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Special Focus: Buddhism and Resilience

Resilience and the Ethics of "Big Mind" Thinking in the Tibetan Diaspora

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Drawing on extensive ethnographic research in Dharamsala, India, this article considers how *sems pa chen po* (vast or spacious mind) can be understood as emblematic of the Tibetan Buddhist view of resilience. The "big mind" view acts as a kind of north star principle, guiding the way, even and especially among those who are struggling. A spacious mind is not merely an outcome, but a pathway, a method, and a horizon, orienting those who are suffering toward recovery. This article explores resilience from a perspective that suffering is inherently workable, and in fact, can be a great teacher. This argument is framed theoretically within an "anthropology of the good," which seeks to understand resilience as moral experience; more aptly explaining what Tibetan Buddhists do in the face of adversity than the dichotomy of trauma/resilience, which is rooted narrowly in a Euro-American view of mental health.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhism; Resilience; Trauma; Lojong

Ani Dechen, a young Tibetan nun, sits on the stoop outside her nunnery in Dharamsala, India, braiding strands of grass as we talk. She explains that if we cannot accept that difficult things happen in our life, we will think in only small-minded ways and will never truly find happiness. "When we can think spaciously," she explains, "we see that all sentient beings are suffering and understand that ultimately our problems and even the self that is having these problems is inherently empty." This sense of a big-mind view—*sems pa chen po*, in Tibetan—encapsulates what I found in my ethnographic research to be the view of resilience among Tibetan Buddhists in exile. Cultivating a spacious mind is not to diminish one's own pain, though it does involve trying to see one's problems (and thus, oneself) as not such a big deal—a view that may initially bristle a Western, trauma-informed sensibility. Yet, as I explain in this article, the notion that pain and suffering are just a part of the human condition seems to strengthen rather than diminish Tibetan Buddhists' capacity to thrive in exile.

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After more than fifty years since its founding, Dharamsala has become home to multiple generations of Tibetan migrants. Tibetans fleeing their homeland arrive to a relatively thriving and stable community where they are free to educate their children in the Tibetan language, practice their religion, seek education, and establish informal businesses. While it is important to note that not all Tibetan individuals may be resilient (and that there may be marked differences across gender, generation, time since migration, and birthplace), this study considers how religious, cultural, and ethical ideals may produce resilience just as structural violence engenders moral injury. Furthermore, I ask whether it may be the case that suffering and resilience can be evoked simultaneously, such that resilience is not seen as the ability to resist or withstand pain. The Tibetan case is instructive in this regard because it demonstrates how communities can train in resilience not in spite of suffering, but because of it, and through it. Indeed, I go so far as to ask: can a person be traumatized in a resilient way, and if so, what might this be like?

Life in Dharamsala

The results of this study on Tibetan Buddhist approaches to resilience are based on extended ethnographic fieldwork I have conducted since 2007, with a continuous fourteen-month period from 2011–2012, during which I lived in the Tibetan area of McLeod Ganj, or "upper Dharamsala," in the state of Himachal Pradesh. While there, I mixed into the fold of everyday life in Dharamsala, drinking tea and cooking meals with neighbors, joining in daily *kora* (*skor ra,* circumambulating around the Dalai Lama's temple and spinning prayer wheels), and participating in political marches and candlelight vigils for Tibet. Although there were common themes related to resilience that emerged across disparate groups, I did not seek consensus across my sample. Instead, I allow the Tibetan exile "community," which is highly diverse, and even disjointed across its mobile population, to stand unresolved on issues where there is divergence. It is important to point out that I do not frame resilience in terms of ahistorical "Buddhist ideals." Rather, this ethnographic work considers how a living Buddhist ethos is articulated and, perhaps, discursively formed in particular socio-historical and political contexts.

Furthermore, not all Tibetans in Dharamsala are Buddhist. Some are Bönpo, Muslim (a very small minority), or not religious at all. As an anthropologist of religion and medicine, I am particularly concerned with the more ordinary and lived aspects of cultural life. And for this project especially, I am interested in the many Tibetans with whom I spoke who do not see themselves as devout Buddhists and yet whose understandings of the nature of mind, morality, and resilience may still be shaped by Buddhist ethics, just as Judeo-Christian ethics can shape the worldview of those decidedly secular. In this study, I did not seek out participants who were especially religious, though my sample was stratified through purposive sampling to include 50 percent laypeople and 50 percent monastics, as I was interested in how formal religious training might shape understanding of resilience.

