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Special Focus: Buddhism and Young People

Youth Buddhism: The Centrality of "Youth" in Modern Buddhism

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Throughout this article, I propose the term "Youth Buddhism" in order to bring out an underdeveloped field of study—of Buddhism and youth—and to emphasize the instrumental role that youth play as both an imagined problem for religions as well as the central protagonists for Buddhist revitalization projects. Taking the case of Buddhism in Ladakh, India, social and religious leaders often proclaim their concern over the perceived lack of interest in Buddhism among youth. However, in taking a closer look at Ladakhi Buddhist youth engagement, a number of important developments appear. Examining Buddhist "youth," both the persons who self-identify as youth and the social category of "youth," I argue, becomes a particularly fruitful analytical optic through which to analyze the various regional, national, and global dynamics which current developments in Buddhism are contingent upon.

Keywords: contemporary Buddhism; modern Buddhism; Buddhist youth; Ladakh; Indian Buddhism

Throughout the past few decades, the Northwest Indian Himalayan region of Ladakh has undergone a rapid modernization process in which its land-based economy dependent on agriculture, animal husbandry, and trade has transformed primarily to a cash-based economy with the lucrative tourism industry, government employment, and army as the main sources of income. Many Ladakhi families benefitting from this economic development have invested their surplus income in building larger homes, establishing businesses, and, increasingly, paying for their children's education. While education facilities have greatly improved in Ladakh, higher education facilities have not met the education standards needed to procure professional employment and the accompanying benefits and prestige. This has led to a significant outmigration of Ladakhi youth to prestigious universities throughout India (Williams-Oerberg 2015). These youth spend their formative young adult lives away from their homes and families, while being introduced to a new way of life amidst the Indian mainstream. At the same time, an evaluation and reflexivity considering the extent of the changes ushered in by these returning students, along with more general changes related to the economic and social development in the region, highlights an

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ambiguity and concern that the changes occurring are not completely for the better. This ambiguity was highlighted in the "Ladakh 2025 Vision Document," a document produced by the local autonomous government, which states: "As new lifestyles, practices and social mores enter the Ladakhi community against a backdrop of centuries' old indigenous traditions and culture, uncertainty and confusion reign supreme in the minds of the region's local populace" (Ladakh Autonomous Hill District (LAHDC) 2005: 1).

Within this backdrop of modernization and ambiguity, there exists a concurrent concern about the survival of Buddhism. A dismal image of Buddhism under pressure and in threat of extinction has become a frequent lament among Buddhist monastics and lay Ladakhis alike—mostly due to the seeming disinterest among modernized youth in furthering and transmitting traditional Buddhist practices to future generations. The "disinterested youth" is a frequent visitor in popular discourse related to youth and Buddhism, especially among advocates who paint the "Age of Degeneration" cosmological scenario invoked by social and religious leaders. Observations such as the following expressed by the late Kushok Bakula Rinpoche (1917–2003)[1] during an interview about his long career as a political and religious leader in Ladakh have become common:

> The change in the attitude and behaviour among our people has saddened me. Ladakh is slowly losing touch with its past. It is extremely important to strike a balance between modernity and tradition. No country, big or small, can survive and protect its identity if it fails to preserve its own culture and traditions. . . . We need to understand the proper meaning of development and should not get carried away by the *glitter of a modern life style*. We should feel proud about our own cultures and our values. In the new millennium, I would like to caution our *young people* and ask them to reflect on the changing trends and their effects in our society [emphasis added] ("Interview with Bakula Rinpoche 2001").

During this same interview, the interviewer followed up with the question: "There is an increasing disinterest among the new generation of Ladakhis (*especially educated ones*) towards traditional Buddhism (*Ska Skurim*). They identify Buddhism only with the performing rituals, chanting mantras and wearing protective threads or ribbons. Would you like to comment?" [emphasis added] (ibid.). Bakula Rinpoche in his response stated: "This alienation has developed mainly because our people, *particularly the youth*, are not in touch with our traditions and culture. This has devastating effects not only on their development but also on society in general" [emphasis added] (ibid.). As Bakula Rinpoche, his interviewer, and others have observed, traditional forms of religion and religious practice do not seem to attract the attention of youth, which could quite possibly lead to "devastating effects" for Buddhist Ladakh.

[1] The 19th Bakula Lobzang Thupstan Chognor was a prominent monk who played a significant role in the political, social, and educational transformations taking place in Ladakh since India's independence as a minister in the Jammu and Kashmir Government, the first Member of Parliament from Ladakh, a Member of the National Commission on Minorities, and India's ambassador to Mongolia.

With the absence of more recognizable and outward signs of religiosity, such as visiting monasteries, performing rituals, and chanting mantras, the older generations have generally assumed youth are not interested in religion, in their culture and traditions; thus, there exists a looming threat towards the survival of Buddhism, culture, and tradition in Ladakh. Moreover, as the interviewer emphasized, it is "especially the educated ones," the educated youth, who pose the biggest threat. This sentiment was also expressed by the Ladakhi Buddhist commentator Sonam Wangchuk (2007: 255):

> The youth of Ladakh are drawing away from the traditional way of life. In this modern society, the traditional beliefs which have supported early Buddhism are gradually threatened. Furthermore, it is not only Ladakhi youth in general, but especially those Ladakhi youth who migrate away from Ladakh to pursue an education who are particularly at risk for being out of touch with their traditions and culture.

