” forms of Buddhism. As post-Soviet Buryat Buddhism prominently reemerged in private and public spheres, its various sources are suggesting a great variety of kinds of beliefs, practices, and institutions to practitioners who see themselves as insufficiently knowledgeable about their religion. As Buddhists learn about it and modify their practice along the way, such layered religiosity may at times strike as conflicting. This is especially apparent in local appraisals of Buddhist counseling: it seems desirable as a way to integrate Buddhist advice and ritual into one’s life but is at the same time questionable as it foregrounds divination and ritual over knowledge. It appears virtuous as it relies on Buddhist authority but simultaneously undermines one’s own efforts of spiritual development. Such consultations and their appraisals are thus arenas of negotiating what reemerging religion is to be and what local, historical, and translocal influences are to guide it.

The second tension in the “bad” Buddhism of consultations is that around community, or the accessibility of the common good of Buddhism equally to all its members. Thus, in the context where many are in need of divine help to muddle through hardships in life, access to Buddhist counseling and its rituals is seen by many as an essential resource that should be open for everyone to use. However, as many local Buddhists see it, recent trends of “bad” (“commercialized”, “consumerist”, and the like) Buddhism threaten this access due to both lamas’ and laypeople’s mercantile approach to religion. More broadly, then, discussions of “bad” Buddhism here point also to ideas of fairness and equality within a community, as mediated through religion.

The discussions of “good” and “bad” Buddhism may seem to be expressly local conversations about the reach of religion as well as its efficacy and the morality of mustering divine support. However, local appraisals of religious practice might also be linked with its scholarly valuations. While Buddhists do not necessarily take on these assessments and taxonomies directly or use the exact terms, it is instead more general hierarchies between “great” and “little” traditions (Redfield 1956), or elite discourses versus local practices, that are absorbed into appraisals of actually existing Buddhism. Over the recent years, a number of scholars have reflected upon a substantial part of earlier scholarship on Buddhism as essentially Orientalist and deeply enmeshed in colonial power structures (for instance, Almond 1988, Lopez 2013) as well as in “Protestant presuppositions”

(Schopen 1991). Much of it has been argued to bear a textual bias, and idealize elite and philosophical kinds of Buddhism over Buddhism as practiced in contemporary Asia, or seeing the latter as a degeneration of a more “pure” earlier tradition. And while, as David Gellner (2017: 207) argues, the anthropology of Buddhism has become a “mature field” in a sense that it “can analyze and compare Buddhism in different contexts without immediately becoming embroiled in issues of identity and authenticity”, significant work remains to be done in an effort to do justice to local religious practice while studying Buddhism cross-culturally. This is even more so since scholarly contributions converge with different local and translocal efforts of Buddhist reform, thus having an impact on contemporary understandings and evaluations of Buddhism as it is variously practiced.

So how can one conceptualize Buddhist counseling, taking emic concerns with “bad” Buddhism seriously but without passing valuations onto local practice? In the recent literature, there are two approaches to such lay-specialist interactions. The first one medicalizes the phenomenon. Martin Mills (2003) draws on Arthur Kleinman (1980) and writes of such interactions as a “health care system”, that is, a “series of differential fields of relationships designed to mediate, interpret and ultimately ameliorate illness”, illness being a cultural rather than biomedical experience (Mills 2003: 168). Based on his data from Ladakh, Mills (ibid: 167–175) lists oracles, astrologers and soothsayers, doctors of Tibetan medicine, and monastics as discrete institutions in this health care system. Each of these has a different specialization and divergent interpretations of causes and treatment. Kleinman (2003 [1980]) himself discusses a wide variety of specialists available to potential clients in Taiwan: shamans, diviners, practitioners of Chinese and Western medicine, and others. Some of them deal exclusively with bio-medical problems, while others offer help with a broad range of questions related to social relations and general well-being. To Kleinman, such counseling is nonetheless medical in the widest sense of the term since they “accomplish many of the same ends as do psychotherapy and supportive care” (ibid: 244). While much of Buddhist counseling in Buryatia is related to health care in this broad sense, medicalizing the whole phenomenon seems to me to be of limited use for understanding these lama-lay interactions, so many of which are future-oriented and directed at inter-personal (and inter-being) relations that go far beyond the scope of medicine.¹⁶ I therefore diverge from this literature and call the system “Buddhist counseling” to refer to it as a broader framework of support, advice and help.

The second approach to similar kinds of lay-specialist interactions in Buddhism link the commonplace interactions with religious professionals explicitly with the vicissitudes of the flows of transnational capital (Weller 2000, Taylor 2016, Abrahms-Kavunenko 2018). In some ways, they follow the aforementioned “occult economies” approach to religious practice, treating it as a coping mechanism when facing novel and uncertain situations. While it is of course important to explore the connections between the socio-economic and the religious realms, I think this body of literature does not pay sufficient attention to mediation in these lay-specialist interactions and its corollary valorization of the role of the sangha. Moreover, the focus of this literature lies elsewhere: it asks

¹⁶However, medical comparisons and metaphors are used emically. Buddhism, consultations and rituals are often compared with medications, psychology and psychiatry, doctor’s consultations, healing, etc.

how people engage with capitalism through Buddhist practices rather than how people engage with Buddhism through addressing a wide range of issues in their lives.

In this context, I think it is worthwhile for the scholars of Buddhism to address Buddhist counseling as a specific kind of practice and institution, and ask how its changing forms shape the way that people understand, evaluate, and engage with Buddhism, its moral underpinnings, and its professional representatives. While doing so, however, one must balance the precarious line of taking seriously the local concerns with “bad” forms of Buddhism while also tracing their ties with particular social and historical configurations. As Zoya’s grandson forbids the ethnographer from speaking with “bad” representatives of Buddhism, this provides us with an excellent opportunity to explore “bad” forms of religion in context.

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