In addition to extended participant observation, I also conducted eighty semi-structured interviews with a range of people in Dharamsala. This research did not rely on wellbeing scales or other clinical instruments to measure resilience. Rather, my aim was to investigate how Tibetans living in Dharamsala identify and understand resilience from their own view. In this first phase of interviews, I conducted what is known as a cultural domain analysis, which asked interview participants to respond to the following question: *how would you know that even in the face of difficulty, someone is doing okay?* Using a free-listing methodology, participants were asked to list as many items as they could think of which would provide evidence that a person was doing okay (and what they think "doing okay" looks like) despite difficulty. I analyzed responses according to both frequency and salience across the sample. This is where I first encountered the notion of *sems pa chen po*[1] (vast and spacious mind), which seemed to define what it meant to be resilient in this context. Within this same group (N=40), I also asked each person to make a list of three or four difficult situations in their lives. Then, we discussed how they coped with each problem they listed.

In phase 2 of interviews, I used the data I already collected to develop a semi-structured guide to interview another set of Tibetan participants (N=40). The aim of these interviews was to explore in greater depth the practices and processes of resilience in Dharamsala. As with every other aspect of my fieldwork, these interviews were conducted in the Tibetan language. A local research assistant helped to transcribe interviews, and we jointly translated interview transcripts into English to ensure my translation captured the nuance of subtle concepts. This research was approved by the Columbia University IRB, as well as local Indian authorities.

Spacious Mind: A North Star Principle

As I explore below, Tibetan Buddhists in Dharamsala tend not to frame experiences of imprisonment, political violence, and even torture in terms analogous to the biomedical notion of "trauma," that is, a mental illness from which one needs to recover. There is no straightforward linguistic gloss for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), an individually based mental disorder, within Tibetan culture. Instead, practitioners and ordinary citizens alike in Dharamsala deploy shared cultural understandings, often infused with Buddhist doctrine, to reframe the mental distress associated with loss, violence, and displacement. Much of this reframing was in terms of trying to see what had happened and the subsequent distress as a way to cultivate compassion and a means by which to see reality as illusory—in other words, using adversity to attain spiritual realization. Though how explicitly this was stated varied significantly across the sample.

As might be expected, monastics spoke of using adversity "on the path" more directly than laypeople, though not exclusively. Many older lay Tibetans, for example, are deeply devout. Though interestingly, people would rarely speak of their own practice or attainment in terms of, such as, having developed greater compassion, which would be seen as an arrogant claim. Yet, many would give example of *others'* attainment, describing how the most resilient people were those who could transform suffering into an opportunity for spiritual growth. Respondents commonly cited cultural heroes as examples, such as Palden Gyatso, an older monk who was imprisoned for 33 years and famously said that his greatest fear was losing compassion for his captors. While ordinary Tibetans do not easily find this kind of resolve, their admiration of such heroes expressing great compassion and a vast mind demonstrates what those in Dharamsala value most and strive to emulate in times of difficulty.

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[1] Participants expressed this view of a "spacious mind" linguistically, in a number of different ways using both colloquial and more religious terminology. Some participants referred to "*sems pa chen po*," and others used phrases, such as "*sems gu yangs po*" or "*blo rgya chen po*" to discuss the need to keep one's mind open, vast and flexible.

The tendency not to focus too much on one's own situation was encouraged and supported by loved ones who helped those in pain to "think more broadly" about what it means to exist in *samsara.* "Thinking broadly," that is, cultivating a more spacious mind, is both a pathway to and evidence of resilience. My argument is that *sems pa chen po* acts as a kind of north star principle, guiding the way, even among those who are struggling. A spacious mind is not merely an outcome, but a pathway, a method, a view, and a horizon, orienting those who are suffering toward recovery.