As Wangchuk highlighted, Ladakhi youth who leave for the sake of education pose the biggest threat to the survival of Buddhism in the region. The disinterest among youth has been especially exemplified by their engagement with "new lifestyles, practices and social mores" and the "glitter of a modern lifestyle." In these portrayals, "youth," especially educated youth, are to blame for this dismal picture of the imagined future of Buddhism in Ladakh.

Hence, educated Buddhist youth are placed at the center of debates surrounding processes of modernization. The state of decay and loss, and possible threats to the survival of cultures, traditions, and religions, positions youth at the vortex of discourse and action aimed towards preservation, revitalization, and reformation. As the scenario of a "Buddhism in crisis" has been clearly painted by Buddhist Ladakhis, this emphasis on threat and fragility helps to position Buddhism within a context which demands attention—from youth, political, and social leaders, as well as attracting the interest from outside patrons. In the case of Ladakh, political leaders have built their election campaigns upon platforms that portray Buddhist youth as swaying away from their culture and tradition in favor of "westernization" and "Indianization," painting a dismal future for Ladakhi Buddhists that only strong political leaders such as themselves can remedy. Depictions of glorified pasts and doomed futures enact a structural nostalgia as a "moral ploy" (Herzfeld 2005: 152) that helps to further political and religious agendas, often disparaging youth in the process. In Ladakh, political and religious leaders stress the importance of delineating a distinct Buddhist Ladakhi identity in the face of perceived threats as a religious and ethnic minority in India. Emphasizing how Buddhist youth are disinterested in their culture and tradition has garnered significant resources—political and economic—for strengthening and expanding the presence and reach of Ladakhi Buddhist institutions.

"Youth Buddhism" pays attention to the crucial role that "youth" play within debates concerning the future of religions when encountering modernization projects. Considering "Youth Buddhism" as a distinct approach to researching Buddhism and modernity first came to light when I

embarked on over one year of ethnographic fieldwork among Ladakhi Buddhist[2] youth in India during the years 2011–2012. Throughout this research, I focused on youth who migrated away from Ladakh to pursue a higher education in prestigious universities in North India. I sought to understand how Ladakhi Buddhist youth negotiated their relation to Buddhism and modernity in an urban, cosmopolitan environment while away from their families and familiar environment in Ladakh. I focused on these youth for three reasons: 1) It was particularly these youth who were undergoing an intensified modernization process through not only their pursuits of a modern, higher education, but also through their introduction to modern/Western lifestyles in urban settings such as Delhi; 2) It was these youth who were imagined as the future leaders of Ladakh based on the skills and degrees they obtained while studying in various education hubs throughout India; 3) It was also these youth who were thought to be the least interested in Buddhism and consequently posed a threat to the survival and preservation of a distinct Ladakhi Buddhist culture and identity. Through long-term, multi-site ethnographic fieldwork in Delhi and Ladakh, along with shorter visits to other Ladakhi student migrant locations, I engaged in participant observation, informal and formal interviews, with over one hundred recorded interviews with youth, as well as social, religious, and political leaders of Ladakh. For the past nine years, I have also engaged in ongoing, extensive social media research, as well as returned to Ladakh multiple times, as recently as 2019.

Based on this research, I present the case of "youth Buddhism" in Ladakh to highlight how youth play a vital role in the revitalization and reformation of Buddhism. I urge scholars to pay attention to youth within the study of religious transformations and encounters with modernity to recognize and emphasize the instrumental role that youth play, both as an imagined "problem" for religions, as well as the central protagonists for reformation and revitalization projects. I propose the term "Youth Buddhism" in order to bring out an underdeveloped field of study—of Buddhism and youth—and to emphasize the specific encounters that youth experience that shape not only their personal understandings and practices of Buddhism, but the ways in which Buddhism is considered and practiced in the contemporary world. Examining Buddhist "youth," both the persons who self-identify as youth and the social category of "youth," I argue, becomes a particularly fruitful analytical optic through which to analyze the various regional, national, and global dynamics upon which developments in Buddhism have been contingent.

"Youth"

In the field of youth studies, "youth" as a category has moved beyond merely denoting the age or life phase of research participants. Deborah Durham (2004) suggests understanding the term "youth" as a "social shifter," as an indexical term which refers to more than the persons and their relations as assumed. In this manner, the social category of "youth" brings attention to the conditions of power, rights, expectations, and relationships, and indexes both youth and the social landscape itself.

[2] Because my research has dealt with Buddhist youth in Ladakh, I have primarily focused on the Leh district of Ladakh, although many of my interlocutors were Muslims from both Leh and Kargil, as well as Buddhists from the Kargil district.

Furthermore, "youth" is both "social being" and "social becoming"— "a position in movement" which is shaped by larger societal processes (Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006: 11; see also Langevang 2007). The manner in which the social category of "youth" becomes invoked at specific junctures in history has the power to illuminate wider social impacts and greater concerns, especially regarding temporalities—the imagined future of societies and religions in comparison with imagined pasts.