But whereas biomedical notions of trauma are tightly woven with the practices of testimony, narrative, and a therapeutic imperative to debrief, many Tibetans insist that talking too much about problems will only make things worse. Many Tibetans who come to India seeking a better life have faced severe oppression and discrimination; some are survivors of torture. But members of this community are reticent to share their personal accounts as ones of chronic suffering. Instead, those living in Dharamsala argue it is best to move on rather than depict details of past horror through debriefing. Elsewhere I have written on a seeming paradox which has emerged given that Tibetan political activists have learned that human rights campaigns are predicated on trauma narratives. Despite claiming that it may be ill-advised to solidify stories of trauma, young activists in particular have learned to engage this foreign genre not for psychological healing but as a political device (Lewis 2019).

As many scholars have shown, "trauma" is a category that is unusually plastic and one that changes dramatically across history and geographic location (Fassin 2009; Hacking 1998; Ticktin 2011). As Finley (2011) demonstrates in her ethnography of PTSD among war veterans in the United States, trauma has become culturally synonymous with a mental disorder—one that importantly is not "found" across the globe. Whereas there are likely biological responses across human (and animal) species in terms of how the nervous system of the body relates to fear, terror, and anxiety, the cultural meanings associated with exposure to threatening events and how one copes after the fact vary widely. As I discuss in this article, whereas the psychologization of Buddhist inspired mindfulness (see Cassaniti 2018; Samuel 2015) has sought to apply meditation for stress reduction in the Global North, the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of what might be called "trauma" is altogether quite different from biomedical notions. Namely, this different understanding suggests exposure to threatening events does not result in a discrete psychiatric disorder from which one must recover with help from a mental health professional. In this article, I am concerned primarily with what an ethics of resilience and recovery looks like in this community.

We might ask, then, is it the case that Tibetans experience ongoing somatic and psychological disturbances analogous to PTSD in the aftermath of displacement, but do not often talk about it? Or is their experience altogether different? And if resilience in the face of political violence and resettlement is not sufficiently defined by the absence of psychological symptoms, such as anxiety, hypervigilance, dissociation, and nightmares, what might it be like? What defines resilience for Tibetans? Furthermore, we might consider what there is to learn about resilience from a culture that thinks about suffering as something that is inherently workable, and in fact, can be a great teacher.

Resilience and the Problem of Trauma

Dr. Dawa, a practitioner of Tibetan medicine or *Sowa Rigpa* (the science of healing) has lived in Dharamsala for nearly thirty years since leaving Tibet. There has been a growing global interest in *Sowa Rigpa*, or traditional Tibetan medicine, but she told me:

> "Although people want to know about the power of Tibetan medicine, foreign researchers do not understand the way the *sems* (mind) works. In *phyi lugs sman* (foreign medicine, or biomedicine), they think you can just take pills, which will do all the work, paying no attention to the patient's state of mind. But medicine becomes more effective if both the patient and the physician are compassionate. The most powerful medicine human beings have at their disposal is the medicine of compassion."

She continued:

> "If a person who practices Buddadharma properly has some difficulties, then they will automatically think that samsara is the ocean of suffering, so of course we will face difficulties. And we understand that when we have problems in this life, it is only the result of *las* (karmic past actions). Therefore, we cannot blame others for our problems. Like this, the advice of Buddadharma is to be selfless and put others before oneself. This is very beneficial. For example, if we are not able to get what we want, we should think, "Oh, no problem," even if others have what we want. Also, when we become unhappy or have problems with the mind, if we can think, "There is no problem," and we don't mind if others are happy. Actually, you can do a little trick in your mind and think, "Oh! I willingly offer these good things to that person." The motivation to think in this way is very positive and it transforms the situation. In our life, the biggest problem we face is desire and attachment. If we cannot get what we want, we have many problems. If we try to be content, then we never have these problems. Others may harm us, and this disturbs the mind. Even if someone is a [Buddhist] practitioner, still, they have problems. So mainly they have to train their minds; there is no way around this."

This kind of training—to think that problems are not really so bad or so solid, to willingly offer happiness to others even when one is struggling—is a radical approach and one that may be off-putting for people in the Global North where assuming the identity of a survivor can often be empowering. From an ultimate point of view, Tibetan Buddhism coaches people to see the illusory nature of samsara and argues the seeming problems within it—and even the "self" who has those problem—only become a source of suffering because of a mistaken outlook. In this way, there is nothing from the outside that causes distress; distress can only come from inside the mind, a notion which Tibetans in Dharamsala seem to experience as empowering. "It is up to you," they say.