The social category of "youth" itself is considered to be a modern construct, coming into existence simultaneously with modernity in the sixteenth century in Europe (Ariès 1978: 37–40). Youth in various contexts, have been released from traditional family enterprises as they entered new public arenas, such as the school, factory, workplace, etc., exposing youth to ideas and lifestyles that differ significantly from those of their parents. With the increasing emphasis placed on education and young people leaving home to search for educational and labor opportunities in urban areas, new parameters have been set as to specific youth practices and lifestyles. Youth as a social category particularly apt to usher in the modern and global is part of socio-historical constructions that position youth in alignment with the new and modern in contrast to older generations who tend to be aligned with the traditional and old-fashioned. Youth often signify contradiction and a "mythic bipolarity" in which they personify the "failure of moral reproduction" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006: 273) as they disregard the old in favor of the new.

Modern Buddhist "Youth"

In academic studies of Buddhism and its encounters with modernity, including efforts to preserve, revitalize, and reform Buddhism, youth have often been at the center either of concern from adults or as the agents of change. Accounts of Buddhism and modernity have mentioned the role that youth have played, especially regarding modern Buddhist movements throughout Asia, such as the Young Men's Buddhist Associations (YMBA) in Kalimpong and Darjeeling in the 1930s-1960s (Bhutia 2016); colonial Myanmar in the 1920s and 1930s (Jang 2010; Ramstedt 2014; Schober 2017); Japan in the 1920s (Snodgrass 2009), and Nepal among Newar Buddhists in the 1950s (von Rospatt 2012). However, scholars have rarely addressed the particularities of youth involvement in these modern and global movements. Comments about youth are frequently found, such as "Not surprisingly, Buddhist reformers and "revivalists" often belonged to a younger generation…" (DeVido 2009: 423), yet with little follow-up discussion as to why that might be the case. Robert P. Weller (2007:27), moreover, explains the formation of the Buddhist humanitarian Ciji youth camps in Taiwan as "designed to transform youngsters from self-absorbed and amoral people to ascetic, mindful and civilized members of the movement" without providing a discussion as to how "youngsters" might be "amoral" or "self-absorbed." Many leaders of reform Buddhist movements found their motivation among their assumptions about the lack of interest among youth in Buddhism. For example, S. G. Covell (2004: 262) writes about the Buddhist reformer Hagami in Japan who "repeatedly notes with trepidation that youth today are overly materialistic, divorced from a religious moral base, and disrespectful of the traditions that once provided the foundation for Japanese moral character." Where "youth" has been invoked as a category of concern or movement towards change within

various contexts of Buddhism in Asia and beyond, rarely is the condition of being young at specific conjunctures of history and socio-economic transformations investigated.

While youth have rarely been studied as the central point from which to examine the conjunctures of Buddhism and modernity, youth in many regards are often central to negotiating continuity and change. With the socio-economic changes occurring in Asian societies, such as Ladakh, youth are perhaps the most affected by these changes. I argue for the necessity of taking youth as a lens through which to analyze societal changes and transformations within processes of modernization that affect the ways that Buddhism is negotiated in the contemporary, modern world. As Durham (2000) argues: "To pay attention to youth is to pay close attention to the topology of the social landscape–to power and agency" (112). As the above discussion illuminates, imagined temporalities play a significant role in youth-focused discourse in which hopes, fears, and desires are produced. Similar to what has been observed in other places, the trope of the "vanishing culture" results in perceptions of loss and a "crisis of transmission" in which youth no longer become the carriers of tradition (Berliner 2005: 576). The "structural nostalgia" (Herzfeld 1990, 2005) of a glorified past aids in producing lament about a moral decay which positions youth as reckless inventers rather than careful transmitters. However, the "trope of the vanishing," I argue, positions Buddhism in a state of crisis and the survival of culture and tradition at risk, yet obscures youth initiatives and efforts to preserve and promote their religion.

Youth, Secularism, and Modernity

Assumptions about youth and religion tend to take youth disinterest at face value without investigating further as to why and how this might be the case. In sociological studies of religion and youth, statistics point towards the lack of participation of youth in attending churches or temples, and other religious services and activities. These studies emphasize not only a lack of participation, but a more generalized lack of interest among youth in matters pertaining to the religious (Collins-Mayo and Dandelion 2010; Lefebvre and Chakravarty 2010; Mason, Singleton, and Webber 2010). Secularization in a narrow sense of the term is often thought to be a main cause of youth disinterest and generally refers to a decline in membership and attendance in churches and temples, a marginalization of religious institutions from public life, and a dominance of rationalism and science which undermines religious beliefs (Turner 2011: 11). The secular most often entails the absence, removal, replacement, or control of religion (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen 2011). However, while secularism is often defined in the negative sense as a residual category, or what is left after religion leaves the room, it is by no means a neutral term (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen 2011: 5; Casanova 2011: 55). A lack of belief in religion has come to assume the position of the natural human condition, accompanying postulations that with increasing modernization a progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices will occur (Casanova 2011: 57). As Casanova puts it, "To be secular means to be modern, and therefore, by implication, to be religious means to be somehow not yet fully modern" (Casanova 2011: 59). In this sense, it becomes difficult to be both modern and religious in societies undergoing intensified modernization processes. While the secularization thesis has long been debated and in some cases debunked (see Berger 2012), in popular

discourse remnants can still be found in which to be “modern” is equivalent to “secular,” i.e., non-religious, and particularly manifests in the “disinterested modern youth” trope related to religion and modernity.