Resilience here is not defined as the ability to "bounce back," like a physical material that can withstand brunt force. It is not grit. Instead, those who are most resilient use their vulnerability as a way to deepen compassion. In this way, compassion is both the result of resilience and a method to train in resilience.

During my fieldwork in Dharamsala, I conducted what is known as a cultural domain analysis, a method for identifying particular cultural idioms used to describe a given concept. In this case, I wanted to learn how Tibetans in exile defined resilience. Although I could roughly translate the word "resilience" into the Tibetan language, I did not assume its cultural meaning would be the same as in English. Indeed, the results of the cultural domain analysis revealed that the qualities associated with resilience in Dharamsala are quite different from Euro-American notions, which tend to center around productivity in the face of difficulty (e.g., being productive in work, school, running a household). For Tibetans, resilience comes from how a person *relates* to suffering itself; it is defined by the qualities of spaciousness, openness, a willingness to let go, and flexibility. Rather than processing details of past events, the support that Tibetan refugees give to one another often follows the kind of sensibility found in *lojong* "mind-training," a set of Buddhist teachings that emphasize changing the way you think rather than the external environment.

The key feature of *lojong*-style advice is to shift from criticizing or changing the external situation; instead, the focus is turned inward, seeing one's own mind as the root of suffering (Lewis 2013: 2018). Proponents of mind-training practices argue that suffering results from an inflexible view. Instead, for example, learning to view one's prison guard as someone who may also be a loving father and loyal friend, or as a person who simply needs the job to feed his family, helps one relinquish the suffering caused by enmity. Viewing a situation from multiple vantage points does not deny suffering, but is an example of how to cultivate *sems pa chen po* in moments of pain and hardship.

Trauma in Dharamsala

Many important thinkers within the humanities and social sciences have contributed to a growing literature on the historical and social construction of trauma. Anthropologists in particular have critiqued the universalizing of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), showing how while trauma is taken to be a natural human experience, it is a relatively new concept brought into existence at a particular moment in history (Fassin 2009, 2012; Hacking 1999; Young 1995). But beyond merely articulating the ways that Tibetan categories of distress are different from biomedical ones, I seek to push back against theoretical boundaries by showing how alternative systems of appraisal contribute new possibilities for understanding resilience.

Whereas the experience of trauma survivors in the Global North is articulated and reinforced by biomedicine, the social world of Tibetans encourages those exposed to violence to see past events as impermanent and illusory (Samuel 2015). In Dharamsala, approaches used in Euro-American psychotherapy including debriefing, working-through, or processing past events is not a particularly efficacious ways to manage distress. Many people I interviewed who knew about Western forms of counseling even worried that talking too much about past events might thwart recovery or even cause illness. Trauma as mental disorder is not reinforced here by institutions such as insurance companies, clinics, and psychiatric experts (Fassin 2009; Foucault 1965; Young 1995), and yet, researchers from the Global North continue to investigate rates of post-traumatic stress disorder within the Tibetan diaspora with perhaps unsurprisingly mixed results.

The purported prevalence of PTSD and other psychiatric disorders varies widely across studies of mental illness among Tibetans in exile, ranging from 25% to 70% for anxiety, and 14% to 57% for depression (Crescenzi et al. 2002; Holtz 1998; Keller et al. 1997; Sachs et al. 2008). Assessing PTSD, a specific category of anxiety disorder, proved difficult for researchers, raising questions about its cultural utility. Many of these studies note that Tibetan clinicians themselves challenge the cultural utility of PTSD, further troubling the validity of these studies. There are many prescribed ways of understanding and coping with distress in Dharamsala. However, they are not easily "back-translated" into psychiatric categories. While some biomedically oriented researchers wonder if a type 2 error (a false negative) is at play due to cultural factors, others surmise that Tibetans may indeed have lower rates of psychiatric illness than would be expected.