Within the context of post-colonial India, secularism has taken on a slightly different meaning beyond the absence or decline of religion. With the foundation of India and the communal violence that occurred between Hindus and Muslims, Jawaharlal Nehru envisioned secularism as a “pillar of modernity” (Calhoun et al. 2011:6) and a key to overcoming communal conflicts and violence. However, this vision for a modern, secular nation did not promote the removal of religion from the public sphere, but rather the equal treatment of all religions in India (see Calhoun et al. 2011; Van der Veer 2002; Gayley and Willock 2016). “Humanism,” or treating all human beings as equal and not prioritizing one community over the other, has been a founding element of this vision of secularism. Education has been a crucial platform for promoting this vision of secular humanism, which recognizes religious diversity yet does not promote one religion above another. After gaining Independence, “secular” education was substantiated by the Indian constitution, which stipulated that no religious instruction can be provided by any educational institution (Malikail 1973: 446). At the same time, promoting “moral education” as a means to counteract the negative effects of “modern education” has been an ongoing project since the struggle for Independence. The colonial “modern education” disregarded indigenous forms of knowledge as well as removed religion from education instruction due to the growing influence of Christian missionaries (Arvind 2011: 484; Malikail 1973: 446; Viswanathan 1988: 86). “Moral education” has been envisioned by various education commissions in India, most notably the 1964–1965 commission headed by Prof. D.S. Kothari, as a form of indigenous education promoting “social, moral and spiritual values” not founded in a specific religious ethical tradition (Goyal 1979: 1). However, creating a basis for “moral education” not founded in religious ethics has proven challenging. Many education institutions, such as Delhi University, have called upon the expertise of the Dalai Lama and his promotion of “secular ethics” as a form of neutral, non-religious ethics (Williams-Oerberg 2014). For those familiar with Buddhist ethics, however, one can clearly identify a distinct form of Buddhist ethics, which emphasizes the importance of compassion and the interdependence of all phenomena (see also Gayley and Willock 2016: 15).

In considering “local articulations of the secular” (Gayley and Willock 2016) in Ladakh, secularist ideals in India which do not allow for privileging one religion over another poses a threat to a distinct communal identity which rests on religious identification. When the elder generations in Buddhist Ladakh invoke the “disinterested youth” paradigm, they do so in an attempt to draw attention to how youth are not interested in preserving Ladakhi Buddhist culture, tradition and religion, but also in an effort to solidify a distinct religious identification. Ladakh is a Union Territory of India and consists of two regions: Leh district with a Buddhist majority and Muslim minority, and Kargil district with a Muslim majority and Buddhist minority. With the increasing Muslim population in Ladakh, as well as the struggles Ladakhis face for gaining rights and recognition as an ethnic and religious minority in India, upholding a distinct religious identification has been of utmost importance for Ladakhi Buddhist leaders. Modern education poses a threat to preserving a distinct

Ladakhi Buddhist identity through the imagined "westernization" or "Indianization" of Ladakhi youth. As a consequence, moral education has also been promoted in Ladakh as a means to counterbalance the perceived negative impact of modern education. "Modern education" has become equivalent to "Indianization" and "westernization" in Ladakhi public discourse in which the education that Ladakhis undergo, in Hindi, Urdu and English, does not resound with Ladakhi cultural and moral understandings. Standardized education in India has meant that "indigenous" knowledge must be taught outside of the classroom. Moral education among minority communities in India has become equivalent with "indigenous knowledge" and a means to counteract the "Hindu bias of the Hindi syllabus" (Froerer 2007: 1067–1068). In contrast to how moral education was envisioned in post-colonial India as an ecumenical ethics not favoring one religion over the other, moral education in Buddhist Ladakh is clearly founded on Buddhist ethics, and becomes a slightly veiled attempt to teach Buddhism in public education institutions (Williams-Oerberg 2014).

Taking "youth" as the focus for analyzing modern and contemporary contexts within which Buddhists must negotiate reveals a complexity that might otherwise be overlooked or oversimplified by taking youth disinterest and immorality for granted. The case of how Ladakhi Buddhists must negotiate preserving a Ladakhi Buddhist identification as an ethnic and religious minority in India shows how education has played a crucial role not only in ushering in modernization and social change, but also in debates about the future of ethnic and religious communities, cultural preservation, and religious versus secular education and ethics. Throughout the following, I present the case for focusing on youth within research on modern and contemporary Buddhism. I argue youth-centered research helps to reveal common misconceptions about Buddhist youth, such as being "amoral," "self-absorbed," and disinterested in religion, but also illuminates how the social category of "youth" has been mobilized among social, political, and religious leaders to protect and reform Buddhism. The concept "Youth Buddhism" focuses the discussion on Buddhism and modernity to address key youth-related aspects involved in Buddhist revitalization efforts, while also highlighting generational continuity. A number of scholars have used the term "New Buddhism" to denote recognizable changes occurring among contemporary, global Buddhist movements (see Coleman 2001). However, while modernity, and along with it "new," often denotes a break from the past, the changes and transformations taking place within contemporary Buddhist organizations, I argue, are a continuation and transformation of older forms and approaches towards practice. Rather than emphasizing how youth engage with Buddhism in radically "new" ways, which disregard the historical transmission and lineage of Buddhist practices and understandings, quite often on closer inspection a continuation of older practices and understandings can be found. For example, while new media technologies have been integrated in Buddhist practice, such as social media platforms, these frequently take on established forms of practice albeit in a new format (see Grieve and Veidlinger 2014). Youth Buddhism helps to recognize generational continuity as well as change, while also focusing on how the social category of "youth" often becomes invoked as a central point of contention and instigator for reformation movements among Buddhists amid contexts of increased modernization and globalization.

Ladakhi Youth Buddhism

In contrast to how modern educated youth have been depicted in Ladakh as disinterested in their culture and religion, I quickly discovered the opposite to be true: Ladakhi Buddhist youth pursuing a prestigious higher education in Delhi—those encountering more intensified processes of "westernization" and "Indianization"—were indeed very interested in learning more about their culture and tradition, and about Buddhism. Measuring religious engagement among youth is of course difficult, yet through participant observation and interviews it became clear that many if not most young Ladakhi Buddhists I interacted with engaged in regular Buddhist practices, of various approaches and styles. By far the vast majority of the few hundred Ladakhi youth I met in person and online proclaimed Buddhism to play an important role in their lives, as well as an interest in learning more about Buddhism. During my research in 2011–2012, a number of youth-initiated Buddhist groups became established. One of these, Flowering Dharma, was formed with the express purpose of helping students in Delhi to learn more about Buddhism and promoting "moral education" to combat the negative effects of "modern education." They arranged monthly full-moon gatherings where students met at the Ladakh Budh Vihar temple complex in Delhi to light butter lamps under a Bodhi tree behind the temple. After the butter lamp lighting ceremony, they gathered in the library at the temple complex and discussed about Buddhism. In contrast to situations where learning about Buddhism typically takes place, such as in a temple with a learned monk sitting on a raised throne expounding on the tenets of Buddhism, these students emphasized the importance of dialogue, discussion, and debate in their efforts to learn more about Buddhism. Many of the issues they discussed regarded how to fit their understandings of Buddhism into their everyday Indian student lives. For example: they debated whether or not karma exists; how Buddhist epistemology might fit with scientific concepts they learned in their classes; and how meditation might help reduce the stress, anxiety, and depression they felt while under pressure to do well on their exams. They also integrated social media into their organization as a main platform to continue these conversations beyond the monthly full moon, face-to-face meetings. At its height, the Flowering Dharma Facebook group had over seven thousand followers and a large international reach with Buddhists from Vietnam, South America, and Europe participating in online discussions and debate.

Other Buddhist youth groups formed in order to support students in their search for knowledge about Buddhism, and to support their community and identification as a religious minority in India. The summer was an active time for Buddhist youth organizations in Ladakh as Ladakhi youth who migrated away for higher education would return home during the break. Summer became an important window to teach these youth about Buddhism and provide a "moral education" so that they may understand more about their culture and tradition after spending so much time away from Ladakh, thus helping to solidify their identification as a *Buddhist* Ladakhi. The Ladakh Buddhist Association youth wing ran a monastery guide training during the summer in order to teach students about Buddhism along with a detailed history of the more frequently visited monasteries in Ladakh. Other lay Buddhist youth organizations in Ladakh include the Young Drukpa Association, the Mahabodhi International Meditation Center youth group, Socially Engaged Buddhists of Ladakh (SEBOL), and the International Fellowship of Buddhist Youth Ladakh (IFBYL).

Concerned adults who saw the importance of transmitting knowledge about Buddhism to youth in order to ensure the survival of Buddhism formed many of these groups. These efforts were mostly lay-run and initiated, however, some religious leaders recognized the importance of focusing on Ladakhi youth and teaching them about Buddhism, mostly as a counter-weight to balance out the "Buddhism in crisis" and "disinterested youth" scenario painted in Ladakh. For example, the Dalai Lama on a few of his visits held a special audience and teaching session with Ladakh youth in an effort to turn their attention towards Buddhism. Some monastic leaders, such as Choegon Rinoche, Thuksey Rinpoche, Geshe Dorji Damdul and Khenpo Rangdrol, held widely attended seminars for Ladakh Buddhist youth in their educational migration locations, such as Delhi, Jammu, and Chandigarh. These seminars ran with titles such as "Buddhism in the 21st century" in order to draw the attention of "disinterested youth" with a catchy title, which did not necessarily fulfill the promise of offering a reformed Buddhism aligned with the contemporary condition of the twenty-first century.