A number of studies investigate the incidence of *srog rlung*, a diagnostic category of "life-wind" deficiency (Clifford 1994; Millard 2003; Samuel 2005), which is a specific cultural idiom for distress in Tibetan communities. Scholars have written on *rlung* disorders (Adams 1998; Janes 1995; Prost 2006), suggesting that traumatic distress becomes subsumed into this culturally constituted category of illness. *Rlung* is associated with *sems* and if defective, can result in a variety of physical or mental illness (Ozawa de Silva & Ozawa de Silva 2011; Samuel 2001). One is said to be at risk for developing *rlung* disorders if negative emotions are strong, yet *rlung*-related illnesses are not exclusively associated with mental distress.

Within many Tibetan communities, mental illness (*sems kyi na tsha*) may often be attributed to various types of spirit harm from *gdon*, *btsan*, *rgyal po*, or *mamo* (different types of malevolent spirits), for which one needs the help of a lama (Clifford 1994; Samuel 2005). As Schröder found in her work among Tibetan healers in Ladakh, "neither the term 'illness' nor the term 'mental' serves to cover" the interpretations of mental distress (2011: 26). Political prisoners are thought to be at higher risk for *rlung* imbalance; as a result, some researchers equate *rlung* disorders with PTSD. Indeed, some symptoms of *rlung*, such as insomnia, irritability, and anxiety, are also part of the cluster of symptoms that characterize PTSD. Researchers such as Benedict and colleagues therefore deduce that because "the *srog-rlung* diagnosis is nosologically similar to PTSD comorbid with MDD [Major Depressive Disorder] or GAD [Generalized Anxiety Disorder]" (2009: 489), it must be a unique cultural presentation of PTSD (i.e., what is "really" going on). And yet I assert that *rlung* imbalance is not a "trauma" disease.

For instance, although political prisoners are at increased risk, so are students studying for exams and practitioners engaged in intensive religious practices. What all share in common is excessive activity within the mind: mental exertion from studying or strong emotions from witnessing torture are equally plausible conditions for developing a *rlung* disorder. There are also key symptoms of PTSD that would likely not be attributed to *rlung* problems. A patient experiencing bad dreams, intrusive thoughts, and nervousness might be more likely diagnosed as a victim of *gdon* (spirits) affecting the *bla* (life essence). This could be true even among those who had been exposed to a traumatic event. A traumatic experience can make the mind unstable, which puts one at increased risk for spirit harm. Whereas investigating the universality of psychiatric categories is a topic that is of great concern for researchers in mental health, my inquiry is aimed more at illuminating local understandings of resilience.

But such a project leads to somewhat dangerous territory. To complicate matters, scholars must always fight against the long-standing romanticizing of Tibetans as inherently peaceful, serene and altogether spiritual (Lopez 1998; Said 1978). And thus, a study on resilience among this cultural group may be easily misconstrued as Orientalist or naïve in its conception. Furthermore, Tibetans may feel compelled to perform a kind of "selling" of the Buddhist faith to outsiders given that political and financial aid comes from foreign groups with stereotyped expectations of what a Tibetan Buddhist refugee must be like. There were also desires around representation for participants, themselves. As a White cisgender woman from North America, some Tibetans assumed when I told them I might write books or articles about their experiences that this meant I would publish an account of human rights abuses, justifying their need for foreign help in their political campaign. "If you write honestly about how much suffering we faced," one young person said to me, "people in your country will believe you. And then they will help the Tibetan cause." Some seem compelled to convince me that the political oppression they faced was real, using evocative narrative to justify its veracity. In my writing, I try to view the motivations around representation as data unto itself that complicates and enrichens how Tibetan Buddhists interact with a global world.

Trauma, Resilience, and the Anthropology of the Good

Social scientists—perhaps anthropologists in particular—have been somewhat wary of studies on resilience and what has been called "the anthropology of the good" (Mattingly 2010, 2014; Robbins 2013; Throop 2010). To this end, Joel Robbins argues that anthropology in the twenty-first century has been defined largely by its fascination with "the suffering subject," using trauma "as a bridge between cultures" (2013: 453). Political theorists argue that the ubiquity of *resilience* as the concept du jour only further entrenches the neoliberal subject in a "responsibility of vulnerability" endemic to the Anthropocene (Evans and Reid 2014). Social critics reject the notion that individuals should "bounce back from the experience of catastrophe unscathed" (Evans and Reid 2014: 6), which implicates the subject in their own oppression as a failure to withstand the blows of injustice. In other words, if a person cannot bounce back from devastating natural disaster, unemployment, or serious illness, then it is because of their own moral failing (see Adams 2013 and Myers 2015 for ethnographic studies that illustrate this problem).