While Ladakhi Buddhist youth widely proclaimed their interest in Buddhism, the majority of the elder generations did not always recognize their interest and engagement. Sitting together with members of the Ladakhi student union on the lawns of the Delhi University, our discussion turned to how parents and the elder generations view Ladakhi youth, especially those who live in Delhi. Nawang,[3] who had completed his studies a number of years previously and was living in Delhi working for a travel agency, sat in during the discussion and offered his reflections:

> I mean, generally, yes, they [parents] worry a bit. Obviously, most of the year they [students] stay in a different community, like Delhi. But, I think, the root is so strong in most of the Ladakhi students, so there is not much to worry about. It's like the meaning of Buddhism is now slowly changing. I mean the definition of the term called Buddhism is changing. The youngsters might have a different definition of the term called Buddhism. They believe more in practical jobs, like doing it more practically, doing meaningful things. And then, our parents form the perception that Buddhism would be involving a religious act, being involved in the small things that happen in the community. And, when they see the students are not participating, they see it as a symptom or a sign that, yes, they are slowly and gradually losing interest in Buddhism, which is, I think it is not [the case]. I mean, they have this Buddhism very strongly in everybody. . . . Visibly they might not look like, some, they don't seem to be that interested, but in majority, 90% I can say for sure, that yes, the Buddhism, the root or whatever cause, knowledge, or whatever, is intact.[4]

Nawang placed his finger on a key misunderstanding about Ladakhi youth, especially those who leave Ladakh for higher education: while elder Ladakhis observe youth not engaging in "the religious act" or the "small things happening in the community," they assume that they are not interested in Buddhism. However, as Nawang observed, students *are* interested in Buddhism, "the root is intact," but in a different way: the "meaning of Buddhism is changing." One of the ways in which the

[3] All names of interlocutors appearing in this article have been changed in order to protect their identity.
[4] Recorded group interview, Delhi, March 7, 2011.

"meaning" was changing included an emphasis on "practical jobs" and defining Buddhism within a socially engaged Buddhist framework, which focuses on "social work," "doing more meaningful things," and helping to improve society to benefit all sentient beings, not just Buddhists (see Williams-Oerberg 2014; 2020). For example, students were often engaged in helping other students enroll in their education programs and become comfortable with their new surroundings in Delhi; they ran blood drives to help support the Ladakhi patients who were flown to Delhi for emergency medical procedures; and they ran clean-up campaigns around the Ladakh Budh Vihar temple area and around Ladakh. All of these so-called "social work" efforts were ways in which youth understood the "meaning" of Buddhism and the compassionate aim of helping all sentient beings. Ladakhi Buddhist youth often stressed the importance of "humanism"—of helping all sentient beings, not just one's community. Witnessing and experiencing the negative ramifications of communalism in Ladakh between Buddhists and Muslims, and between Hindus and Muslims in India more generally, their social engagement was also an effort to go beyond focusing on one's own community and instead focus on "being human" as an important Buddhist practice. The so-called "moral education" that Ladakhi youth promoted, such as in Flowering Dharma, was less of an effort to solidify Ladakhi Buddhist identification as distinct from Muslims and Hindus, and more to do with preserving Buddhist culture, traditions, and knowledge. The elder generations, however, did not recognize these actions as Buddhist practice, as they were used to recognizing daily ritual practice such as making offerings or going to the temple to participate in large communal rituals as key Buddhist practices.

Young Buddhist Knowing

In conversations with educated youth, changes in the "meaning of Buddhism" seemed to be based primarily on a search for knowledge and personal engagement with Buddhism rather than protection through rituals. Many Ladakhi youth expressed having a more "rational approach" in their understandings of Buddhism compared to their parents. They emphasized knowing the purpose and benefit of performing rituals before engaging in the practice of these rituals. Drolma summed it all up in one illuminating statement: "The parents are *practicing* more; the students are *knowing* more" (group interview, DU campus, March 14, 2011). Being positioned as modern, rational young persons did not seem to allow space for belief in abstract deities and what they considered to be superstition in the so-called "traditional approach" of their parents, which is difficult to understand from a rational point of view. Young Ladakhis often openly rejected what they regarded as superstitious ritual elements, perceiving their parents as practicing merely out of blind faith. However, few students seemed to deny or reject requests from their parents or grandparents to perform daily Buddhist rituals. Ladakhi youth dutifully performed these ritual practices, such as making offerings, chanting prayers and mantras, etc., without knowing or understanding the meaning, yet they insisted that they would like to learn or discover the meaning at some point, even if it meant doing the search for knowledge on their own.

The emphasis on knowing the meaning of ritual and the desire to acquire knowledge, I suggest, becomes part of a process of "objectification" (Eickelman 1992) of Buddhism in which ritual practices become an object of knowledge, something to be acquired, contemplated, and discussed. Dale F.

Eickelman (1992) observed in his seminal article, "Mass Higher Education and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary Arab Societies," what he considered to be an "objectification" of the "religious imagination" in the Middle East brought upon by three kinds of questions: "What is my religion? Why is it important in my life? And, how do my beliefs guide my conduct" (1992: 643). These explicit and "objective" questions were, according to Eickelman, "distinctively modern ones that increasingly shape the discourse and practice of all Muslims" (ibid.), leading to a transformation in the ways in which Islam was understood and practiced among educated Muslims.

Similarly, an objectification process has also occurred among modern Buddhist reform movements. Many Buddhist societies have witnessed transformations in religious understandings and practices among their more educated population, such as in Burma in the 1930s (Ramstedt 2014; Schober 2017), Nepal in the 1950s (von Rospatt 2012) and Japan in the 1920s-1950s (Snodgrass 2009, 2015). Early reform movements in Asia promoted the acquisition of knowledge and understanding over belief and blind faith. Aligning Buddhism with rationality and science has been an ongoing development among modern Buddhist reformers and can be traced back to the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 (Lopez 2002, 2008; McMahan 2008). Also in Ladakh, early reformers promoted this more "rational approach" in the formation of the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), and the influence of Rahul Sanskrityayan, Shridhar Kaul, and the Maha Bodhi society in the 1930s (Bray 1991: 131–146; Bertelsen 1996, 1997a, 1997b). Annabella C. Pitkin (2016: 108) illustrates this development clearly in her article depicting how a Tibetan Buddhist leader considers there to be an "age of faith" before 1959, and an "age of knowledge" which was ushered in along with the modernization of Tibetan Buddhism. What Pitkin recognizes as "secular skepticism" entails a similar process to Eickelman's objectification in which new forms of knowledge have led to questioning practices and beliefs based on magic and superstition (Pitkin 2016: 109).

Many young Ladakhi Buddhists who moved away from Ladakh to pursue a higher education explained how it was especially the encounter with a mainstream Indian public who posed simple questions such as "Are you Buddhist?" and "What is Buddhism?" that initiated a process of objectification. The attempts to answer these questions sparked an interest in learning more about Buddhism, and figuring out why it might be important for them. Whereas previously the transmission of knowledge about Buddhism occurred through observing family members or through access to a religious adept, increasing pathways for learning about Buddhism have opened allowing any interested person with literacy and access to books and the Internet to learn more. This situation differed greatly from elder generations in which, as Fernanda Pirie (2006) observed, "While unquestioningly accepting the importance of the monastic centres, the village people generally regard the majority of Buddhist practice as being the preserve of specialists. The intellectual content of the religion is regarded by even literate villagers as being obscure, esoteric, and hardly comprehensible" (177). This has changed considerably among highly educated Ladakhi youth who have become increasingly interested in the intellectual content of Buddhist philosophy, especially through reading books (see Williams-Oerberg 2017).

With increased access to education, along with access to books in English and the Internet, Ladakhi youth have been tapping into a wide array of sources that influenced how they understood

and practiced Buddhism while away from Ladakh. Rather than taking various aspects of Buddhism for granted, many Ladakhi youth, especially those who have left Ladakh for education, stress the importance of *knowing* that precedes practice. During a group interview with Ladakhi students on Delhi University campus, I asked whether or not they felt the way they understood and practiced Buddhism changed after moving to Delhi. Dorje replied immediately with "Yeah! It is definitely changing." After which he explained:

> We question the practice, whether it is a ritual or whatever . . . I see what monks are doing at the monastery, what my parents are doing. And I come out here, I am maturing, I read books. Then I question those practices, you see. And I try to know really, what exactly it will lead to, these practices.[5]

The reformulation of customs, practices, and understandings about Buddhism in order to become relevant for young twenty-first century Buddhist lives, as those seminars for Ladakhi Buddhist youth also proclaimed, reflects the wider impact of historical global trends in the development of Buddhism as a "rational" religion and compatible with science. Ladakhi youth, moreover, not only proclaimed the correlation between Buddhism and science, they also stressed the importance of approaching religion through rational thought which leads to questioning doctrine, dogma, and clergy about the practices and understandings of Buddhists in Ladakh, thus challenging the religious status quo in the region.

Studies on youth religiosity have highlighted how youth question religion, and in many cases reject institutionalized religion in favor of other explanatory narratives, such as those encountered in what has been encased as "spirituality" (Beyer 2010; Collins-Mayo and Dandelion 2010; Hughes 2010; Lefebvre and Chakravarty 2010; Clark 2007; Mason, Singleton, and Webber 2010). Ladakhi Buddhist youth have also found resources in the more "spiritual" approach to Buddhism, i.e., emphasis on self-development, meditation, and individual well-being, a manner in which Buddhism has been promoted especially for a Western audience (see Williams-Oerberg 2017).[6] While they often reject institutionalized religion in some regards (such as not performing daily rituals or regularly visiting temples), they do not outright reject Buddhism as a source of identification. For many young Ladakhis, what was considered to be religion, culture, and tradition has provided a source of identification and morality which was valued and propagated rather than something to be abandoned on the path towards modernization (Williams-Oerberg 2014). Ladakhi Buddhist students were eager to express an interest in Buddhism and align themselves with a Buddhist religiosity that does not as readily align with the religious-traditional or the communal, but more so with the spiritual-modern, i.e., fashionable (Borup 2009, 2016; Prohl and Graf 2015; McMahan 2008). The positioning of Buddhism as a modern, *global* religion, thus, has enabled youth to negotiate the complex demand of being both modern *and* in touch with what they considered to be Ladakhi culture, traditions, and morality, which was mostly based on Buddhism.

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[5] Recorded interview, Delhi, March 14, 2011.