Although a vigilant focus on inequity and illness may momentarily safeguard against naïve (and sometimes racist) formulations of how oppressed people can withstand pain, it ultimately backs our interlocutors into a narrow corner of marginalization if we disavow resilience. What this article contributes is a case study in how suffering, itself, may be a launching point for the good. Whereas it may feel intuitive that suffering, illness, and pain should be eradicated as quickly as possible, Tibetan Buddhists argue that a willingness to sit with suffering opens a special kind of door to liberation.

Cheryl Mattingly (2010 2014) serves as an intellectual beacon for understanding the good within suffering—or perhaps, the goodness *of* suffering. Her work reveals how people take extraordinary events (murder, incarceration, disability, assault, displacement) and fold it into everyday experience. Through ordinary engagement, Mattingly argues that it is important to learn how suffering "demand[s] a transformative effort to reimagine not only what will happen, but also what ought to happen, or how one ought to respond not only to difficulties and suffering but also to unexpected possibilities" (2014: 5). Whereas concepts like "trauma" and "resilience" are evaluative terms coming from the outside, anthropologists engaged with phenomenological understandings of pain ask us to drop this language of assessment and instead walk directly up to first person experience. Whereas those from the outside slide the experience of Tibetans in exile into familiar registers like "trauma" and "resilience," it is critical to underscore the ways in which such concepts do little to illuminate what pain is like and how it may serve to open transformative doors.

The Path of Resilience in Dharamsala

Dekyi and I walked the *kora (skor ra)* one afternoon in Autumn, the sun finally peeking out behind the clouds after months of monsoon rain. Dekyi, a 60-year old mother of a *tulku (sprul sku)*, had become a good friend, and she seemed to like having a younger person to look after. As we walked, she often told me stories of life back in Tibet, or sometimes about topics she thinks may be related to my research project. Often these stories are different versions of a similar story—a humble, noble person is wronged in some way, and yet through deep Buddhist practice, they ultimately prevail. For example, she said:

> "Usually ex-political prisoners seem very happy and do not exhibit much sorrow; they smile a lot and look radiant. Also, they often sing and recite prayers for most of the day. Some ex-political prisoners when they have difficulties will try to do [mantra] recitation and prostrations to alleviate their mental suffering. For example, from my county, one tulku called Gawochi was arrested and imprisoned for seven or eight years. After his release, we went to meet him at the prison bearing *khatag* (silk scarves for offering). His face was radiant, and his body seemed very light. Later we learned that when he was in prison, he used it as it opportunity to do many prostrations and prayers. For this reason, he was mentally and physically sound during his stay in prison. Some prisoners don't know anything about Buddhism, and when they are tortured, they cannot tolerate the suffering and even commit suicide. I think whether people can cope with problems or not depends on their understanding of Buddhism, particularly how *sems gya* (spacious) their mind is."

As I listened, I thought back to when I first met Dekyi at the Tibetan reception center, where she cried throughout our first interview.

"So, these stories seem to help you," I said simply.

"Yes, we can do our best to look up to these humble people, and follow their example," she said. We continued walking silently, Dekyi holding a *mala* and reciting mantras easily under her breath.

"But what if people cannot live up to this spacious mind," I asked. "What if they struggle a lot and don't feel any compassion at all, like the ones you talked about, the ones who might even commit suicide?"

"What about them?" she asked.

"Well," I tried to explain. "It is not their fault they are imprisoned."

"But it is their karma," she interjected. "It is so important to train our minds towards the Dharma so that we can find it easily in our next lifetime. When our minds are well trained in any difficult situation, we will naturally recall our practice. For people who commit suicide in prison, they probably did not practice very much in their previous lifetime, and now when they need it most, their minds are untrained. But *nying je* (compassion) we should practice on behalf of others and wish that they will train their minds."