[6] See Beyer (2010) for a comparative analysis on Buddhist youth religiosity in Canada; Yip and Page (2017) in the UK and Lam (2018) in Australia.

Conclusion

As the case with Ladakh has shown, the specific circumstances of being a young Ladakhi Buddhist has shaped the manner in which Youth Buddhism has manifested. Nawang stated this very clearly above, "the definition of the term called Buddhism is changing. The youngsters might have a different definition of the term called Buddhism." For Ladakhi Buddhist youth, this has meant a shift in focus from habitual ritual practice, both individual and collective ritual participation, to engaging in "social work" and socially engaged Buddhism. Furthermore, with the pursuit of "modern education" and the increase in education levels attained among Ladakhi Buddhists, this has led to a shift in how Buddhism is understood. Through the readily available sources of Buddhist knowledge, such as books in English and the internet, Ladakhi Buddhist youth often spend their time studying about Buddhism just as they would spend their time studying about world history and science. This has led to a shift in emphasis among Ladakhi Buddhist youth as they seek sources that help to align Buddhism with their modern education.

Youth engagement with religion, however, may not be as recognizable as other, more well-known parameters. For example, Ladakhi youth may not visit the temple, but they visit various websites, discuss on social media sites, or watch various You Tube videos in order to learn, engage, and practice Buddhism in the privacy of their own rooms making their interest in religion less observable and well-known (see Williams-Oerberg 2017). Likewise, transformations in *how* youth understand and practice Buddhism has necessarily ensued in order to accommodate the project of modern education and modernization in Ladakh. This is not a "new" situation, however, as encounters with projects of modernity have historically urged a transformation and revitalization of Buddhism within various contexts (see for example Lopez 2002; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988; McMahan 2012).

Hence, through the focus on "youth," a more complex and compelling picture of the intersections of Buddhism and modernity appears. For example, in some cases not only youth, but rather modern-educated youth, have played a vital role in enacting and advocating transformations of Buddhism. Young, modern-educated lay Buddhists have often formed influential reform movements in Asia in the 1920s-1950s, such as the Young Men's Buddhist Associations (YMBA) (Bhutia 2016; Ramstedt 2014; Snodgrass 2015). Specifically, the emphasis on approaching religion through rationality, stressing the correlations between religion and science, and questioning institutionalized practices and hierarchies has been a particular development among modern educated youth. In this way, the focus on Youth Buddhism helps to bring out the dynamic of historical traces and wider political, social, and economic developments that influence Buddhists within various contexts, as well as placing youth firmly in focus as those who are central to current transformations of Buddhism as well as their main proponents.

Furthermore, "youth" as a social category and the manner in which youth are referenced in public discourse raises questions, such as: What kinds of positioning and claims-making are being set up? What might be the possible agendas behind these assumptions? The trope of disinterested youth, modernity, and religion has been frequently evoked within political demands in Ladakh, which emphasize the necessity of protecting a distinct Ladakhi Buddhist identity, and consequently also of

protecting Buddhist institutions in the future. Ladakhi Buddhist youth, through their involvement with modernization and so-called "westernization," even "Indianization," seem to threaten and dissolve a distinct Ladakhi Buddhist culture and identity. Where concern about "disinterested" youth has arisen in public discourse among Ladakhis, these concerns are frequently revealed to create an opening and insert a possible remedy—most often through advocating an increased presence of Buddhism in the public sphere. Invoking "youth" and the crisis of Buddhism has helped to solidify a distinct Ladakhi Buddhist identity in facing perceived threats from a growing Muslim population in Ladakh, and as an ethnic and religious minority in India. Therefore, the categorizations produced by local public discourse and discussions regarding youth, religion, and modernity need to be examined. Ladakhi Buddhist youth are not merely passive bystanders within these projects, as they are actively engaged in promoting as well as resisting the ways in which they have been positioned as the focus for debate. As the future of Ladakhi Buddhism rests upon their shoulders, many youth are poised to take upon the responsibility to secure the survival of Buddhism in Ladakh and preserve Ladakhi Buddhist culture.

Hence, I argue it is important to take "youth"—both the way the category is invoked as well as the experiences of young persons—into consideration when engaging in a study of religion and modernity. Researchers need to focus on the contribution of youth towards the regeneration and persistence of religion rather than the "crisis of transmission" with which they are frequently associated. David Berliner (2005) outlines how common assumptions about youth pitch their "amnesia, nationlessness and amorality" while in reality, young people are often "starving for cultural transmission" (578). Thus, instead of understanding youth to be passive recipients of cultural and religious transmission and social transformations, we should look at the ways that youth are both positioned as well as position themselves as they negotiate the complex relations of religion and modernity in their everyday lives. Youth have been actively engaged in revitalizing religious practices and organizations in order to align with their modern and twenty-first century lives. Instead of taking social change and youth disinterest in religion at face value, youth-focused research reveals a number of complex and intricate factors that show how historical as well as personal, regional, national, and global factors affect the everyday lives and understandings of contemporary religion. Thus, I argue, taking Youth Buddhism into consideration when analyzing the intersections of Buddhism and modernity highlight not only how Buddhism might be transforming in its encounters with projects of modernity, but also the individual lives, political projects, and global currents which shape these transformations.

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