"But," I prodded further. "In your own life, when you struggled with losing family members and witnessing violence, how did you feel when it was not easy to find *sems pa chen po*?"

She explained, "I am not a good practitioner, so it is only natural that I have some difficulties. Like when we first met, my mind was very disturbed. My relatives in Dharamsala who helped me when I arrived told me many times, 'don't make yourself sick!' They reminded me and warned me that I should not hold on to anger and agitation. The past is the past. It is good to think like this, and compassion protects the mind. You can take something like anger and wrap it in compassion—compassion for yourself, for others in that same situation, and for all sentient beings. Have you ever tried it, Sara-la? It works." Here, my skepticism or prodding seemed to be read as evidence that I was an outsider who still had much to learn. As well, Dekyi's worry about becoming sick from excessive worry and agitation was echoed across many participants who expressed the ways that over-thinking can result in *rlung* (wind) disorders emblematic of mental dis-ease (see also Jacobson 2007 and Prost 2006, 2008 for discussions on *rlung* disorders in exile). In this way, training the mind serves to orient Tibetans in the diaspora towards simultaneous physical and mental health.

This narrative and others like it reveal the path and north star kind of quality to resilience in this cultural context. Whereas it is not the case that every Tibetan living in the diaspora effortlessly uses the Dharma to awaken *bodhichitta* (awakened heart of enlightenment), but stories like these, show what is valued most. An anthropology of ethics and moral experience helps to elucidate how "the good" is found woven throughout the human experience even when, and perhaps, especially in times of deep pain and loss.

Resilient Trauma?

In my book *Spacious Minds: Trauma and Resilience in Tibetan Buddhism* (Lewis 2019), I propose that there may be such a thing as a resilient trauma response, something that in this context, is mediated through Buddhist praxis. The misnomer conflating of resilience with positivity in Euro-American pop culture reveals the ingrained belief that resilience means a person has overcome, withstood, or resisted adversity. Because Tibetans tend to treat suffering as an ordinary part of life and something that is expected, the notion that difficulty can be *related to* resiliently seemed rather natural from how we view resilience in the Global North. A neighbor, Tenzin, who has a small stall on the side of the road where he sells religious puja items told me:

> "When I first arrived here, I had an audience with the Dalai Lama. I was so happy I cried. But after leaving the reception center, we had to stand up on our own feet. So, there were some problems. I went to Norbulingka [an area about 20 minutes away from Dharamsala] because there was someone there from my county, and he helped a few of us find work as laborers. There is one little company that collects people to clean, work on buildings, or do painting. Sometimes I would sell carpets on the street or do building work. But we got only 100 rupees each day. My two children are in Massouri TCV boarding school, so they need clothes and other things. But we didn't have enough money. Then I started selling Tibetan bread. I would stay up all night making bread so I could sell it in the morning at the temple. This was very difficult to stay up all night. Then I started making vegetable momos instead. We managed to save around 20,000 rupees, so I bought some malas, blessing cords, and *khatags* and set up my stall. Now we are doing okay. But sometimes the Indian police will come and say that we can't sell our things here. They will ask for bribes and will shut us down otherwise. The police will say, "you can't do this" and "you can't do that," but we can't do anything. We also cannot go back to Tibet. Here we don't go hungry because of the kindness of the Dalai Lama. We will never have an empty stomach. When I see the Dalai Lama, I feel very happy. But otherwise, we aren't so happy here. At the same time, we just stay patient and try not to let it affect our peace of mind too much. A person doesn't need happiness all the time."

The sense of equanimity, *btang snyom*, that Tenzin and others discuss is an important aspect of the Tibetan style of resilience. One does not need to act like everything is fine when it is not, but the imperative is to stay patient and not solidify one's thoughts and emotions.

And yet, somehow this attitude runs counter to notions of recovery, resilience, and social justice in the Global North where it is assumed that people should talk, share, debrief, and, importantly, point out injustice. As well, it drums up a dangerous (yet mistaken) idea that individuals are fault if for whatever reason they are not able to find sources of resilience. Instead, I consider how Tibetan Buddhists see an opening for awakening through the doorway of suffering. Instead of forsaking and valiantly resisting pain—bouncing back unscathed—a resilient person is one who is deeply changed and transformed. As resilience research in psychology—which has largely focused on individuals—enters into conversation with community resilience perspectives (Berkes and Ross

2013), it will be critical to understand how the vulnerability of trauma may provide essential cues for social connectedness. From the Tibetan Buddhist point of view, the path to resilience is found and cultivated through interdependence, a sense that all sentient being are joined, through karma, and through community.

Conclusion

This study elucidates the ways in which members of the Tibetan Buddhist diaspora understand resilience in a context of violence, oppression, and rapid social change; it does not suggest that Tibetans are more resilient than other cultural groups, but rather it reveals an alternative system of trauma appraisal and a highly developed approach for relating to distress, which they see as inevitable in *samsara*. The approach to trauma appraisal and resilience in Dharamsala reveals a unique perspective on how to think about suffering. Seeing the world as flexible and illusory, member of this diaspora community try to understand their difficulties as fleeting and not particularly special. Likewise, compassion, the wish for others to be well and happy, provides something outside oneself on which to focus, which people in Dharamsala see as integral for healthy coping. This ethnographic work may also bring to light the historically specific and situated ways that Buddhist ideals are filtered and refashioned in a given sociopolitical context.

Friends and relatives encourage one another to swiftly "move on" from negative emotions. This might be called repression in the West, but in Dharamsala this sensibility is connected to what is known as broad thinking and being in touch with reality (that is, a view of emptiness). Such approaches to meeting life's challenges are deeply inscribed with religious and cultural wisdom within the Tibetan diaspora. As Norbu explained:

> "The people who come to India through Nepal experience a lot of hardships and difficulties. They have to cross many high mountains in their journey to India and are in constant fear of arrest by the border police. We also don't have enough food and drink. Secondly, Tibetans inside Tibet don't have any human rights or freedom of religion and culture. For example, you don't have the right to keep photos of the Dalai Lama and Karmapa. In general, we keep these photos very secretly. When the Chinese government comes to inspect our houses, we take down the photos and hide them in a box. Tibetans have a very unique culture. The kindness and advice of Buddhism helps us to avoid hurting any others. It teaches us to be patient even in the face of adversity; this is our habit—being patient with problems. Also, I think since Tibetans are innocent, we are proud to struggle for our freedom since it is truth. Secondly, those who experience many difficulties, such as Tibetans, become accustomed to bearing hardship. Thirdly, the Dalai Lama gives good advice through his teachings, helping us to keep our hope strong."

This sense of patience connects to the Tibetan Buddhist view of resilience in that it not only helps practitioners to stay with their own experience, but to think broadly about all the other beings in this world who are also suffering.

Many Tibetans living in Dharamsala do not consider themselves particularly religious, and yet cultural concepts of health and healing are shaped by Buddhist concepts to such a degree that it is impossible to divorce Tibetan medicine from religion (Adams 2001; Ozawa-de Silva and Ozawa-de Silva 2011). When community members in Dharamsala use compassion as a method for cultivating resilience, they do not do so, necessarily, with the aim of being a good Buddhist, but rather, as an efficacious way of managing suffering—something that one ought to do in the face of difficulty. Buddhist principles guide Tibetan action and thoughts regardless of whether one is religious.

Clinical researchers like Bessel van der Kolk (2014) and Mark Wolynn (2017) have written award winning books that are emblematic of how new scientific research on trauma has permeated the cultural zeitgeist. These works detail the neurobiological effects of trauma, including the ways that maladaptive stress responses may be passed down from generation to generation. We might also consider that the biological and social inheritance of trauma may not be wholly negative (Levine 2018) and is always historically and culturally shaped (Desjarlais 1995). When Rachel Yehuda speaks of her research on the epigenetics of trauma, she argues that trauma is simply something that changes you. And not necessarily for the worse. She says, "when something cataclysmic happens, people say, I am changed. I am not the same person I once was" (Yehuda 2015). In this same vein, the Tibetan moral framing of *sems pa chen po* teaches that pain and suffering can be a great teacher—that is, it is not only workable, but from a bigger perspective, it may actually shape the path to enlightenment.

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